

Representing desire in postmodernity

THE POLITICS OF desire has been a prominent feature of much contemporary art in London and elsewhere. Recent exhibitions in the capital, bearing titles such as 'Popocultural' (Cabinet Gallery/South London Gallery), 'Bonkers Bird', 'Goffick', 'Shut up you Stupid Cunt' (BANK) and 'Belladonna' (ICA), have continued to draw upon discourses which were important for the formation of identity politics in the seventies and the eighties. In viewing these recent shows one could conclude that the 'de-centring' of the subject and the assault on repressive social institutions through a pursuit of pleasure, remains a key concern for many contemporary artists. Some, informed by post-structuralist theory, have gone further by radically investing in *libidinal economies* thus implying that representation itself is a mechanism of repressive power. Such practices have attempted to explore desire as a drive (towards pleasure and the dissolution of subject/object boundaries) rather than conceptualise desire as something oriented towards an object: a move which has challenged the notion of desire as something produced by the prohibition of pleasure.

One could further conclude from recent exhibitions that this particular celebration of *libidinal economy* and its concomitant critique of representation has been challenged, of late, by artists whose works have manifested the limits of desire or the relationship of desire to the social realm. While the various ruminations on the politics of desire by contemporary artists are too diverse to map, we intend to identify two prominent, recent projects with the positions outlined above. The purpose of this is to point towards some of the implications of a *libidinal economy* as expressed in cultural forms today.

The first example is Jake and Dinos Chapman's installation *Chapmanworld*; a utopia populated by mutant infant mannequins created for the ICA in the spring of 1996 in which Logos was banished, setting libidinal drives free to run riot in a perverted Garden of Eden. The second example is Larry Clark's film *Kids* which similarly presented pleasure-seeking bodies in the form of very young people, though Clark's work differed from that of the Chapman brothers as it contextualised the kid's libidinal economies as a form of alienated consumption. In considering these examples we will discuss the problematics of these two projects which have developed out of Post-modern debates on pleasure and representation.

The comedian Jack Dee is not commonly thought to be an expert on matters relating to the politics of desire; so perhaps it was just an accident that he quipped: "they say that parents shouldn't smack their children but I think they should stop fucking them first". Dee's insight would not be wasted on Jake and Dinos Chapman who populated *Chapmanworld* with mutant infant mannequins. It was claimed that the infants who sported erect cocks, anus and vaginas where their mouths, noses and ears would normally be found, were genderless. A further claim was made that these beings were "reproductive" and "not representations"—a declaration which owed much to the post-structuralist cultural discourses of the seventies and eighties.

We understand a *Libidinal economy*¹ as a force that shatters the stage of representation, the rigours of production and all value systems through a libidinal drive which recognises neither hierarchies, ethics or history. Lyotard conceptualised this through the image of a revolving bar. When static the bar serves to separate the subject or body from the world but when the bar rotates at high speed all boundaries are destabilised and the surfaces that separate things (people, objects, genders, substances) all dissolve. Such *libidinal economies* have been severely criticised as risking too much but despite even Lyotard's own denouncement of such 'philosophy', *libidinal economies* became an

established feature of eighties Post-Modern discourse. What then is a stake in a turn to a *libidinal economy*? Is it that the promise of freedom can collapse into the familiar consumption patterns of late capitalism, or is it that such a move could not hope to escape the stage of representation? The question is perhaps then, not 'how perfectly *libidinal economies* fit with the patterns of consumption of late capitalism', but rather can those desires, pleasures and excesses that might be set in flight through a *libidinal economy* escape capitalism? There is also a further question of gender politics as it might be highlighted that Lyotard's Nietzschean libidinal economy should be understood in the context of a patriarchal society.

In *Chapmanworld* this Lyotardian discourse on pleasure and desire is examined through various devices. The kids dressed only in Nike trainers, are 'polymorphous perverse'. Perhaps they are visitors from a future where advanced technology has eradicated the limits for libidinal excess, creating a world where the libido is no longer confined to the imagination or the literary, as in Bataille's 'The Story of the Eye': in this future anus could become mouths and pricks could replace noses through advanced genetic engineering.

Freud's definition of the 'polymorphous perverse' is premised upon the pre-oedipal state of a child's body as a surface invested with uneven sites of erotic intensities, sites which are limitless. In *Chapmanworld*, the artists sign-posted these possible erogenous zones with orifices and phallus that unexpectedly grow at surprising places all over the angelic bodies of their creations. In *Zygotic Acceleration, biogenetic de-sublimated libidinal model* (1995) the space between two heads becomes a vagina and noses metamorphose into pricks, inviting the viewer to leave the safety of voyeurism and plunge a penis or fingers into the orifices. The ginger-haired *Fuckface* (1994) has both aroused cock and orifice offering pleasure to any passing hermaphrodite. Within *Chapmanworld* there is a nostalgia for the pre-oedipal and to take part in the delights of the garden you must forget yourself, forget your history and leave your civilised bourgeois subjectivity at home.

