

Demanding Deleuze

Keith Ansell Pearson

The Shortest Shadow and *The Puppet and the Dwarf* are the first two books in a new series edited by Slavoj Žižek entitled 'Short Circuits'.* In his series' foreword Žižek proposes that the shock of short-circuiting provides one of the best metaphors for a critical reading. His proposal is that we can take a major classic text, an author or a notion and read it in a short-circuiting way through the lens of a 'minor' author, text or conceptual apparatus. He intends the 'minor' to be heard in Deleuze's sense as that which is not of lesser quality but marginalized or disavowed by the dominant ideology. The minor approach will provide shocks to thought by shattering and undermining our common perceptions, as Deleuze and Guattari did with their text on Kafka, or, as Žižek notes, Marx did with his short-circuiting of philosophical speculation through the lens of political economy, and as Nietzsche and Freud did with morality (short-circuiting our highest values through the lens of an unconscious libidinal economy).

Žižek maintains that the result of this procedure is not a simple desublimation (reducing the higher to the lower), but rather a 'decentring' of the text subject to interpretation, bringing to light presuppositions and consequences it disavows. This is not a hermeneutics of suspicion in any straightforwardly phenomenological sense, but rather something much more severe and cruel, on the one hand, and something much more doctrinal and dogmatic on the other. Žižek states, somewhat in the manner of a categorical imperative of thought, that the underlying premiss of his new series is that Lacanian psychoanalysis is a 'privileged instrument' with regard to this approach and task. One might object that a key issue has been extracted from the equation and placed outside the forces of critique, that of the status of Lacanian psychoanalysis. However, this would be to prejudge the most important issue, namely whether its conceptual apparatus is capable of producing a set of new minor readings that make acute demands on us and pose new challenges to us.

Zupančič's text on Nietzsche provides us with a test case. It sets itself the task of opening up afresh the horizons of Nietzsche's thinking in an effort to breathe some new life into an alleged modern master of suspicion. The model for reading Nietzsche in minor terms already exists in Deleuze's *Nietzsche and Philosophy* of 1962, which is the only truly revolutionary reading of Nietzsche to date, and whose title indicates that Deleuze's Nietzschean battle cry is not simply contra philosophy but at the heart of it. In a number of respects Zupančič offers a genuinely thought-provoking book on Nietzsche. It does, indeed, short-circuit, presenting a Nietzsche that in key aspects is unrecognizable, and in a manner that is instructive and novel. It does this largely by taking core Nietzschean ideas and problems – such as the death of God and nihilism – and demonstrating how we have yet to think adequately through them and assimilate them.

Zupančič detects in the academy a widespread suppression of the shocking Nietzsche – that is, the Nietzsche who jolts thought. His jolts are either swept under the carpet or treated as exotic objects. One is not simply referring to his unpalatable remarks on race and women; the issue extends much further and deeper than this. In the case of Nietzsche – but of course not only in his case – it is as if philosophy has become a corpse; it no longer lives or seeks to show signs of life, it lacks what Nietzsche himself would call the passion of a great faith and the capacity for spiritual perception. (Philosophy as it was practised in the 1880s, as the 'theory of knowledge', evoked only pity in him, from which we can infer that he smelled the end was nigh.) Zupančič, whose previous book was a thought-provoking and demanding text on Kant and ethics, is able to marshal all the dark and disturbing conceptual weaponry of Lacanian psychoanalysis to revitalize Nietzsche and give his concerns an urgency and a demand that they have lost.

The problem with the text is twofold: it does not sufficiently allow Nietzsche's voice to speak with the

* Alenka Zupančič, *The Shortest Shadow: Nietzsche's Philosophy of the Two*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA and London, 2003. 193 pp., £10.95 pb., 0 262 74026 5.

Slavoj Žižek, *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity*, MIT Press, Cambridge MA and London, 2003. 188 pp., £10.95 pb., 0 262 74025 7.

Lacanian one, but allows one to override the other in almost every instance; and it fails to sustain its reading of Nietzsche, letting it dissipate at key moments. The result of the latter is that one does not get a total revelation of Nietzsche's revolution but only glimpses of it. The problem with the former is that Nietzsche's own philosophical legislation is never allowed to challenge the Lacanian 'truths' the author wishes us to live with and think by.

