

CHRIS FLEMING AND
JOHN O'CARROLL

symmetrical modernities?

JANE BENNETT

*The Enchantment of Modern Life:
Attachments, Crossings and Ethics*

Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2001

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SIMON DURING

*Modern Enchantments: The Cultural Power of
Secular Magic*

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Sometimes terms become commonplaces such that they attain the status of conceptual lingua franca; these terms and their associated meanings come to pervade widely shared conceptions of contemporary culture. Possible examples are the words (and perhaps their associations) *modern* and *enchantment*. A customer browsing books who encountered the titles *Modern Enchantments* and *The Enchantment of Modern Life* could well be forgiven for imagining them as having a subject matter in common. The books under review here, however, would undermine such a presumption; if there are symmetries and assumptions common to both, they can best be distinguished by their respective fields of inquiry. Simon During's book, ostensibly about secular magic, turns out 'really' to be an inquiry into the significance of feigning, of the theatrical ruse and the 'put-on'—in 'magic' of course, but equally in film and literature. (One thinks here of certain parallels between During's and Michael Taussig's influential book *Mimesis and Alterity*). Jane Bennett's book, on the other hand, seeks to outline (for want, no doubt, of better descriptors) an ethico-epistemology and affective topology of a re-figured modernity.

Given the above, it should come as no surprise that the word *enchantment* works differently in each study: During's book uses it to name the secular field he will explore radiating out from the magic show; Bennett's is a more theoretical enterprise, where the word names the possibilities of affective absorption afforded by an engagement with a world that offers only an immanent sense of the sacred. But perhaps

it is easy—indeed, too easy—to overdraw the disparities. In working through their respective differences, though, we encounter assumptions in common leading to surprising—and often under-thought—symmetries between the two works. In particular, there are shared—and perhaps troubling—axioms, common straw-doll enemies ('baddies' perhaps), parallel aims.

Having said this, let us begin (again) with a word or two on each of the projects. During's book spends three chapters unfolding the inquiry: one sketching the history of magic from antiquity, one theorising enchantment and modernity, and one exploring the prehistory of modern secular magic's ambivalent role in the late Renaissance and Enlightenment. There follows a series of what look like excursions. Chapter 4 journeys into the nineteenth-century field of magic shows themselves, but Chapter 5 (film) and Chapter 6 (literature) take us into what, on the face of it, seem less 'core' aspects of 'secular magic'—areas to which the descriptor is applied with a dexterity at the service of considerable metaphorical displacement—before returning to magic stages and places in Chapter 7. The eighth, and final, chapter looks at the optical apparatuses of magic—the magic lantern, the photograph and film. In *Modern Enchantments*, in other words, we sense a deeper, or perhaps residual, inquiry into staging and fictionality on the one hand and an instability in the field of 'secular magic' that this label of During's itself implies on the other. During's book is admirable insofar as it thoughtfully engages the possibilities of using the notion of secular magic as a theoretical lens to

example select cultural phenomena of modernity. Despite its title, this book is comparatively modest in its theoretical ambition, a project that Daring largely carries off with scholarly detail and few pyrotechnics.

Bennett's *Enchantment of Modernity* seeks to offer a new politics of affective engagement with the world. This she derives largely from a revived Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, two writers renowned in the 1970s for their work on madness and capitalism—and who, in Australia at least, are currently undergoing a renaissance of sorts. This leads to, among other things, an exploration of ethics and the body. Aware of the lure of Romanticism, Bennett rehearses these and related issues in her chapter 'Ethical Energetics', which also looks at Friedrich von Schiller and the later Michel Foucault. Most suggestively of all, she takes up the work of Richard Flatman on language and ethics, showing that there's always a gap between 'ethical rules and ethical outcomes'. (152) Again, though, she gives up this line of inquiry by turning back to Deleuze and Guattari, because Flatman 'underplays [language's] somatic character'. (153) Intriguingly, the book takes the work of Stephen White on weak ontology to argue a new way of relating to and being in the world. This idea is not particularly well developed; it appears more as an end-point or suggestion than a formula. Yet given the text's obvious hostility to Christianity, the resonance of this idea with Gianni Vattimo's profoundly Christian version of the same, the Italian philosopher's reflections on 'pensiero debole' [weak thought]—or indeed Charles

Taylor's centrality to the debate—does appear to raise more questions than it answers in terms of the ontological character of the unambiguously post-Christian world she posits. Rather than this query being seen as expressive of conflicting priorities or agendas between the reviewers' views and the author's, we see it as a necessary engagement only because of the purported terrain of the reflection—modernity and enchantment. Indeed, this is especially true since the enchantment–modernity nexus itself should really be seen as a hypothesis rather than an established historical fact. There are complicated issues here that are elided by the author in too summary a fashion.