The Chapman's in their installation and through their polymorphous perverse beings, challenged the western fantasy of the child: they implied that their mutant infant beings didn't exist as subjects. Visitors to *Chapmanworld* were offered the choice of either forgetting themselves or acting as a responsible parent and condemning the whole affair. What is lacking in the Chapman brother's gambit, though, is not only the consequences of forgetting but the contingencies and circumstances that form our desires. In this light, the Chapman's supposed abandonment of representation is contradictory as on the one hand, it is strategy designed to incur moral outrage and thus employs representation to this end and on the other hand, formulates an idealised, abstract libidinal universe.

Our uneasiness with the Chapman's abstract libidinal universe can be expanded upon by considering Lyotard's critique of the subject, brilliantly analysed by Peter Dews in his book *The Limits of Disenchantment*. Dews quotes Lyotard's use of a Borges story 'The fauna of mirrors' and suggests that for Lyotard, 'Subjectivity is presupposed by reflection' and the consequence of this is that the specular world is lost (imprisoned) through this reflection. For Lyotard, this reflection must be smashed to unleash the specular world (*libidinal economies*). Lyotard, however, recognised that there was a problem with his libidinal revolution: he realised that one person's excess might be felt as an objectifying force by someone else and in 'Au Just' and later in 'The Differend' he refuted parts of his earlier thesis.

Contemporary culture, identity and even politics is often lived through the activism of consumption in

which bodies are empowered and identities are shaped, changed and undermined; but what of alienated consumption?² A reading of Larry Clark's film *Kids* offers a dystopian vision of excess and consumption, something he blames on bad parenting.³ Either by chance or by design *Kids* evokes the concept of libidinal economies; the anarchic, pleasure-seeking bodies in *Kids* are without order, the kids are ciphers caught in an endless flow of consuming the next pleasure fix in a perpetual present. The lead character, Telly, defines his identity through a relentless pursuit of "pussy" and at the end of the film he says:

'When you're young not much matters. When you find something that you care about then that's all you got. When you go to sleep at night you dream of pussy. When you wake up it's the same thing, it's there in your face, you can't escape it. Sometimes when you're young the only place to go is inside. That's just it, fucking is what I love, take that away from me and I really got nothing.'⁴

Kids is a film about bodies in search of pleasure; the lives of the characters are structured by drifting from one party to the next, the city is one big concrete playground. The parents are elsewhere; only one parent is seen, sitting at home nursing a baby, oblivious to her teenage son's exploits and at various points in the film the kids act as one body—they skate, drink, fuck, fight, steal, smoke, dance and swap stories about sex and Aids in large groups. Two scenes capture this behaviour. The first scene is in a park where the kids, united by their homophobia, brawl at a passing gay couple whilst sharing a joint. Telly's sidekick Caspar, high on weed, borrows a skateboard and collides with a passing stranger; the confrontation leads to the unfortunate guy being brutally beaten by Caspar and his friends as the camera circles around the faces of the baying kids raining blows upon their victim. The second scene is at the end of the film in which the camera passes over the overlapping, interlocking bodies of the comatose party-goers, the morning after the pleasures of the night before. They are a group burnt-out by pleasure and seemingly undifferentiated by class, ethnicity, family or religion. The force that unifies them is their hedonism encouraged by the absence of their parents and the production of a social space which constitutes the kids network of relationships. This network is defined, in the film, through consumption. For the kids, the city is a series of sites for pleasurable encounters and the lead character, Telly, is caught in an endless cycle of consuming and drifting as he searches the city for virgins. He finds them, fucks them and forgets them. His everyday life is governed by an economy in which everything is spent, used up, beaten and fucked. In his first soliloquy, whilst screwing another conquest only one year into her puberty, Telly makes clear his motivation for his life style:

"Virgins, I love 'em. No diseases, no loose as a goose pussy, no skank, no nothing. Just pure pleasure"⁵

The world of Clark's kids manifests itself through an alienation from the adult world and Telly and Caspar either cannot aspire to, or refuse to conform to, the values of production and responsibility. Instead they create a social space in which they are not productive bodies but consumers who steal, whether it be liquor, money or virginity.