Where is Deleuze?

The target of Zupančič's attack is our lamentable and miserable postmodern condition in which 'nothing can shock us any longer'. She proposes we resist the tendency to reduce Nietzsche's jolts to thought to the level of opinions. She does not deny that Nietzsche is an ironic writer, or that he often deploys irony; but she detects another style in his writing, one that is much more disarming than the postmodern ironic Nietzsche and that is a crucial part of what makes him an 'event' in modernity, namely his deployment of the *naive* style. The reference is, of course, to Schiller's distinction between the naive and the sentimental, one which Nietzsche himself made use of in his first published text, *The Birth of Tragedy*. Zupančič argues that the naive style informs Nietzsche's philosophical project as a whole, giving it its manifesto-like character, its futurist tonality, its critical power, and its eventful character. It is a Nietzsche that the overly sophisticated 'postmodern' appropriation of him has allowed to disappear, with the result that a crucial part of the 'basic text' of Nietzsche has got buried under the weight of secondary meanings and interpretations. The decision to construct Nietzsche in this way informs Zupančič's admirable attempt to read the moment of his philosophy through the category of the event. Her proposal, in short, is that we should read Nietzsche's projections of his world-historic destiny not in terms of postmodern irony but in terms of naive seriousness.

To advance this construction of Nietzsche she begins by contesting Badiou's reading of Nietzsche as an anti-philosopher, which she does in a highly instructive and fertile way. She utilizes Badiou's conception of the event and reads Nietzsche as seeking to constitute himself as an event in this specific sense: 'the capacity of a given practice to produce its own object'. (When Badiou defines Nietzsche as anti-philosopher we need to appreciate that he is engaged, in part, in a repetition: this was exactly Merleau-Ponty's appraisal of Nietzsche.) One might suppose that there is nothing new in this claim. Does not Nietzsche himself tell us that he is an event that will divide humanity into two,

into those who come before him and those who will come after him? Have not several great thinkers read him, critically and clinically, as an event? Heidegger and Klossowski to mention but two. Zupančič's approach is distinctive on account of the attention it gives to the significance of the 'midday' in Nietzsche, the great noontide, which is also the stillest hour. She contends that this is Nietzsche's 'time of the event', the moment when one becomes two – that is, the moment of a fundamental break or split. She is very good on the meaning of the 'stillness' at play in Nietzsche's event and she impressively subverts Badiou's claim that a declaration of the new that lacks the Real (its object) is one that becomes caught up in the impossibility of making the distinction between its actual presence and its projected announcement. She asks in response, could we not say that this impossibility is the very presence of the Real and a true indication of it at work?

The relation is not *to* the Real but 'of' the Real. Moreover, do we not encounter the end of all things, as Zupančič suggests, when the reality principle gets conceived as the only and ultimate Real? Is this not our problem now? Of course, one could reply to this defence of Nietzsche, that this leaves an important issue untouched, namely, to use a Deleuzian term, how one is to *authenticate* an event. For Deleuze it is the test of the eternal return – a revolutionary doctrine in Deleuze's hands – that allows this authentication to take place. Zupančič is also very good in trying to do demanding things with many core aspects of Nietzsche, including the death of God and nihilism, perspectivism, the ascetic ideal, and the attempt to think 'beyond good and evil'. As she rightly points out, we should reflect in a demanding and precise manner on the nature of this 'beyond'. She proposes we conceive this not as denoting a realm, but rather as having the structure of an edge, and she contends the event that is Nietzsche is precisely this edge. Later in the book the 'beyond' is said to be neither a synthesis of a pair (good and evil) nor a third term that transcends them, but rather an 'in the middle', which we can understand, she says in Deleuzian terms as the neutrality of life or being in its divergent logic. Life is a creative neutrality and it in this sense that Nietzsche's 'beyond' places itself in the 'middle'.

