Red and black

Kristin Ross, *May '68 and its Afterlives*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago and London, 2002. 238 pp., £19.95 hb., 0 226 72797 1.

Kristin Ross's lucidly written book on the 'survivals of May '68' tackles the 'memorial management of May', those games of memory and forgetting that make the event a prisoner of its successive representations. This book has the great merit of dismantling, with the utmost clarity, the laborious exercise of ideological mine-clearing which in thirty years of celebrations – from interpretations to commemorations – has ended up turning the greatest general strike in French history into a mere students' procession or a 'spring cleaning'. In the staging of '68 each anniversary decade marks yet another phase of intellectual and moral collapse.

In 1978, the Right was still in power and the pretenders of '68, some of them already converted to Mitterrandism, remained in the antechamber. The official Left presented its own union around the Common Programme of Government as the logical consequence of May. In 1988, the disavowal of Third Worldism and of any lyrical illusions had already taken its toll. Having ignored Rousset, Ciliga or Victor Serge, the *nouveaux philosophes* discovered the Gulag with Solzhenitsyn. The opposition between totalitarianism and democracy replaced class struggle and anti-imperialism on the ideological screen. Bruckner recommended that we stifle the white man's sob and get rid of the burden of colonial guilt. The repentant 'ex' sixty-eighters had become the eulogists of Mitterrand's modernity. Making honourable amends, the various Kouchners, Webers and other converts to social democracy now equated '68 with violence and only wished to retain from it a great movement for liberal-libertarian reform. In 1998, the 'exes', in France as well as in Germany, had been definitively converted to the realism of the Third Way; 1968 had become nothing but the upsurge of the vigour of youth, now evoked with tender condescension.

This methodical undertaking culminated in the formula of the German sociologist according to which 'nothing happened in France in 1968'. This stance consisted in arguing that the false event or nonevent of May masked the authentic event of the Prague spring. This rewriting – to which several 'actors' of May actively contributed, preoccupied with legitimating their successive trajectories – in turn accompanies and nourishes the ideological offensive of the liberal counter-reformation.

Ross rightly underlines the fact that this historical revision constitutes above all an exercise in depoliticization and dehistoricization. Far from opening up an unexpected field of possibilities, the event is inserted as a simple link within an ineluctable process of modernization and cultural *aggiornamento*. Instead of revealing the explosive contradictions at the heart of contemporary capitalism, the social irruption of '68 would represent 'the fulfilment of its deepest desires': 'Following this teleology of the present, official history thereby eliminates the memory of past alternatives in which we could get a glimpse of outcomes other than the ones that actually took place.' The temporal rupture disappears into the repetition of the same. Clearly, nothing took place that could have upset the unchanging order of works and days.

Ross targets two complementary discourses that contribute to this political neutralization. On the one hand, we find a sort of (auto)biographical appropriation, in which May '68 is represented as the revolt of a generation or as a 'generational drama'. The advantage of this operation is twofold. It allows one to exorcise the spectre of class struggle in favour of the recurrent conflict of generations: as the saying goes, youth will have its fling! It also allows the establishment of media-friendly spokespersons for the generation in question as the (sole) legitimate interpreters of the event: in accordance with an implacable – biological – law of ageing, which would constitute a maturation and progress in what concerns both wisdom and reason, the bohemians would have become bourgeois

and the Cronopes would have turned into the Famous. Order finally reigns in the best of all possible capitalist worlds.

Taking her cue from the pioneering work of Karl Mannheim, Ross expertly dismantles the ideological function of the concept of generation and the use of the royal 'we' among the repentant witnesses: 'We invented the Third World', declares Jean-Pierre Le Dantec (former director of *La cause du peuple*); 'We discovered the Third World', echoes Bernard Kouchner. Already in 1985 Guy Hocquenghem rose up against this generational glue, which in the name of an 'age class' imposes a sort of connivance or complicity between people who nevertheless find themselves – from some time back – in opposing camps of the social struggle.

According to Ross, the other great neutralizing procedure directed against May resides in sociological anaesthesia. Sociological recuperation would dissolve the singularity of the event in statistical quantification and the ponderous tendencies of the *longue durée*. On a smaller scale, this approach would repeat the ideological exercise that was applied with a certain degree of success to the French Revolution on the occasion of its bicentenary. In the midst of a historically determined process of modernization, an accident would have proven necessary (the stubbornness of the king's incompetent advisors in 1789, the blunders of the police in 1968) in order to send the situation skidding off the rails, only for history then to resume its normal course. According to this theory of the 'skid', the evental bifurcation and the plurality of possibilities disappear under the crust of the real, effaced by the ineluctability of the *fait accompli*: after a simple detour or an unfortunate setback history returns to its course, like a long and tranquil river.

These schools of thought, moreover, are the same ones which, not content with simply banalizing the event, make it responsible for all of society's atavisms and 'delays'. By opposing the course of modernization, the French Revolution would have created a country of small rural proprietors, with hundreds of cheeses and wines, to the detriment of industrialization. Likewise, May '68 would have generated the social rigidities that stand in the way of the necessary liberal reform.

The liberalization of moral standards, the right to contraception and abortion, narcissistic hedonism, individualism without individuality, have ended up imposing themselves, after a few years, in all developed societies. The French singularity of May 1968 – the fact that ink and saliva are still shed in its name, that books and essays continue to be written about it – is to a great extent the consequence of the international context (its simultaneity with the Tet offensive in Vietnam, the Prague spring, the student uprisings in Mexico or Pakistan), but, above all, of the general strike. Between 7 and 9 million strikers, according to statistics? No matter, we are indeed dealing with the biggest general strike of the twentieth century. The last of a cycle, some might remark so as to reassure themselves: the final bouquet of the workers' struggles begun in the nineteenth century, the last convulsion of

a world in the process of disappearing, as symbolized by the workers' fortress of Renault-Billancourt and by an old philosopher perched on a barrel to harangue a species of worker on its way to extinction (in an extinct world, where pedestrian crossings [*passages cloutés*] were still covered in nails [*clous*], where cops wore leaden pelerines, and telephones had round dials). Yet we can argue with just as much (if not more) verisimilitude that it was the first civic and social strike of the twenty-first century, the beginning of a new cycle of resistances and protests against commodity reification. The strike constituted a general uprising of the salaried society in an urban country, in which the peasantry represents a mere 7 per cent of the active population, and in which the salaried workforce makes up 80 per cent. This explains the movement which starts from the universities and the factories then to penetrate all pores of society, agitating the worlds of culture, communication and even sport; and also the aspiration – whose extent is new – to autonomy, self-management and the democratic control of struggles.

