

Let's talk about sex

Luciana Parisi, *Abstract Sex: Philosophy, Bio-technology and the Mutations of Desire*, Continuum, London/New York, 2004. x + 227 pp., £60.00 hb., £18.99 pb., 0 8264 6989 2 hb., 0 8264 6990 6 pb.

Mario Perniola, *The Sex Appeal of the Inorganic: Philosophies of Desire in the Modern World*, trans. Massimo Verdicchio, Continuum, London/New York, 2004. 147 pp., £55.00 hb., £15.99 pb., 0 8264 6244 8 hb., 0 8264 6245 6 pb.

'Sex' is an ambiguous word in several respects. Its dual references to sex difference and sexual intercourse often operate indistinctly and in concert with a fuzzy notion of 'sexuality' in a superficially legible but seriously confused semantic field. What, then, is the 'sex' in the title of these two books? Although both Parisi and Perniola, in their very different ways, set out to redefine sex for the twenty-first century, both at least begin with the same unreconstructed object in order to destroy it: sex defined as specifically human sexual coupling or mating, that coming together in the flesh of organic bodies associated with pleasure, orgasm and (an occasional consequence of certain kinds of sex between certain kinds of people) sexual reproduction. Sex in this sense, according to both authors, is *over*.

Luciana Parisi's book, which begins 'In the age of cybernetics...', presents this, initially, as a historical thesis. Bio- and info-technologies have progressively blurred the boundaries between 'artificial' and 'natural' sex, with the possibility of cloning, in particular, problematizing the definitions of male and female and mother and father. In Parisi's 'Introduction', the intellectual-political debate on the interpretation and consequences of the historical novelty of cybersex – a feminist debate in the broadest sense of the term – is represented as a stark opposition between two equally inadequate positions. Is it the realization of the Cartesian dream of disembodiment, the patriarchal dream of the liberation from the flesh coded 'feminine'? Or is it 'the prolongation of sexual pleasures outside the limits of the body', the liberation of desire from biological function, and in particular the liberation of feminine desire from the destiny of reproduction? Under the encompassing concept of 'abstract sex', Parisi proposes – no surprise here – 'a third way' to 'map' the emergence of the new sex.

This is necessary, Parisi implies, because the alternatives to be surpassed do not escape a certain conception of the body tied to the traditional understanding of sex 'where a set of pre-established possibilities determines what a body is and can do'. To the extent

that the aim of Parisi's book, in the name of feminist politics, is the criticism or even destruction of this conception of the body, it is difficult not to sympathize with its motivation. To put it simply (which Parisi never does), the conception of the body as, for example, necessarily either male or female determines what a body can be in such a way that the intersexed child is ontologically, and not just socially, unacceptable, a form of existence that is either not recognized as such – that cannot be recognized as such – or is not allowed *to be*. The criticism of this conception of the body is not, however, based on a claim about the inadequacy of the model to empirical reality, but on the presumption of a more sophisticated relation between 'model' and 'reality' where the former helps to shape (but does not 'create', idealistically) the latter. Given this aim, Parisi is curiously dismissive of Judith Butler, merely repeating the misunderstanding of her work as arch 'discursive constructivism', aligning her with the idea, completely alien to Butler, 'that you can perform your own gender by changing your sexual identity', whatever that means.

However, as a contribution to feminist theory (a category which, by now, should be understood to include a vast field of both objects and influence), Parisi's book is most persuasive in the performance – rather than the explicit statement – of the need for philosophically sophisticated concepts of difference and differentiation. Indeed, it may be that it is currently one of the most important disciplinary tasks of feminist philosophy to provide just this. Parisi assumes – although one would need to argue for – a Bergsonian–Deleuzian concept of differentiation as the actualization of already 'real' virtualities. The processual emergence of difference (for example becoming-woman) displaces the idea that already differentiated (and limited) possibilities – identifiable unities – are actualized in a process of exclusion whereby one is either male or female. If the ontological monism which is part and parcel of this conception of differentiation is one of the main weaknesses of Parisi's book, as explained below, the recognition of

difference as a philosophical problem, rather than an empirical given, is nevertheless extremely important for contemporary feminist theory.

Parisi's aim to 'construct a new metaphysical conception of the body-sex' – that is, a conception of the 'indeterminate potential of the body to mutate across different organizations of sex and reproduction' – is approached through the central concept of 'abstract sex'. Abstract sex is, according to Parisi, a 'machine' (or 'abstract machine') in the sense proposed by Deleuze and Guattari, a machine constituted by the process of endosymbiosis, or the abstract machine of endosymbiosis itself. Endosymbiosis is the process by which reproduction or replication (the production of new 'compositions of bodies') occurs at the molecular or cellular level through contagion, invasion, parasitism, trading and so on. Parisi locates the process of endosymbiosis – the scientific elaboration of which she takes from the work of molecular biologist Lynn Margulis – as it functions across different but connected levels of biological, cultural, social, technological and digital organization. As abstract sex is sometimes simply equated with endosymbiosis, the need for the additional concept of abstract sex, and its often tortuous elaboration, is at times unclear. But the original move from the traditional concept of sex to the theory of endosymbiosis, which generates the notion of abstract sex, is motivated – indeed necessitated – by Parisi's metaphysical commitment to an ontological monism of 'the One', Spinoza's Substance, Nature or God, Deleuze–Guattari's Planomen, or what Parisi also calls 'hypernature' or 'artificial nature'.

Abstract sex, as a theoretical proposition facilitating the analysis of different hypernatural strata (i.e. forms of organization) of sex and reproduction, thus differs from plain endosymbiosis in its ontological indifference of application. As a process located at the molecular or cellular level, endosymbiosis could only function by analogy at the level of the social or the cultural. 'Abstract sex', on the other hand, in the theoretical context of an undifferentiated and ontologically indifferent hypernature, operates in the same way across the hypernatural strata because the body (or the 'body-sex') is not constituted at any one of these levels alone. This is why, according to Parisi, abstract sex is a 'third way': it locates the body neither exclusively at the biological level (the mistake of the 'corporeal' technophobic feminist interpretation of cybersex) nor at the cultural or linguistic level (the mistake of the 'incorporeal' technophilic feminist), but bypasses these dualisms.

Parisi deploys the concept of abstract sex across three of a virtually infinite number of strata of the organization of sex – the biophysical, the biocultural and the biodigital strata – between which, according to her, there is no fundamental difference. The density – oftentimes the sheer unreadability – of the chapters dealing with these strata is bloody. The monistic metaphysics of the hypernatural, in which there is no ontological differentiation of the objects of various discourses, means that there is no differentiation between types of discourse and little real sense that any of them deployed in this 'warfare' might be incompatible with each other or making different kinds of claims. Thus Irigaray – the most strenuous feminist purveyor of a theory of irreducible sexual duality – can sit here quite happily alongside the critique of sexual duality, as a consequence of the 'resources' approach to philosophical theories. One may, however, attempt the following reconstruction of the main line of Parisi's argument.

The chapter on the biophysical strata ('the cellular level of the body-sex') outlines a new conception of sex and reproduction – symbiotic sex – that challenges the traditional view of sex as sexual mating – that is, the conjunction of sexed bodies involving the sexual organs and transmitting sexed chromosomes. In short, the chapter aims to disassimilate the concepts of sex and reproduction from the idea of sexual reproduction. Parisi ties the traditional concept of sex ('meiotic' sex) to Richard Dawkins's neo-Darwinian account of evolution, which, if somewhat misrepresentative of the current state of mainstream evolutionary theory, at least provides a stark background against which to make her point. On this account of evolution, sexual mating functions to preserve the fittest genes, ensuring the inheritance of the (metaphorically) 'immortal' germ plasm at the expense of the mortal soma plasm, the phenotype, identifying the two sexes in terms of the sexed organism's function in reproduction, its sexed character itself being determined through inheritance.

Parisi contrasts this with the idea of symbiotic sex, drawn from the work of Lynn Margulis and Dorion Sagan. 'During the Archeon Aeon, in the pre-Phanerozoic, 3900 millions of years ago', we are told, bacteria suffering from DNA damage 'repaired' themselves by 'borrowing' genetic material from other, different kinds of bacteria, 'trading microbial DNA across unrelated bacterial cells'. This 'transgenesis or cloning of genetic information' is 'bacterial sex'. Another form of endosymbiosis involves the incorporation or cellular merging of different bacteria: 'hypersex'.



