

# Common monstrosity

Mark Neocleous, *The Monstrous and the Dead: Burke, Marx, Fascism*, University of Wales Press, Cardiff, 2005. 160 pp., £45.00 hb., £17.99 pb., 0 7083 1904 1 hb., 0 7083 1903 3 pb.

Some spasm of the *Zeitgeist* (or was it an astrological conjunction?) in the 1990s gave birth to an extraordinary rash of books about vampires, werewolves, zombies and assorted mutants, as though a whole culture had fallen in love with the undead, those monstrous, liminal figures which hover between life and death as surely as the commodity form or a DVD. Perhaps this was because a jaded postmodern sensorium for which even sodomy and necrophilia were as tedious as high tea could now reap feeble stimulation only from such Gothic grotesquerie or Transylvanian exotica. Mark Neocleous begins this book by noting the cultic nature of such obsessions, without pausing to comment on why he is feeding them.

Neocleous's study is concerned with the politics of remembrance – with how commemorating the unjustly dumped and discarded can help them to live again, this time as comedy rather than tragedy. The past is unfinished business, and what will determine its meaning, indeed its very continuing existence, is our own political activity in the present. Though Neocleous finds this an alluring enough notion, he is also a mite embarrassed by it, since he is the kind of leftist who suspects that the backward-looking is inherently conservative. His book is among other things an attempt to resolve this uncomfortable tension.

Just as there are radicals who hold the astonishing opinion that all authority is oppressive and all hierarchy obnoxious, so there are radicals who believe that a preoccupation with the past is inertly traditionalist. They are thus at odds with Leon Trotsky, who once observed that 'we Marxists have always lived in tradition'. There is a good deal of salvage, retrieval and conservational work at stake in any revolutionary project. Even in revolutionary situations, there is more continuity than change in human affairs. It is curious why some on the Left see tradition as about the Changing of the Guard and the House of Lords, rather as Tories do. The only difference between the two camps on this score is that the former condemn what the latter commend.

The truth is that all good radicals are traditionalists. It is from the Jacobins, Chartists, suffragettes and the like that we draw our vampiric resources. A

spot of political blood-sucking never did anyone any harm. What spurs men and women to revolt, as Walter Benjamin once remarked with his customary Judaic piety, is not dreams of liberated grandchildren but memories of oppressed ancestors. It is the Blairites who seek to erase history with their modernist blather about drawing a line beneath the past and moving wide-eyedly on. Just as historicism strives to disavow the dead, since nothing in this grandly unfurling evolution can ever be absolutely lost, so the ideologies of progress and modernization seek to write the dead out of the historical record.

It is a pity, however, that Neocleous takes as his paradigm of conservatism the most magnificently eloquent scourge of colonial oppression that these islands have ever produced. Edmund Burke was not a Tory; he was a Rockinghamite Whig who bravely opposed the corrupt cabal clustered around the king, and inherited from the eighteenth century the liberal doctrine (not untouched by a strain of classical republicanism) that political authority is legitimate only when it loyally serves the interests of the common people. (He did not, to be sure, hold that such authority should be *elected* by the common people, but one would scarcely expect him to be a prototype of George Galloway.) Neocleous, by contrast, defines Burke's interest in the people only in terms of his celebrated contempt for the mob or swinish multitude, apparently unaware that for this resplendent example of a liberal Whig 'mob' and 'people' were by no means cognate terms.

Burke was certainly a conservative in a broad sense of the word, but he was so, like, say, Samuel Johnson or John Ruskin, in all the most honourable ways. He did not believe that a jumped-up middle-class caucus of quacks, projectors and wild-eyed experimenters should have the right to tear up for their own selfish interests the dense thicket of common law and customary privileges which protected the vulnerable. If he turned to tradition, it was in some remarkably subversive ways. At dire risk to his seat in parliament, he lent his incomparably persuasive voice to the cause of the American insurrectionists, in the faith that their strike against colonial power was an affirmation of traditional British liberties. No other 'British' politician

(and Burke was not of course British) has matched the scurrilous, superbly burnished rhetoric of his assault on British imperialism in India, whose odious chief officer Warren Hastings he dragged before the House of Commons and pilloried with such merciless venom that ladies in the public gallery fainted melodramatically away.

Derided as a potato-eating Paddy himself, Burke was a champion of otherness and monstrosity, not a smugly suburban critic of them. His scorching, lushly figurative denunciations of the colonial junta of his own native land, the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, are legendary even in the well-stocked rhetorical annals of Irish nationalism. On his death bed, this bitterly disenchanting defender of the Irish poor was as close to support for the revolutionary United Irishmen as one who loathed and dreaded such political turmoil could conceivably have been. (He was, to be sure, outdone in this respect by his compatriot, parliamentary colleague and fellow prosecutor of Warren Hastings, the playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan, a man who secretly fellow-travelled with the United Irishmen while holding government office, and thus covertly pledged to bringing down the very imperial power of which he was officially a servant.)

If Burke excoriated the Jacobins, it was because he classed them, however deludedly, alongside the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, the East India Company and British colonial rule in America. All were self-elected sinister interests inimical to the good of the people. Burke's theme from beginning to end is hegemony – the belief that only that power that has secured the affections of the people is legitimate. In the case of Ireland and India, this meant revering local customs and cultures, which in Burke's eyes were quite as precious as those he venerated at home.

No reader of Neocleous's account of this reviled colonial, the product of a hedge school in County Cork, would have the least inkling that he was anything but a kind of Michael Oakeshott in knee breeches. Even so, Neocleous has some illuminating commentary on Burke's notions of the sublime, and on the relations between his aesthetics and politics. He sees shrewdly that sublimity for Burke is intimately allied with death; but he overlooks the fact that what is secretly at stake in this connection is the sublime as Thanatos or the death drive. The sublime is that chastening, daunting, humbling, intimidatory, exhilarating, exuberant, expansive force which in the usual manner of *jouissance* or obscene enjoyment is both living and dead, annihilating and invigorating. The sublime is the Law, superego or political authority which demands that we

reap a masochistic pleasure from its furious, sadistic dismemberment of the self, one which is most effective when it presents itself in the vicarious form of tragic art. Tragedy for Burke is a kind of *Schadenfreude* in which we relish the sufferings of others, secure in the knowledge that we ourselves cannot be harmed. It is a drawing life from the dead, plucking redemption from the jaws of defeat.