Ross's book has the indisputable merit of resituating the sequence of May – from 3 May (the student explosion) to 30 May (de Gaulle's speech announcing general elections) – in both space and time. In time: it recalls the deep links between the radicalization of '68 and decolonization, the war in Algeria; she underlines the role of Éditions Maspero, of the books by Fanon, Sartre, Nizan. In space: it insists on the international context, the Cuban revolution, the death of Che in Bolivia, the liberation struggle in Indochina, the Cultural Revolution. It is these conditions and this context that make the event a political event, a moment of crystallization of possibilities, and not a religious miracle pure and simple. Where superficial journalism only wants to see a lightning flash without either antecedents or premisses, the event instead reveals the potentialities harboured by an undecided situation, a situation that is determinate but not predictable.

The post-'68 legend thus represses precisely that which accounts for the singularity of May '68 (as compared to the student revolts on American or German campuses), to wit, 'the May of the proletarians'. Without the general strike, who would still be interested in this date? Ross correctly remarks that the revisionist enterprise dissolves the figure of the worker (and, to a lesser degree, that of the anti-colonialist militant), preferring to it that of the sole student leader. Hervé Hamon and Patrick Rotman's book, entitled precisely *Generation* (published at the beginning of the 1990s) is exemplary in this regard. Diametrically opposed to the *Annales* tradition, or to Daniel Guérin's vision of the French Revolution, Hamon and Rotman's book proposes an anecdotal history, centred on the biographies of a few actors (all of them products of the student movement); in other words, a history made by the princes, captains and great men of this world. It is significant, moreover, that when it comes to evaluating the impact of the event in terms of the number of dead, media commentaries insist upon the fact that 'there were no victims in '68'. If it is certainly true that restraint, sometimes going to the extent of producing a mere simulacrum of conflict, was remarkable on both sides (as testified by the memoirs of chief of police Grimaud or those of the union leaders), it is just as significant that in general this count 'forgets' the deaths not only of the lycée student Gilles Tautin but also of the two workers murdered in the grounds of the Peugeot factory at Sochaux.

A large part of the critique developed by Ross is thus both corrosive and salubrious. However, the repoliticization that she calls for against the depoliticization practised by the dominant discourses remains inconsistent. Essentially, it can be summed up in a handful of debatable generalities, whereby the political dimension of '68 would revolve around 'the political opening to alterity', the encounter with the colonized, the deconstruction of social identities, and so on.

Ross never approaches the situation from the standpoint of the political strategies at play. The balance of power between classes is at no point the object of analysis, any more than the balance of power between political currents or the debates over the orientation of the general strike and its consequences. The author's overt contempt for sociological research comes back to haunt her. By haughtily ignoring (as the bibliography attests) an entire literature which in any case does not constitute an apologetics, she ends up supporting her argument with references taken from very fragmentary and superficial accounts (drawn in particular from the book by Nicolas Daum). The result is a very deformed image of reality. If the sudden appearance of the Neighbourhood Action Committees can be considered an interesting symptom of a territorialization of the struggle and of an aspiration towards local democracy, the phenomenon nevertheless remained very limited, dispersed, and was far from being capable of contesting the union leadership's hold over the majority of the movement. The Maoist practice of the workers' enquiry is accorded disproportionate importance, whilst at the same time it is presented in an uncritical manner; in fact, much could be said about the demagogic populism that this practice often dressed up with falsely erudite considerations. If it is indeed

very pertinent to recall the original work produced for some years by the journal *Révoltes logiques* (edited by Jacques Rancière), there is not a single mention of a whole host of publications like the journals of the PSU or *Critique Communiste* or the *Cahiers de la Taupe*, or of the far Left newspapers of the 1970s. Paradoxically, this refusal of sociological research ends up playing into the hands of the generational narrative, by giving it a central, albeit critical, role in the refutation. Thus, the often very intelligent recourse made to cinematic or literary manifestations cannot but remain superficial. An ideological critique of ideology is not enough to restore the political dimension of controversy.

If the activity of the far Left (too readily identified by Ross with its Maoist components – which in fact remained quite ephemeral) does indeed anticipate transformations at work in the long term, the political scene in 1968 remained largely dominated by the strategies of traditional organizations, and of the Communist Party (PCF) in particular. It is not enough to observe that the gains of the general strike (which were substantial in terms of salaries and union rights) remained symbolically very inferior to those of 1936 or 1945, whilst the level of mobilization was actually greater. Of course, one can condemn the compromise made by the union leadership during the Grenelle negotiations. Nevertheless the question remains why these disappointing results did not provoke greater fractures within the unions and the majority parties (there is nothing here that could compare to the crisis that followed the Renault strikes in 1947). May '68 is the starting point for a molecular process that erodes the grip of the traditional apparatuses over the workers' movement, but it is still necessary to measure the amplitude and rhythm of these phenomena.

Unable to raise themselves above their own subjective perception of the event, some have made a mountain out of '68, turning it into their hour of personal glory, their most intimate altar. Conversely, for others it is today a question of good manners to forget the general strike and to retain from May '68 only a student escapade on the way to liberal–libertarian modernization. The reality is in fact situated somewhere between these two stances: we are dealing with a general strike that had a political impact, in which the elements of a duality of power remained embryonic, and whose breadth of demands was limited by the absence of any real political continuation on the part of an essentially respectful Left.

Instead of according this question of power in '68 the importance it deserves, Ross turns it into the symptom of its ebb and regression. The question of power thus does not even pose itself in the heat of the event, emerging only when the event has turned to ashes. Refusing to get involved in the dispute between Raymond Aron and Pierre Goldmann, for whom the absence of an armed confrontation would suffice to mark the limits of the situation, Ross affirms that 'the real question lies elsewhere, and is alien to the parameters of a revolution, whether failed or otherwise: why did something happen rather than nothing?' According to her, the theme of the conquest of power would remain prisoner to a 'narrative determined by the logic of the State'. Her presentation of the opposition between an imaginary Lenin and an equally imaginary Rosa Luxemburg does not go beyond clichés and platitudes. Her own tale of May, often very subtle when it comes to deciphering cultural symptoms (with regard to the film *La Reprise*, for example), thus ends up opposing one discourse of depoliticization with another. In this perspective, the strategic problem of May would find itself reduced to the failed meeting between workers and students, and to the desynchronization between the respective temporalities of the world of workers and the world of students.

It is not surprising that in this way Ross moves from the necessary and legitimate rehabilitation of the event to its fetishized hypostasis; and it should elicit no surprise that she finds the formula for this absolute and unconditioned event in the work of Alain Badiou: 'something that takes place by excess, beyond any calculation'. Such an approach in no way prepares us to follow and comprehend political currents and their trajectories, throughout the 1970s and beyond. It is as if politics, once reduced to the strong time of the event, were to be extinguished along with it.