Sexual reproduction, according to this reading, does not just emerge from, but is still dependent on, endosymbiotic processes to the extent that the division of cells known as ‘meiosis’, which occurs in all sexually reproducing organisms, is symbiotic. At the heart of sexual reproduction, then, is hyper- and bacterial sex, meaning that meiotic or traditional sex ‘does not exclusively ensure the reduction and the transfer of genetic material [as the neo-Darwinists would have it], but also the recombination of bacterial genes residing in the cytoplasmic body of the eukaryotic [i.e. possessing a distinct nucleic membrane] cell’.

This extreme condensation of the argument should be enough to give a sense of what seems to be Parisi’s main point in this chapter. This is to locate human sexual reproduction within a wider context of sex, redefining sex to include bacterial trading (‘human sex and reproduction is neither the first nor the last mode of sex and reproduction’) and, she hopes, problematizing the idea that the emergence of sexual difference, or sexual differences, depends on the actualization of limited, inherited, possible identities (male or female), which is the presumption in the traditional concept of sex. In contrast, she favours a conception of ‘gender as a process of becoming: a molecular differentiation of bacterial sex, hypersex and meiotic sex’.

In the chapter on the biocultural strata (the organization of the body-sex at the socio-cultural level) Parisi describes an ‘overcodification’ of sex (as traditionally understood) in the organization of the body-sex in disciplinary society. According to Parisi, this organization of the body, linked to a thermodynamic–entropic

conception of energy, is characterized by the transcoding of the patterns of meiotic sex (the mode of reproduction of human sex, or genetic filiation) onto the conception of desire (especially in Freud’s economy of excitation and expenditure) and into the social and economic spheres (especially in Marx’s conception of the reproduction of capital). Against the disciplinary organization of sex and reproduction captured in Freud’s linking of sex, reproduction and death, Parisi counterposes another ‘machine’: parthenogenic sex. Parthenogenesis is, classically, the development of a new individual from an unfertilized ovum, or human conception without fertilization by the male. Deleuze’s account of masochism as the non-genital, non-climactic intensification of desire is, for Parisi, the ‘demonstration’ of the logic of this new machine. The disavowal of the principle of filiation (traditional sex-reproduction) in masochism involves a kind of reproducibility – of the masochist’s desire and of the masochist as desiring machine – which is ‘a rebirth of feminine sex, a second yet initial becoming independent both of the father and of the uterine and Oedipal mother’. Parthenogenic sex, defined as ‘the autonomy of reproduction from the logic of filiation’, is a ‘line of flight’ in the micropolitics of becoming-woman, and, as such, a tactic in the warfare for ‘a feminism to come’ (as Brian Massumi says on the back cover).

The mapping of the third, bio-digital level of strata – the body-sex defined by information science and technologies such as cloning and genetic engineering – reveals, according to Parisi, ‘the *real* subsumption of all machines of sex’. As thermodynamic models

of energy economies are supplanted by models of chaos and turbulence, the new 'biological machines of information (genetic engineering and cybernetics)' give rise to control (rather than disciplinary) societies in which capital 'no longer wards off but feeds on' the unpredictable and infinite virtualities of bacterial sex – a process of endosymbiosis which is exploited in the engineering of information systems and of the body-sex itself. Parisi calls this a 'virtualization' of bacterial sex, where 'virtualization' is later glossed as 'the acceleration of potential tendencies', which seems to mean an intensification or acceleration of uses, in contradiction to the Bergsonian–Deleuzian concept of the virtual, which one might have expected. Despite its 'real subsumption', biological sex (an 'assemblage of genetic, cellular and technical processes that decodes and recombines information') is part of the arsenal of micropolitical warfare to the extent that it disentangles sex and sexual reproduction, privileging infinite virtualities over predetermined possible identities.

In conclusion, Parisi claims that the analysis of abstract sex across these strata encourages 'micro-feminine warfare' arising out of the (presumably endosymbiotic) recombination of the bodies–sexes that do not congeal into sexual identities but are part of the continuous construction of difference in the non-filiative reproduction of bacterial, parthenogenic and biological sexes. The message, it seems, is that this is just how it is. The infinite virtualities of the new body–sex emerging from these mutant recombinations are there for either us or capital to exploit.

This reconstruction of Parisi's argument cuts a line through swathes of technical detail and vocabulary in a fantastically overcomplicated discourse. *Abstract Sex* is a hellish read, and those without an extremely well developed tolerance, if not enthusiasm, for the Deleuze and Guattari of *A Thousand Plateaus* and – more importantly – the Deleuzo–Guattarianism of their ardent admirers will not get past the first few pages. The 'philosophy' in Parisi's subtitle consists of the wholesale, uncritical acceptance and non-mutated replication of the vocabulary and claims of Deleuze and Guattari (and, of course, Lucretius, Spinoza and Bergson), and the proliferation of new 'concepts' (like 'turbosex', which appears once in a subheading and is then never explained or used), similar in effect to the overuse of exclamation marks!!! In this respect, the book is utterly typical of one appropriative tendency in cultural theory today.

The presumption of metaphysical monism implicit in this appropriation makes some of the otherwise odd claims in the book comprehensible, if not exactly

plausible. Parisi's use of the concept of 'real subsumption', for example, is from one point of view simply confused. Marx's theory of the real subsumption of production to capital refers to the transformation of a specifically social form and makes no sense when applied to a molecular process such as symbiosis. The fact that 'real subsumption' in Parisi's argument seems to mean, in fact, no more than the total or enhanced recuperation of, for example, the symbiotic process of bacterial sex reveals this. The difficulty is that metaphysical monism makes possible the transcoding of concepts such as 'real subsumption' and 'sex' itself, but also 'endosymbiosis', 'parthenogenesis' and 'reproduction', across a variety of contexts, in such a way that any objection to it on the basis of the specificity of any of the concepts is ruled out in advance. There can be no distinctiveness of ontological reference to these – or indeed any – concepts, according to Parisi's metaphysical presuppositions. I cannot see how this can be anything other than disastrous for feminist theory. A similar inability to recognize the ontological specificity of the human – which means the ontological specificity of the social – and the illegitimacy of certain transcodings is at the heart of the kind of genetic naturalism behind, for example, Randy Thornhill's 'rape-adaptation hypothesis' (see Lynne Segal's review in *RP* 106), in which the interpretation of insect behaviour merges seamlessly into claims about relations between men and women. The insistence on certain ontological distinctions does not preclude the recognition of relations between – or the co-dependency of – the 'biological' and the 'cultural', for example, as the work of feminist biologists like Anne Fausto Sterling attests. Indeed, these relations constitute the specificity of the human.

If Parisi's metaphysical monism makes the extension of the concept of sex possible, it also, unfortunately, makes it impossible for her to say anything of any interest about human sex at all. Within such a philosophical context there is nothing that can be said about the politics of human sex: nothing can be said about sex as a social category and nothing can be said about the specifically sexual nature of certain practices (like cunnilingus) in contrast with, say, the decomposition of vegetable matter. There is, in short, nothing sexy about this book.

Mario Perniola's *The Sex Appeal of the Inorganic*, on the other hand, is full of cunts, cocks and arseholes in various combinations. This curious and entertaining little volume takes the form, in part, of a manifesto for a 'neutral', 'artificial' sexuality. The reader's task: to learn how 'to give oneself as a thing that feels

and to take a thing that feels'. In a sustained polemic against all vitalistic, organicist, spiritualistic prejudices concerning sexuality, against the 'orgasmomania' of the instrumental conception of sexuality as 'mountain climbing' and the associations of sexuality with expression, individual, life, the 'sugary and sickly vulgarity' of pleasure, Perniola, an anti-Nietzschean Nietzschean proclaims 'the greatness and dignity of a sexuality without life and soul'. Having exhausted the great historical task of comparing ourselves, on a vertical scale, to God or to the animal, it is now time, according to Perniola, to follow 'a horizontal movement towards the thing', to admit that 'man is an almost thing and the thing is an almost man' and to recognize – following Walter Benjamin – 'the sex appeal of the inorganic' on the basis of our affinity with, not opposition to, it.