Burke regards this sublimely unrepresentable Law as terroristic; but he had witnessed enough political terror in the gibbet-ridden Ireland of his youth (one of his own relatives was hanged by the British) to wish to temper and modulate its unlovely force. The terrorism of the sublime had consequently to be softened and feminized by the 'beauty' of custom, grace and civil society, if men and women were to look upon this Gorgon-like power and not be turned to stone. A coercive, inherently masculine Law had thus to tart itself up in the decorous garments of a 'feminine' consensuality. The law for Burke is effective only when it is a cross-dresser. It is thus, in Neocleous's terms, a kind of monster in its hybridity, as indeed is the whole concept of hegemony – though Neocleous might have noted that one of the meanings of 'monster' in classical antiquity is a creature which is entirely self-sufficient, as the deluded Oedipus believes himself to be. In this sense of the term, what is most monstrous about modernity is also what is most central to it: the idea of freedom as self-determination.

In a useful chapter on Marx, Neocleous rightly registers his ambivalence about the dead. On the one hand, we have the brusque 'Let the dead bury their dead' of the *Eighteenth Brumaire*, a typically modernist exercise in the politics of amnesia. Given the vital importance of such rituals in Judaism, even a thoroughly secular Jew like Marx could hardly have allowed these words to pass his lips without the faintest *frisson* of guilt. (The slogan derives, of course, from another secularizing Jew, Jesus.) On the other hand, there is Marx's Jewish preoccupation with commemorating the casualties of that long atrocity known as history. Neocleous identifies this tension perceptively enough, though like Marx in his more avant-garde moods he does not seem to see that we can only break with the past by deploying against it the contaminated instruments which it has bequeathed us. Besides, avant-garde ruptures with history have a depressingly long history. The very term 'modern' comes to us from antiquity. Like a good many leftists, Neocleous is also reluctant to acknowledge that the tradition which roused Marx most was that of the bourgeoisie. It was not only the victims of class society which the present

was to cherish, but the mighty spiritual and material resources of bourgeois culture, without which any socialism was doomed to be no more than generalized scarcity. Marxists are to be distinguished from other leftists by their fervent enthusiasm for the middle classes. They are traditionalists because they wish to safeguard the working class from the horrors of that modernist rupture with history known as Stalinism. As though someone shy of pursuing such unpalatable reflections, the book turns instead to an account of the most necromantic Marxist of them all, Walter Benjamin, who knew a thing or two about seeking to preserve the dead from the violence of the living.

The book's most impressive chapter by far is its erudite, politically impassioned account of fascism, a movement for which the dead will never quite lie down. The book might have added that this is because fascism's stereotypical enemies, epitomized in the Jew, are embodiments of a sinister, nameless negativity corrosive of all national or ethnic substance; and nothingness, as symbolist poets and metaphysically minded anarchists do not need to be told, is the one thing that cannot be annihilated. Neocleous sees that Thanatos – an ecstatic embrace of death – lies at the core of fascist doctrine. From St Paul to Martin

Heidegger, however, there is more than one way of actively embracing one's death. If there is the path of fascism and nihilism, there is also the path of the most authentic brands of tragedy, for which embracing one's death signifies a Lear-like openness to one's finitude and mortality which lies at the root of all realism, and thus of all moral virtue. It also involves a refusal to give way on the desire of which death is the final signifier, and thus a refusal of bogus ideological consolation.

Neocleous writes of the need not to see others as inhuman monsters; but the finest of tragedies understand that only when we encounter one another on the basis of our common monstrosity, relating not in some imaginary or symbolic mode but on the properly inhuman ground of the Real, can our relationships be said to be genuinely human. It is when we are stripped of our kin, kind and culture that we are most inhuman – which is to say of course, like Lear on the blasted heath, most purely and intolerably human as well. *The Monstrous and the Dead*, a book written with all the stylistic elegance one would expect of a doyen of *Radical Philosophy*, is a useful place from which to begin such investigations.

**Terry Eagleton**

## Postapologetic

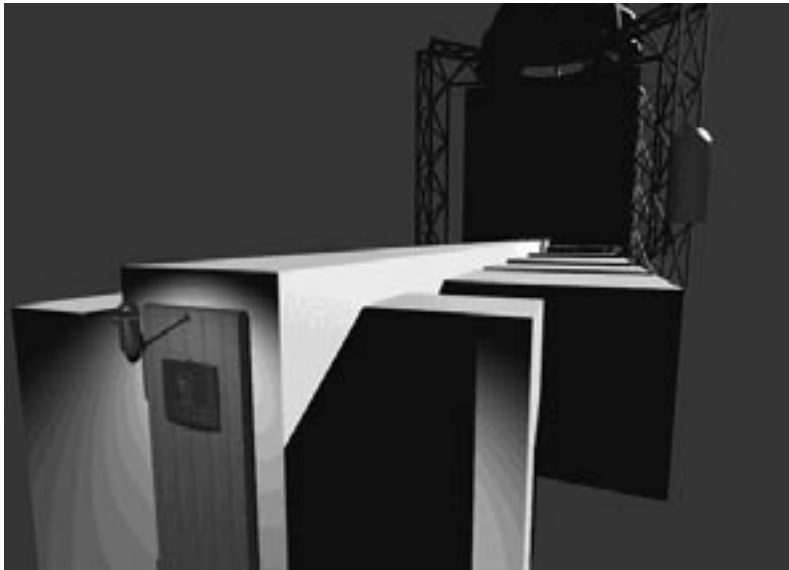
Alexei Monroe, *Interrogation Machine: Laibach and NSK*, foreword by Slavoj Žižek, Short Circuits, MIT Press, Cambridge MA and London, 2005. xxi + 314 pp., £22.95 pb., 0 262 63315 9 pb.

'No apologies.' These words begin Monroe's *Interrogation Machine: Laibach and NSK*, or rather they begin his 'Preface', which is the third section in the book, following two prefaces by Slavoj Žižek – one introducing MIT Press's Short Circuits series, which he edits and of which this book is a part, and the second previewing the radical encounter with the interlinked Slovenian avant-garde artistic and political collective Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK) and post-punk band Laibach, which are the subject of the book. But before Monroe's rhetorical refusal to atone for the complexity and difficulty of his study, Laibach get the first words: 'The explanation is the whip and you bleed.' This line is a lucid capturing of the power of Monroe's project and the avant-garde cultural production it tackles; Monroe's book is the first to engage the work of NSK and Laibach with serious historical and theoretical rigour. (*Interrogation Machine* is the updated English version of the Slovene book *Pluralni monolit – Laibach in NSK*, published in 2003.) Laibach's words also offer a crystallized forecast of the

methodological problems of a study that tries to couple this sort of brutal practicality together with complex historiography and theoretical sophistication.