The film presents another narrative interwoven with Telly's pursuit of pleasure; that of Jennie one of Telly's previous conquests. Telly's search for Darcy, (his next virgin), is paralleled by Jennie's search for Telly which begins after a visit to a health centre. Jennie's search is driven by a recent discovery: although Telly is the only boy she has ever slept with Jennie has learned that she is HIV positive and she

1. Jean-François Lyotard, *Économie libidinale* (Paris: Minuit, 1974)

2. An empowered form of consumption, for instance, was delineated by Simon Edge at a conference which accompanied the exhibition *Imagined Communities*. He described a hedonistic life-style that worked, progressively (though problematically) to further gay acceptability in his paper 'The Politics of Visibility: hedonism in the gay nineties'. He suggested that the recent commercial culture has seen less old-style political activism, but more people coming out. Gay culture has moved from the "unhealthy" subterranean leather images of Tom of Finland to the "healthy" cappuccino bars of Old Compton St. While this new commercialism disempowers those without a disposable income, and those whose consumption has been curtailed by the Aids virus, the visibility and acceptance of homosexuality has, in Edge's opinion, been increased. This has thus been achieved by aligning gay culture, not with an alternative and marginalised politics, but with capitalism. For Edge this is a new and positive activism.

3. Artforum, May 1995

4. *Kids*, faber & faber 1996

5. *ibid.*

6. discussed by Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman & Causality* Verso 1994

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tries to track Telly down before he infects yet another girl. Telly however has forgotten Jennie, remembering past conquests is not part of his vocation but Jennie is Telly's past catching up with him and in that sense she occupies a different temporality to that of Telly: Jennie is all too aware that there was a beginning and that death will bring about an end to her present predicament. Clark here indicates gender differences between the kids by reflecting on this difference in terms of temporality—Telly caught in an eternal present and Jenny haunted by the past and future—and by also presenting the male kids as possessing boundless libidinal energy.

What marks out the world of *Kids* from the utopia of *Chapmanworld* is Larry Clark's insistence on highlighting the contingencies of excessive behaviour; whereas the Chapman's abstract libidinal universe is unhindered by social circumstance and the consequences of transgression. In *Chapmanworld* the visitor could endlessly renew themselves through a stream of erotic encounters in a world which offers no limits to pleasure, not even disease despite their interest in mutation and filth. Clark is forever reminding interviewers that his *Kids* are real kids and in his film, while blurring the boundaries between realism and fiction, the kids often come up against the limits of pleasure. The spectre of Aids is clearly one limit to Telly's pleasure, the scenes of poverty, addiction and the mental ill-health filmed in the estranged blue light of the dawn, are the spectre of another limit. For Clark there is no escape from repre-

sentation through a pursuit of pleasure. In the final scene of the film a wasted Casper, gazing around at a scene of devastation after raping Jennie, exclaims what one might suspect to be Clark's own moral outrage, "Jesus Christ! What happened?"

To agree with Clark, though, who believes that we need better parenting, that is more understanding parenting, is to call for an ordering of pleasure and such an ordering is never acceptable to kids. If the Chapman's demand for a libidinal revolution is problematic then Clark's siding with the parent, i.e. a Superego, is equally misplaced. The child which is socialised by learning that certain drives should be repressed to win parental approval will have those same repressed drives propel future desires: as everyone knows the forbidden is always desirable. To seek an escape from representation, parental law and an ordering of pleasure, suggested by *Chapmanworld*, seems equally implausible: imagine the Chapman brothers' world of reproductive beings existing beyond representation where nothing is forbidden; would it not also be a world without desire?

Despite the limitations of both projects it must be recognised that Larry Clark and the Chapman's have important insights into the politics of desire and reveal the limits of each others practices when considered together. While Clark foregrounds pleasure's relationship to specific contingencies, a perspective lacking in *Chapmanworld*, the Chapman's propose utopias and alternatives to the present, a concern unfortunately

absent in Clark's realism. The representation of the kids in Clark's film is an interesting one though as it deals with the culture of an alienated group whose only expression of non-productivity is a cycle of consumption that at times risks death—indeed in one scene a boy laughs at the possibility of "going out" fucking, a mood which seems to echo the much fetishised annihilation of the subject sought by the Chapman's.

Adorno fantasised about some sort of reconciliation between libidinal drives of the Id and the Ego by banishing the Superego.⁶ This would be a reconciliation between the spectral world trapped in Borges mirror and the human world. As is true of all utopias, though, its hard to visualise such a world as this would mean the pursuit of a sovereignty without a forbidding Superego, which would no longer direct the subject behind the subject's back so to speak.

Adorno's utopia is clearly appropriate when considering the pleasurable economies of the kids in both *Chapmanworld* and Larry Clark's film as these young people have no place in the adult world, alienated as they are by its demands and restrictions which also demarcate the limits of their pleasure. Their underworld of sex, violence, dress and behavioural codes could be viewed as not so much a pursuit of freedom but the outlet for desires and economies otherwise unrecognised. It is hard to imagine a reconciliation of this conflict, for as Jack Dee implies, not only is the child a fantasy but so is the good parent.