To give oneself and to take one's partner's body as a thing that feels is to enter a horizon of sexuality without a subject in which, more properly, 'one' feels. Becoming almost-thing is not, according to Perniola, like the reification and commodification of bodies in prostitution. It differs from sadism in lacking its major premiss: the master as 'a strong, autonomous, independent subject'. In neutral sexuality it is the world of things, not the master, that demands to take or be taken in a certain way. Although masochism and neutral sexuality have in common 'the will to give oneself absolutely as a thing that feels' and the anti-orgasmic 'aspiration to the perennial availability of excitement', masochism, founded on a contract between two interested parties, is ultimately, 'a wile of subjectivity'. To give oneself as a thing that feels is to become extraneous clothing, for bodies to become 'rolls of material that fold and unfold on one another', such that – in a twist on Descartes' remarks on automata – it is not I nor you but the clothes themselves that feel:

When your partner sinks his fingers in your vagina or when the lips of your mistress bare the penis, don't be excited by the old-fashioned idea that your body is reanimating and coming to life again, but by that more actual idea that you are sentient clothing!

Thus spoke Perniola.

But if *The Sex Appeal of the Inorganic* is a 'call to neutral and impersonal sexuality', it is also an impassioned plea for the necessity of philosophy. Today, both philosophy and neutral sexuality absorb into themselves what was previously opposed to them as opposite and inaccessible: the mode of being of the inorganic. Neutral sexuality, Perniola implies, reveals

the sex appeal of philosophy, as only 'the poor souls' in 'their vitalist stupor' would conceive the abstraction of philosophy (its alleged desiccation and lifelessness) as a block to sexuality. More importantly, however, it is only the discipline of abstraction and analysis in philosophy that is capable of revealing to us the thing as thing. This is a very different kind of abstract sex to Parisi's. Sexuality alone – the empire of the senses – cannot attain the excess proper to it without philosophical abstraction, diverting the rush towards 'the swarming and turbid viscosity of life', 'its tendency to self-annihilation and self-destruction in orgasm and death', into the 'timeless horizon of the thing'.

Perniola insists that neutral sexuality is not sexual anaesthesia. It does not seek to eliminate excitation but to maintain it indefinitely, on a timeless horizon. Nevertheless, as the 'overcoming of oneself and one's own limits', as 'an effort, an enterprise, an exercise, a training', 'a long road where all subjective affections are abolished or at least suspended', it bears a certain resemblance to the mystical and ascetic traditions of Christianity and the sexualist cults of European modernity. It is also not clear that Perniola's claims will convince any but those ready to extend their pre-established anti-vitalism into their sexual practice. The rest might be left wondering what exactly it is that is so wrong with orgasm. To the extent that there is a philosophical answer to this in Perniola's book it seems to be this. Neutral sexuality, as a philosophical practice, is the experience of the limitless accessibility and porosity of bodies. All the smooth and solid parts of the body as almost-thing, the body as clothing, are experienced as openings into which one can insert oneself or into which one invites insertion. (*The Sex Appeal of the Inorganic* reminded me, on more than one occasion, of Monique Wittig's *The Lesbian Body*.) This porosity and the mixture of bodies (neither mine nor thine) become clothing 'gives us the experience of reality', a reality which is itself 'tactile and porous ... held together by links, knots, joints'. Philosophy and neutral sexuality are incandescent moments of perceptive illumination, 'a type of superfetation because the world is already at its philosophical and sexual maximum. They are at best an assent to what is already there.' The pitiable delusion of vitalist sexuality is its metaphysics of transcendence (Perniola mentions Levinas, among others). Reaching for an unreachable beyond, vitalist sexuality fails to understand that everything begins and ends in the empire of the thing.

It is not really possible to compare Parisi's and Perniola's books in any useful way, or to say that their

near-contemporaneous publication (Perniola's was first published in Italian in 2000) indicates a significant moment in the philosophy of sex. But that there is something symptomatic about *Abstract Sex* and *The Sex Appeal of the Inorganic* is suggested by the ease with which the novels of Michel Houellebecq mediate their positions. The plane of equivalence between philosophy, science and fiction in Houellebecq's *Atomised* mirrors – albeit in different proportions – that in Parisi's book. Houellebecq's 'hero', Michel Djerzinski, is located in the same field as Parisi's scientific influences (his first published work: *The Topology of Meiosis*), though Djerzinski's theory of 'perfect reproduction', the elimination of mutation in the reproduction of the genetic code, runs counter to the thrust of Parisi's biodigital machines of sex. The Lieu de Changement campsite in *Atomised* stands as a monument to the vitalist delusions of sexual liberation

identified in *The Sex Appeal of the Inorganic*, and Perniola correctly diagnoses the malaise afflicting Djerzinski's half-brother: orgasmomania. In Houellebecq's *Platform*, Europe, sexually exhausted, chases the illusion of vitalism through disastrous sex tourism in 'exotic' locations.

If Parisi and Perniola suggest that sex is, or could be, the domain of radical philosophy or politics, do Houellebecq's novels mock just this? Or do Parisi and Perniola resist the easy irony and mock-shock tactics of Houellebecq's redundant cynicism, wresting sex from the arms and pseudo-philosophizing of Houellebecq's docile capitalist subjects? We do not need any of these books to confirm the central place of sex in contemporary society. But they shed considerable light on some of the changing stakes in current conflicts over its meanings and forms.

Stella Sandford

Early thought

Manfred Frank, *The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism*, trans. Elizabeth Millán-Zaibert, SUNY Press, New York, 2004. x + 286 pp., £39.25 hb., 0 7914 5947 0.

Frederick C. Beiser, *The Romantic Imperative: The Concept of Early German Romanticism*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA and London, 2003. xiii + 243 pp., £29.95 pb., 0 674 01180 5.

Early German Romanticism has become increasingly conspicuous in the historical self-consciousness of contemporary philosophy. Interest has intensified over the last fifteen or so years, and there is now a range of publications with ambitious claims for this little epoch, *circa* 1789–1800, and its motley band of thinkers. Indeed, this development seems to have achieved a kind of critical mass, with a field of primary, expository and advocatory texts available. A new Romanticism! (Is it a coincidence that Spandau Ballet have been getting more radio time?) The often naive new historicism that has inverted analytical philosophy's old ahistoricism renders such developments suspicious. But in any case, a critical consideration of whether early German Romanticism has the significance currently claimed for it is certainly due, and there is plenty of material to work with.

Among the most forceful claims for its significance is that it is pivotal for understanding what happened in the development of so-called 'classical German philosophy', from Kant through to Hegel and Marx. Moreover, it is claimed that it produced philosophical positions that are not reducible to the landmark figures of this period, promising a resolution or rethinking

of the standard problems and antinomies – 'Kant or Hegel?', 'Hegel or Marx?', and the rest. The promise is that early German Romanticism is the secret of classical German philosophy, and therefore of our present. In so far as contemporary disputes over naturalism and idealism, myth and enlightenment, modernity and postmodernity, are understood according to these debates, the promise is that early German Romanticism holds the key to their diagnosis and resolution, and that it anticipates, often critically, the apparently novel projects of contemporary philosophy.

Thus the contention is that Romanticism is the repressed truth of the present. Such contentions have become less shocking than soporific. The exposure of a repressed truth has become a seemingly irresistible strategy or discourse of contemporary historiography. So much so that, according to a syndrome that has become only a little less familiar, this strategy often reveals itself to be the ultimate motivation, the ultimate desire. However gratifying this may be to the historiographer, the historiography is short-circuited. So we need to establish whether there has in fact been a process, or agents, of repression in order to understand and assess how and why this might have

changed; or whether what we are seeing today is not just the restatement of an old case, louder, as if we didn't hear it the first time.

In general, early German Romanticism has remained branded by the criticisms of late-nineteenth-century positivism and materialism, which propagated its enduring stereotypes: namely, that it was a mystificatory and obscurantist brand of metaphysics, that it was anti-scientific, that it was either politically conservative or a naive form of enthusiasm, and that it was best confined to the fictions of the literary world. It is for these reasons that various anti-positivist lineages, which have become more influential since the late twentieth century, have lent a more sympathetic ear to its charms, particularly its opposition to mechanistic conceptions of enlightenment and their cultural effects. This shift has revealed a new configuration of early German Romanticism's status and meaning, and it is this reconfiguration that is at stake in the new publications.