This is the sort of book that eschews any particular methodology in favour of throwing itself headlong into an experimental engagement with a vast, difficult and continually changing historical and aesthetic terrain. If punk meant never having to say you're sorry, then *Interrogation Machine* aims to perform a kind of Laibachian scholarship. What unfolds over the course of Monroe's book is a variety of cultural history in which a way of being in the world is not just at issue but genuinely at stake. But for that kind of scholarship to produce modes of 'explanation' that can become operational, it has to succeed in making contact with flesh and making something or someone bleed. In endeavouring to do so, Monroe produces an exhilarating and properly punitive study, one that occasionally loses its own thread through the complexity it relishes, but that nevertheless does some serious and deserved violence to the clinical complacency of the art history

industry and its well-oiled recuperations of any and all avant-garde activity. *Interrogation Machine*'s appearance in English means that the anglophone academy can have no excuse for not dealing with its provocation to virtually all efforts to theorize the avant-gardes and their histories.



Spanish literary theorist Federico de Onis, who first coined the notion of *postmodernismo* in 1934 to characterize a then-contemporary conservative tendency within modernism – ‘one which sought refuge from its formidable lyrical challenge in a muted perfectionism of detail and ironic humour’ – believed that the momentary postmodern period would be followed by a phase he named *ultramodernismo*. This would consist of the activities of a series of interwoven avant-garde practices whose effects would actualize the radical experimental promise of modernism, focus it by means of the creation of a ‘rigorously contemporary poetry’ that would be universal in scope. The established histories of the avant-garde that have been produced by and for the West have scant room for this sort of enterprise. It is little surprise but nevertheless a disappointment worth registering that the recent tome *Art since 1900*, team-written by four of the most accomplished art historians and theorists of our time and imagining itself to be (however partial) a comprehensive panorama of important radical artistic practice over the last century, does not have the time of day for NSK, surely one of the most consequential avant-gardes in European history. (And the only Irwin it mentions is Robert.) So, apart from *Interrogation Machine*'s importance as a source that traces the genealogy of NSK and Laibach and their historical and cultural contexts, the book also demonstrates the fertile dialogue, largely unmined, between them and the Western European and American postwar avant-gardes. ‘Laibach and NSK works

are permeated with either direct borrowings from or references to conceptual art,’ notes Monroe, ‘particularly that of Duchamp, Fluxus, and Beuys, all of whom they cite at some stage.’ In fact, Beuys’s death in 1986 prevented him from realizing a planned collaboration with Irwin in which they ‘would perform a joint action sowing the Slovene fields’.

It may be here – in staging the beginnings of a history of avant-garde practice and performance that links the well-worn Duchamp–Cage–Beuys–Fluxus scenario with the lesser-known Russian constructivist–Suprematist–NSK–Laibach lineage – that Monroe’s book will offer its most lasting contribution. For instance, with *Interrogation Machine* as a mediating agent it becomes not just possible but almost necessary to rethink Fluxus ‘founder’ George Maciunas’s endeavour to fashion a kind of contemporary socialist avant-garde in

America in the 1960s. Poet and Fluxus artist Jackson Mac Low described Maciunas as a peculiar sort of Marxist–Leninist, or better a ‘Russianist’; he remembers Maciunas once showing him a letter he had just mailed to Nikita Khrushchev ‘in which he urged the Soviet ruler to encourage “realistic art” ([Fluxus event scores and Fluxkits] such as [George] Brecht’s, La Monte [Young]’s, and to some extent [Emmett Williams]’s) as being more consonant with a “realistic economic system” such as that of the Soviet Union than the old-fashioned “socialist-realist” art then in favour.’ Would art history not understand Fluxus (and its debt, little-remarked in comparison to the endless accounts of Duchamp’s and Cage’s importance, to the Russian avant-garde) in a much more interesting and political manner if we approached its activities and its structure through, for example, Eda Cufer and Irwin’s 1993 statement ‘NSK State in Time’?

One of the aims of *Neue Slowenische Kunst* is to prove that abstraction, which in its fundamental philosophic component – suprematism – explains and expels the political language of global cultures from the language and culture of art, contains a social program adequate to the needs of modern man and community. The NSK state in time is an abstract organism, a suprematist body, installed in a real social and political space as a sculpture comprising the concrete body warmth, spirit and work of its members. NSK confers the status of a state not to territory but to mind, whose borders are in a state of flux, in accordance with



the movements and changes of its symbolic and physical collective body.

In 1995, exactly a decade before the publication of *Interrogation Machine*, the most puzzling of teddy bears made its way to the shelves of shops in Ljubljana. Cute, cuddly and sporting an armband with a black cross, *Ursula Noordung* was the collaborative creation of Irwin and NK (Novi Kolektivizem – New Collectivism). (The primary groups within NSK are Laibach, Irwin, Noordung (formerly Red Pilot and prior to that Scipion Nascise Sisters), New Collectivism Studio, and the Department of Pure and Applied Philosophy. See [www.ljudmila.org/embassy/](http://www.ljudmila.org/embassy/).) Monroe notes that this bear was sold to raise money for charity. A ‘symbol of childhood innocence... problematized by a black-cross armband’, it was precisely the sort of volatile theoretical object in whose production NSK and Laibach have specialized. However, according to NSK member Eda Cufer, the *Ursula Noordung* teddy bear – its artistic dimension notwithstanding – was entirely a profit-making venture by the artists, and was not sold for any charitable purpose. As Cufer has noted, the *Ursula Noordung* project was actually made for the Soros Foundation-sponsored *URBANARIA* exhibition. The charitable version of the bear came later, when *Ursula* was appropriated by Mobitel, a Slovenian telecommunications company with ties to the arts, who developed it as a fundraiser for its own philanthropic activities. But Monroe’s mix-up of the two teddy bears is fortuitous rather than merely ironic, in that it points to the necessity of thinking of the activities of the NSK constellation in relation to the seismic shift from post-communism to free-market capitalism in Slovenia during the 1990s. Though Monroe notes the movement in Irwin’s work in the 1990s away from more ‘monumental national and political themes of the 1980s’ and towards deliberately ‘user-friendly’ forms that intersect with ‘overtly kitsch territory, often using domestic and commercial elements’, he does not take up the opportunity at this moment to theorize the deeper reasons behind Irwin’s strategic change in its themes and forms of address.

