

The acts of looking and imaging, the nature of differing visions and flexible readings, are themes which run implicitly through the articles in this issue of *New Formations*.

Kevin Robins, in his article, presents the postmodern city as an attempted return to the mythical origins of community and identity. And if, in this game of postmodern nostalgia, the attempts at re-establishing personal and collective roots fail, one can try the alternative strategy of the development of 'city image campaigns'; if the city cannot be re-imaged then maybe it can be re-imaged. But could it be that there is a deeper crisis; that we no longer have a need for the city? Is there, Robins asks, a role, between the modernist thrust of the universal and global, and the postmodern nostalgia for a pre-modern localism, for the city itself? If there is a role, he argues, it must be one which is based on a recognition of the increasingly diverse and different populations within cities, and an accommodation of these populations within a revitalized public space 'a genuinely open space', in which 'all of the city's loose ends could hang out, all of a city's inner contradictions can express and unfold themselves'.

This is no vision of a cohesive community, no uniform public sphere of shared values and assumptions, for there is no single dominant culture. There is an acknowledgement here, and in the following article, that cohesive communities, whilst they may be an important ideal, are certainly not lived realities.

It is the tension between this ideal of the cohesive community, and its absence, that underpins Charlotte Brunsdon's case-study of the erection and reception of dish aerials to receive satellite television within Britain in 1989/90. Erecting a dish signals a desire, a desire made public, not secretly indulged. The 'anti-dishers' speak at the general social level of matters of public concern – discussion of architectural concern, environmental regulation and value; 'dish erectors' on the other hand, speak at the level of the particular, the personal, the concrete. Although the anti-dishers frequently refer to the dishes as 'unsightly', it is ultimately, Brunsdon claims, not what these dishes look like that matters, it is what they mean. There is a vision inspiring the anti-dishers, 'a vision of the old country', of a cohesive community, of a uniform public sphere sheltering private uniqueness. The vision which Brunsdon locates amongst the 'anti-dishers' is that same vision which Robins speaks of as the nostalgia for the pre-modern localism of community; for a single dominant culture.

Ken McKenzie Wark, on the other hand, addresses a related theme: not in terms of the eclipse of, and longing for, a lost localism, but rather in terms of the eclipse of one global hegemonic cultural force with another. Is Japan's economic and cultural eclipse of America related, he asks, to the rise of post-modern culture? If the old Fordist system produced a dominant American culture, what does post-Fordist society have to offer us culturally? The answer, McKenzie Wark implies, may be Japan. In which case we may now have to deal with forces and cultures of which we, Westerners, have little understanding at all. This, as a recent newspaper headline states, can be 'deeply disorienting'.¹ The £20m Japan Festival currently taking place in Britain can in this context

be seen as a way of helping us absorb this other culture: of overcoming the fear expressed by Madame Cresson that Japan is 'another universe'.²

This, McKenzie Wark wants to argue, impacts upon cultural theory when we come to discuss different modes of reading media images. To the 'dominant', 'negotiated' and 'resistant' readings proposed by Stuart Hall, McKenzie Wark adds perverse and paradoxical readings – those which show no regard to the meaning of the message in its original community, and those which knowingly decontextualize the message. These readings should be seen, he claims, in the context of the decline of the dominance of American culture which previously provided cohesive communities of interpretation. Which refers back to Charlotte Brunsdon's arguments about private tastes, no longer regulated by a public sense of 'what's better to like'. Those who have bought into 'supranational entertainment' are not, as Brunsdon points out, available for 'the ritual, citizen-making moments of national broadcasting'. They are not engaging in a local or national public sphere, participating in a cohesive community.

Meanwhile, Sarah Kember looks at the crisis in the sovereignty of the empirical eye created by computer imaging. She addresses this crisis in the context of contemporary medical computer imaging and its relation to the transition from the analogical visions of the body of the middle ages and the anatomical visions of the renaissance period; arguing that the anatomical function of medical computer imaging can be theorized in terms of post/modernism, whereas the analogical function is best understood with reference to chaos theory. The geometry of chaos is evolving through computer imaging technology and its creation of optical models for space.

If taking a good look now implies something more complex than the single vision of the empirical eye, having a good read has always involved adopting multiple standpoints. Gill Frith argues that if one sees the central constituent of feminine subjectivity not as 'lack' or 'passivity', but as adaptability ('womanliness' as mask, mimesis, performance), one finds a link between the feminine and the 'good reader': both require the ability to alternate roles, shift subject-positions and identifications. Hence the required position of the reading subject conforms much more closely to the conventional prescriptions of femininity than to those of masculinity. Frith's concluding question, of what it might then mean to 'read as a man' echoes, in different form, Kember's 'crisis in the sovereignty of the empirical eye'.

Finally, Christopher Norris explores what he perceives to be common mis-readings of Derrida. Challenging the tendency amongst certain postmodern literary critics and neo-pragmatist thinkers to characterize Derrida's writings as a 'brilliant debunking exercise' representing a renunciation of the Enlightenment project (notions of truth, reality, validity, etc.). Norris argues that Derrida has sought to use these very principles to maintain a commitment to 'a reasoned and responsible critique of existing forms of institutionalized power/knowledge'. In short, Norris claims, Derrida is concerned with the social, the political, the ethical. To the extent that this is the case there is a crucial difference between Derrida's work and that of postmodernist textualists.

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NOTES

- 1 Allison Pearson 'Deeply Disorienting' *The Independent*, Sunday 22 September 1991, p.19.
- 2 Kevin Robins and David Morley 'Japan Panic' *Marxism Today* September 1991, p.33.