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Peter Conlin: *Temporal Politics and Banal Culture: Before the Future*. Routledge, 2022, pp. 108. ISBN: 9781472474377

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Has the future been cancelled due to lack of interest? For UK-based researcher and writer Peter Conlin, the answer is “yes” ... and “no.” What has gone, or at least should be discarded, is a naïve faith in a linear temporality moving inexorably towards the usual Enlightenment conceits of enhanced human freedom, material abundance, and a more efficient control of nature. The “grand utopian imaginary” that marked the 19th- and to some extent 20th-centuries has since taken on a curious half-life in the musings of the ecomodernists, who suppose we can have our hyper-technological civilization and a sustainably “green” future too, or Elon Musk fanboys dreaming of colonizing Mars (which will almost certainly never be suitable for human habitation) and the allegedly looming AI “singularity.” Yet such thoughts about the future today, despite being oft-wrapped in florid corporate-speak, are largely reductive extrapolations from existing technological trends that do not fundamentally challenge the reigning world (dis)order, by envisioning a radically different future understood as a project of collective transformation.

So far, this implies a “no.” But in this provocative and stimulating little book, Conlin also wants us to consider shifting our perspective away from “the future” (again, understood as grand metanarrative) towards a more supple and nuanced idea of “futura.” The latter is by no means a full-throated affirmation of a glittering future waiting for all, but a rather more qualified “yes” that sets out to explore an ambiguous, open-ended, and multifaceted set of possibilities composed in a “minor key” (p. 2). Grappling with the complexities and odd byways of these “futural conditions” necessitates a Benjaminian approach trawling through the discarded and outmoded trappings of our failed civilization, so as to dispel (or at least challenge) the dominant ideology of a “continual present” (p. 4) and the seemingly obdurate “capitalist realism” it upholds. Letting go of “the future,” in other words, frees us to uncover a series of “counter-temporalities” or “heterochronicities” that persist, often hidden or veiled, in the fragments and interstices of the (over)developed world, and to grapple with the implications of a new “politics of time” vis-à-vis material culture, spatialities, media, and so on.

After a substantive introduction setting out the theoretical parameters of this study, Conlin develops his thesis over the course of three overlapping chapters on logistics, boredom, and obsolescence, respectively. All such phenomena are for him marked by the “eerie time of the mundane, the nondescript, quotidian blandness and detritus” (p. 3). They represent places, processes, and affects where nothing seems to happen. Interestingly, however, Conlin resists the blandishments of a “depth hermeneutics” that purports to effortlessly peel back the phenomenal surface of things to reveal the teeming interpretive richness below. To a considerable extent, the apparent semiotic blankness of, for example, the standard-issue logistics warehouse, which although it has become one of the central elements of a rapacious planetary capitalism, really is an inscrutable null-space of absence/presence. If contemporary capitalism is “Deleuzian,” feverishly stoking and capturing flows, intensities, and mobilities, then perhaps tarrying with such generally unnoticed moments of stasis or interruption is a useful critical strategy. Of course, end-stage capitalism cannot avoid myriad disjunctions and blockages (supply chain crises, pandemic lockdowns, canals stoppered by grounded container ships, war in Eastern Europe), but for Conlin these are “normalized,” experienced as part of the fabric of everyday life in conveniently denialist fashion. A “politics of stoppage,” by contrast, approaches the mundanity of the “pause” and subjects it to techniques of estrangement. Through this and other modalities of defamiliarization, ordinary times and spaces can become peculiar, uncanny, and paradoxically

“eventful,” pregnant with possibilities, undercutting the “engineered despair” of capitalism as usual wherein the prevailing attitude is that things can only get worse before they get worse. The ultimate goal by Conlin’s reckoning is the consolidation of a “weird left” that brings instinctual and affective elements into the political realm, but in a manner still rooted in rigorous socio-economic analysis.

Boredom is here characterized as a mode of suspension as regards the subject’s cognitive and experiential operations, indicating the presence of “affective waste” linked to overarching “cycles of novelty and outmodedness” (p. 3). The manic nature of capital accumulation demands the neoliberal subject always be “on” in the pursuit of maximum productivity. Leisure is no respite, becoming the site where “techniques of the self” are deployed to ensure the quantifiable optimization of work/consumption. This necessarily generates tedium; we are impelled to embrace the “new” out of the desire to transcend these repetitive and outmoded qualities. But of course the new quickly becomes old because the former is really commodified sameness, at which point we lapse into boredom again. As it is constitutively linked to financial flows and resource extraction, logistical infrastructures, commodity abstractions, “machinic enslavements,” and ultimately the “hyperobject” of the Anthropocene itself, boredom – and indeed the everyday tout court – can only be understood as subjective condition, cultural formation, and socioeconomic construct simultaneously.

The boredom cycle Conlin describes here is a lot more vicious than virtuous. But although it cannot be understood as some portal to a putatively redeemed future – dubbed “Messianic boredom” – certain possibilities remain. Thinking (and writing) with boredom sensitizes us to the contradictions of hyper-capitalism, especially the intertwining of novelty and obsolescence, and the continual streams of psychic and material effluvia the accumulation process churns out, and that boredom disrupts. One implication is that we have not entered into a “post-boredom” phase, which, according to such luminaries as Mark Fisher (2009), has been occasioned by the distractions of streaming content on demand, haptic compulsions of the “digital twitch,” and the algorithmic colonization of daily life. Boredom remains the default subjective position of dwellers in the Global North’s metropolises, but boredom in even a “desubjectivized” form is still boredom. (As is, presumably, “post-capitalist” boredom.) Accordingly, reflection on our bored states can give us insight into the weirdness of the contemporaneous moment and its latent heterochronic potentialities with respect to pressing issues of waste, value, and so forth – insofar as the “contemporary” itself is a tangled skein of multiple timelines linking past, present, and possible futures. (That boredom is not “dead” per se is, one supposes, good news for boredom studies.)

To conclude with a note on Conlin’s prose style: the writing here is consistently witty and engaging, but there are also formal and aesthetic choices that convey a more oblique, experimental character. In this sense, the author takes up McKenzie Wark’s call for “disparate methods” of exposition and expression – or, by Conlin’s own description, “elliptical and generative” (p. 5) approaches to the project of *c r i t i c a l* scholarship. For instance, there is an off-kilter “alternate preface” inserted into the text of the introduction, a kind of “dub” version that opens up divergent thematic and narrative threads. Conlin’s point here is that, in the interests of promoting the afore-mentioned weird left, or what Fisher (2018) once called (in a tantalizing

but ultimately unfulfilled way) “acid communism,” conventional academic criticism is simply not up to the task. This is an intriguing and, indeed, convincing notion, propelling *Temporal Politics and Banal Culture: Before the Future* into an errant, weird-in-a-good way place. Which is, after all, only fitting.

References

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