This is ingenious and deeply thought-provoking; one only wishes it was coupled with what Nietzsche actually posits himself of beyond good and evil. The conjoining of the two would make for a better instruction than the one we get where we largely have to take Zupančič's inventive reading on trust. In Nietzsche

the 'beyond' is the essential place to position oneself 'outside' morality (outside the ex-position of the morality of metaphysics and the metaphysics of morality). This explains his attempt to change the sense of the 'beyond', away from metaphysics and humanism and in the direction of a new way of thinking and feeling (sometimes he speaks of it as a 'beneath'). On other topics central to an encounter with Nietzsche, the author is less original and thought-provoking, and indeed at times, admittedly rare, banal: for example, the material on forgetting, which is done much more profoundly in Deleuze and in the context of a treatment of the becoming-active of forces, which is Deleuze's earliest encounter with Freud and psychoanalysis and a signal of what is to come in much more aggressive and extreme terms in *Anti-Oedipus*.

For Zupančič the exact formula of Nietzsche's constitution or declaration is not 'I am the event', nor 'I will break the world in two', nor 'I am dynamite'; rather, it is 'I am two'. When, in *Ecce Homo*, Nietzsche becomes the 'one' that he is, this is not a moment of



unification but of a pure split. We can see this, she says, in the way Nietzsche forges the division between decadence or negation and the principle of the new beginning or absolute affirmation. It is not simply that Nietzsche offers himself as 'Dionysus versus the Crucified', but rather that Dionysus is this very split between the two. But she wants to claim more than this. Dionysus does not come after the Crucified as something completely different, which would make of him the beginning of a new era. Rather, Dionysus is the beginning *as midday* – that is, as the moment when the one is doubled into the two. It is this moment of splitting, of the one becoming two, that constitutes what is new, and this is the moment of the 'shortest shadow'.

The argument is an intricate one, but one worth chewing over. One might conceive it in terms of a pure or absolute becoming. The becoming is absolute not because completion takes place, whether dialectically or speculatively; rather, there is the repetition of the

new beginning again (and again) and this repetition is the repetition of an absolute difference, of a new event (for example, the collision and catastrophe of 'Dionysus versus the Crucified'). It is, as Deleuze understood well, the repetition of difference and the new without the need for negation or the labour of the negative. It is not that there is no role for negation, but rather that the negative and reactive get subjected to a superior force or power (affirmation) that would expel them and ensure they do not return. It is for this reason that there is no *labour* of the negative. One might say that it is the event – revolution, for example – which is the 'truth' of itself, in which being gets becoming *stamped* or impressed on it. This was how Nietzsche himself put it, and it was a decisive move for Deleuze, and, it may be noted, for Deleuze positioning himself contra Heidegger on the question of Nietzsche. It is clear when Zupančič discusses Nietzsche on truth that her conception of truth, like her conception of the event in Nietzsche, has been heavily inspired by Deleuze. The full extent of this inspiration is, however, as Žižek would say, 'disavowed'. Indeed, in her text Zupančič draws repeatedly on the insights Deleuze developed in his book on Nietzsche. However, she never stages an encounter or a confrontation (or whatever it is that one might desire) with Deleuze's book. A 'minor' moment in philosophy, which is also to speak of an event in philosophy, has been disavowed. This is important because ultimately we do not have in this book a new Nietzsche; we have a revolutionary Nietzsche borrowed from and inspired by Deleuze that will not speak the name of Deleuze *as an event*. In an act of Lacanian appropriation, the text disavows the very book that makes its own reading possible. Was it not Deleuze who sought to teach us that in Nietzsche propositions, such as the death of God, are not speculative but dramatic ones – that is, revolutionary ones that give rise to the forces that then become capable of effectuating a rupture or break (the event)?

Zupančič concludes her book with a long addendum on the comedy of love, which leaves Nietzsche completely out of the picture. This is distinctively odd given that he is a fecund writer on love – especially on the *demands* of the love of knowledge and the love of life. There is also the important usage of courtly love in his conception of a gay science and so on. The author attempts at the start of it to justify what she is doing, and confesses that it is based on a paper that was given on an occasion that had nothing to do with Nietzsche. What is missing from this book, which could, and should, have constituted its ending, is an encounter with a demand that it does not care to