Monroe is correct on the one hand to characterize Irwin’s development during this period as a response to ‘recontextualizing and renarrating their history within NSK ... driven by the accumulated momentum of the NSK project onto their own increasingly distinctive territory’. But, at the same time, it is not possible to understand this very modification of NSK’s strategies for artistic and ideological production without recognizing the force of the challenge of suddenly having to survive in the open market. As Cufer explains, ‘it was

not only new but also scary for the artists in the East to be able (to be suddenly forced, in order to survive) to sell their work in the free market economy.’ In moving away from the concreteness of that challenge and its demands on NSK’s practical as well as ideological concerns, and slipping into this sort of speculative art historical generalization, Monroe’s analysis loses much of what is at other moments a whipstinging bite.

One of Monroe’s most inventive and successful instances of fusing brutality and nuance is his reframing of Arthur C. Clarke’s portentous black monolith from 2001, configuring it as a tool for thinking through *Interrogation Machine*’s objectives and procedures. Comparing it to the black cross that appeared on Laibach’s first poster in 1980 and that has remained a central symbol ever since, he describes it as ‘a communicative symbol, abstract but active... The cross, as a mute but active symbol, is like the monolith in the way it *resists interrogation while itself interrogating*.’ This interrogative function becomes a kind of permanent provocation to Laibach’s audiences as well as to the historian:

The ‘narrative’ of this book and the course of Laibach’s work can be framed around the cross as a constant symbol of Laibach’s presence. Where and why has it appeared? When has it appeared, and how has it been received? What significances and effects has it generated?

And so with the charge of this abstract but active symbol underwriting as well as perpetually threatening the organization of his ‘narrative’, Monroe proceeds to develop his sprawling nonlinear study, any chapter of which could be the starting point for any particular reader. There seems nonetheless to be an end: Chapter 10, ‘Das Ende?’, concludes the book by looking at the current work and concerns of NSK in the early twenty-first century, eliciting from them a guardedly optimistic vision of an avant-garde practice that just might continue to matter, against the odds:

The *raison d’être* or *raison d’état* of artists such as NSK is to reveal what authority wants concealed (everything), and to conceal what authority wants revealed (everything). One of the key values of this approach is the ability of NSK works to hold together, and *slow down* and *make visible* all these contradictory forces we are structured by and exposed to.... By continuing to slow down the accelerating flows of culture and politics, NSK may be able to maintain and defend a space within which it remains possible to render perceptible the underlying noise and shadowy forms of power.

**Chris Thompson**

# Maria complex

Cecilia Sjöholm, *The Antigone Complex: Ethics and the Invention of Feminine Desire*, Stanford University Press, Stanford CA, 2004. 240 pp., £32.50 hb., 0 8047 4892 6.

In this rather dense and opaque book, Sjöholm sets out to formulate an ‘Antigone complex’ which will be a better model for the understanding of ‘feminine desire’ than the much-maligned Oedipus complex – better because it is non-structural, relates feminine desire to ethics, politics and the law, and figures this desire as ‘complexity’ and ‘alterity’, rather than as merely sexual. However, the notion of ‘feminine desire’ perhaps requires more clarification and concretization than it gets here and the ‘Antigone complex’, she writes, ‘refers not to an actual function of the feminine, but rather to the complexity introduced in any discussion of desire where the feminine is concerned.’ This, then, is a complex which is not a complex, which refers (to the extent that it ‘refers’ to anything) to a certain resistance to and undermining of systematization and structurality on the part of the feminine. This seems simultaneously its strength and its weakness.

Sjöholm is particularly concerned with the relationship between desire and ethics, and so uses her first chapter to trace the establishment – and subversion – of a certain negative relationship between feminine desire and morality during the Enlightenment: the development of the now-familiar opposition between ‘masculine’ reason and morality, and ‘feminine’ irrationality and sensuality. Feminine desire, she notes, is generally figured as ‘excess’ or ‘deficiency’ in moral terms. Chapter 1 proceeds via readings of two unlikely bedfellows – the Marquis de Sade and Mary Wollstonecraft – both of whom are held up as facilitating a view of woman as an autonomous moral agent, *because*, not in spite of, her ‘desires’. The way in which this is achieved, however, is rather tendentious, for Sjöholm reads Wollstonecraft as suggesting that the feminine inclination towards submission comes from within rather than without: ‘Feminine desire is the product of a pervasive and crippling fantasy, which ultimately has its origin in the continuous investment of women in their own submission.’ Despite the very negative (practical, political, social) ramifications of this argument, Sjöholm asserts that this allows Wollstonecraft to depict women as ‘autonomous’, as ‘moral agents’ – *because* they fall into submission. The opposite could surely be asserted – that submission denotes a lack of agency, despite recent attempts within feminist and post-feminist theory, fiction and film to ‘recuperate’ female masochism as a paradoxical form of agency

and source of potential power within patriarchy (for example, Anita Phillips, *A Defence of Masochism*); more problematically, Sjöholm’s argument relies on what looks like a misreading of Wollstonecraft.

On the basis of the relatively uncontroversial claim that Wollstonecraft ‘does not explain the misery of women through social conditions *alone*’, Sjöholm asserts the much stronger claims that ‘there is *no causal link* between moral degeneration and social downfall’ and that the miserable heroine of *Maria* is ‘not subjected to any man, or any law, but *only* to the machinations of her own desire’. The middle way here would be to assert that female submission results from the internalization of ‘outer force’ – that is, of dominant (patriarchal) ideologies. This is not the same as saying that it originates in the subject, because the subject is, precisely, a product of the social. As Foucault and, more recently, Butler, have stressed, power doesn’t work upon the subject (as a force external to it) but rather through the subject, through the constitution or enactment of subjectivity. But this isn’t the point that Sjöholm seems to be making in her discussion of the female subject’s ‘feelings’ and ‘inclinations’.

