

body breathes the breath of other bodies and gets energy for life or loses it thanks to a multitude of other bodies'. Chehonadskih sharply criticises his interpretation for dissolving perspectivism into some sort of 'Deleuzian immanent materialism'. Rather than simply observing 'the chronicles of revolutionary events in an objective manner', Platonov 'actually organises a proletarian point of view on the social totality'. For Platonov, she insists, people are never merely a colony or multitude: 'Platonov zooms in to the conglomerates and observes a subject and a singularity in it ... in Platonov's novels, oppressed others have found ... an idea of philosophical thinking that could only have arisen in the revolutionary period'. The poor make themselves, she claims, against their environment. Platonov's ecology for the proletariat, she argues, can only be fully understood through the lens of Bogdanovian perspectivism:

The proletarian point of view becomes visible as soon as we consider the embodiment of labour in the exploitation of humans, animals and nature, as soon as we find the traces it leaves on bodies and minds. The proletarian point of view in Platonov coexists with a bourgeois and normative perspective, so much so that the same subject in his text can be considered from different observing points.

She argues that while tektology is subjectless, focusing solely on 'the systems of equilibrium and degrees of organisedness', Bogdanov's politics remain 'subject-oriented'. The proletarian ecology he developed after the Revolution strove for 'a new form of comradely relation' aligning 'with the definition of a social system as a complex unity of things and people'. Rather than dissolving the individual into a faceless collective, Chehonad-

skih sees Platonov, too, as a philosopher of proletarian subjectivation: 'the process of "becoming a subject" is difficult and confusing, and it is also not clear what it means to think in the way that the subject has to think'. Chehonadskih's brilliant book unravels a forgotten epistemic thread emerging from the material collectivism of the 1920s, one that favours mutualism, perspectivism and comradely cooperation over self-interest and individuality.

Her book is a remarkable contribution not only to the study of early Soviet philosophy but also to ecological theory. It might offer a blueprint for both political action in response to our planetary climate crisis and new ways of thinking and organising knowledge. In the Soviet counter-canon she excavates, thinking is conceptualised as collective and material world-building rather than individual consciousness. This approach reflects a uniquely ecological understanding of cognition, where thinking entwines with activity, and the body with the environment. Feelings and ideas are no longer abstract but somatised within the body, located in the head, throat, stomach, chest and the sexual organs: 'Everyone has an entire imperialism encamped down below', as Platonov aptly put it. From the perspective of feeling, thinking, acting, labouring collectives, political philosophy shifts from analysing hegemony to developing new capacities for sharing and strengthening the weak. An ecology for the proletariat demands an equitable distribution of resources among all the poor in the environment – humans, plants, machines and working-class bears. With Bogdanov in mind, admiring heavy mediaeval armour in a museum, the time to bear the weight of the past may have finally come.

Isabel Jacobs

## Knowledge without knowing

Alenka Zupančič, *Disavowal* (Cambridge/Hoboken: Polity Press, 2024). 162pp. £35.00 hb., £9.99 pb., 978 1 50956 119 3 hb., 978 1 50956 120 9 pb.

In 1962, J.G. Ballard's *The Drowned World* gave us an account of the counterproductive tendency of knowledge. When the novel's protagonists are faced with the reality of the climate disaster – that the drowned, scorched

Europe will continue to become even more inhospitable – their admission of this destruction paradoxically *inhibits* any effective reaction. As both Kerans and his team become increasingly confronted with their slim chances

of success in staving off the impending catastrophe, any acknowledgement of the reality is a simultaneous dismissal of the gravity of the outlook. By agreeing on the disastrous state of the world, their preoccupations shift elsewhere, onto dream-like, existential, and even trivial preoccupations – onto anything, in short, but the reality of the situation itself.

What Ballard reproduces is the tendency of knowledge to be admitted yet simultaneously rejected. It is precisely this predicament which Alenka Zupančič intends to deconstruct in *Disavowal*, showing that this paradox of knowledge applies to the basic coordinates of today's political sphere. For Zupančič, the key to understanding our collective impotence in the face social catastrophe lies in an appropriation of what Freud called *Verleugnung* (disavowal), whereby we *admit* something, but *act* entirely as if the opposite were the case. It is the constitutively self-defeating structure of knowledge which plagues late capitalist society's capacity to effectively deal with its greatest threats: the ecological crisis, nuclear warfare, political corruption and exploitation, etc.