In this regard, both books share in a version of history that might best be called the 'disenchantment hypothesis of modernity'. This has a narrative rather than analytic structure insofar as it is usually retold or assumed rather than argued anew in each case. After Max Weber, and perhaps Blumenberg, it holds that prior to a posited onset of reason, superstition held sway—*fides* held sway over *ratio*, dogma presided over debate. The Enlightenment (usually) is seen as dispelling superstition and replacing it with reason. The consequence of this is a disenchantment of the world, often seen as a twofold process with Christianity first dispelling the immanent pantheistic spirits, and then Christianity itself being dispelled. Bennett accepts the nihilist universe of the disenchantment hypothesis (again, here she draws close to Vattimo), but does not accept that it is without affect or valid reasons for wonder and a sense of the numinous. While During does not explore

the issue on its own terms, he too clearly accepts this version of history; but this is not a flaw in his work given that his is not the task of theorising a renewed modernity.

It is not as if During has not theorising impulses of his own. Yet he seems to choke off such inquiry just whenever it is getting going. We say this not as a lament for a book we wish During might have written but because at every turn he seems to be resisting the impulse to write it. The final fascinating chapter nominally dedicated to the optical machineries of magic, for instance, is driven by no such thing. It is, as he puts it very well himself, an exploration of 'Spinozism in relation to the emergence' of these apparatuses. (261) As it stands, the discussion of Spinozism—from the name of Baruch Spinoza—casts a strange and nuanced light on that philosopher currently made popular through the works of Deleuze and Guattari. During remarks that Spinozism is a 'spiritually tinged secularism which swept throughout Europe from about 1770'. (261) (Again, this is a very popular version of Spinoza at present, one that can be upheld perhaps only by a particularly narrow reading of the *Ethics*, combined with a refusal to countenance or take seriously works such as his *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*.) Using ETA Hoffmann's novella *The Master Flea* to open the account and George Eliot's *Daniel Deronda* to explore it, During notes the influence of the 'immanent rather than transcendental understanding of the universe' that inflects the stories and Spinozism, and how indeed film itself is also related 'to that ambitious and sensitive form of philosophical secularism first described by Spinoza which

was most influential in absorbing and displaying older forms of spiritualism'. (260, 261) But technologies such as the magic lantern seemed to endanger Spinozism, because these 'technologize' the imagination and construct a 'material membrane on images'. (265) Thus, Spinoza 'belonged to that rationalist and scientifically curious community in which the instrument was devised but despised it'. (266) In a way curiously related to Bennett's weak ontology, Daring shows how Spinozism existed in weak and strong versions (with the latter seeking to scientifically validate supernatural experience and to 'retain a realm of imaginative culture'). (266–7) But the Spinozist view (either way) was to lose: 'almost everywhere in our culture (except perhaps in the academic humanities) George Albert Smith and the heirs of the magic assemblage have triumphed over the endeavours of Gurney, Deronda, and Spinoza'. (278)

Citing Deleuze and Guattari, Bennett endorses a version of immanence widely assumed to be Spinozist both early in her work and more explicitly near the end, when she favours a version of the cosmos that 'names a dimension of being with all conceptual and experiential strata ... that energetic aspect of things, thoughts, matter, which has not (yet) crystallized into a place of knowing or belonging'. (166) But unlike Spinoza whose secularity implied an immanent spirituality, there is no spiritual plane that we can discern in Bennett's account because she discounts this possibility. For her, 'an intrinsically meaningless world also brings new opportunities for freedom'. (60) In this respect, those who share this view might

profit further from an exploration of the kind Adam Seligman undertook into the possibility of a sceptically founded epistemology in his *Modernity's Wager* (2000), which finds a basis for modernity in a renewal of inquiries of the seventeenth century.