What Wollstonecraft actually says in the Introduction to *Maria*, which Sjöholm alludes to without directly citing, is that she means to exhibit ‘the misery and oppression, peculiar to women, that arise out of the partial laws and customs of society’. Is this not quite unambiguous? Sjöholm’s rather off-kilter reading appears to arise from her desire to figure ‘moral reason’ as ‘a domain detached from social conditioning in the absolute sense of the term’, but as a founding premiss of her argument this must be subject to interrogation, given the historical and cultural contingency of concepts like ‘morality’ and ‘reason’ (not to mention ‘femininity’). The aspiration to make a positive link between feminine desire and morality is an admirable one, but at times in this book it seems to come at too high a cost, entailing a view of feminine desire *as* (self-imposed, voluntary) masochism or, at the very least, marginality (outside the Law, the Universal, the Symbolic Order). This is an impression compounded by Sjöholm’s choice of Campion’s *The Piano* and Jelinek/Haneke’s *The Piano Teacher* as her literary/filmic examples, and even by the choice of *Antigone* as the text around which her argument is structured. In her reading of *Antigone*,

Sjöholm says that, although Antigone's act 'seems utterly self-defeating, as if she were crushed under the weight of a punishing superego demanding her death', nevertheless she represents 'a feminine alternative to the oedipal structure of identification with the law' because 'her death does not simply signify submission to the aggressive punishments of the superego'. But why doesn't it? Is a will to self-destruction admirable simply because it is a will?

Yet this reading of *Antigone* comes much later in the book. After the first chapter, the book proceeds via readings of Hegel, Heidegger, Lacan and Judith Butler. The fact that these are readings of readings of *Antigone* occasionally has a disorientating effect – whose argument is it we are being offered here? Hegel's – or Sjöholm's own? In each case, she considers the 'use' of Antigone within a philosophical system and uses this as a jumping-off point for her own development of a model of feminine desire. So, although there is no explicit discussion of femininity (or sexual difference) in Hegel's treatment of *Antigone*, Sjöholm asserts that in figuring Antigone as 'an impossibility in and limit of the community',

[Hegel] provides us with the sketch of a form of subjectivity that is not defined as the self-consciousness of the social agent, but rather as a desire that finds satisfaction and recognition neither in the ethical order nor in the modern form of universality. Such a subjectivity ... is ... the margin, the fault, the deficiency that opens up the gap in the social fabric of any historical community. We have stumbled across a possible figure of feminine desire.

This is still a notably negative definition of feminine desire (as margin, fault, deficiency, as neither/nor); femininity as faultline of the ethical order may indicate its subversive potential, but it also offers grounds for its containment and/or exclusion. She fails to admit this possibility, despite subsequently citing Judith Butler's view that the Hegelian conception of women is 'not really subversive, because it merely enforces their exclusion from the state'. The benevolence here is Sjöholm's, not Hegel's. As she acknowledges, 'we may choose to read Hegel against himself and make his notion of femininity into an unstable and uprooted form of subjectivity rather than just another symbol for excess and irrationality.' Well, we *may*...

Sjöholm's reading of Heidegger is similarly optimistic, as she suggests that the gender-neutral term *Dasein* 'does not so much invite us to ignore sexual difference as show us a way of conceiving of sexual difference beyond a structuralist or metaphysical point of view'. She later avers, in an interestingly convoluted way, that

'a picture emerges that could serve as a substitute for a theory of feminine desire that Heidegger never had' and much of the work of the book consists in 'substituting' for what is not, in fact, there. The picture that emerges, in her reading of Heidegger, is again a picture of feminine desire as that which subverts or renders impossible the structural and the universal – so here it is 'a foreignness that shatters the ground of neutrality on which the being of *Dasein* is supposed to stand'.

Despite Sjöholm's insistence at various points that the figure of Antigone stands, amongst other things, for 'the collapse of heteronormativity', she fails to acknowledge that the feminine desire of which she writes is fundamentally heterosexual. This is implicit in her criticism of the Oedipus complex in Chapter 4, where she argues that, for woman, 'there is no immediate coherence between the prohibiting law [against incest] and the object of desire, and therefore no possibility of simply constructing a metonymic chain of displacements from the maternal body.' She assumes here that the 'object of desire' for woman is, necessarily, man. As Adrienne Rich has effectively shown in 'Compulsory Heterosexuality', the Oedipus complex can be employed to argue the 'naturalness' of homosexuality for women, by contrast with the 'natural' heterosexuality of men.

The reading of Lacan again serves to reiterate a negative conception of feminine desire as 'the void of the symbolic system, the nihilistic disruption of its construction, ... enigmatic and seemingly uncontrollable'. Nevertheless, Sjöholm sees this as an advance on the Freudian conception of feminine desire, in its focus on cause rather than aim or object, and thus its move away from a structuralist understanding of desire. The preferred model of desire (which, given its focus on origins, can hardly be termed 'post-structural') is one for which Antigone serves as paradigm, and feminine desire, in turn, stands as the paradigm of a certain modern conception of subjectivity.

In the final chapter Sjöholm fights a Lacanian corner against Judith Butler, whilst detailing the latter's view of Antigone as 'the limit of culture' and intelligibility. She asserts the value of the symbolic and the real against Butler's emphasis on language and culture, claiming that 'social and cultural norms do not simply form subjects, but are dependent also on the investments of those subjects. A cultural order is not to be understood merely on the basis of its values, but on the *desires* investing those values.' What this reveals – apart from a somewhat simplistic reading of Butler, who surely doesn't deny a certain reciprocity in the relationship between subject and culture

– is that Sjöholm situates desire *outside* the cultural, reading it as something instinctive, pre-linguistic, pre-social, rather than as something culturally produced and regulated (as Butler would contend). She also figures cultural constructivism and ethics as somehow mutually exclusive.

Sjöholm's own ethical model is a Lacanian one. Her argument stems from this:

That feminine desire is an excess of the symbolic order does not mean that woman fails to incorporate or enact ethical norms, which was the Enlightenment view. It means rather that feminine desire indicates the possibility of an ethics situated in the rift between symbolic prohibition and normative injunction. Antigone allows us to formulate an ethics in which the subject is not only autonomous but also exposed, not only finite but also destructive, not only vulnerable but also monstrous.

Desire doesn't pull against or undermine moral values, it contributes to them – this is an appealing idea, but leads us only to the conclusion that 'the ethics of

psychoanalysis becomes ... to act according to your desire', which is something less than a model for living.

The book ends on a note of excitement and promise: 'all we need to do is affirm something that is sustaining us, between those two walls of impossibility that we are up against. What a chance, and what a surprise!' But it remains unclear exactly what this 'affirmation' might involve and what advantages the assertion of femininity as alterity might really bring. In linking feminine desire to ethics, Sjöholm sometimes unwittingly abstracts it from the 'real' world of the social. The fact remains that how women experience and express their desire has significant consequences in the world, not least for how they are constituted as subjects, as 'women'. This is something that Antigone learns to her cost. Sjöholm undoubtedly recognizes this, but situates her argument in a realm where such recognition is consistently suppressed.

