

## Operation Adorno

*The Challenge of Surrealism: The Correspondence of Theodor W. Adorno and Elisabeth Lenk*, ed. and trans. Susan H. Gillespie, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2015. 248 pp., £63.38 hb., £18.16 pb., 978 0 81665 616 5 hb., 978 0 81665 617 2 pb.

At the beginning of a talk on ‘Critical Theory and Surreal Practice’ Elisabeth Lenk rhetorically asks whether these ‘two movements’ ‘ultimately unleashed the May 68 events?’ This is the question and the promise of this newly translated volume of correspondence. Lenk was Theodor Adorno’s graduate student between 1962 and 1969, writing a dissertation on André Breton’s surrealism (the correspondence concludes with the death of her beloved advisor). More promising than the confrontation between Adorno and surrealism – a subject treated in his brief and brilliant essay ‘Surrealism Reconsidered’ (1956) retranslated here – is, however, the promise of something more unexpected: a confrontation between Adorno and situationism. Lenk was formally expelled from the surrealist group in Paris for a ‘situationist deviation’. At one point she asks Adorno if he is ‘familiar with the *Internationale Situationniste*’, remarking that it has ‘affected me in a way that nothing else has for a long time’. Unfortunately, Adorno doesn’t directly engage with the situationist materials she sent him, but situationism is the implicit background of their ongoing exchange.

As it turns out, there is little back and forth on the issue of surrealism (Adorno is reticent to engage on the topic beyond what he wrote in 1956), but the events of May ’68 form the dramatic backdrop for their later discussions. Lenk is in the thick of it, both at Nanterre and Paris, and sends reports to Adorno in Frankfurt and elsewhere. Adorno, for his part, found himself in the midst of the June 1967 events in Berlin where he was aggressively challenged by the SDS during a talk on Goethe in Peter Szondi’s seminar. He was confronted for his seemingly tepid response to the shooting death of Benno Ohnesorg and lack of support for the jailed student Fritz Teufel. It is this moment between June 1967 and May 1968 that enlivens an otherwise rather routine exchange between advisor and student. And there are some truly awkward moments. Attached to letter 26 Lenk encloses a short essay ‘Thoughts on the Relationship between Sade and Fourier’ which articulates some of her basic philosophical commitments concerning

happiness and desire. ‘True happiness,’ she writes, ‘unknown until now, consists in giving in to the inner, passionate impulses, raising them to principles of action.’ Not long after receiving this ‘fragment’ Adorno declares he has ‘never, really never, met a woman whom I consider to be as endowed with genius as you are.’ He warns Lenk not to ‘ascribe that to my feeling of being in love, to which it merely contributes even more.’ He ends the letter by saying he looks ‘forward to going away with’ her. Lenk does not acknowledge the advance, but it inevitably colours the exchange from that point on.

The book includes a range of material related – some of it rather loosely – to the correspondence, including, as well as Adorno’s ‘Surrealism Reconsidered’, Walter Benjamin’s 1929 essay on surrealism, some early surrealist ‘readings’ co-written by Adorno and Carl Dreyfus, and four essays by Lenk: an afterword to Louis Aragon’s *Paris Peasant*, an introduction to the German edition of Charles Fourier’s *Theory of the Four Movements and General Destinies*, an introduction to the correspondence, and the 2001 essay ‘Critical Theory and Surreal Practice’. The new introduction by Rita Bischof – former student and friend of Lenk – sets an awkward tone for the volume. According to Bischof, Adorno ‘clearly misses the point’ of surrealism, observing that the ‘developing lack of consensus’ in the exchange reflects the fact they belong to ‘different generations’. (The lack of consensus is apparent in October 1967 when Adorno declares his inability ‘to strike any real fire’ from Lenk’s translation of a Breton poem.) Lenk’s generation is part of the contemporary ‘surrealist turn’, Bischof writes, and cites a wide range of ‘new forms of political opposition’, including Occupy, Pussy Riot and the ‘early’ Arab Spring, as instances of the turn. ‘When reality is the way it is, surrealism is the only way out’, Bischof quotes Lenk as saying. ‘This turn was shown by the fact that in post-Mubarak Egypt [Lenk] had succeeded in holding a seminar on sleep’, Bischof writes. As an alternative to the ‘trap set by revolutionary parties’ – a constant hymn of Lenk’s writings, a thought foreign to Breton’s surrealism

– surrealist dream politics begins to look precisely like the expression of a ‘subjectivity that in becoming estranged from the world has become estranged from itself’, as Adorno famously observed of surrealism.