The last part of the book briefly signals the fact that in the wake of the strikes of winter 1995, the scene of the debate has once again changed. Without actually turning crimson (to borrow from the title of a film by Chris Marker), the air has begun to gain some colour. The activity of social movements testifies to this, but also the rebirth of a socially aware cinema and the results achieved by the far Left during recent French elections. It would not have been in the least otiose to deal with the question of the links between this recent renewal and the heritage of another '68 – whoever its messengers may be – since it is indeed true that there is no rupture (and in particular no generational rupture) without an element of continuity. But Kristin Ross's unilateral approach to the 'memorial management of May' does not prepare her to reconsider the balance sheet of '68 from this angle.

Daniel Bensaïd

Translated by Alberto Toscano

The importance of being-two

Penelope Deutscher, *A Politics of Impossible Difference: The Later Work of Luce Irigaray*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, 2002. 256 pp., £26.95 hb., £11.95 pb., 0 8014 3825 X hb., 0 8014 8797 8 pb.

In this stimulating new study of Luce Irigaray's later work, Penelope Deutscher seeks to assess the coherence of the now frequent charge that Irigaray unjustifiably prioritizes sexual difference over issues of 'race' and multiculturalism. The issue is pressing not only because it relates to the central debate among Irigaray's readers in the mid-1990s on the nature of her purported essentialism. As Deutscher suggests, the matter is of wider importance given the recently intensified debate, particularly in liberal feminist circles, about the possibility of integrating concerns for gender equality and cultural recognition within a unified theoretical perspective. Thus, this study is at once a contribution to Irigarayan scholarship and an attempt to place Irigaray's feminism within wider theoretical debates about gender and the conditions of postcoloniality.

That Irigaray herself would wish to be placed within such a context is borne out by the publication of her recent book, *Between East and West: From Singularity to Community*, the text which appears to have motivated Deutscher's inquiry. In this work, Irigaray first aspires to deepen her earlier claim that sex constitutes the most important difference within each and every culture, and second she claims that the post-colonial West has much to learn from pre-Aryan Eastern traditions. Using these claims as a point of departure, the first stages of Deutscher's book provide a careful if critical endorsement of the continuity between Irigaray's earlier abstract work and her later more politically engaged writings. However, ultimately the book is critical of the later work for two reasons. First, she questions Irigaray's apparent desire to present the category of sex as an ever more specific and concrete entity, rather than a site of creative 'becoming' that has been rendered culturally impossible by masculinist universalism. Second, she expresses a connected concern about the apparent *cultural* essentialism in Irigaray's latest work on multiculturalism. Ultimately, since both of these worries centre on difficulties with the Irigarayan concept of *être-deux* or 'being-two', the success of Deutscher's thesis depends on the cogency of her criticism of Irigaray in this regard.

The charge of 'double essentialism' against Irigaray's later work arises out of what Deutscher takes as the 'impossibility' of sex in her philosophy as a whole. This seemingly arises out of Irigaray's early work on the phallocentrism of Western philosophy and psychoanalysis in her classic works of the 1970s, *This Sex Which is Not One* and *Speculum of the Other Woman*. Reading such texts through the optic of Irigaray's French and Anglo-American commentators, Deutscher emphasizes that Irigaray has always been concerned to show that the West's relentless dismissal of femininity as the atrophy, negativity and trope of masculinity renders entirely impossible a positive symbolic expression of women's bodily (and, by extension, pscychological or spiritual) integrity. Within this 'economy of the same', the problem is that women have nothing to do or say *as women*.

While the 'impossibility of sex' neologism might seem attractive, it seems to miss something fundamental in Irigaray's vision. As Deutscher herself concedes, in the Irigarayan scheme the fact of systematic exclusion logically suggests that there is something *real* to exclude, namely sex itself. To this extent, one might question the utility of characterizing the material reality of sex in Irigarayan terms as *either* impossible *or* possible. Deutscher's argument is that in Irigaray's later texts such as *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* and *Je, Tu, Nous*, women's awareness of the impossibility of their genuine sexual representation provides the very ground for the *possibility* of a transformation of the symbolic; it anticipates an adequate feminine representation of bodily integrity through legal institutions such as the much debated Irigarayan 'bill of sexuate rights'; and ultimately it evinces the possibility for sexed agency and citizenship in a reconceived ethical public sphere.

This may seem a productive reading at a certain level, but the interpretation is persistently problematic in that it treats sex uniquely as symbolic interpretation, and hence risks underestimating the force of Irigaray's most basic ontological claims. For example, in Chapter 2 (and, indeed, in many places elsewhere in the book), Deutscher takes up the familiar debate about the 'essentialism' of Irigaray's works. Since, she claims, Irigaray has nothing but the standard feminist contempt for traditional notions of 'the eternal feminine', she concludes that the concept of sexuate rights should only be understood 'rhetorically' – that is, as a protest against a culture in which sexual differ-

ence cannot be actively or positively expressed. Thus, according to Deutscher, Irigaray is not concerned to ask 'What are women really like?' Yet, inescapably, the basic claim grounding the entire project of sexuate rights is one of sex as fundamental to the very nature of human existence. In brief, by dealing with sex exclusively as *symbolic representation*, Deutscher avoids addressing head-on the most controversial implications of Irigaray's basic philosophical claim.

Nevertheless, one of the book's strengths is to respond to both French and Anglo-American feminist critics' charges of political naivety against Irigaray, by offering sympathetic readings of her treatment of political issues from the early 1990s onwards. This is helpful not only for the Irigaray specialist, but also for those approaching Irigaray's work in this area for the first time. Alluding to her critique of dominant conceptions of equality as they are embodied in the French state's explicit policies of *parité*, Deutcher explains that such policies are insufficient for Irigaray, because they force women to exchange a role of other for the role of 'equivalent', with the result that they remain symbolically colonized and annihilated. In such a culture, genuine equality is impossible because women are faced with having to accept the minimum social equality constitutional rights currently guarantee, at the disproportionate existential or psychic price of making do, for instance, with male working patterns and routines which are blind to their (sex-) specific needs. The problem, as Deutscher explains it, is that in an 'equality-as-equivalence' economy, women have no language in which to articulate these costs publicly. As a result, 'women's civil identity refers to an identity that does not exist'. As Deutscher expresses the point, Irigaray's 'bill of sexuate rights' represents justice for women as 'an anticipated, abstract possibility, which at once mimics … traditional representations of women so as to render them exorbitant'.