respond to: the event of Deleuze's book on Nietzsche. Instead of staging this encounter, which would also serve to put itself to the test, it chooses to do something parochial: staying with Lacan on the comedy of love, which, for all the instruction it provides, is quite irrelevant to the needs of this book. This is unfortunate since the ending gives the reader the impression that Zupančič does not know what she is doing with Nietzsche. The truth of the matter, of course, is that she knows *exactly* what she is doing. The question, however, is whether she is doing *enough*. Deleuze was absolutely clear – naively so, one might suggest – about what the Nietzschean revolution consisted in and the fact that it sought to inaugurate a new earth and new people. Zupančič tells us virtually nothing with regard to this vital issue and this is a direct result of her employing the formal resources and static machinery of Lacanian psychoanalysis. We get a revolution and an event without any content. This also has the effect, ultimately, of leaving untouched Badiou's critical concerns over a revolutionary figure like Nietzsche, namely that the act or event of auto-constitution and auto-legislation is one of fantasy.



Here is Deleuze?

In the opening pages of *Organs without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences*,* Žižek openly tells us that his is a Lacanian book on Deleuze. It is one that will not assume the form of a dialogue between two theories – he duly notes Deleuze's aversion to debate and to the conversations of philosophy – but instead will trace the contours of an *encounter* between two incompatible fields. Moreover, he is keen to tell us that an encounter like this cannot be reduced to the level of a symbolic exchange, since what resonates in it is the 'echo of a traumatic impact'. This, then, is heady and heavy stuff. The problem with Žižek's conception of Deleuze is that it is overly fantastical, and fantasy may be the structural defect of Lacanian psychoanalysis. The word 'encounter' plays an important role in Deleuze's conception of the activity of thinking, but this is never engaged in Žižek's book. Indeed, he shows a serious disregard for Deleuze's own words and formulations, preferring instead to rely, and on numerous occasions, on secondary commentaries on Deleuze. In the opening pages we are told that, 'In the past decade, Deleuze emerged as the central reference of contemporary philosophy.' In a hyperbolic and wild statement like this we have effectively lost any chance of a rational perspective on contemporary philosophy (as well as making ourselves blind to the many academic contexts and institutions where Deleuze is effectively suppressed and silenced).

The aim in staging this encounter with Deleuze, says Žižek, is to go 'against the current'. Its 'starting premise' is that beneath the 'popular Deleuze' – which for him means the Deleuze of 'Deleuze and Guattari' – there is another Deleuze that is 'much closer to psychoanalysis and Hegel' and whose consequences are said to be much more 'shattering'. This is all welcome and provocative, but as the book unfolds it soon becomes clear that we are never going to learn enough about it. The 'ultimate' aim of the book, as stated much later in it, is said to be one of engaging 'in the practice of the Hegelian buggery of Deleuze' (readers may not be mistaken if they draw the inference that Žižek has made this book up as he has gone along). It's a book that cannot decide what its aim, ultimate or otherwise, is. All of the things which have a precision, clarity, rigour and discipline in Deleuze – including philosophizing as buggery – get turned into their opposite in Žižek. The reading of Deleuze is so imprecise with respect to key aspects and issues as to make the reader sceptical of all the major critical

* Slavoj Žižek, *Organs without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences*, Routledge, New York and London, 2004. 217 pp., £50.00 hb., £13.99 pb., 0 415 96920 4 hb., 0 415 96921 2 pb.

claims it wishes to make. At one point, for example, Žižek declares that, ‘The “ultimate fact” of Deleuze’s transcendental empiricism is the absolute immanence of the continuous flux of becoming, while the “ultimate fact” of Hegel is the irreducible *rupture* of/in immanence’. One wonders how Žižek would place Deleuze’s figuration of the eternal return, which is absolutely central to the transcendental empiricism at work in *Difference and Repetition*, in this continuous flux of becoming, since it is clear that it operates as a *selective* ethics and *selective* ontology – that is, it imposes becoming on being and creates the superior forms. The repetition of the new and of the future is the superior form of all repetitions such as those of habit and memory. Žižek’s reading of Deleuze is often of this character, picking one aspect or facet and neglecting the genuinely intricate and complex character of the movements of thought at work in the texts.