By taking Freud's use of *Verleugnung*, via Octave Mannoni's formula for disavowal ('I know very well but nevertheless ...'), and framing it according to its ontological weight as well as its collective (rather than individual-pathological) structure, the robust malleability of contemporary ideology as well as conspiracy theories can be better accounted for. Zupančič's efforts to bridge the ontological and the ideological are undoubtedly impressive, and faithful to the original meaning of the psychoanalytic intervention. It is in part Freud who depicted the permanent entanglement of the constitution of subjectivity and everyday life; a reciprocal movement between an ontological origin and everyday expressions of the unconscious (slips of the tongue, jokes, etc. all reproduce an antagonism at the beginning of subjecthood).

For Freud, fetishism is the first prototype of disavowal: it permits the belief in a non-existent object to persist despite our conscious acknowledgement that this object does not exist. This 'real-imaginary' object is the maternal phallus, the last bulwark against the fact of castration; the accordance of sexuality to 'social' modes of enjoyment. Where the infant initially believes in the existence of the maternal phallus, it does not need to recognise the possible lack of the phallus – that the phallus always implies its own potential non-existence (as

Lacan states, that the phallus signifies only its own absence – unlike the penis, which can be reduced to its biological reality, the phallus has an unmistakable symbolic function: its meaning is impersonal and socially formulated, an obscure sign of power that is nevertheless not reducible to the penis itself, and thus a symbol not of presence or virility but absence and impotence). The universality of the phallus, its existence both in men and women, would be a guarantee that the phallus *is what it is*. Yet the traumatic revelation for the infant that the mother has no phallus is in itself the negation of the phallus by itself – a recognition of the precarious state of the phallus.

With a fetish, however, sexuality assumes a reactionary position against this fact of castration. The fetishist may consciously acknowledge the fact of the non-existence of the maternal phallus (of castration, in other words), yet their behaviour implies something else: the fetishist never reaches the point of a sexual relation in which the lack of the phallus is directly encountered. It sets up as the object of its own drive a point which precedes the recognition of the absence of the phallus (such as a foot or a shoe). The fetish is an objectified method of enjoying the *lack* of a sexual relation. Consciously, the fetishist can acknowledge that 'I know very well that the maternal phallus does not exist' yet at the same time the 'but nevertheless' is embodied in their fetish, in the fact that they never materially confront this fact of castration. As Mannoni writes, the fetishist does not need to *utter* the second portion of the formula ('but nevertheless ...'), since the fetish is itself this disavowal, this 'but nevertheless ...' is embodied in their object choice.

Zupančič's contribution is to pursue Freud's inquiry to show that this mode of relating to inconvenient knowledge – to dismiss it precisely by admitting it – defines not only fetishised individual belief, but ideology as a whole. She builds on the example of the Italian adventurer Giacomo Casanova, who describes his pleasure at manipulating the naivety of others by pretending to be a magician. He is very well aware that his 'magic' is merely performative nonsense, and yet when a storm unexpectedly breaks out during one of his spectacles, he finds himself believing his own performance: he fearfully remains inside a magical chalk circle which according to his mock-narrative would be a magical protection from lightning. In other words, as Zupančič suggests, he 'falls

victim to his own magic'. In this double movement of disbelief that sustains belief itself, Casanova utilises castration as a defence *against* castration: the magic that he mocks ('the symbolic narrative of magic is after all nonsense') becomes a tool of protection when the irrationality or threat of this magic is revealed ('yet if I stay in the chalk circle, the magic cannot affect me either way'). By disavowing a direct belief, a mediated, symbolic belief is avowed: 'I know very well that magic and the "chalk circle" is a joke, but I am nevertheless protected by remaining in the chalk circle, even if I do not really believe in it'.



In order to frame this paradox as operating on the ontological level, in the primary register of *being* and *knowing* itself, Zupančič returns to Descartes' *cogito*, and in particular Lacan's problematic reading of it. The *cogito*, the identification of thinking with being, is initially rejected by Lacan where the psychoanalytic subject is concerned – the unconscious is after all where thinking eludes my being. Yet Lacan eventually reverts to his original position, reading the *cogito* as an affirmation of the self-contradictory discrepancy which makes the relation between thinking and being an unconscious relation *par excellence*: the 'thinking act' which registers being

is a momentary disruption in knowledge, a momentary abjection in which thought affirms being by a rejection of itself. Hence Lacan's famous variation on Descartes' *cogito ergo sum*:

I think where I am not, therefore I am where I do not think.  
I am not whenever I am the plaything of my thought; I think of what I am where I do not think to think.