In recent years, Irigaray has had much more to say about the conditions of citizenship in Europe than is expressed by her (often puzzling) bill of sexuate rights. Given Deutscher's overall aim, however, one should not be too critical that she does not engage in greater detail with, say, Irigarayan perspectives on sexually-differentiated citizenship in, for example *Democracy Begins Between Two*. While this would have been desirable for those readers seeking primarily to assess Irigaray as a political theorist, this subject alone would have constituted sufficient material for another book. Aiming, instead, to treat Irigaray's corpus holistically, Deutscher turns in subsequent chapters to areas of Irigaray's thought largely neglected by Anglo-American political philosophers: namely, the relationship between language and social justice and the concept of the 'feminine divine'. Here, she highlights the transformative potential of Irigaray's reconceptualization of female divinity as the very ground of egalitarian justice, in the sense that it enables a transformed mode of communication, not only between women of different cultures, ethnicities and religions, but also between the two sexes. As Deutscher observes, Irigaray is concerned to undermine the traditional Western, secular liberal account of divinity based on what she takes to be a 'God-Different' economy. This economy is deficient for its unsatisfactory account of women's relationship with the sacred and the infinite. But more than this, through its valuation of a masculine-paternal god, it entrenches unsatisfactory identity structures for women *and* men generally.

The strength of Deutscher's thesis lies in these chapters. Here she succeeds more clearly than Irigaray herself in integrating the various aspects of Irigaray's corpus. In defending

the pluralism inherent in concepts of divinity and sexed 'genre', Irigaray is convincingly portrayed as a profoundly political thinker, whose unsettling of the identity structures implicit in the philosophical works of Levinas, Sartre and Merleau-Ponty anticipates a just, non-appropriative mode of being and of communication across the lines of fundamental difference. The core theme permeating these diverse areas of Irigaray's work is the concept of being-two, or *être-deux*. This is the recognition that adequate I–you communication must involve a strong but non-appropriative conception of difference. 'Being-two' must be strong in the sense that it relies on the notion of fundamental difference; and it is non-appropriative in that it refuses to assimilate or to cast the other as the trope or atrophy of one's own material being.

In spite of this productive understanding of 'being-two', Deutscher is concerned about Irigaray's tendency to vacillate between a conception of sex as a site of abstract hypothetical possibility and her increasing desire to present a more fixed definition of annihilated femininity. This is exemplified by Irigaray's attempt to provide a systematic ontology of sexual difference through research into sexed language in *To Be Two*, a project that seeks to establish *consistently* masculine or feminine patterns of linguistic usage. Deutscher is worried about the 'essentialist' implications of this move, and thus seeks to foreground instead what she takes to be the most convincing reading of the concept of 'being-two': namely, the minimal 'generative' ground, as specified earlier, on which non-appropriate communication across difference may occur.

In Chapter 10, Deutscher finds Irigaray's recent work on multiculturalism, *Between East and West,* to be equally problematic from the perspective of her preferred conception of 'being-two'. This time, Irigaray is guilty of cultural, rather than sexual, essentialism. Briefly, Irigaray holds that the West can look to yogic cultures, particularly those of India, for a benign paradigm in which a creative ethic of sexual difference based on a respect for breath, nature and femininity has been preserved. Here, Irigaray uses 'the East' to buttress her own long-standing criticism of the noise, ecological failures and persistent social and political problems of the West. Deutscher, however, charges her with the inconsistency of criticizing traditional accounts of the essential or eternal feminine, while paradoxically evincing the politically naive desire to reify the East. 'In arguing that the west is culturally impoverished, her work contributes to an idealized depiction of the east'; and that 'some time must elapse in Irigaray's corpus before she comes to ask if, say, Hinduism, might not also be subjected to her deconstructive analysis'. The idea of transparent understanding between Irigaray and 'the East' can 'hardly be accepted as ideal'.

Prima facie, Irigaray's theses in *Between East and West* do seem to depend detrimentally on cultural overdeterminations of a kind that anybody with knowledge of, say, India would surely contest. Yet it is equally worth noticing that, originating in a 1995 contribution to the world conference on women's inequality and global responsibility in Beijing, Irigaray's thinking on multiculturalism is more self-conscious and politically engaged than Deutscher's account suggests. In fact, as a whole, *Between East and West* seems to respect exactly the kind of minimal conception of 'being-two' that Deutscher extrapolated from Irigaray's corpus earlier in her book.

In sum, while this is a much needed contribution to debates about Irigaray's feminism, it is a pity that Deutscher focuses principally on the somewhat circular debates about essentialism. One may criticize Irigaray, as Deutscher does, for failing to specify the mechanisms that could institute 'the transformation of thought' necessary for genuine 'being-two', but it is unlikely that the mere charge of impracticability will undermine the appeal of Irigaray's imagined goals.

Monica Mookherjee

On the run

Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life, Volume 2: Foundations for a Sociology of the Everyday*, trans. John Moore, Verso, London and New York, 2002. 380 pp., £22.00 hb., 1 85984 650 5.

Henri Lefebvre's critique of everyday life reaches across the second half of the twentieth century as a paean for radical change and an attempt by philosophy to lay hold of actuality. Lefebvre offers a definition of philosophy as 'an attempt to bring the greatest possible quantity of present-day human experience, the experience of our so-called "modern" era, along with the practical experience of love, political action or knowledge, into a set of reflections and concepts'. Such a project (at least in 1961 when this book was first published in France) recognized the need for a radical alteration of the everyday, and among the results of such alteration was to be the dissolution of specialized activities such as philosophy and art. Indeed, the radical alteration of the daily and the dis-

solution of philosophy are intimately and dialectically connected: 'were we to change the process of the philosophical becoming of the world into the process of the world-becoming of philosophy, would that not be to metamorphose everyday life?'

The projected critique of everyday life, then, is nothing if not ambitious and it crackles and fizzles with the same kind of energy that animates the early humanist writing of Marx, so admired by Lefebvre. Given that Lefebvre wrote in the region of seventy books, and several hundred articles, it is hardly surprising that this book is not characterized by the kind of overly careful, fully cogitated writing that marks most academic production. Instead you get a form of 'thinking on the run' that simultaneously grapples with abstract, philosophical concepts and attempts to grasp the living actuality of modern life. At times the thinking runs away with itself. For instance, in his discussion of women's liberation and women's magazines the kind of dialectical manoeuvres that he performs in regard to other phenomena are short-circuited, and the critical potential of liberation gets blurred into the spurious claims of French magazine journalism. Lefebvre has quite rightly been criticized for his short-sighted and phallocentric response to feminism. Yet even here he manages to suggest a productively inventive approach to media analysis: within women-oriented magazines 'practical texts (such as recipes, menus, dress patterns) read like dreams, and … conversely the imaginary texts read in a practical fashion'. There is the echo here of Lefebvre's former enthusiasm for surrealism, but also a strong link to the critical theory of Adorno, who in the 1950s was similarly claiming that astrology columns were instruction manuals in disguise.