I have a lot of sympathy with the point of Žižek’s attack, including his concern that the radical-chic aspects of Deleuze’s current assimilation have the effect of transforming him into the ideologist of digital capitalism. (At his best – his most Deleuzian one might say – he is a severe critic of its cerebral cretinization.) I am also in sympathy with his claim that Deleuze is very close to psychoanalysis and Hegel (so close that at the same time he is also something altogether different). Žižek’s book has some exacting and utterly brilliant moments: the section on Spinoza, for example, provocatively entitled ‘Is It Possible Not To Love Spinoza?’ stands out as an absolute gem. He is astute on the ambiguous character of the multitude in Spinoza and on the simple-minded way it gets figured in Hardt and Negri. But these are gems that are buried in the rambling flows of the text and are barely related to the alleged encounter with Deleuze. At one point, for example, we find Žižek on a flow about the death-drive, a notion that deeply occupies him for obvious reasons. Deleuze’s own dense and remarkable reworking of the death-drive in Chapter 2 of *Difference and Repetition* is never even mentioned. There are some odd mannerisms as well as odd claims on display in this book. For example, on the first page of the opening chapter on ‘The Reality of the Virtual’, Žižek writes: ‘The first determination that comes to mind apropos of Deleuze is that he is a philosopher of the Virtual.’ The casual nature of this remark is, in fact, characteristic of the undisciplined character of Žižek’s style of writing in this book. ‘Comes to mind’? ‘Apropos’? What language of thought is this? In fact, it is more revealing than it at first appears: it shows that Žižek is not at all writing or thinking about Deleuze; his mind

is elsewhere. A genuine encounter with Deleuze forces one to focus and concentrate the mind, to discipline it, to encounter strange forces of thought and life.

The book is divided into two main parts. The first, entitled ‘Deleuze’, has thought-provoking insights into Kant, Hegel, Spinoza, the quasi-cause, the thing in itself, and so on. Deleuze figures as an occasional point of reference. The second, ‘Consequences’, is divided into three sizeable chapters. Deleuze effectively disappears from the book at this point, re-emerging only in the final chapter on ‘Politics: A Plea for Cultural Revolution’. In the previous two chapters Žižek engages in the kind of superior intellectual tourism that has become his calling card, offering a series of instructive and provocative insights into cognitive science, autopoiesis, memetics, Kino-eye, Hitchcock, and so on. Žižek is severe on the politics of Deleuzism (or Deleuzo–Guattarism), especially the politics of *Anti-Oedipus*. This is one of the strongest and most effective parts of the book. He raises some disquieting but necessary questions; for example, are there *not* features of Deleuze’s work that indeed justify calling him the ‘ideologist’ of late capitalism? He is at his most astute in his treatment of Deleuze and Guattari’s micro- and molecular analysis of fascism. It is difficult to deny that this is one of the weakest aspects of their work, and alarmingly so. Žižek is, I think, spot on when he says that we need to appreciate fully the problematic nature of Deleuze’s sympathy for Wilhelm Reich.

We can add this critical point to his concerns. When at the start of *Anti-Oedipus* Deleuze and Guattari pose the fundamental problem of political philosophy as one of determining how desire comes to desire its own repression (for example, the masses and their alleged desire for fascism), they institute a badly posed problem from which they never recover. Although the analysis becomes a lot more nuanced by the time of *A Thousand Plateaus* (they effectively renounce the earlier question without making this clear and assessing its implications), serious problems continue to afflict their approach and analysis. Žižek is a good old-fashioned Western Marxist; in my view he is to be esteemed for being such. He argues powerfully against the view that holds that the situation would have been different if the Left had chosen to fight fascism at the level of libidinal micro-politics, or if, today, the Left abandoned what is called ‘class essentialism’ and accepted the ‘post-politics’ of the amorphous multitude as the proper terrain of resistance. This, he says, is a case of ‘Leftist arrogant intellectual stupidity’.

One can only take seriously Žižek’s critique of Deleuze on a certain level, that of the polemical and

the political: his critique is really one of ‘Deleuzism’. The book’s ‘encounter’ with Deleuze is deeply undisciplined as a work of philosophy. The book, it has to be said, is a chaotic mess. The encounter with Deleuze never effectively takes place, and so one has little idea of its desired effects. This is for several reasons. One is that Žižek is too keen to quote what commentators have made of Deleuze (especially de Landa), as opposed to reading the texts themselves, and this on some of the most crucial questions and issues surrounding Deleuze’s work. Another is that he has no feeling for Deleuze as a classical and modernist philosopher (in the way that Badiou does, for example, who would never discuss *Difference and Repetition* by relying upon a book that is allegedly about it or linked to it). A third is that he is too quick in his readings and thoughts. Žižek does have a thesis on Deleuze that is well worth staging, developing and putting to work; the problem is that he does not remain faithful to it in any philosophically rigorous sense.