**Kaye Mitchell**

## Wide awake

Michael Löwy, *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History'*, trans. Chris Turner, Verso, London and New York, 2006. 144 pp., £16.99 hb., 1 8446 7040 6.

Studies of Walter Benjamin, of which it is obligatory to say there are many, often focus on a theme – the city, literary criticism, technology, reproduction, experience and so on. This book, instead, restricts its focus to one piece of writing by Benjamin, and a short one at that. The book is devoted to a reading of the series of theses known as 'On the Concept of History'. These theses have, to be sure, been subjected to critical evaluation before. What has tended to happen in the literature though is that either the theses as a whole are mentioned in passing in more general studies of Benjamin's work, or a single thesis – most particularly the one about the Turkish chess automaton or the one about Paul Klee's 'Angelus Novus' – is blasted out of the theses and even out of the context of Benjamin's work to become emblematic for some other statement about progress, catastrophe or the 'cunning of history'. This book is unusual in that it addresses the theses as a whole, but enters Benjamin's broader thoughts and relevance through close scrutiny of this small chip. The main part of the book is a thesis-by-thesis reading. Seventeen main theses are discussed plus four extra variants and unpublished theses. Between two and ten pages are devoted to each thesis, for, as Löwy admits, some parts speak to him more than others which continue

to remain opaque. Löwy uncovers an internal structure to the work: for example, how theses II and III mirror each other. A growing body of Benjaminiana includes illustrations, prompted in part by the great value that Benjamin sets on the visual and optic. This little book is not short of them, and includes a scattering of odd images such as an illustration of Nepomuk's automatic chess player, Messonier's 'La Barricade', a mural by Diego Rivera, a painting of Blanqui by his wife, Daumier's 'L'Émeute' and, of course, Klee's 'Angelus Novus'.

The theses were first published in 1942, two years after Benjamin's death, in a hectographed volume called *Walter Benjamin in Memoriam*, issued, under Adorno's care, by the Institute for Social Research in Los Angeles. The volume was a special issue of the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*. This publication reached a relatively select number of readers. Löwy notes that the first proper publication was in French, translated by Pierre Missac in 1947 for *Les Temps Modernes*. This publication garnered no response. Silence greeted the theses again in 1950 when they were published in German in the *Neue Rundschau*. The critical buzz around the theses is revealed by Löwy to be a more recent phenomenon. Löwy refers, for example, to responses to



the theses by Habermas, Wohlfahrt, Agamben, Grefrath. Most influential perhaps was the response by Benjamin's friend Scholem, who predetermined many interpretations of the theses, by branding them a product of Benjamin's shocked awakening to the nasty reality of Marxism, at the moment when the Hitler–Stalin pact was signed. Scholem fixed an image of Benjamin as a naive, disillusioned utopian and insinuated that the theses move away from politics in order to 'leap into transcendence'. This contradicts Benjamin's own account of the theses' motivation in a letter to Gretel Adorno. They represent well-pondered thoughts, because the theses, he reveals, had been germinating for twenty years (see editorial notes on 'Über den Begriff der Geschichte', *Gesammelte Schriften* 1.3, p. 1226). That is to say, from 1939 backwards two decades to 1919 – when the thought seed is planted after the final, fatal struggle of the one political group enthusiastically referenced in the theses, Luxemburg's and Liebknecht's Spartakus, revolutionary competitor against social democracy, cut down with its inferred approval). The theses are a reckoning with the Left, and Löwy notes the signing of the Hitler–Stalin pact was a 'direct spur', along with the outbreak of war and occupation in Europe, but they do not represent a sudden turning point in Benjamin's thought.

Löwy sets his interpretation firmly within a class struggle frame of reference, but not only that. The introduction sets out three sources that nourish the text: German Romanticism, Jewish messianism and Marxism. Löwy argues that the result of the mixing of these three is not a simple synthesis but the invention of a new conception. The theses are here subjected to what Löwy terms a "Talmudic" analysis', which is to say, word by word and sentence by sentence. Löwy hopes to surmount some of the problems and contradictions of previous approaches, identified as coming from one of three schools of interpretation of Benjamin's work as a whole: the materialist school à la Brecht, the theological as promoted by Scholem, and the trend that argues that Benjamin's work as a whole is contradictory and brings into alliance elements that are impossible to mix – such a position is represented



by Habermas and Rolf Tiedemann. Löwy proposes a fourth approach whereby Benjamin can be both Marxist and theologian. He admits that usually such approaches would clash, but notes that Benjamin is no usual thinker. This claim is a prelude to an interesting piece of original information. Löwy's research in the archives has established that parts of the theses are modelled on Scholem's 'theses on the concept of justice', from 1919–25.

Löwy always writes unambiguously, unlike much commentary on Benjamin whose formulations twizzle and tangle much more than Benjamin's own. The theses are, quite simply, statements of political philosophy and Löwy treats them as resources for intellectual history and political analysis. Any names referenced therein are explained – such as Lotze, Ranke, Schmitt. There is an illuminating recovery of forgotten figures – such as Josef Dietzgen, mentioned in the theses but rarely analysed in the secondary literature (indeed the editor of the theses in English, in *Illuminations*, misnamed him William Dietzgen).

Links are made between, on the one hand, structures of thought or phrases and expressions and, on the other, systems of thought such as Judaism or Cabbala, the Bible, Romantic philosophy or varieties of materialism. Special emphasis is given to connections between Benjamin and Trotsky, in particular Benjamin's non-linear concept of history and historiography and Trotsky's idea of permanent revolution or combined and uneven development. (This is an interesting contribution to connections already made between Trotsky and Benjamin in other publications by Löwy and other French Marxists such as Daniel Bensaïd and Enzo Traverso, as well as by Terry Eagleton and me.) Through this connection, Löwy is able to explain how the theses combat the illusions and malpractices of Stalinism as well as German Social Democracy. The core of Löwy's analysis revolves around the question of progress. In the course of the introduction Löwy raises an issue that he has addressed before: Benjamin's supposed anti-technologism (which, he insists, was only briefly countered by a short period of falling under the influence of Brecht). From 1936 to

1940 Benjamin develops his thoughts against progress in a number of essays, culminating in the theses. The reading of the theses builds up to an inspirational political crescendo as postwar revolutionary heroes of the oppressed (Zapata, Sandino, etc.) are discussed in the context of a Benjaminian 'history from below' and collective memory.