The ultimate outcome of Descartes' meditations is to reduce thought to an empty formality, to evacuate all *thought content* and in so doing to discover being as the accidental by-product of thought's inability to account for itself. In this sense, Lacan insists that the *cogito* is in fact the subject of the unconscious, one in which being and an 'impossible knowledge' are contracted into an imperceptible singularity, in which, in other words, knowledge is a rejection of being. Knowledge is in this sense itself a fetish, it continues to function insofar as it is disavowed. Its lack of ontological 'weight' becomes the inverted ground upon which it is perpetually justified. Put more simply, knowledge 'functions' by the fact that it simultaneously rejects itself. To have knowledge of a thing is to install a certain screen *against* a recognition of said thing.

Another of Zupančič's examples reveals a similar ability of subjectivity to apprehend finitude (death) by latently rejecting it: a man says to his wife, 'If one of us dies, I shall move to Paris.' The possibility of death is uttered, yet the second part of the statement reveals that if death is possible, it is after all the wife who will be dying. Disavowal operates by a constitutive, yet necessary exclusion; a certain element in our shared subjective register is ejected, and in so doing we can speak in the affirmative about a Symbolic fact whilst at the same time denying its universal or 'true' significance. Consider the manifold examples of forest fires, droughts, floodings, freak weather, etc.; as Zupančič puts it, these very real events seemingly prevent us from recognising the 'Real' upon which they touch – the overarching rupture in day-to-day life that the climate crisis represents. Each isolated recognition of some natural disaster veils a more fundamental comprehension of a universal destruction which lies behind isolated disasters. This is the difference employed by Lacan between reality (in this example, an isolated natural disaster) and the Real (the global warming responsible for these disasters and threatening the



basic coordinates of social reality, i.e. the Symbolic). We know these facts only insofar as our true knowledge (a complete knowledge of what they mean) is veiled.

Conspiracy theories are the ‘other side’ of the same coin on which rational enlightenment thought is located. Descartes’ *Meditations*, as Zupančič points out, begin with an almost comical level of paranoia over being deceived. The ‘deceiving Other’ is what drives Descartes towards the perpetual doubt which culminates in the metaphysical status of the *cogito*. For Zupančič, this same epistemological paranoia, this conviction of a ‘deceiving Other’ colouring everyday life, returns in the form of conspiracy theories – one of her preferred references being the far-right, 4chan-originated QAnon. Rational scepticism lends itself to an asymmetrical avowal of conspiracy theories (as opposed to ‘mainstream’ theories): the sceptical attitude initially includes the outlandish claims of conspiracy theories (a generalised scepticism of the mainstream and of conspiracies). Yet the fact that, unlike the mainstream, conspiracies come to reflect in their theories this idea of a deceiving ‘big Other’, the paranoiac-sceptical, enlightenment subject leans towards them, finds in them an independent knowledge in the absence of the Other, their own political *cogito*.

What is crucial, then, about disavowal is that it explains how we can know something without *actually* knowing it; how we can accept and simultaneously reject something. The strength of Zupančič’s argument is to reflect this political tendency in a fundamental ontological tension: the negative relationship between knowledge and being. However, is something not missing in accounting for political/social behaviour by the function of disavowal? The doctrine of disavowal can ultimately be summarised as follows: we *know* only so that we can continue being ignorant. We disavow something in order to continue enjoying it. If enjoyment really is the *raison d’être* of disavowal, ought we not to problematise this same enjoyment as much as we have dissected knowledge?

Zupančič’s model presupposes a self-serving enjoyment, where disavowal furnishes a continued (ignorant) pleasure. Here we should remember one of Freud’s crucial discoveries: enjoyment must also be located *beyond the pleasure principle*. Enjoyment is constructed in the impasses of the social, and can as such directly contradict pleasure; collective enjoyment is generated in the face

of the failure of personal enjoyment.