As the positivist suppression of early German Romanticism suggests, the persistence of its literary significance is consistent with its philosophical insignificance. Its literary claims have been largely ensured by the Romantics' contribution to the historical canon of literary criticism (such as Friedrich Schlegel's opposition of classical genres to romantic, or modern, forms) as well as their literary productions (such as their development of the fragment or Hölderlin's poetry). That early German Romanticism is now acquiring a philosophical status is probably due less to this persistence – which has in any case been embattled – than to the weakening in the strictly disciplinary definition of philosophy instituted by analytical philosophy and the 'scientific' or 'non-literary' conception of the analysis of language that underpinned it. This has generated an audience for early German Romanticism within post-analytical philosophy (Cavell is the conspicuous example here) and given it philosophical respectability within the Anglo-American academy. It has been bolstered by the simultaneous influence of philosophical traditions without these inhibitions, which have often identified the Romantics as precedents, such as deconstruction and the Frankfurt School. This exposure of philosophy to literature has made early German Romanticism all the more interesting in so far as its conception of literature was far more metaphysically ambitious than has been conventionally allowed by the academic specialization of literary studies. Thus there is the promise that it offers not the reduction of philosophy to literature, or vice versa, but a transformation of their relation into an altogether new practice.

This shift in the relation of philosophy to literature has been accompanied by the renewal of specifically philosophical research into early German Romanticism. At its heart has been the so-called 'Jena Project', a group research project, directed by Dieter Henrich, into the philosophical initiatives at and around the University of Jena in 1789–95. Pursuing a historiographic method of 'constellational research' – in which the analysis of theoretical texts is set within the broad ensemble of conditions that effect their production – this project has generated an intimate portrait of the period and its figures. This has revolutionized research into early German Romanticism, revealing the decisive but often inadvertent and counter-intuitive influence of historically marginal figures. Henrich's principal text from this project, *Konstellationen: Probleme und Debatten am Ursprung der idealistischen Philosophie (1789–1795)*, has yet to be translated, but some of his subsequent work on Hölderlin has. Manfred Frank's *The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism* is an exemplary export from this scene. As well as bringing to life a series of archival resources and instigating a series of publications and translations, this research has been informed by key texts that were not available until the 1960s, which saw the discovery of Hölderlin's fragment 'Judgement and Being' and the first reliable critical edition of Novalis' *Fichte-Studies*. In general, then, this research has revealed a new historical consciousness of this period. Indeed, the assemblage of letters and notes that were only partially known at the time reveals a present that is only present now.

This research resonates with another feature of the decline of analytical philosophy, namely the problematization of its separation from 'continental' philosophy and the renewal of attention to classical German philosophy that this has generated. The revived scrutiny of this period – particularly the nature of the transition from Kant to Hegel – has disclosed the Romantics as offering intermediate positions that promise to mediate the separation. This has been bolstered by the genealogical significance of early German Romanticism in understanding figures who have traversed contemporary philosophy. Heidegger is the obvious example. Andrew Bowie's work has been perhaps most conspicuous, certainly in English, in drawing out the genealogical and critical significance of early German Romanticism for contemporary philosophy.

The other familiar reason for the suppression of interest in early German Romanticism has been its association with conservative politics, in particular its link to the politics of Nazism. This association was

first made in the criticisms of romantic conservatism in the 1840s by the young republicans Heinrich Heine, Arnold Ruge and Karl Marx. Latterly, Lukács was highly influential in sustaining and extending this position through texts like his epic *The Destruction of Reason* (1955), which constructs a direct lineage from Romanticism to Nazism. This critique is given added force when set against the young Lukács's own romantic sympathies, especially in *Soul and Form* and *Theory of the Novel*. And yet the popular image of romantic liberation is not restricted to the English variants of Byron and Shelley. The early German Romantics were enthusiastic supporters of the French Revolution and, in the first instance at least, critics of the Enlightenment only in so far as it seemed to contradict the project of secular emancipation. This contradiction has been condensed into the fall of Friedrich Schlegel from fierce republican to conservative Catholic. The response of the new research has been largely to separate early from late Romanticism; hence the political, as well as historical and philosophical, significance of its awkward denomination.

This ambivalence permeates one of the decisive genealogical claims for early German Romanticism: that it is the first avant-garde, providing a model for twentieth-century groups. The reception of Romanti-



cism into French aestheticism in the mid-nineteenth century became the object of ridicule by realists and subsequent avant-gardes. But it has also sustained a revolutionary aura. Maurice Blanchot's seminal essay from the 1960s, 'The Athenaeum', draws a direct link between surrealism and Romanticism via the poetico-political form of the manifesto. Walter Benjamin, whose work was in many ways constituted by these political ambivalences and ambiguities, articulated this tension well in his proposition – more chiasmic than speculative – that the aestheticization of politics must be countered by the politicization of aesthetics.

The books under review here are noteworthy for different reasons and in different ways. Manfred Frank's *The Philosophical Foundations of Early German Romanticism* is a highly scholarly and erudite series of lectures, saturated with archival research and the minutiae of its topic. Frederick Beiser's *The Romantic Imperative* serves as probably the most inviting philosophical introduction available in English. It is more encompassing and places early German Romanticism within a broader historical context. It is more schematic as a result of this breadth, but the endnotes do a good job of underpinning the text with reference to further, often obscure, research. In combination, then, these two books complement each other well, especially since they also reveal fundamental disputes over the interpretation and legacy of early German Romanticism.

Frank was among a new generation of doctoral students to work on the Romantics in the late 1960s and early 1970s and he has been prolific ever since. This translation is from the third and final part of his major survey of the period, *Unendliche Annäherung. Die Anfänge der philosophischen Frühromantik* (Infinite Approximation: The Beginnings of Philosophical Early Romanticism), published in 1997. This sets out from the mixed reception of Kant's thought – from

sceptics like Jacobi and Schultz, to advocates like Reinhold and Fichte – and then explores how they established problems and tasks for the generation of students who largely compose the ranks and marginal figures of the early German Romantics, most of whom were taught by Reinhold and then Fichte, who held the chair in philosophy at Jena consecutively. These include famous figures like Schelling, Hölderlin, Novalis

and Friedrich Schlegel, and historically obscure but contemporaneously influential figures like Niethammer and Erhard. The twelve lectures translated here cover the central figures in this constellation, with particular attention to Novalis. The translator and introducer, Elizabeth Millán-Zaibert, justifies the selective translation on the basis of that it covers the figures least obscure to anglophone readers. This is in many ways a shame, since it is one of the unavoidable features and virtues of the book that it introduces the obscure. The lectures on Isaac Sinclair and Jacob Zwilling are the only remnants of this.

The book is exemplary of the constellational research developed around the Jena Project. It involves intimate analyses of the theoretical and biographical developments of the period, establishing originality and precedent with extreme precision, and working out detailed networks of influence. The mix of philosophy and life is at times gripping and sometimes pedantic. At one point Frank remarks: 'It would be tempting to reconstruct the conversations which the housemates, Herbart and [Friedrich] Schlegel, shared as they made their way to or from Fichte's lectures.' Tempted?

The main theoretical focus of the book is the development of what Frank considers the essential philosophical argument of early German Romanticism: the move from a philosophy of first principles to a philosophy of infinite approximation, which Frank elaborates as a fallibilistic form of realism, with a coherence theory of truth. This position develops out of the critique of the attempts of Reinhold and, particularly, Fichte to develop a systematic justification of Kant's transcendental idealism, taking his conception of the unity of apperception as the clue that self-consciousness provides the foundation or first principle. This project reveals itself to be deeply problematic in so far as self-consciousness proves to be an inherently contradictory first principle. The main problem here is in demonstrating that self-consciousness is absolutely self-grounding. In so far as self-consciousness necessarily involves a determination of one's self, it contradicts the sense in which it could be absolute. Indeed, it contradicts the sense of identity or auto-affection that enables self-consciousness, and makes any attempt to describe it in the language of objectification inadequate. This problem suggests that self-consciousness presupposes a ground or relation that remains obscure and irreducible to it, and that self-consciousness is therefore not self-grounding. This throws Reinhold's and Fichte's project of philosophy as a systematic science derived from first principles into crisis. The figures that have come to constitute early German Romanticism were the students of this project who diagnosed this crisis. Frank is insistent on distinguishing early German Romanticism from German Idealism; making a strict separation between those like Novalis and Schlegel who gave up the project of a systematic idealism, and those who pursued it after Fichte by different means, such as the early Schelling and Hegel.

