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ByMute Editor

When is a book about Deleuze, paradoxically, not a book about Deleuze? When it's by Slavoj Žižek. Jean-Jacques Lecercle reviews the latest theory romp from the Slovenian philosophy king
Organs Without Bodies: On Deleuze and Consequences, Slavoj Žižek, London: Routledge, 2004

There *is* such a thing as vintage Žižek, and this book is an excellent example of it. A rich cloth of jokes (always excellent), anecdotes (always entertaining), snippets from films old and new, and philosophical concepts is woven before our admiring eyes – not forgetting the usual moments of brilliant insight, as when Žižek expounds the inhuman essence of language according to Lacan. All the qualities we have learnt to expect from Žižek are present in this book: he frisks on the stage and flits about from concept to concept, from philosopher to theorist: from Hegel to the hapless Pinker, from Lacan who, we learn to our surprise, is not always right, only almost-always (see his anti-philosophy stance), to Badiou, who is practically always right. This is our Žižek: the boisterous but lovable child, the philosophical Nigel Molesworth (it is safe to mention him, now he has been canonised as a Penguin Modern Classic), a genius at provocation, a game at which Deleuze and Guattari thought they excelled. Remember the (in)famous incipit to *Anti-Oedipus*: it shits, it fucks, etc. Well, Žižek, who is not only gifted with extraordinary pedagogic flair (he has no equal in the clear exposition of abstruse Lacanian concepts through filmic illustration) but is out to *épater le bourgeois*, informs us that fist fucking is an archetypal Deleuzian practice: at the game of provocation, he wins fists down.

There is a problem with the book, though. It lies with its title. For the title leads us to expect a book about Deleuze, and about the consequences that may be derived from his philosophical positions. But the 'and' of this title is not one of inclusion, consecution or consequence, but of exclusion and separation. There is an attempt at a reading of Deleuze in the first 40 pages, after which he only makes guest appearances, as they say in soap operas, in the manner of the blond young lady in an episode of Monty Python, who eventually exclaims in a pitiful tone: 'But this was my only line!' For after the first quarter of the book Deleuze's lines are indeed few and far between. He is rightly absent from the first 'consequence' chapter, which is devoted to 'Cognitivism with Freud' (but I fail to see what it is doing in this book, except as a vague echo of the trinity of concepts that structures *What Is Philosophy?*), more surprisingly absent from the second, on film analysis (this is where Deleuze's culture and Žižek's intersect most manifestly), a chapter mostly devoted to a Lacanian reading of Hitchcock; he is fleetingly present from the third, which deals with politics, where a critique of Deleuze and Guattari's rather vague concept of molecular fascism is proffered, and where Deleuze's main descendants, Negri and Hardt, are also criticised (this is the only moment when the term 'consequences' makes sense) – the chapter ends on a celebration of Chairman Mao's Great Cultural Revolution, which I hope is tongue in cheek.

The reading of Deleuze, meagre as it is (this is a book about Hegel, about Lacan, about a host of minor figures, down to George W. Bush as unwitting Hegelian, hardly about Deleuze), is not without interest. For one thing, it is a sympathetic, even if critical account. No carping criticism of Deleuze by a reader eager to point out the great philosopher's mistakes in the approved analytic manner: Žižek knows that a philosopher's 'errors' are interesting only in so far as they are necessary for the overall coherence of his system of concepts. And his reading is mostly based on *Logic of Sense*, for him Deleuze's greatest book (the reason is clear: Deleuze calls it in his preface 'an attempt at a logical and psychoanalytic novel' and goes on to be kind about Lacan). I happen to agree with the assessment, and I do think that Žižek is right in revaluing the book, and stressing the importance of the concept of sense-event, even if this goes against the grain of Deleuze himself (who hardly ever referred to the book in his later work) and of mainstream Deleuzians, who usually ignore it. Lastly, Žižek's reading

takes us a long way from a host of vitalist, ecological, anarcho-desiring and generally obscurantist current readings of Deleuze. And I have no quarrel with his critique of Deleuze and Guattari's superficial concept of fascism (even if I think that the concept of 'multitude' is more interesting than Zizek seems to, having its roots not only in Deleuze, but in the Italian tradition of Operaismo, of which Negri is a classic exponent, and a contemporary offshoot of which is to be found in the work of Paolo Virno [see Massimo De Angelis' review of Virno's *A Grammar of the Multitude*, p. 122]).

But, interesting as it is, the reading is not without problems. The attempt to separate the 'good' Deleuze from the horrible Guattari is hardly original, and it is entirely misguided, as it leads Zizek to neglect not only some of Deleuze's major philosophical contributions (an example, dear to my heart, would be the critique of mainstream philosophy of language centred on the concept of minority: there is a politics in this, and not merely a politics of language) but it also loses the coherence of his philosophical progress, as well as neglecting the best known example of *écriture à deux* as an answer to the aporias of consensual dialogue (to which Deleuze was notoriously hostile). And the reading remains embryonic. It hardly engages with the Deleuze corpus. Zizek has read *Logic of Sense* with care; he has read with equal care *Anti-Oedipus*, which he thinks, quite rightly to my mind, is Deleuze's worst book. He must have read the cinema books, although he never really engages with them. But he makes practically no reference to *A Thousand Plateaux* (a much better book than its predecessor, without a close reading of which one is unable to say anything of substance about Deleuze's politics), nor to any of the subsequent works (*The Fold*, *What Is Philosophy?*, the essays collected in *Critique et clinique*). So the critical reading of Deleuze, even of what needs to be criticised, for instance certain aspects of his politics, remains superficial: a number of references to the 'sense-event', a few dark hints about 'the dark precursor', and that is about all.

Nor is the reading doing what it says it does. Zizek, in an entirely appropriate attitude, claims that he means to do to Deleuze what Deleuze does to other philosophers: to take him from behind, that is to penetrate the system of concepts with a degree of violence and engender from this violation a monstrous offspring of new concepts. Only Zizek does not penetrate Deleuze's system – the art of philosophical buggery entirely eludes him. His approach is in fact much more traditional: he practises unnatural couplings between Deleuze and his arch opponents, Hegel and Lacan. So we get a Hegelian Deleuze, and a Lacanian Deleuze. The Hegelian Deleuze is of some interest (no French philosopher of that generation entirely escaped Hegel's embrace), but the Lacanian Deleuze is all too predictable: Deleuze's concepts are merely translated into Lacanese, through Zizek's infuriating rhetorical device of the biased negative question ('Is it not that the Deleuzian concept X amounts to the same thing as, and is far better expressed by, the Lacanian concept Z?' he asks knowingly, nudge nudge wink wink).

I am being unfair to Zizek (but then, I usually am). This is a brilliant book, which I thoroughly enjoyed. In the current spate of boring books about Deleuze (I should know, I wrote one of them), it is a breath of fresh air. Except it is hardly a book about Deleuze. Have I already said this?

J-J Lecercle is professor of English at the University of Paris in Nanterre. His book *Deleuze and Language* is reviewed on page 124 of this issue