As a tactic, surrealist dream imagery – above all Ernst’s montages of childhood remnants from the nineteenth century – in splitting itself off from contemporary social reality leaves the world of reification intact. Adorno offers his crushing verdict on surrealism through the words of Hegel in the *Phenomenology*: ‘The sole work and deed of universal freedom is thus *death*, a death that has no inner significance or fulfilment.’ Like the Enlightenment itself, surrealism, Adorno writes, bears witness to the ‘relapse of abstract freedom into the supremacy of objects and thus into mere nature’. Lenk of course resists this criticism but nonetheless affirms, following Benjamin’s account of German *Trauerspiel*, a ‘vision of naked concreteness’, bare facticity ‘deserted by God and meaning’. It is hard to square this materialism with the one offered by Hegel. In her brilliant afterword to Aragon’s *Paris Peasant* she cites the following from Hegel: ‘The Natural holds its place in [the minds of the Greeks] only after undergoing some transformation by Spirit – not immediately.’ Perhaps everything in the debate between Lenk and Adorno (it is something of a replay of the Benjamin–Adorno dispute) rests on the status of this transformation. *Paris Peasant* narrates the rediscovery of ‘nature in the metropolis’. Aragon shows his readers ‘where, in the interstices of the contemporary world, mythical elements reside’. For Adorno, that dialectic could only appear too static, too unmediated, too void of development.

The root of the conflict between Lenk and Adorno centres on opposing accounts of materialism. Lenk affirms ‘Breton’s particular view of reality [she calls] poetic materialism.’ Breton’s materialism consists in the ‘idea that the body of the word creates the very first sense, the way an inadvertent movement of the human body can bring forth (or come up with) a thought, a rhythm’. Against this view, Adorno notes (rather cryptically) that in ‘surrealistic productions the individual associations, in their necessity, are not conveyed starting from the articulated image’. Any work free from the ‘crutches of meaning’ would require that it is also raised ‘above the level of chance’. In other words, surrealist associations risk being merely individual if they are not set within a larger social setting. It is only within a social context that they can do their destructive work. This is Adorno’s criterion for surrealist success, to strike the right

balance between individual fantasy and social whole. Adorno may have been wrong about that balance in certain works by Ernst and others (say between 1916 and 1924), but it should be clear that Lenk does not engage Adorno on these terms. Lenk offers alternate criteria for surrealist success.

If it is the body that produces the thought, then that thought, as long as it is tied to the body, is not only contingently, but by definition, without meaning. This is the point of Lenk’s assertion (in her fragment on Sade and Fourier, but it dominates her thinking as a whole) that ‘in the passions the fate of every human being is already foreshadowed’. Lenk cites Jean Gaulmier on this point, ‘the number of passions with which a being is equipped at its inception announces the destiny that it is promised.’ She goes on to cite Sade: ‘It is in our mother’s breast that the organs are produced that will render us susceptible to this or that fantasy.’ That these affective desires are nonsocial is clear when Sade observes how ‘education can do what it will, it no longer changes anything’. There are latent ‘energies’ that slumber within all of us; it is the task of the social to allow those to flourish and be fulfilled. For Lenk, May ’68 is ‘a truly Fourier-like state of affairs’, one where latent desires are unleashed and satisfied, even if temporarily.

Lenk narrates an encounter with a group of FGÉRI psychiatrists (Federation of Groups for Institutional Study and Research, founded by Félix Guattari). Lenk and her friends had ‘just read *Justine*’ and were struck by the ‘lack of restraint’ among the communards. Within this community ‘night has been abolished’ and she wonders whether ‘something new might not be more likely to come from [this] quarter than from those who are brilliantly, smoothly, repeating the old boring commonplaces?’ Boring and old, for Lenk, stand in some basic philosophical and political opposition to the shocking and new. After her visit Lenk worries she has begun to write in a ‘nomad’s language’. Or, rather, she has not ‘written a single word’, which means she has not ‘strayed very far from surrealism’. One begins to see how this improvised mixture of Breton’s surrealism, Vaneigem’s situationism, Guattari’s (nascent) nomadology, and Benjamin’s allegory gives rise to a new paradigm of aesthetically charged politics. But it is one largely at odds with her advisor’s paradigm.