Novalis is at the centre of Frank's account, since his contention is that Novalis' *Fichte-Studies* are as early as Hölderlin's 'Judgement and Being' in developing a critical alternative to Fichte's project. Here Frank

enters into a dispute with Henrich, each waving freshly revealed documents from 1795. We're talking about a matter of months and even days here! Hölderlin's criticism is oriented towards 'Being' as that which is presupposed and irreducible to consciousness. In a very similar move, Novalis' critique of self-consciousness concludes that there could be no first principle and that the task of absolute self-grounding must orient itself instead towards a ground that can only be approached as an ultimate goal, which will nonetheless never be exhausted in consciousness. Frank understands this according to Kant's model of the regulative idea:

Novalis shows that the reflexive nature of our self-consciousness (Fichte's 'highest point') is incompatible with the thought of an absolute (that which Novalis, along with Jacobi, calls 'original being' [*Urseyn*]). Thus, reflexive self-consciousness, as an I, cannot be taken as the first principle of philosophy. Rather, the foundation for this I is transformed from a piece of evidence immanent in consciousness (which is felt in an intellectual intuition) into a 'principle of approximation', that is, into a Kantian idea, which we are supposed to approach in an infinite progression. The thought of conferring reality to this idea leads, says Novalis, 'into the realm of nonsense'.... Or also: 'Everywhere we *seek* the unconditioned, but *find* only things.'

Thus Frank understands early German Romanticism as a return to Kant in 1795, before German Idealism even got into full stride. However, this remains an unelaborated horizon that tends to collapse the whole import and novelty of the period.

According to Beiser's introduction to *The Romantic Imperative*, the book is intended as an immanent account of early German Romanticism – he proposes importing the temptingly brief *Frühromantik* – defending it on its own terms rather than through a more comparative account. But this belies his mapping of historical disputes that have formed its reception, as well as his own dispute with these and more contemporary research, including that of Frank. Indeed, Beiser's approach is to introduce the Romantics through the confrontation of a series of misconceptions. Much of its readability and value as an introduction is derived from this, rather than through detailed archival, textual or conceptual analysis. Beiser does not preoccupy himself much with who was and who wasn't a Romantic, or what the network of influence was. Nonetheless, he has a considerable grasp of this period of philosophical history, of which he has become a well-established historian. (His early books *Enlightenment, Revolution and Romanticism: The Genesis of Modern German Political Thought, 1790–1800* (1992) and

German Idealism: The Struggle against Subjectivism, 1781–1800 (2002) cover the period.)

Beiser's resonant point of departure is a consideration of the meaning of 'romantic poetry', confronting its literal-minded misinterpretation as a source of the overdetermination of early German Romanticism as a literary movement. In contrast, he draws out its ambitious metaphysical and political meanings in a way that makes its relation to the twentieth-century avant-gardes explicit:

First ... [*romantische Poesie*] refers to not only literature, but also to all the arts and sciences; there is indeed no reason to limit its meaning to literary works, since it also applies to sculpture, music and painting. Second, it designates not only the arts and sciences but also human beings, nature and the state. The aim of the early romantic aesthetic was indeed to romanticize the world itself, so that human beings, society and the state could become works of art as well.

This passage indicates the course of the book as a whole, as it moves from the specifically artistic concerns of Romanticism to its relation to philosophical and political debates of the age: the critique of the Enlightenment, the preoccupation with the concept of *Bildung*, and the organic conception of natural philosophy.

While many of these topics are familiar, Beiser's treatment of them is contentious and revealing. Its heart lies in his insistence on the Platonism of early German Romanticism, in opposition to the recent scholarship, which he accuses of a postmodern repetition of the traditional misconception that Romanticism is an aesthetic reaction to the Enlightenment. (Beiser includes Frank and Henrich in the company of De Man, Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, evidently conscious of the slander he proposes: 'All the way from the banks of the Neckar to Lake Onondaga I can hear a howl of protest from Manfred Frank for being placed in such company.') Beiser's argument is that the Romantics' interest in art was not as a limitation but as a realization of reason:

For [the Romantics], aesthetic experience is not *superrational*, still less *antirational*; rather, it is *hyperrational*, consisting in the act of intellectual intuition of reason. It was through the intellectual intuition of aesthetic experience, they believed, that reason could perceive the infinite in the finite.... Such a perception was intellectual or rational chiefly because of its object: the idea, principle, or *arche* underlying all the particulars of sense experience.

There is certainly a sense in which the Romantics saw art as achieving what philosophy could not, namely the presentation of the absolute. It is also true that

insistently 'postmodernist' thinkers like Nancy have sought to develop a critique of the Romantics' aesthetic orientation towards the absolute. But it seems equally apparent that the Romantics conceived of art as a presentation of the *unpresentability* of the absolute. Thus Novalis writes: 'the highest works of art are simply disobliging – they are ideals, which can – and should – only appear to us *approximando* – as aesthetic imperatives.' Indeed, what seems to be at stake here, especially through Schlegel, is the emergence of a specifically modernist conception of art.

In any case, these deliberations are largely cut short by Beiser's refusal to distinguish early German Romanticism from German Idealism, confirming the traditional conception of Hegel as its realization, albeit according to the nickname he apparently acquired from his more precocious contemporaries: *der alter Mann*, 'winning the race for posthumous fame only because he was a more sure-footed plodder'. This Platonic account of the Romantics sits awkwardly with Beiser's diagnosis of their 'vitalist pantheism'. Moreover, his admission that this remains subject to Kant's critiques of an absolute organicism of nature suggests that little has been won by this more idealist account. Ironically, it seems that Frank and Beiser ultimately agree that these roads finally lead back to Kant.

The juxtaposition of archival minutiae and blustery polemic offered by Frank and Beiser is indicative of the lively state of recent research on early German Romanticism. They are welcome contributions to the dissemination and assessment of this period. They are also indicative of the generally advocatory ethos that has characterized this work. Perhaps we can now look forward to the creative application of this research. The ground is prepared for a contemporary refusal of early German Romanticism.

Stewart Martin

Techies

David M. Kaplan, ed., *Readings in the Philosophy of Technology*, Rowman & Littlefield, Lanham MD, 2004. xvi + 512 pp., £65.00 hb., £37.95 pb., 0 7425 1488 9 hb., 0 7425 1489 7 pb.

Judith Wajcman, *Technofeminism*, Polity, Cambridge, 2004. viii + 148 pp., £45.00 hb., £13.99 pb., 0 7456 3043 X hb., 0 7456 3044 8 pb.

At the dawn of the twentieth century Henry Adams imagined the future as a place driven by a mysterious, immensely powerful force, comparable to that of the

Virgin Mary, which according to Adams had been responsible for raising the great cathedrals of Europe in the middle ages. This new force was *electricity*, the latest, most powerful manifestation of technological innovation. At the beginning of the twenty-first century it is difficult to question the accuracy of Adams's prediction about the centrality of technology to twentieth-century cultures and lives, but the breadth of critical writing on the subject makes it difficult to present an overview of the contemporary meaning and function of technology. These two books, however, go some way towards introducing and consolidating this field: one in the form of an anthology of philosophical writings; the other an account of the development of feminist responses to technology over the last thirty years and the possibilities for the future development of 'technofeminism'.

Kaplan's anthology is divided into six sections. The first introduces essays by writers such as Heidegger, Marcuse, Jonas and Habermas, written during the 1950s and 1960s, which functioned as critical starting points for many subsequent philosophical approaches to technology. The second section, including essays by Langdon Winner, Don Ihde, Donna Haraway, Bruno Latour and Andrew Feenberg is designed to demonstrate the ways in which more recent thinkers have developed and expanded the field. The next three sections focus on how technology has impacted upon the traditional philosophical concerns of ethics, politics and human nature. In these sections philosophical approaches introduced in the first two sections are developed in relation to specific aspects of technology, including ecology, information technologies, medical technologies and architecture, and to specific political and ethical issues, such as the concept of rights and the culture of democracy. The final section engages with the thorny question of how technology relates to science and, by extension, how abstract discourse relates to material practice.