To understand this, we can return to *The Drowned World*. Interestingly, the paradoxical reaction of the protagonists – to stay and likely perish in former London as the rest of the research team moves further North – cannot be explained via the pleasure principle. No longer simply contending with insufferable temperatures and Earth returning to prehistoric conditions, the survivors additionally face their own psychological self-destructiveness. Collective nightmares, hallucinations and archetypal images of mankind’s parasitic relation to nature plague them far more than the ecological threat, yet encourage them to stay out of an aestheticised, narrative-form of what can best be described as the Freudian death drive. Their decision to stay is not a disavowal in the name of a protracted enjoyment. It is rather a drive serving an imaginary horror *more horrifying* than their reality itself.



It is precisely this self-contradictory centre of enjoyment – its existence beyond the pleasure principle in the realm of the death drive – that disavowal alone misses. Where Zupančič’s exploration of disavowal centres around the mediated ‘use’ of pleasure (to adapt Foucault’s term), it misses the impersonal, anti-

individualistic colour of ideology. Enjoyment transgresses the biological coordinates of pleasure – enjoyment is not only located beyond the finitude of the individual, but beyond any determinate aim or determinate object relation. This is one of Freud’s principal theses in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, a thesis which is even more clearly furnished by Laplanche’s (and to an extent Lacan’s) reading of Freud. We enjoy abstractly, without any stable formula of enjoyment, divorced from the specific thing which we claim to enjoy – since this thing itself does not exist. Enjoyment is constructed on the ground of a non-relation (a ‘lack’ in Lacanian terms), and thus persists only by relinquishing any immediate pleasure.

The death drive signifies an enjoyment that denies pleasure, denies life. For example, the traumatic realisation of the absence of the maternal phallus, the recognition that castration is immanent, and that free, individualised desire is impossible. The coordinates, in other words, in which fetishism emerges – these events are not pleasurable, and yet lay the ground for an excessive, destructive enjoyment. Fetishist enjoyment turns away from life and towards death: an enjoyment (e.g. of a shoe) that counters reproduction.

What Zupančič fails to consider is an enjoyment that rejects pleasure (the pleasure in continuing to live as if ‘everything is okay’). Deleuze’s understanding of habit becomes relevant here: habit is a formal mode of constructing ‘sense’ by grounding what is repeated through the very act of repeating it. Habit is, according to this definition, a political factor: it is often not with a direct avowal, but with a retroactive justification, that political formations arise. It is by acting first, and grounding the

intention of this act after, that we can persistently drive ourselves towards catastrophe. Repetition justifies itself – it is not the thing being repeated, but the principle of repetition itself.

Disavowal as a ‘knowledge that does not know itself’ is an important political factor. Although it has been more popularised by Žižek, Zupančič remains faithful to its conceptual origin (discussing its implication for Freud and Mannoni) whilst impressively constructing her argument in accordance with the ontological categories of knowledge and being, thereby grounding disavowal as a social-ontological function in a way which eludes Žižek’s discussions of the concept. Yet disavowal obscures a more impersonal political factor: a habitual-destructive enjoyment beyond the pleasure principle.

In order to approach today’s dominant political antagonisms, the image of humanity as acting in the service of individualistic pleasure must be abandoned. The perceived ‘self-sacrifice’ of QAnon and related conspiracy theories, the desolate world-outlook of reactionary populism including its performative animation in Trump, and even the formless indifference with which liberal democracies support an increasingly exploitative and destructive techno-capitalism, reveal an ideological movement unaccounted for by pleasure alone. The colour of the contemporary political landscape is one in which a psychology of pleasure – under which disavowal can be subsumed – is insufficient. What should be stressed is the political dimension of the death drive, of an impersonal, pleasure-less enjoyment which retroactively formulates what it is repeating.

Rafael Holmberg

## Perpetually thinking beyond

Yuk Hui, *Machine and Sovereignty: For a Planetary Thinking* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2024). 368pp., £23.99 pb., 978 1 51791 741 8

When did the awareness of living on a planet first start to emerge? This is a difficult question since its various implications did not all arrive in the same time and place. Ideas of a spherical Earth and heliocentrism can be traced back at least to the writings of Ancient Greece. But the

likes of Aristarchus of Samos would have been unable to conceive of the Copernican trauma that now underlies the profane image of Planet Earth revealed by modern astronomy, 150 million kilometres from the sun, awaiting solar death 5 billion years in the future. Nor would