Lefebvre is faced with a world where 'the manufacturers of consumer goods do all they can to manufacture consumers', and where 'to a large extent they succeed'. As a critical response to such a situation he continues to employ concepts central to the traditions of Marxism. As in earlier formulations of his critique, alienation is productively extended to describe not just the modern workplace, but the everyday world more generally. Underlying Lefebvre's assessment of capitalist modernization is the understanding that it always articulates an uneven development. In characteristic fashion this allows Lefebvre some truly inspiring revelations. Rather than simply employing uneven development to highlight the conflicts and contrasts between two distinct but related phenomena (between nations, for instance, or classes), he uses it to discuss the uneven developments and effects *within* phenomena. For example, domestic technological development is initially seen in contrast to other industrial and military developments, which results in the critical assessment that the everyday lags behind these more instrumental sectors of society. The revolutionary spark here is the idea of diverting the massive budgets, resources, expertise, and so on, away from this military–industrial complex into the realm of the everyday world. What kind of revolutionary imagination would this ignite? But such analysis is pushed further. Television, for instance, is seen as producing varying, uneven effects: it allows access to a massively extended social world, but in a manner that condemns people to a reprivatized realm. Succinct, prescient and incorrigibly dialectical, Lefebvre pithily observes that '"globalization" is being achieved in the mode of a withdrawal'.

It is perhaps in the final chapters of the book that Lefebvre announces his most suggestive projects. One of these is a reformulation of semiotics, which is here named semeiology, in order to distinguish it from the structuralism of current semiology, which for Lefebvre was a technicist and moribund project. Lefebvre suggests his own social semiotics in which the object is the entire 'semantic field' or 'social text' made up of a varying mix of signs, non-signifiers (unnoticed, yet expressive elements within a culture), images, symbols and signals. It is the rise of the signal in modern culture that Lefebvre diagnoses, and, as he was to show in later works, is vividly demonstrated by the postwar planning of new towns. For Lefebvre our communicative environment, or social text, needs to negotiate between the dull legibility where the signal has triumphed ('the triumph of redundancy') and one illegible because 'overloaded with symbolism and overflowing with information'. Always an incipient urban planner, Lefebvre suggests that 'a good social text which is legible and informative will surprise its "subjects"'; it is the lack of surprise that the saturation of signals articulates – 'reduced to signals, it collapses into perfect banality'.

The final chapter is titled 'the theory of moments' and makes a case for the importance of activities and states of mind that *'attempt to achieve the total realization of a possibility*', even if they have little chance of success. It is the importance of these moments (and here he seems to be deliberately distancing himself from Debord and the privileging of 'situations') that reveals a different possibility for radical politics. For Lefebvre while certain forms of political action might provide a moment marked by a characteristic mix of clarity, negativity, absolutism and partial disalienation, the 'theory of moments' will also find these features in

more 'everyday' activities. So while the day of global demonstration against war on Iraq can be conceived of as a 'moment', so too can falling in love and forms of play. It is here that you get an inkling of what a critical activity might look like that fulfils philosophy while superseding it. However, this chapter is relatively brief and closes the book with a feeling of anticipation.

As the title tells us, this is not Lefebvre's first outing into the critique of everyday life, but nor is it, strictly speaking, his second. The translation of the first volume (also by John Moore and published by Verso in 1991) included a foreword that was itself a substantial piece of work, nearly as long as the original volume. Thus the first volume is made up of two distinct sections: the foreword first published in 1958 and the original book initially published in 1947. This second volume followed three years later in 1961, to be followed in turn in 1968 by *Everyday Life in the Modern World* (a kind of interim report which also included many reformulations). In 1981 came the third volume *De la modernité au modernisme: pour une métaphilosophie du quotidien* (which Verso still plans to publish in English). It is also worth mentioning that Lefebvre thought of his posthumously published *Éléments de rythmanalyse* (1992) as a fourth volume of the critique. Indeed, reading this second volume with this in mind allows one to see just how central rhythm-analysis always was to the critique of everyday life.

Taken as a whole the project offers the historian of ideas an idiosyncratic seismometer for registering the shockwaves of twentieth-century history as they reverberate within and across the various books. The continuities and discontinuities, the adjustments and reiterations, evidence one of the most vivid examples of a dynamic philosophy of modernity. It also provides an example of tenacious revolutionary zeal that refuses to acquiesce in the face of the intensifying colonization of the everyday by capitalism: 'as for revolution in general … we say of it what Rimbaud said of love: "Revolution must be reinvented".'

Ben Highmore

Error against obstacles

Gaston Bachelard, *The Formation of the Scientific Mind*, trans. Mary McAllester Jones, Clinamen Press, Manchester, 2002. 258 pp., £55.00 hb., £16.99 pb., 1 903083 23 0 hb., 1 903083 20 6 pb.

Long overdue for English publication, Bachelard's crucial 1938 text, *The Formation of the Scientific Mind* (his best-known in France, as McAllester Jones points out in her concise but useful introduction) is as relevant as ever. Its concern to do battle with the mind's 'conservative instinct', to unpick and undermine the epistemic obstacles that block scientific thought, lays waste to innumerable tendencies that have multiplied during the scandalously long stretch of time between its first French publication and its appearance in English. McAllester Jones has provided the best possible translation: clear, attentive to Bachelard's polemical yet subtle style, and accompanied by a series of informative footnotes that avoid being intrusive. She and Clinamen must be congratulated once again (the translation of Bachelard's 1936 study of Bergson and time, *The Dialectic of Duration*, was published in 2000) for introducing Bachelard's important epistemological works to the English-speaking world. (McAllester Jones has elsewhere published various extracts from these texts, with commentary, in her 1991 book *Gaston Bachelard, Subversive Humanist*.) It is a sorry indictment of the Anglo-American approach to European philosophy that while the majority of Bachelard's works on the imagination and poetry have been available for many years, only a smattering of his philosophy of science has been party to the same treatment: *The Philosophy of No* and *The New Scientific Spirit* – both of which are extremely hard to find. With luck, a renewed interest in this often noted but little read thinker will lead to the translation of his other works on, *inter alia*, rationalism, atomism, relativity, chemistry and time.

Bachelard is often acknowledged to be a key influence on Canguilhem, Foucault, Althusser, Serres and others seeking to differentiate themselves from various forms of phenomenology and the lure of subjectivity. It is less clear how this 'influence' actually manifests itself, and what the *problems* with it are. What, then, makes this particular text so relevant?

The main importance of the book lies in the discussion of the 'epistemic obstacle' in its multifarious manifestations: those inhibitory modes of thought that lie at the heart of cognition itself. The specificity of the

term ‘obstacle’ should be stressed and differentiated from the notion of *coupure* so beloved of Althusser, taken from elsewhere in Bachelard. However, there is an initial break posited at the beginning of *The Formation of the Scientific Mind* between scientific experiment and everyday experience. It is particular manifestations of the confusion of the two that concern Bachelard. Thus, we have a chapter each devoted to the obstructive nature of primary experience, general knowledge, ‘the over-extension of familiar images’ (in this case, the sponge), unitary and pragmatic knowledge, ‘substantialism’, animism, the libido and digestion. While Bachelard casts his critical net far and – with intention – eclectically, his ultimate aim is clear:

> we must put scientific culture on the alert so that it is always ready to move, we must replace closed, static knowledge with knowledge that is open and dynamic, and dialecticise all experimental variables.