The volume lends itself to undergraduate teaching as well as providing a good introduction to some key thinkers in the field. However, the range of approaches covered is restricted. Most of the essays do not stray far from the traditions of Western philosophy, and the kinds of ethics, politics and human nature that are at stake in sections 3–5 are of a specifically Euro-American variety. Notably, in his introduction to Foucault's analysis of panopticism, with which he begins the 'Human Nature' section, Kaplan plays down the latter's critical engagement with the ways in which modern subjectivity is produced through processes of discipline and observation. Rather, he emphasizes

Foucault's assessment of power as constructive, and hence positive. Kaplan writes:

There is nothing necessarily insidious about disciplinary practices.... The disciplinary society described by Foucault evolved alongside capitalism and the Enlightenment. Even democracies depend on disciplinary mechanisms that classify and order people according to a norm or scale. Power and knowledge reinforce one another to form the foundations of social life. More power creates more categories of knowledge; more knowledge refines and extends the scope of power. This is how the liberatory Enlightenment project is at the very same time a process of increased discipline: we achieve greater freedom as power and knowledge become more detached and controlling.

Kaplan, unlike Foucault, does not seem to find the Enlightenment concept of freedom problematic, and so he tends to read panopticism as a necessary process for the maintenance of modern liberal democracy, a political system the value of which he does not question.

This lack of critical reflection is also suggested by the sparsity of essays that look outside of the traditional scope of Western philosophy. The few essays that address technology from feminist perspectives – for example, Haraway's ubiquitous 'Cyborg Manifesto' and Diane Michelfelder's 'Technological Ethics in a Different Voice' – are isolated examples which run against the grain of the volume. Consequently there is little sense of how to approach such writing. In a volume that privileges certain philosophical traditions over others, notably phenomenology, it is difficult to engage with the odd essay that falls outside of these parameters. If the anthology had been divided according to philosophical positions, Haraway, for example, might have been read alongside Sandra Harding, who appears in the final section, sharing Haraway's interest in situating science and technology. But Kaplan fails to situate his chosen essays according to the historical and cultural circumstances of their production. Phenomenology is taken for granted, as a universally valid way of reading technology, while the situated approach seems at best tangential to this process.

If feminism is poorly represented, non-Western responses to and engagements with technology fare even less well. The second section includes an essay by Arnold Pacey, 'The Culture of Technology', which illustrates the case for reading technology as part of social networks, with examples of technological practices in societies that lie outside or on the borders of Western cultural norms. But, again, Pacey's analysis is not presented in terms of a debate concerning the cultural situatedness of technology, and nowhere does

Kaplan question the assumption that technology is primarily a Western phenomenon. The sixth section does criticize the longstanding assumption that technology is essentially secondary to (Western) science, but the fact that this does not happen until the end of the book reflects the broader failure of the anthology to consider how a revised understanding of the relationship between science and technology might affect approaches to non-Western technological practices. There has been some interesting work recently on Japan, which experienced a technological revolution during the late nineteenth century without investing in Western ideals about the Enlightenment project or the scientific revolution. Steve Fuller's essay in Andrew Ross's *Science Wars* collection (Duke University Press, 1996) and Kitaro Nishida's and Andrew Feenberg's essays in Robert Figuerou and Sandra Harding's *Science and Other Cultures* (Routledge, 2003) are examples of this kind of work; Kaplan might usefully have included something similar in his anthology.

Kaplan's anthology arrives a year after the publication of a similar collection, Robert C. Scharff and Val Dusek's *Philosophy of Technology: The Technological Condition* (Blackwell, 2003). The volumes inevitably cover some of the same ground, including Heidegger's 'Question Concerning Technology', Foucault on panopticism, Habermas's 'Technical Progress and the Social Life World', Feenberg's 'Democratic Rationalization' and, annoyingly, Haraway's 'A Cyborg Manifesto' (it would be good to see another Haraway essay anthologized for a change). Scharff and Dusek's is a far heftier volume and so plugs some of the gaps left open by Kaplan, including work by Arendt, Mumford and Caroline Merchant, as well as a valuable section on pre-twentieth-century philosophy. But it is the organization of material in Scharff and Dusek's book that gives it the edge, in my opinion, over Kaplan's.

Judith Wajcman's *Technofeminism* addresses one of the significant gaps left by Kaplan's anthology: feminist responses to technology. In this small, extremely readable, student-friendly volume she sets out to provide a historical overview of these responses from the 1970s to the present, identifying two dominant strands: a 'materialist' constructivist approach that focuses on how technologies are structured within (largely patriarchal) social networks and how they in turn help to structure these networks; and a 'metaphoric' cyborgian approach that is concerned with the ways in which recent technological concepts such as virtual reality and the cyborg have provided an imaginative space in which women are able to rethink and liberate themselves. In the final chapter of the book Wajcman situates herself between these two critical traditions,

attempting to avoid the pitfalls whilst drawing on the strengths of both.

Constructivist theory, she argues, tends to be too deterministic and dystopian, seeing technology as inextricably tied to its patriarchal roots and driving society forward unstoppably in a particular direction. Women, within this context, are ultimately subject to forces beyond their control. Cyberfeminism and cyborg theory, however, are too utopian, according to Wajcman. Placing rather too much emphasis on fiction, virtuality and the possibilities of linguistic play, these more recent approaches to technology are insufficiently aware of material constraints on real women and the impact that technology has upon their lives. Ironically, given their emphasis on the fluidity and fragmentation of identity, Wajcman also argues that they tend to essentialize gender. After all, women are traditionally identified as irrational, fluid and disorganized, so when Sadie Plant identifies cyberspace as a peculiarly female space capable of realizing and releasing women's subjectivity, she is calling upon a very conventional notion of female subjectivity.

Drawing on the material rootedness of constructivism and the possibilities of redefining agency opened out by cyborg theory, Wajcman argues for a reading of technology indebted to Foucault's analysis of power as a dynamic constructive network through which agency is produced and not simply controlled. She sees technology as a key aspect of the social networks that define and control women, whilst insisting that these same women play a crucial role in redefining technology. In other words, women are subject to technological power, but, as agents actively involved with technology, they are able to redefine it according to their own needs. This means that, in spite of the material constraints placed upon them by technologies, they are also sometimes able to redefine and empower themselves via a renegotiation of their relationship to these same technologies.

The primary strength of Wajcman's book lies in the clarity with which it reviews the field of technofeminism. The first two chapters provide a useful overview of the broad trends in technological and feminist studies from the 1970s and of how they converged and developed into an appreciation of the mutually constitutive, historically variable relationship between technology and gender.

In Chapter 4, 'The Cyborg Solution', Wajcman gives a valuable assessment of Donna Haraway's significant, but problematic, contribution to technology and gender studies. Critical responses to Haraway all too often fall into one of two positions: total dismissal or idolization. The strangeness of her style, born out

of her desire to resist the dogmatic rationalism and dualistic logic which have traditionally bound critical responses to science and technology, means that as many readers are alienated by Haraway as are drawn towards her. Wajcman provides an accessible overview, rather than simply focusing on her most famous essay, as Kaplan, Scharff and Dusek do. She does justice to the development of Haraway's thought from the arguably utopian 'Manifesto' to her more carefully worked through *Modest Witness* and she acknowledges Haraway's sensitivity to the historical development of the technologies with which she is concerned. The main criticisms that she levies at Haraway – her failure to identify material (as opposed to fictional) examples of how cyborg identity generates liberating possibilities for women and the disparity between her 'piercing analysis of the interconnections between capitalism, patriarchy and techno-science' on the one hand, and 'her belief in a radical discourse of discontinuity and the emancipatory potential of advanced technologies' on the other – are carefully expressed and supported. Her treatment of Haraway is a rare one.

