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Mark Schmitt: Spectres of Pessimism: A Cultural Logic of the Worst

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After reading Mark Schmitt's well-written and intellectually stimulating account of pessimism, I have found myself repeatedly humming the theme tune of Mel Brooks' somewhat underappreciated 1974 comedy *The Twelve Chairs*: 'Hope for the best, expect the worst. / Some drink champagne, some die of thirst. / No way of knowing which way it's going, / hope for the best, expect the worst!' In addition to being a devilishly catchy tune, the song also neatly captures the extent of what I knew about pessimism 'before' consulting this book, in other words: not much more than the slight feeling that pessimists moan a lot and go on about glasses being half empty (or, to borrow

from Woody Allen, about those glasses being 'half full, but with poison').

It is to the credit of this volume that it manages to engage with ubiquitous 'lifestyle pessimism' in a succinct way and to go far beyond it at the same time. The book paints a nuanced portrait of pessimism's various ambiguities and explores its appeal for contemporary philosophy and cultural studies. Schmitt convincingly argues for the gloomy subject position of 21st-century humanity, as we face the catastrophic perspective of the climate crisis and unabashed fossil-fuel capitalism. In describing the overwhelming feeling that we have already lost the future while being simultaneously haunted

by the past, the author alludes to the Derridean idea that „the present [is pervaded by spectres] in the form of ritual manifestations of uncertain futures“ (p.20), which makes for a twisted sense of time being out of joint in the contemporary age.

Yet instead of simply giving in to ‚the end is nigh‘ rhetoric, Schmitt makes a strong case for the productive side of pessimism, characterising its highly ambivalent relationship with the present and the future. He draws on various philosophers and cultural theorists, all of whom developed their own branch of pessimism, not in spite, but ‚because‘ of their investment in said future. The spectrum of ‚productive pessimisms‘ covered in this dense and highly diverting study is impressive and reads like a Who’s Who of cultural theory. Among others, Schmitt engages with Theodor W. Adorno’s and Max Horkheimer’s brand of Critical Theory (*Towards a New Manifesto*. London: Verso, 2019) as well as with Stuart Hall’s nuanced take on how pessimism is productive precisely because it prevents us from being paralysed and rendered passive through false hope (*The Hard Road to Renewal*. London: Verso, 2021). Moreover, Schmitt discusses the anti-utopian stance of afropessimism and the ahuman ethics of ‚ecosophers‘ like Patricia MacCormack (*The Ahuman Manifesto*. London: Bloomsbury, 2020), who try to conceptualise the future beyond humanity.

In what struck me as the most thought-provoking chapter of the book, Schmitt offers an insightful

discussion of parental ethics, balancing our species’ „grievable futures“ against the „reproductive pessimism“ (p.73) as formulated by queer theory’s take on anti-natalism. In a critical tour de force, the author assesses the potential narcissism inherent in the idea of releasing children into a borderline dystopian future, taking his cue from Ted Chiang’s short story „Story of Your Life“ (In: *Stories of Your Life and Others*. London: Picador, 2020) and its subsequent film adaptation *Arrival* (2016), directed by Denis Villeneuve.

This is not the only chapter that successfully blends elaborate theoretical discussion with fitting examples from (popular) culture. Elsewhere, the discussion turns to historical events like Tony Blair’s ascent to the office of Prime Minister in 1997, contemporary literature (Hari Kunzru’s novel *Red Pill* [2020]), TV shows (*True Detective* [2014-]), the „suicidal logic“ (p.111) of Lars von Trier’s apocalyptic comedy *Melancholia* (2011), and Steve McQueen’s anthology film series *Small Axe* (2020), which highlights the significance of education and critically probes the role of the state to suggest „new modes of collective solidarity and a new ethics of care“ (p.69).

Ultimately, Schmitt makes a strong case for the various ways in which pessimism may allow us to overcome our anthropocentric preoccupations. This makes his book paradoxically (and, some might say, perversely) optimistic: By inviting the reader to imagine a „world-without-us“ instead of a „world-for-us“ (p.124), he offers pessimism „as a corrective to overly optimistic (and

daresay naïve) inflections of cultural studies“ (p.123), suggesting that there is in fact a future to behold, though it may not be one with humans. Maybe Mel Brooks had a point after all: ‚Live while you’re alive‘, he reminds us in the song I have quoted before, ‚no one

will survive‘. Schmitt’s book might not hold out any high hopes for the future of humanity, but it suggests a future path for cultural studies, and is all the more convincing for it.

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