The final chapter is called 'The Opening-Up of History'. These last few pages return us to the general context of Benjamin's relationship to critical and revolutionary thought. While the theses do not appear to be on the main route of the history of ideas in the twentieth century, their significance must not be overlooked. The whole book has established them as a secret template of past, present and future historical actions. Löwy describes the theses as constituting a 'philosophical manifesto'. He uses the conclusion to make general observations on the fate of Marxism, which he establishes as split from the very start by irresolvable tensions. Marxism as represented by Marx and Engels sometimes assumes a natural scientific model of the evolutionary development towards socialism, and at other times sees the revolution as an exceptional moment, a moment of sudden revolutionary action. These two concepts mark the subsequent heritage of Marxism, which, according to Löwy and Benjamin, is firmly rooted in the latter vision.

Löwy's opening claim for the theses is a grand one: the theses represent the most significant revolutionary document since the *Theses on Feuerbach* and are to be placed within a revolutionary tradition that includes Lenin's *April Theses*. Benjamin's text, however, needs

much more interpretation – it is hermetic, allusive and enigmatic. This book provides useful and necessary services, both in interpreting the document and in establishing why it is so important. Löwy first read the theses in 1979, and admits that they have haunted him for twenty years. The theses changed his thinking utterly. One thing that intrigues him is that the texts are endlessly reinterpretable. He has discovered new things in each reading over the years. This does not, however, intend to throw any reading of them into freefall. Certain 'heavy weights', as Benjamin puts it, can anchor the analyses, but it is also the case that as history develops the theses gain new relevance. Löwy's analysis is written from a retrospective perspective too: a perspective that knows the Holocaust that Benjamin did not live to witness. This is one of the subsequent contexts for the theses, which revises their meanings in a fashion that exemplifies Benjamin's own sense of an artwork's 'afterlife'. Benjamin is cast, in a way, into the role of prophet. He predicts the inhuman horrors of technocratic fascism, wherein the Holocaust is the outcome of a deadly combination of different modern institutions: the Foucauldian prison, Marx's factory and Taylor's scientific division of labour. The theses do not cease to have an 'afterlife' and, occluding the subsequent nightmares that they play a part in revealing, they also encompass utopian actions. Löwy suggests one aspect of their contemporary relevance in a photograph captioned 'Young Indigenous Brazilians Firing at the Clock at the Official Commemoration of 500 Years since the Discovery of Brazil'.

**Esther Leslie**

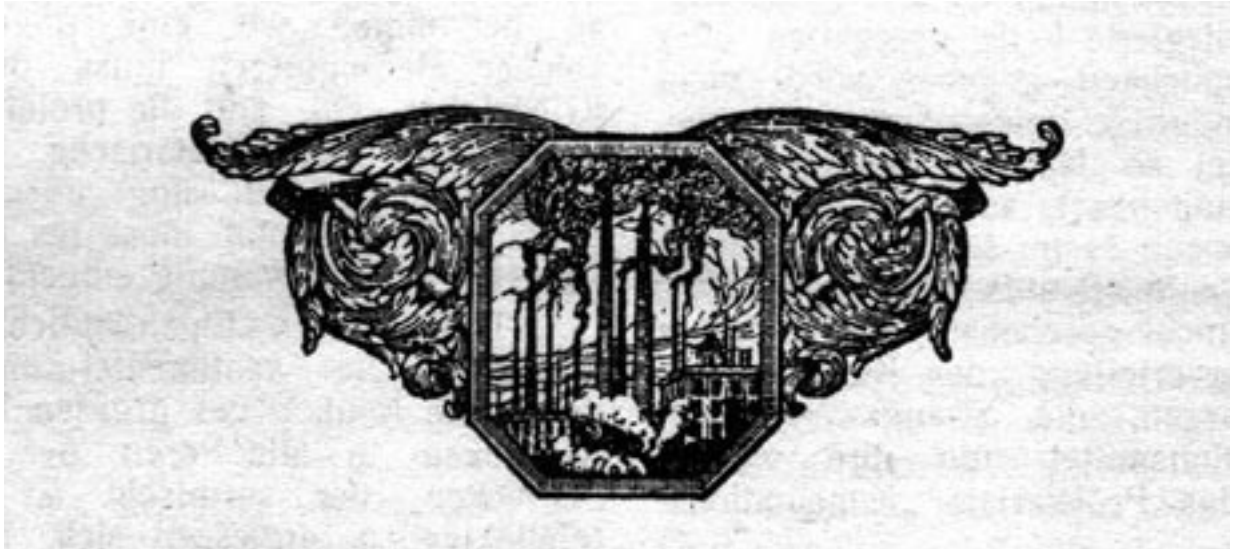
## Sketchy

Nikolai Bukharin, *Philosophical Arabesques*, trans. Renfrey Clarke, with editorial assistance by George Scriver, Pluto Press, London, 2005. 448 pp., £35.00 hb., 0 7453 2476 2.

Languishing in the Lubyanka prison on fabricated charges of treason for which he would pay with his life, the prominent Bolshevik Nikolai Bukharin remarkably completed three books in 1937, a collection of poetry, the autobiographical novel *Vremena* (*The Times*, published in 1994, and in English translation as *How It All Began* in 1998) and this philosophical tract. Despite its title suggesting something much more fragmentary, *Philosophical Arabesques* actually constitutes a single sustained work on materialist dialectics. The scope of this work alone earns it a place alongside that other great Marxist work written in political incarceration, Antonio Gramsci's *Prison Notebooks*.

Bukharin's philosophical work is much narrower in focus, however, and often reads as a belated attempt to disprove Lenin's assessment that Bukharin never really understood dialectics. It is not surprising, therefore, that the 1996 Russian edition is subtitled 'dialectical sketches'. Here we find a detailed engagement with Hegel as viewed through Lenin's *Philosophical Notebooks* (which had been written chiefly during the First World War but published only in 1929) and a development of the themes found there.