It is the *dialectical* nature of Bachelard’s framework that perhaps intrigues most here. While Bachelard’s aim appears to have much in common with certain strands of Deleuzo-Guattarianism or contemporary Bergsonism (and, indeed, there are fruitful points of comparison), it is the constitutively dialectical aspect that distinguishes Bachelard’s account of knowledge and feeds into his broader account of the necessary role of error and discontinuity in rationality; a rationality so far removed from any naive or linear characterizations that it ultimately entails the ‘reconstructing’ of all knowledge at every moment, and the necessary ‘mutation’ of the human species on the basis of the ‘mental revolutions’ required by scientific invention.

In order to give weight to his analysis of each epistemic obstacle, Bachelard turns to a wide array of texts. In his discussion of ‘the libido and objective knowledge’, for example, he refers to, among other things, Martin Buber’s *Ich und Du*, Mallarmé’s brilliant line from ‘Brise marine’, ‘The flesh is sad, alas! and I have read all the books’, and an anonymous seventeenth-century treatise on alchemy. What is remarkable is the way that his argument (essentially, libidinal thought guides ‘neutral’ scientific endeavour far more insidiously than might at first appear) convinces, without reducing the force of the original textual sources. Indeed, for all his defence of boringness and his privileging of the ‘asceticism of abstract thought’, Bachelard possibly succeeds too well in his various presentations, making his case studies interesting for all sorts of unintended reasons, though this is hardly a negative point. As he himself claims, truly scientific thoughts are nothing other than ‘thoughts that suggest other thoughts’.

It is by ‘psychoanalysing’ the common obstacles of cognition that Bachelard hopes to move beyond their stifling grasp and to reinvigorate the sense of the problem being posed in each case. Truth for Bachelard lies, then, in the dynamics of the problematic; it is never static, nor purely utilitarian, nor beyond revision – ‘there is no truth until an error has been rectified’. When he discusses the obstacle of unity (the declaration of one general principle of Nature, the thought that ‘everything is the cause of everything’), he makes it clear that knowledge that seeks to determine itself as beyond contradiction, as complete, as absolutely ‘true’, is as harmful to dynamic scientific knowledge as the thought that seeks to quantify minutely elements in their fragmented isolation without understanding their relations to larger epistemological problematics. Bachelard presents his own position as open to attack from all angles:

> we would like to take up an intermediate position between realists and nominalists, positivists and formalists, between advocates of facts and of signs. We are therefore laying ourselves open to criticism on all sides.

It is the subtle way in which the work is shot through with an awareness of error, discontinuity and the revisable nature of reason that makes it so rewarding. Bachelard’s pedagogical, but never dictatorial, style is as much at home discussing Strindberg as

Heisenberg; his careful and often entertaining discussions of the pitfalls and constitutive blind spots of thought deserve a wide readership.

Nina Power

Immanuel Icke

John McMurtry, *Value Wars: The Global Market versus the Life Economy*, Pluto Press, London, 2002. xxv + 277 pp., £50.00 hb., £15.99 pb., 0 7453 1890 8 hb., 0 7453 1889 4 pb.

John McMurtry's books always seem to appear with lots of pre-publication praise. His *Cancer Stage of Capitalism* (Pluto, 1999) was described by Susan George as 'deeply learned, relentlessly logical and corrosively liberating', while McMurtry himself was described as 'an unconventional, idol-smashing philosopher imbued with passion and urgency'. This new book comes with similar praise in no fewer than four back-cover plaudits. In one of these, G.A. Cohen describes McMurtry's work as combining 'a philosophical perspective in the deepest sense, a perspective of continuity with the historical preoccupations of philosophy, both East and West; a novel and compelling general conception of the capitalist "global market as an ethical system"; and a wealth of scholarly reference across many disciplines in the humanities and social sciences.' Think of a book written by George Monbiot and Naomi Klein after they had spent a year studying Kant and the early Marx and you might get some idea of why people are fond of these books. Unlike all those snarling critical critics, here is a writer who at least tries to lay down the principles for an alternative system.

It is sad, then, that this is one of the more unreadable texts on the market. It may have the verve, swagger, and passion lacking in many other books, but try this:

> The regulating value-set of the life-ground ethic selects for means of life capital growth, not means of money capital growth, as society's properly regulating principle of governance across generations.

Likewise, the regulating value of the proposed 'life economy' is said 'to turn life into more vitally comprehensive life by means of life'. Such formulations are resonant more of David Icke than Kant or Marx. Simple words are always given some rhetorical embellishment. And words such as 'totalitarian', 'fanatic', 'terrorist' and 'psychopath' are used to describe things McMurtry opposes, without any sense that adopting such terminology developed by the ruling ideology may generate certain problems.

The style is compounded by McMurtry's assumption that he is the only writer brave enough even to consider some of the issues in the book. 'Few dare to name the game', as he puts it with an eye to his own swagger. In his discussion of prisons and criminality, for example, he claims that we must 'see through the category of "*criminal*" which even critics assume as given', and asks 'where anywhere in legal studies, criminology or philosophy of law do systematic corporate and state crimes arise as even a *question*?' It's a rhetorical question of outrageous ignorance. Not only is there a body of political and scholarly work which *has* raised the question, and even tried to answer it, but some of this work has appeared with McMurtry's own publisher. This ignorance masquerading as bravery is far from being a one-off:

> one can examine any mass media organ from 1985 to 2002 to see if even *once* the evidence against the global market experiment arises as an issue of concern.… Has the certitude of the fundamentals [of the global market] been once questioned by … a mass information system?

The rhetorical gesture completely obscures the fact that liberal broadsheets regularly carry such items; indeed, McMurtry's own footnotes are full of citations from mass media organs such as the *Guardian* and some of its regular contributors, such as Monbiot.

This looseness with the work of others is carried over into McMurtry's occasional excursions into the history of ideas. Again, an example: it is suggested that scientific management and 'behaviorist technology' build on 'the first systematic control of human beings, first explicated by Machiavelli'. But Machiavelli is a poor candidate for such a position, should one be needed, since his idea of order was founded on a dialectic of love and fear rather than in any systematic control. Why waste all that time and money on surveillance to achieve obedience when the butchered body of an unpopular local leader left in the town square does the trick just as well?