If Wajcman reads Haraway as too metaphorical and insufficiently materialist in her reading of technology, Wajcman herself errs in the opposite direction. Although she locates herself between the material and the metaphorical, the constructivist and the cyborgian, there is little sense of what Haraway's method has contributed to her position, other than providing a focus on new communications technologies. By her second chapter Wajcman has already arrived at an explanation of how gender and technology produce one another and of how women, who rarely play a visible role in the initial design and representation of new technologies, influence the subsequent meaning and value of these technologies via their consumption and use of them. Her discussion of technofeminism in Chapter 5 does not substantially move from that position. Here she argues for a reading of new technologies informed by a specific awareness of their historical and cultural location. She illustrates her position with examples of how new media have radically different implications for women living in the developed world (who consume them) and women living in the developing world (who produce them). The possibilities opened up for the female consumers of new media, she points out, must be weighed against the economic constraints placed upon their counterparts in the developing world.

Wajcman's lack of interest in metaphor is most apparent in her chapter on 'Virtual Gender'. Beginning with a discussion of the ways in which outer space was gendered during the 1960s and 1970s she goes on to consider how gender has been redefined in the context of virtual space. A brief discussion of the fictional birth of virtual reality in the writing of William Gibson is followed by a lengthy analysis of cyberfeminism with a specific focus on Sadie Plant's *Zeros + Ones*. Plant, Wajcman argues, is carried away by her own metaphors, reading cyberspace as a zone of liberation and endless possibility without any regard for the material and economic circumstances in which women encounter cyberspace, ironically reproducing an essentialist notion of femininity with the claim



that cyberspace is female. While this critique is well argued, I would dispute Wajcman's assumption that Plant can simply be read as representative of cyberfeminism. Wajcman creates a straw target, an obvious example of the dangers of losing track of the material world. She also fails to engage with the large body of feminist writing that provides a far more complex and ambivalent analysis of the ways in which materiality and virtuality, embodiment and gender, are negotiated in encounters with cyberspace. Catherine Waldby's *Visible Human Project* (Routledge, 2000) comes to mind, as does N. Katherine Hayles's discussion of the politics of gender, embodiment and cybernetics in *How We Became Posthuman* (Chicago University Press, 1999).

One of the primary concerns of both Waldby and Hayles is the way in which assumptions about embodiment, gender and sex are reproduced within the sphere of virtuality. Moreover, many fictional accounts of cyberspace are also concerned with the impossibility and undesirability of separating mind and body. William Gibson, I would argue, is such a writer and I find it hard to recognize his profoundly ambivalent

representation of cyberspace in Wajcman's description of it as 'an almost biblical Heavenly City ... [a] vision of immortality, transcendence and omniscience ... [in which] the tyranny of the flesh and of distance is overcome, as the old divisions of class, race, ethnicity, gender and sexuality are dissolved'. Perhaps this reading of Gibson stems from Wajcman's own lack of interest in fictional, or metaphorical, representations of technology. This might also explain why she begins this chapter with a discussion of the (masculine) gendering of space exploration, without mentioning Constance Penley's *NASA/Trek* (Verso, 1997), a book which is not only concerned with the relationship between gender, technology and space, but which also explores the rich cross-fertilization between the fictional world of *Star Trek* and the material world of NASA. Penley's book navigates the channel between the metaphoric and material far more explicitly than does Wajcman's.

Megan Stern

Communism without communism

Lars Iyer, *Blanchot's Communism: Art, Philosophy and the Political*, Palgrave, London and New York, 2004. xviii + 190 pp., £45.00 hb., 1 4039 2168 7.

In the relatively late essay 'Our Clandestine Companion', Maurice Blanchot presents his friendship with Levinas, which first began at Strasbourg in 1924, as one uniquely forged in and through philosophy. Philosophy 'would be the clandestine friend we always respect, loved, which meant we were not bound to it ... all the while giving us to believe that there was nothing awakened in us, vigilant unto sleep, not due to our difficult friendship'. What does it mean, Blanchot asks repeatedly, to be a *philosophical* friend? Is such a friend the one with whom one always agrees, or, rather, is a 'true state of friendship' one which necessarily harbours forms of 'difficulty' and divergence? Already more than a matter of mere autobiography and anecdote, for Blanchot this question also, famously, attains a properly political significance in so far as it is linked to a certain thought of 'community'. Interrupting fusional fantasies of total identification, and their philosophical correlates, the 'workless' (or 'inoperative') community – a 'community without community', in that characteristic phrasing – is that which, like

friendship, attests to 'the differentiation at the heart of our being together'.

Such ideas are by now fairly familiar, if probably more usually from the work of philosophical 'friends' like Nancy and Derrida than that of Blanchot himself. The merits of *Blanchot's Communism*, such as they are, reside not so much in any novel re-presentation of these philosophical motifs – for all of its talk of the 'unexpected' and the 'unanticipated' there is no moment of defamiliarization to be found here which would cause us to see Blanchot anew – but in its elegant working through of them in relation to the specificities of Blanchot's distinctive oeuvre. And in this respect one would have to say that there is little for the reviewer to dispute as regards the accuracy of Iyer's commentaries. The key philosophical engagements with Hegel and Heidegger are present and correct, and well explicated, as are the crucial differences between Levinas's and Blanchot's respective presentations of the opening to the Other, relating to the latter's often unacknowledged *refusal* of an 'ethical' vocabulary of 'God' and the 'good'.

Yet the motif of friendship also raises the question of to what extent Iyer's own treatment of this 'profoundly obscure writer' – as Roger Laporte describes him – is itself a 'true' act of philosophical friendship, or if, in the end, a rather different relationship between author and subject emerges here. A 'true state of friendship', Bataille writes in a passage quoted by Iyer, 'requires being abandoned by friends, since a free friendship isn't hampered by confining ties'. However, this is a book which, in its refusal to go beyond or even to extend Blanchot's own terms confines itself from the very beginning. It is characterized by both an absence of risk and a certain persistent evasiveness with regard to a series of critical questions that might legitimately be raised. As ever, the would-be academic acolyte is not necessarily the philosopher's best friend. For, opening with a restriction of the book's focus to an account of Blanchot's 'negotiation of the work of his friends Bataille and Levinas', *Blanchot's Communism* never really looks beyond the familiar, sectarian concerns of an already circumscribed 'community' of readers.

Nowhere is this clearer than with regard to the book's central 'hook': Blanchot's claim to the word 'communism' and 'the memory of actual working class movements' that it inscribes. If the provocation of Iyer's title is presumably aimed at what Derrida calls 'proprietary Marxism', jealously guarding its property rights – a provocation which is certainly welcome – it is still somewhat surprising to find only

two references to Marx himself, both involving the same quotation. (Bizarrely, there is no mention of Blanchot's essay 'Marx's Three Voices', which plays a pivotal role in Derrida's *Specters of Marx*, and which is cited approvingly in Daniel Bensaid's recently translated *Marx for Our Times*). Whilst self-appointed protectors of the revolutionary flame may have no exclusive claim upon the word, it seems perverse, as well as something of a missed opportunity, not to have engaged Blanchot's readings of Marx, when it is the 'meaning' of communism that is at stake. By failing to do so, the task of communicating the singularity and significance of Blanchot's intervention in critical relation to other legacies of communist thought is effectively passed over, taken for granted rather than put to the test.

Admittedly, what Blanchot, in his preface to *The Infinite Conversation*, calls the 'advent of communism' cannot, as Iyer notes, 'become the object of a new political theory' of the type familiar within much of the Marxist tradition, and cannot be critically 'assessed' in such terms. Rather, it 'challenges particular determinations of the political field', affirming, against any foreclosure of the future – a 'communism being still always beyond communism' – the 'indeterminacy of what is always "to come" in any social space'. We are a long way here, as Blanchot knew, from what Marx understood, under the name of communism, as 'the *real* movement that abolishes the present state of things'. In fact, like Derrida's more famous (and itself Blanchotian) notion of a 'messianicity without messianism', it is conceived as a universal, quasi-transcendental structure of existence, which, if it must always be 'negotiated' in a 'singular, practical situation', is nonetheless deliberately and explicitly abstracted from any particular moment of political history or culture.