If we compare this work with Bukharin's earlier *Historical Materialism* (1920, translated 1925), which earned the critical attention of, inter alia, Georg



Lukács, Karl Korsch and Gramsci for its mechanical approach to Marxism, *Philosophical Arabesques* marks a significant advance. It is structured according to a dialectical spiral rising from the contradictions of solipsism and ‘things in themselves’ through the nature of reason, the distinguishing features of idealism and materialism, and the concept of truth, before arriving at the divergence of Hegelian and Marxist dialectics. To summarize this adequately would be impossible within the space of a short review, but it is possible to draw out certain themes that receive special attention. The practical, theoretical and aesthetic relations towards the world are held to constitute a single process that leads to a broadening understanding of practice. Theory and practice are shown to be mutually implicated and mutually informing at every level and locked into a rising spiral. Connections within nature are held to be multifarious, encompassing causal, functional, statistical and teleological (the last understood as a ‘moment of necessity’). The sociology of thinking is seen as an introduction to philosophy, growing out of an analysis of the interrelationship of modes of production and of representation, where the last includes ideological forms and ‘styles of thinking’. The role of experience and co-experience in art is seen as the equivalent of the immediacy of knowledge in science. And, finally, the unity of theory and history is posited, according to which theory is historical and history theoretical.

This all clearly marks a major departure from the ‘notorious “theory of equilibrium”’, according to which dialectics is understood as ‘the conflict of forces, disturbance of equilibrium, new combination of forces, restoration of equilibrium’. This had originated in the work of Aleksandr Bogdanov and dominated Bukharin’s earlier work. Here, however, it is regarded as ‘a refined variant of mechanistic materialism’. Such

shifts in position in Bukharin’s philosophical thought require the close attention of a scholarly editor, as do the engagements with many ideas that were current at the time and that are now of varied relevance: neo-Kantianism, hylozoism, fascist racial ‘theory’ and Hindu mysticism. Clearly a work so rooted in its historical context is not easily digested by today’s readers of radical philosophy, but one should expect to be illuminated about the more obscure references. Unfortunately, the editors of this volume do not provide an adequate critical apparatus to guide today’s (relatively) casual reader through the intellectual riches on offer here, or to give the more specialist reader a way in to the debates of the time. One example will suffice, though several could be raised.

In Chapter 22 Bukharin refers respectfully to the now discredited ‘Japhetic’ theory of language developed by the controversial but, at the time, highly influential Soviet archaeologist and philologist Nikolai Marr. The importance of Marr’s work for understanding Soviet scholarship on language between 1930 and 1950 is difficult to overstate, but his work is little known to a contemporary readership. This is clearly a case where editorial assistance is required. The notes correctly identify Marr, but tell us nothing about the ideas Marr developed, his position in Soviet scholarship, or where the reader might look for information on these important issues. This is even more concerning since Marr’s controversial contention that language forms part of the ‘superstructure’ arising on the economic base had most likely been adopted from Bukharin’s *Historical Materialism*. Bukharin also considers the sources of Marr’s ideas about the origin of language in the works of Ludwig Noiré, Wilhelm Wundt, Max Müller and another figure whose name, the editors tell us, appears in the Russian edition as ‘Laz. Geir’, but who has not been identified. Reference to works on or

by Marr, or on the history of scholarship on the origin of language, would quickly have yielded the name of one of the most important figures in the field, Lazarus Geiger. Similarly, while the English text reads very fluently, the editors rarely give us the opportunity to glimpse the original Russian terms behind the English translation. This becomes an obvious problem when a term as problematic as ‘truth’ appears, since this could be the translation either of *istina* or *pravda*, terms that have specific connotations in Russian philosophical and political discourse.

The editorial work is, therefore, inadequate for this type of work, but we should have no hesitation in welcoming the appearance of this text in English. It is a work of real philosophical interest, but also of historical importance since, among other things, it underlines the tragedy of Bukharin as a historical figure. The introduction to the volume is urbane and sympathetic, but Bukharin’s repeated attempts to see in the grim realities of the Soviet Union of the 1930s the realization of the ideals of socialism can only make one wonder how such an acute mind could accommodate such blind faith. On two occasions when discussing the transition from the realm of necessity to that of freedom Bukharin cites Stalin’s ‘well-known formula “the plan? We are the plan!”’ where ‘We’ is understood not as his jailer’s evocation of the ‘royal “We”’ but (apparently without irony)

‘organized society, planned society, the manifestation of the collective will of society as the expression of the totality of individual wills’. This recalls the excruciating final letter Bukharin wrote to Stalin from prison, recently published in Getty and Naumov’s *The Road to Terror* (1999), in which he begs Stalin’s forgiveness, asks to be given poison rather than shot and declares his continuing faith in the progress of the Revolution. Even now, when facing death, Bukharin was incapable of facing the reality of Stalin’s rule, which he had helped to install through his elaboration of the theory of ‘Socialism in One Country’, cultural revolution, and in practical support in the struggle of the Party bureaucracy against the left opposition.

The Russian edition of Bukharin’s *Prison Manuscripts* is a two-volume set, the first of which remains untranslated and is entitled *Socialism and its Culture*. Bukharin was an extremely influential writer on culture in the 1920s and 1930s and was responsible for the shift away from the Leninist cultural policy to one that officially accepted the notion of ‘proletarian culture’ and legitimized the move against the culture of Soviet intellectuals. These works from the pre-prison period remain untranslated. The appearance of *Philosophical Arabesques* makes the translation of all Bukharin’s major writings on culture highly desirable.

Craig Brandist

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### Images in Peter Weibel, ‘Re-presenting Repression: The Political Revolution of the Neo-avant-garde’

- p. 21 Polyclitus, *Doryphoros*, 450–440 BCE.
- p. 22 Arno Brecker, *The Party and the Army* – this pair of statues stood outside the entrance to Hitler’s Chancellory.
- p. 23 Arnulf Rainer, from *Black Architecture*, 1967.
- p. 24 Hiroshima.
- p. 25 Invitation to *Zero Avantgarde*, Galeria il Punto, Turin, 1956.
- p. 26 The Vienna Group, *Literary Cabaret*, 1958; Yves Klein producing a fire-picture, 1961.
- p. 27 Gustav Metzger, *Misfits evening*, 1962; *Festival of Psycho-Physical Naturalism* (Dieter Haupt covers Nitsch with Blood), 1963.
- p. 28 [left to right, top to bottom] Peter Weibel/Valie Export, *Cutting*, 1967–8; Otto Muehl, *Apollo 11*, 1969; *Art and Revolution*, 1968; poster and performance; Günther Brus, *Clear Madness – Urination, Excretion, Cut*, 1970.