Lenk’s politics are ultimately driven by a vision of ontological *difference*. Surrealism is not the ‘search for a common language, but the pleasure that results from the separate, finally communicable awareness of unbridgeable difference’. Following Fourier,

Lenk shows how these differences are founded on individuated desires or passions. These passions, she explains, are the 'real motors of the soul', for they are 'teleological in themselves'. Society channels the passions in various directions but it does not produce them. Desire is primary; it is what orders human communities along their innate axes; it is society's job to solicit every imaginable passion and bring them into new harmonies. Rather than equality, it is the 'most extreme differentiation of passions and characters' that defines a community. 'Every passion, be it the oddest one imaginable, for example, a preference for tough chickens, has its irreplaceable spot in the economy of this universe.' The Benjaminian detail becomes the fetishistic passion: 'The fanatical lover of soft pears is the sworn enemy of the devotee of firm pears. In this passion for the unique, this sensitivity to nuance, the men and women of Fourier's community of the future resemble the aristocratic dandy – a figure that had emerged in his era as a living protest against the banality and mediocrity of the bourgeois lifestyle.' This last point clarifies Lenk's political project. If your problem is the 'banality' of the 'bourgeois lifestyle', then your solution is the 'new'. If your problem is the 'elimination of boredom', then the 'elimination of poverty' could only be a (contingent) by-product of that goal.

Given the 'false social state of the passions' it follows that 'the rich cannot be entirely happy'. Alternately, Lenk shows how under Fourier's new social state 'Kings, clerics, brutes, capitalists, traders and criminals, with all their vices, will all fit harmoniously into the new order. Even bloodthirsty Nero, without any need to change his nature, would have become a useful member of the "harmony," namely, the best of all possible butchers.' It is, one might say, a butchered image of Marx's 'From each according to his ability, to each according to his need.' But nowhere does Marx imagine that communism would include kings, clerics, capitalists or Neros. Their harmonies are incompatible with the ones that emerge under communism. Then again, Lenk never really imagines that what she is doing is Marxist. Lenk is forthright about her opposition to organization as such: 'Odd that people's political perspective is completely irrelevant. For this reason I expect little from the well-meaning little leftist groups (including the SDS) and much from spontaneity.' (Adorno, as she says early on, is really 'an artist' for her.)

The consistency of Lenk's politics of the new emerges in her gloss of Fourier's account of class struggle. Fourier, Lenk writes, 'wants to retain class

differences, on account of the differentiations that are necessary for a series'. A politics of the new results in a vision where 'equality and fraternity, even as ideals, are just philosophical nonsense, which – if it should ever be possible to realize them – would only produce mediocrity and deathly boredom'. Against this death-dealing boredom we read about 'new forms of political opposition', 'new ways of thinking', 'new images', 'what counts is only the new thing', 'new meanings', a 'new definition of humanity', and the 'new social movement', the one that caused a 'moderate earthquake in France' (the latter phrase appears in 2001; it is hard to pinpoint the tremor-causing event). Lenk could only take comfort in Adorno's sense that 'capitalism had found within itself the resources for postponing the collapse more or less until the end of time.' This is why she could casually 'consign [Marxist contradiction] to the dustbin of history with other relics of the past'. Any movement worth having 'cannot be planned', Lenk reflects; one doesn't 'need a party of socialist unity, even the most avant-garde one' to 'channel' the experience of the new. Truly understood, Critical Theory was a renovation of the senses, an experiential model. It provided an 'alternative to politics' rather than a form of it. Against a 'culture of consensus and homogeneity', Lenk posits 'real cultural diversity'.

But there are old resources that speak to the (old) politics of the new. They are there in Marx's 1873 response to what he describes as the ongoing 'Indifference to Politics' among social idealists. Because there was little class consciousness at the beginning of the nineteenth century early socialists like Fourier had to 'subscribe to dreams of the *ideal society* of the future and condemn all such attempts at strikes, associations and political movements undertaken by the workers to bring some improvement to their lot'. Marx implies that Fourier would change his mind in a society marked by real class struggle. But it is only a 'bourgeois doctrinaire' who would 'forbid the working class every real method of struggle because all the arms to fight with must be taken from existing society'. It was Breton's dream that truly 'radical [political] propositions get formulated *outside the existing framework*'. In Lenk's words, one must 'escape from the old world' in order to produce the new one. What will the new world look like if its terms are formulated outside the existing framework? It's possible that it might look uncannily like the one we inhabit now.

**Todd Cronan**