McMurtry's opposition to the global market lies in his notion of the life-economy, currently repressed beneath the abyss of 'no alternative'. What this life-economy consists of is initially unclear, since it often appears in terms suitable for *New Age Monthly* or *Spiritual Times*:

> Consider all that is real which does *not* follow invariant sequences. This is the inexhaustible field of *the living moment* which is continuously new.

It includes human thinking itself, the felt side of being alive of any being in whom blood runs, and the infinitude of the internal universe of images and thoughts to which awareness at any moment can open.

But it soon becomes clear that while the argument appears to be pitched against capital it is, like most new-agery, pitched against 'money-capital'.

The argument is not *anti*-capital, but anti-*money*-capital. The proposed 'life economy' turns out to be founded on capital – 'life capital'. Life capital is defined as

> *the generic and non-consumed bearer of means of life in an economy's overall life sequence of value through generations*. Thus life capital *includes* physical capital, natural capital, and social capital, as well as money capital, *so far as each serves this macro life sequence of value*, and is not spent away.

In other words, it's capital, but not as we know it. It is capital in which interest rates and a more general sovereignty over the money supply are used as interventionist measures for 'life', and a general 'Well Being Index' is used to measure a society's economic performance. Such an index is to measure things such as sufficient nourishing food, health care, access to clean water and so on (all items on current international indices and all items over which political struggles currently take place).

What is clear, then, is that despite the book's subtitle, what is being discussed is not an argument for an alternative to the global market, but rather a set of principles around which capital might be reorganized. The 'value war' is over the humanization of capital. Regardless of its passion, verve and swagger, the book is little more than a long demand that capital really should be nicer to people.

Mark Neocleous

A fine mind mulled

Agnes Heller, *The Time is Out of Joint: Shakespeare as Philosopher of History*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham MD, 2002. 375 pp., £65.00 hb., £24.00 pb., 0 7425 1250 9 hb., 0 7425 1251 7 pb.

According to the back cover, *The Time is Out of Joint* 'handles the Shakespearean oeuvre from a philosophical perspective'. Mainly this means taking up a theme of broadly philosophical character – such as nature and history, character and identity, acting and disguise, outsiders, love and families, time, good and evil – and tracing it through some Shakespearean plays. Occasionally and usually briskly, writing by philosophers is invoked. There is almost no reference to the efforts of academic Shakespeare critics; indeed, there are no citations at all, there is no bibliography, and no index.

There should be advantages in observing a fine mind mull over the Shakespearean corpus without the constraints of professional academic criticism. Heller comes up with some good ideas. She derives her account of Shylock from a production by Robert Afoldi in Budapest. Picking up on Portia's first words in court, 'Which is the merchant here? and which the Jew?' Heller infers that Shylock (so far from displaying distinctively Jewish manners and garb, as actors and directors have assumed) is indistinguishable from the others. This is because he has harboured assimilationist expectations. Nothing makes him different, in fact, other than the determination that he should be named a Jew. The hatred of Venetian patricians has no other basis.

The downside to Heller's innocence of literary scholarship is a tendency to reinvent the wheel. In *King Lear*, for instance, 'It is not just a storm. It is a symbolic storm (just as in *The Tempest*).' Again: 'Cleopatra is not a French cocotte, as she is sometimes played. She is the queen of Egypt – she is Egypt. (Antony frequently calls her "Egypt").' Lady Macbeth is by nature a woman, and hence deeply compassionate.

A leading question, in Heller's view, concerns two rival concepts of nature. One 'identifies tradition with nature'; so, for example, daughters should obey their fathers. The other concept finds it 'natural that everyone succeed according to his talents and not according to his rank'. Heller is unaware that this issue has often been addressed, since the classic study by John F. Danby, *Shakespeare's Doctrine of Nature* (1949). Indeed, Danby's version might be thought the more philosophical, in so far as he stages the matter as a debate between Hooker and Hobbes.

Heller's philosophers do not include post-structuralists, who might be specially mistrustful of treating characters as if they were figures in a realist

novel. Sometimes her comments on character are surprising and ill-supported, for instance when she asserts that Macbeth 'never thinks before acting'. Interpreters of the play have usually viewed Macbeth, contrariwise, as notably given to cogitation. 'Look, how our partner's rapt', Banquo exclaims, as Macbeth ponders the Witches' prophecy. In a famous soliloquy he assesses the pros and cons and decides against killing Duncan; it is his wife who prefers action to thought.

Also, *The Time is Out of Joint* contains a sequence of casual errors, suggesting that some of the plays have been read in haste. It is Mowbray, not Mortimer, who is accused of killing Gloucester in *Richard II.* It is Angelo, not Antonio, who is made the Duke's deputy in *Measure for Measure*; in the same play, it is Isabella, not Mariana, who is to marry the Duke. It is Edgar, not Edmund or Albany, who disguises himself as Poor Tom in *King Lear.*

In times when expertise is ever more specialized, it is perhaps to be welcomed that Shakespearean texts offer themselves as one site where a traditional intellectual may express herself without hindrance. Even so, professionals might have had something useful to contribute.

Alan Sinfield

Import–export

Jacques Derrida, *Deconstruction Engaged: The Sydney Seminars,* edited by Paul Patton and Terry Smith, Power Publications, Sydney, 2001. 119 pp., US$10.95 pb., 1 86487 433 1.

In August 1999 Jacques Derrida, visiting Australia for the first time, presented two public seminars in Sydney with the aim of introducing aspects of his post-1990 work to a predominantly non-specialist audience. *Deconstruction Engaged* is the collected transcripts of these seminars, published to 'provide clear, systematic and highly accessible introductions' to recent issues in Derrida's thinking. Derrida is presented in discussion with a panel of experts and his audience, covering topics such as the mass media, visual arts, technology, justice and hospitality. The seminars also allow Derrida several opportunities to offer his thoughts on specifically Australian political and cultural issues, providing examples of deconstruction engaged with contemporary political questions.

The discussions in *Deconstruction Engaged* bring into focus a number of concerns that have been emerging in Derrida's writing over the past decade. During this time, Derrida's work has undergone an important shift, away from obscurities of his earlier texts, towards more concrete engagements with such topics as ethics, friendship, inheritance, technology, politics and Marxism, in a phase that has been dubbed 'affirmative deconstruction'. The problem with this new political focus is that, while Derrida may have claimed that deconstruction has always functioned as a form of radicalized political critique, its actual affirmative political use is still open to serious question, as the recent controversies over *Specters of Marx* (collected in Michael Sprinker's *Ghostly Demarcations*, 1999) amply illustrate.