Žižek’s thesis runs as follows. In Deleuze’s work we can identify a fundamental opposition between the virtual conceived as the site of productive Becoming, on the one hand, and as the site of the sterile Sense-Event, on the other. This is how, he argues, we can start to think the opposition between the ‘body without organs’ and the ‘organs without body’ (think of the cat’s smile without the body of the cat in *Alice in Wonderland*). It is also the difference between the Deleuze of *The Anti-Oedipus* and the Deleuze of *The Logic of Sense*. This focus on the ‘consequences’ of this inner tension at the heart of Deleuze’s work is put to work in the rest of the book with regard to the domains of science, art and politics. The results are indeed intriguing. The problem is that the specific nature of the inner tension is neither sufficiently examined nor closely probed.

Žižek is at his best when he turns things on their head and refuses to rest content with the cosy, undemanding stories we tell ourselves about knowledge and life. He has a habit of permanently introducing into reflections on culture a welcome element of discomforting surprise. This is fully and spectacularly on display in his book on ‘the perverse core of Christianity’, *The Puppet and the Dwarf*, which is a superb contribution to his own series. We also encounter it in his book on Deleuze, though hardly ever in connection with Deleuze. The following provide good examples of the practice. In the face of Daniel Dennett’s compulsive selling of Darwin’s allegedly dangerous idea – that intentionality and mind emerge out of a blind, algorithmic process – what if this idea is one that contains the ultimate pacifying message: don’t get overexcited,

there is no meaning or obligation in our lives. In other words, just where lies its danger? What if the true danger and really unbearable trauma consist in accepting that we cannot be reduced to the outcome of evolutionary adaptation? (We are reminded here of Nietzsche’s disquieting exegesis of the *meaning* of the ascetic ideal in the *Genealogy of Morals*.) What if only a being like *Dasein*, with its obsession with impossible and unsolvable problems, can make breakthroughs in possible knowledge? Isn’t the problem with machines that they only break down in the purely mechanical sense of the word? (This last one is my own Žižekian-inspired offering.)

Žižek reveals his true (dogmatic) colours when, after noting that the genuine enigma is not that of the meaning of life as such but rather the fact that we continue to persist in probing into this meaning, he claims that metaphysical questions cannot be suspended as they form such a fundamental part of our nature. He notes the contribution of Kant to this issue and proposes that, since Hegel provides the necessary critique of Kant, it would be worthwhile to read the Kantian antinomies of today’s cognitive science – evident in the likes of Dennett, Colin McGinn, and Steven Pinker – through a Hegelian lens. It would indeed be interesting to do this. But one could also mention Nietzsche’s appeal to a new earth and a new people to come, a people that would learn how to live in new and different ways, becoming indifferent to metaphysics. This was a vision and a riddle that exerted such an influence on Deleuze. What Žižek takes to be impossible, Nietzsche took to be eminently possible. One could begin to reflect on Deleuze’s unique contribution to this debate and many of his texts provide a fascinating contribution to it. The appeal of perversity to him is immense – from the anti-nuptial nature of *A Thousand Plateaus* (symbiotic complexes, monstrous couplings, etc.) to the refrain of Melville’s *Bartleby*. The entire project of thinking ‘difference and repetition’ is informed by a search for the superior form of nature, a nature that goes against and ‘beyond’ what it institutes and creates. Alternatively, what kind of ‘nature’ is Lacanian psychoanalysis seeking to demonstrate and induct us in? What is the law of its nature and the nature of its law?

Žižek is one of the most important intellectual figures of our time. He is also, without doubt, the great Lacanian of our times, an educator who can instruct, inspire, provoke and shock. It is unfortunate that in his encounter with Deleuze he has not allowed his Lacanianism to be instructed in turn by the truths of another way of thinking and feeling. I can only advise him to persist with his trauma and to go deeper with it.