Unlike many of those I might regard as my own philosophical friends, I have no 'philosophical' problem with this: I have yet to see any convincing refutation of its underlying 'logical' argument. I even think, politically, that its emphasis on an *essential* openness of the future contains considerable critical force in a historical conjuncture in which the narrative horizons that have hitherto sustained the Left have come to seem untenable. As regards the attempt to think through the possibilities and conditions of what Susan Buck-Morss has termed an 'ungoverned revolution' – which, contra the revolutionary time of the Leninist party form, anticipates the future without sacrificing the present – there is much to be gained from an engagement with Blanchot's obscure 'political thought'. Similarly to so

many French intellectuals of a certain generation, this is connected to Blanchot's experience and understanding of the events of May 1968. (Iyer summarizes this well.) For Blanchot, what was so distinctive and inspiring about the events was their apparent revelation of 'a communism of a kind never experienced before and which no ideology was able to recuperate or reclaim': that is, the lack of a unifying 'determinate project' or a desire to constitute a 'political group' revealed an 'idea of a revolution that does not need to *succeed* or to achieve a fixed goal'. If this 'responds' to a Marxist exigency, it is not a strictly prophetic one, but one that speaks in a 'brief and direct' voice – the second of Marx's 'three voices' – calling for a 'decision of rupture' as an '*ever-present* demand'.

Whether or not one finds this compelling, it raises a number of critical issues in relation to our usual understandings of what is designated by the terms 'communism' and 'revolution'. These are issues which Iyer evades, even as he implicitly acknowledges their presence. How much more interesting might it have been if, for example, he had ever wondered whether Blanchot might – beyond his established connections to Levinas or Bataille (with which we are all familiar) – actually have an unexpected philosophical friend in the Marxism of someone like Lefebvre. Or, how about an unlikely friendship with Benjamin, given a similar insistence on the open-endedness of the future and a certain shared intellectual inheritance incorporating Schlegel, Kafka, Proust and surrealism; not to mention his own still mysterious friendship with Bataille? What is so unsatisfying about this book, and indeed about so many 'continental philosophy' books of this type, is that nobody who isn't already convinced about the significance of Blanchot's interventions is going to be swayed by it, in any way. This is not a book that is going to make Blanchot any new philosophical friends. This raises the question of who exactly this book is *for*. Or is it a new type of book that, in a UK context dominated by the Research Assessment Exercise, is not really designed to be read by anybody? Neither an academic monograph of the traditional kind, which could claim a contribution to scholarly knowledge, nor an introductory text governed by genuine pedagogical principles, this is a *library book* in what would seem to be a new, specialized historical sense.

We are told that, now we English-speaking late arrivals have incorporated continental philosophy into our canon, the time for exegesis is past and the time to engage has arrived. *Blanchot's Communism* attests that such a time is still, apparently, to come.

David Cunningham

Looking after ourselves

Hugh P. McDonald, *John Dewey and Environmental Philosophy*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 2004. 227 pp., £49.00 hb., £16.50 pb., 0 7914 5873 3 hb., 0 7914 5874 1 pb.

Recently environmental philosophers have debated the nature and possibility of an 'environmental pragmatism', in part by examining the areas of intersection between environmental thought and classical American pragmatism. McDonald's book contributes to this debate, defending John Dewey's pragmatist theory of value on the grounds that it provides a better basis for environmental ethics than currently popular theories of nature's intrinsic value. McDonald's defence of Dewey is not entirely convincing, however, as emerges when we survey the interpretation of Dewey's ethics which occupies the core chapters of the book.

McDonald first outlines Dewey's naturalist conception of humans as organisms. Human organisms emerge from less developed types of organism and, as organisms, they depend upon, and must interact with, the natural environment. McDonald claims that this conception of humans, which relocates them firmly 'in and of' nature, already gives Dewey an incipient environmental ethic. Moreover, Dewey thinks that all organisms value those activities and things that further their growth, a fact which introduces value into nature in two ways. First, all organisms – not only humans – have their own goods or values. Second, when we (as organisms) experience certain natural things as valuable, our experiences are revealing values that are objectively present in those things. As McDonald explains Dewey's point with respect to animals: 'If animal life is experienced as valuable, then this value is a real trait of nature, not a mere projection.' Here Dewey seems to endorse a form of direct realism about perceptions of value (although it is uncertain – and McDonald does not discuss – how this position could accommodate cultural diversity in values).

Having through these points suggested that Dewey believes nature to have value intrinsically (that is, objectively – independently of human valuations), McDonald considers the objection that Dewey is an avowed instrumentalist, who believes that only instrumental value exists. To overcome this objection, McDonald reinterprets Dewey as someone who retains a transformed conception of intrinsic value within a broadly instrumentalist theory of human action. Dewey rejects the idea of a highest good or single, all-important, end (such as pleasure), on the grounds that

all ends of action are subject to continual reassessment by agents. Ends, once achieved, become means to new ends: 'Ends may later be means.... They are part of an ongoing process in which they are now ends and later means to further consequences.' However, McDonald argues, some ends may still have intrinsic value temporarily, relative to a given stage in the agent's ongoing process of enacting and appraising her values. The problem is that such 'intrinsic value' as arises here is the value which an agent finds in something for its own sake (not as a means to something else). This non-instrumental value is not necessarily the same as the objective value that Dewey also attributes to nature, according to McDonald. McDonald needs to show how these kinds of intrinsic value are connected; he fails to do so because, following much contemporary environmental philosophy, he does not maintain a clear distinction between the different senses of intrinsic value.

The environmental implications of Dewey's value theory become clearer as McDonald goes on to elucidate Dewey's 'experimental' understanding of moral theory. According to this understanding, moral theory enables us to determine how to improve the quality of human life in specific, problematic, situations. Moral theory therefore involves close analysis of these problematic situations, of the viability of possible solutions, and of the acceptability of both the relevant human desires and the means available to achieve proposed solutions. McDonald argues that Dewey takes a holistic view of moral justification, on which ends can only be justified with reference to all these various situational factors. McDonald favourably contrasts this holistic, contextualist, model of justification to the more common, arguably 'foundationalist', environmentalist approach which seeks to identify intrinsic value in nature and, upon that basis, to infer that humans have obligations to nature. McDonald is unduly brief as to the reasons why Dewey's holistic model is preferable. (Although McDonald spends a long time critically reviewing popular theories of nature's intrinsic value in Chapter 1, he never fully links his reading of Dewey back to this review.) McDonald does suggest that intrinsic-value theories generate an impossibly demanding range of obligations to nature and have



problems in accepting that species need to predate on one another – although these are criticisms that do not straightforwardly apply to the relatively complex intrinsic value theories of Callicott and Rolston, which McDonald considers in Chapter 1. More generally, McDonald suggests that Dewey's holistic approach to moral justification allows that humans have moral obligations to the environment as a whole, as well as obligations to preserve species and biodiversity and to protect scenic landscapes. On Dewey's approach, these obligations do not follow directly from the intrinsic value of these items, but arise from moral reasoning which is situated in a context of worsening environmental problems and which takes diverse, interrelated, elements of this situation into account.

There are reasons to be cautious of Dewey's 'environmental ethic' as McDonald reconstructs it. On this ethic, we are obliged to protect the environment because 'the environment is required for humans', required as the physical component of our social environment, on which we depend. This seems to imply that the environment has only instrumental value as a means to human well-being, but then, for Dewey/McDonald, intrinsic and instrumental value are not firmly separable. Our environmentally problematic situation means that caring for the environment is required of us, and is therefore obligatory and – at least temporarily – an end in itself which can override

other purposes. Yet Dewey's ethics still seems to imply (for McDonald) that humans are obliged to protect the environment only in so far as this protection is necessary to resolve environmental problems which adversely affect humans themselves. Arguably, though, environmental protection requires more robust obligations to nature, of the sort which theories of nature's intrinsic value can generate. Whether Dewey's ethical theory is really preferable to theories of intrinsic value, as McDonald claims, therefore remains moot, especially since McDonald does not integrate into his defence of Dewey's theory his stronger arguments that landscapes and species have the (objective) value that we perceive in them and that non-human organisms have (objective) value qua living, growing, beings.

In addition to these difficulties with McDonald's central thesis, his book has off-putting features: his expositions of Dewey and of contemporary environmental philosophers are sometimes unnecessarily convoluted and technical, and McDonald has a tendency to detail these thinkers' claims without explaining the arguments that motivate them. Nonetheless, McDonald's core claims regarding the environmental relevance of Dewey's ethics are interesting and original, and they deserve attention in so far as they help to flesh out one possible form that an environmental pragmatism might take.

Alison Stone