Similar questions haunt *Deconstruction Engaged.* Some of the most interesting debate in the seminars occurs when Derrida is asked to comment on contemporary political issues in Australia, particularly as he seems remarkably averse to engaging in such debates. In discussions with Terry Smith over the 'spectrality of the media', Derrida details how, in an interview with an Australian newspaper, he was reluctantly drawn into the debate over the conditions of indigenous Austral-

ians and the propriety of the Australian government offering a formal apology for past injustices. Derrida states that he tried to avoid the question by telling the reporters that this 'is a problem for Australians, for the Australian government to take on its own responsibility', before finally conceding that 'it might be better if the government did apologize, but that is up to you'. So much for Derrida's bold call in *Specters* for a New International, which promised fearlessly to advocate the extension of human rights and international law 'beyond the sovereignty of States'!

In another instance, Penelope Deutscher asks Derrida how his recent writing on hospitality could be applied to issues surrounding Australia's history of colonial violence. Derrida pauses briefly to address this issue, considering how those who continue to benefit from the history of colonialism must also accept responsibility for the original violence and exploitation, and not simply dismiss it as occurring 'before our time'. This seems a fruitful area, but Derrida does not follow through; and before we know it, he leaves these questions aside and is off again on a long, introspective pondering on the concepts of 'responsibility' and 'decision', and his point is lost in a sea of wordplay and garbled sentence construction.

The panel approach adopted for these seminars has its advantages and disadvantages. At its best, this interaction helped to break down Derrida's tendency to verbosity, allowing brief yet thorough excursions into Derrida's recent thought. Terry Smith's chapters, covering Derrida's views on visual art, technology and media, achieve this admirably. Smith engages in a succinct discussion with Derrida over the central concerns of Derrida's publications such as *Memoirs of the Blind*, *The Truth in Painting* and *Specters of Marx*, and draws useful parallels between the themes of these works and those of Derrida's earlier publications, such as *Of Grammatology* and *Writing and Difference*. However, some of the panel members seem to get carried away when sharing the limelight with Derrida. The worst offender here is David Willis, who seems desperate to out-Derrida Derrida by launching into a painfully convoluted and self-referential question, opening with the statement: 'By way of a parenthetical introduction, I'd like to say that the question I am going to put to Jacques Derrida are double. I'll repeat it: *the* question I am going to put to Jacques Derrida *are* double.' Willis probably thought he was offering a sophisticated deconstructive performance, but it reads as if he forgot to run a spellcheck.

James Smith

Derrida: the movie

Derrida, directed by Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman, 2002.

If, like Jacques Derrida, what you would really like to see in a documentary about a philosopher is their sex life, Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman's portrait is likely to disappoint. While Derrida himself repeatedly associates the idea of autobiography in philosophy with indecency, *Derrida* remains thoroughly prim and proper. The tone is set when Derrida himself concedes that, were a camera crew not following him around, he would probably be philosophizing in his dressing gown.

We do not see Derrida's dressing gown in *Derrida*. Nor do we see anything else which satisfyingly matches what Derrida himself claims he would like to see in a documentary – that is so say, those things which the philosopher's writings exclude. One reason for this is fairly straightforward, though you would not know it from watching the film: Derrida maintained the right to the final cut. And one of the scenes that he apparently dispensed with? The scene in which he demanded the right to the final cut.

There is a simple dishonesty to the film's failure to acknowledge this self-censorship on the part of its subject, but it really only masks a more fundamental disingenuousness in the filmmakers' original conception. Dick has said, 'We discussed how we didn't want this to be a primer or a standard biopic. We did want this film to be very ambitious theoretically; to give a sense of Derrida's work and at the same time make it cinematic and pleasurable, and funny as well.' Funny it sometimes is, though this owes much to the subject himself, who is urbane and twinkly. But the gap between primer and biopic, and the failure to find a third term, hobble the film. In fact, rather than neither, the filmmakers have opted for both, watering down both theory and portrait in the process.

The theory appears in discrete, paragraph-sized chunks, read in air-hostess tones over off-the-peg 'poetic' imagery. These are unlikely to prime anyone for anything except boredom. One wonders what the filmmakers would have done had the subject of their film been an important particle physicist – read the first paragraph of some of his major research papers? The film seems gently to mock the New York students who attend one of Derrida's lectures in the hope that hearing his philosophy in his own voice, sheer proximity even, will elucidate the texts; but *Derrida* itself seems secretly to share this hope and remains incapable

of reflecting on what relationship the man might have to the writing – which is surely its only justification. A more ambitious film might have rejected using the texts at all, or indeed any justification of its subject's inherent importance, but there is a thoroughly pre-philosophical awe for Derrida and deconstruction at the heart of Dick and Ziering Kofman's project.

According to Dick, 'Derrida's very rigorous. If you ask him a question he will address it from all angles and these answers would be very fascinating, but sometimes they would go on for ten minutes, and you knew you couldn't use it.' Where the knowledge that a ten-minute take couldn't be used might come from, or whether it is knowledge at all, is never clear. For Dick and Ziering Kofman, documentary film seems to have no inherent philosophical, or political, content of its own – everything is considered from the point of view of a naively conceived layman audience, and adjusted accordingly. The filmmakers enjoy the conceit of filming Derrida watching rushes of the film, and then filming him watching himself watching. This kind of self-consciousness is repeatedly substituted for thinking. When, at the end of a lecture on reconciliation and forgiveness, a South African student suggests to Derrida that his position covertly justifies the indifference of the white middle class to which his audience belongs, Derrida's answer is cut short and he is allowed to reconstruct the argument later, at his leisure and away from any more difficult questions.

Derrrida is certainly not likely to face any difficult questions from his biographers (unless 'which philosopher would you like to have been your mother?' counts). Ziering Kofman characterizes her approach in the following way: 'You know, it's nice to listen to philosophy. Even if it's not in your training, it's nice to have someone sit down and say, "Hey what does love mean?"' And indeed, her questions throughout seem to construct Derrida as a kind of exotic, *jeu d'esprit* ing *philosophe*, of the type from which Derrida himself has so clearly distanced himself in his comments on Sartre. Her questions seek to draw out the kind of aperçus that would be at home in Alain de Botton, which is to say musings on the Big Questions: philosophy is to be a virtuoso improvisation on familiar themes. Derrida's own occasional irritation with this is mostly manifested in long, rambling digressions on why he cannot answer the question.

If there is an indecent omission in *Derrida*, it is its failure to conceive of the biographical philosopher outside of a thoroughly nineteenth-century framework of unexplained genius. There is no reflection, for example, on the peculiar history of deconstruction in the United States, where much of the film takes place. Nor do any other contemporary philosophers gain more than a mention – a real layman would assume that Derrida's contemporaries were Kant, Hegel and Heidegger. Towards the end of the film, a few other talking heads appear in order to detach Derrida from his background and biography entirely – his brother explaining how he just doesn't know where Jacques gets all these ideas – and the philosopher finally remains, like Ryuichi Sakamoto's much-praised soundtrack, a polite enigma.

Michael Sperlinger