If the two writers share in the disenchantment hypothesis, their works occupy a fairly circumscribed, even narrow, theoretical terrain. Both repeat a recognisable kind of cultural studies orthodoxy that involves straw dolls of whom the best known is Theodor Adorno. Adorno is seen by Daring as 'restrictive and misplaced', 'losing' sight of the spread of pleasures, competencies, and experiences that secular magic afforded; he is also seen as failing to see that individuals can be both enchanted and disenchanted at the same time (65–6). And contrary to the jacket notes of Bennett's book to the effect that hers is a book written generously, let alone straw dolls, her work systematically constructs an oppositionally founded inquiry, responding not only to what she calls the 'failure' of Adorno, and Max Horkheimer, (123) or aspects of Weber's disenchantment thesis itself, but also, in surprisingly vindictive language to anyone who cannot 'profit' with a 'heroic will' of the Nietzschean-Deleuzian variety, 'to choose rather than the cowardly slide into resentment'. (60) Where Daring's terms of analysis are elusive at worst, suggestive at best, Bennett's are programmatic and dogmatic at worst, illuminating at best. In this respect, it is worth elaborating Bennett's work a little further so its distinctive qualities may be made clearer.

The reliance on Deleuze and Guattari is, of course, familiar in cultural studies analysis of

late. But it makes for some odd effects. Their gauche and once gauchist critiques of capitalism might once have seen like prescriptions for a better future. Unlike most theorists who are good at remedies but bad at fortune telling, Deleuze and Guattari's work was strangely prophetic, as their dream of flows and Nietzschean yea-saying and even of assemblages came true: nomads to do indeed walk the earth (and God help them find a permanent job—or country). And other princes of the universe (Richard Branson et al) are the figureheads of the push to annihilate centralised governance of any kind. What flows, of course, is money (the other things flow too, of course). Their revolutionary prescriptions happened without bloodshed in many places, and are even more cruel than what they replaced. In Bennett, there is a certain uneasiness at crucial moments of the Deleuze and Guattari manifold: she is quick to move beyond the account of the horse masochist (927), and when it comes to Deleuze's account of Franz Kafka, Bennett responds in an extremely interesting way. She cites their Kafka repeatedly—in her account of interspeciesism, in enchantment, even the idea of the somatic sonority of language. (20, 51, 153) But it is in her discussion of laughter itself that we gain the most telling citation of all. Here we learn, via Deleuze and Guattari, that when Kafka first read the opening of *The Trial* to friends, 'he laughed so much that at times he could not read any further'. (108) Citing approvingly their contention that Kafka's was a 'joyous' laughter, creating worlds for us to wonder at and enjoy, Bennett assures us that all this is 'fiction' and that 'no harm accrues to real people',

that we can feel free to 'draw analogies'. (110) Yet we must ourselves wonder about this—about a humour (Kafka's, supposedly) Deleuze and Guattari's, Bennett's that makes of fictional Joseph K's (the *Trial*) or K's (*The Castle*) bureaucratic anxieties and nightmares a circus for our mere enjoyment. We recall too the contexts of the joke, and not just the bureaucratic blunder Bennett is comfortable to relate, but also the trajectory of Joseph K who, for reasons we never quite get to find out, ends his days when his throat is 'cut like a dog'. Bennett assures us, with the cheery tone of the Nietzschean yea-sayer, that it better to drop the sceptical mode (advocated as we noted before by Seligman) and instead to think anew:

Another strategy is to strengthen the will to resist the enchantment of violence by feeding that will with food of another kind of enchantment, the enchantment of the wondrous complexity of life. The idea here is to fight enchantment with enchantment, to weaken the appeal of violence by infusing oneself with the affective energy of a more life-giving mood. (110)

Thus the advertising spruiker prevails over the cynic. Like Deleuze's version of Kafka.

Readers will, we suspect, discern that we are not entirely comfortable with the ethos that Bennett takes for granted in this book. We suspect, indeed, that Adorno and Horkheimer might supply a better antidote to violence of this kind than distraction, and if an antidote is needed to *them*, that might be a lesser problem.

Bennett's book operates on a narrow theoretical terrain, but does attempt something theoretically coherent that is well worth reading. If we are inclined to question the limits she puts on her inquiry to start with, the book is to be welcomed as an attempt to make sense of this as a field. During's book, strangely, shows signs of being perhaps more theoretically astute, but his is a project that is deceptively titled—it offers a glimpse of an under-thought field of interconnection, one that lies between fiction, film and optics, magic and, ever so discreetly, God itself.

CHRIS FLEMING teaches philosophy and cultural theory at the University of Western Sydney and is currently a visiting fellow at the University of California. His most recent book is *René Girard: Violence and Mimesis* (Polity, 2004) and his work has appeared in *Body & Society*, *Griffith Law Review* and *Modern Drama*.

JOHN O'CARROLL teaches literature and communication at Charles Sturt University. His research interests are in the areas of multiculturalism, modernity, and the theorisation of secular society. He has written a number of essays with Chris Fleming on the subjects of anti-Americanism and Romanticism, especially for the journal *anthropoetics*.
