

## Book Review: The Trouble with Pleasure: Deleuze and Psychoanalysis by Aaron Schuster

*In The Trouble with Pleasure: Deleuze and Psychoanalysis, Aaron Schuster explores Gilles Deleuze's complex relationship with psychoanalysis, in particular Lacanian theory, in order to 'short circuit' contemporary understandings of desire and pleasure. Traversing topics such as pessimism, complaint, the pleasure principle, the death drive, lethargy and schizophrenia, this is a rich and thorough study of the psychoanalytic history of pleasure, writes Sofia Ropek Hewson.*

***The Trouble with Pleasure: Deleuze and Psychoanalysis.* Aaron Schuster. MIT Press. 2016.**

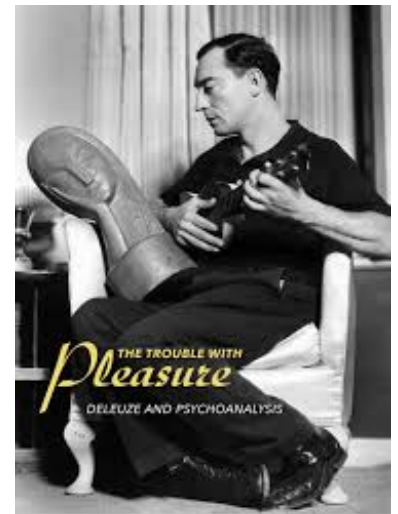
*The Trouble with Pleasure: Deleuze and Psychoanalysis* forms part of MIT Press's 'Short Circuits' series, edited by Mladen Dolar, Alenka Zupančič and Slavoj Žižek. In the opening foreword, Žižek writes that the series has been curated to 'decentre the interpreted text, which brings to light its "unthought", its disavowed presuppositions and consequences'. He also writes that 'short circuiting' is an appropriate metaphor for a critical reading: crossing wires and sparking unusual connections produces textual insights. Aaron Schuster's book explores the work of Gilles Deleuze and Jacques Lacan, theorists rarely read together; this 'encounter' intends to 'short circuit' the networks or contemporary understandings of desire and pleasure.

Schuster's monograph is a rich study of the psychoanalytic history of pleasure, peppered with cultural references from Marcel Proust to Louis C.K. and written for academics and students who relish playfully obscure sentences like: 'But to be "not-Hamlet" does not exactly mean "not to be"'. For to be the Hamlet who has chosen not to be does not mean "not to be", but to be "not-Hamlet".' Ultimately, Schuster's book describes the workings of 'regimes' of pleasure and is divided into chapter analyses of pessimism and complaint, the pleasure principle, perverse pleasures, lethargy and schizophrenia.

Schuster generally presumes familiarity with psychoanalytic terms and concepts, although he also produces memorable and original explanations of, for example, Deleuze's famous notion of the 'body without organs' through a fragment written by wonderful Russian author, Daniil Kharms. This comes to represent the book's deconstructive narrative:

*There was a redheaded man who had no eyes or ears. He didn't have hair either, so he was called a redhead arbitrarily. He couldn't talk because he had no mouth. He didn't have a nose either. He didn't even have arms or legs. He had no stomach. He had no back, no spine, and he didn't have any insides at all. There was nothing! So we don't even know who we're talking about. We'd better not talk about him any more.*

Schuster deftly writes that the 'body without organs', in the theme of this 'story', is a 'self-cancelling nothing that does not simply disappear, but, on the contrary, becomes all the more pressing in its very nothingness'.





**Image Credit: Freud Exhibition (régine debatty)**

In his first chapter, Schuster also provides an engaging analysis of Deleuze's reading of the 'death drive' through his writing on the story of the scorpion and the frog. In summary, the scorpion asks the frog to carry him across the river; the frog (understandably) refuses, on the grounds that the scorpion will sting him. The scorpion reassures the frog that it would not be logical to sting the frog, because then they would both drown. The frog agrees and starts to carry him across the river; halfway across, the scorpion stings him; the frog demands why; and the scorpion replies that he cannot help it: 'it's in my character.' Schuster writes that our first interpretation of the story might be that it clearly illustrates the death drive, or that we are all 'cruelly exploited frogs'. But Schuster notes how, according to Deleuze, the scorpion had no intention of dying; he is the 'victim of circumstance' and his own character: 'his desire becomes fatal destiny owing to an unfortunate combination of contingent factors'. Schuster adds that the story would have ended differently with a thick-shelled turtle rather than a 'fleshy frog': 'it is not that his character is bad, but it combines badly with the situation, and so he ends up drowning'.

Drawing upon Spinoza, Schuster concludes that the death drive is not a Freudian inner desperation for a 'return to the inanimate'; rather, it is an 'event that comes from the outside' – on the basis that 'no drive seeks its own extinction'. Essentially, context and situation determine how the drive manifests itself. This drive can be 'comic' or the source of 'tragic conflict'. Throughout the book, Schuster concludes that drives often resemble the *pharmakon* (Plato's remedy/poison): depending on the dose or the context, both pleasure and the 'death drive' can be curative or poisonous.

Schuster's preface on theories of 'complaint' is also compelling. He writes about the pleasure and potency of complaints, citing the work of anthropologist Nancy Ries, who wrote about grievances or 'litanies' in 1980s Perestroika-era Russia. These litanies about poverty, 'heroic shopping' and the absurdities of Russian life formed a crucial part of everyday discourse, creating 'ties of sympathy and identification', yet also serving as an 'instrument of domination and control.' Complaining created communities, but, as Ries writes, 'this same sense of belonging and moral worth that they fostered may have helped to sustain relative powerlessness and alienation from the political process at the same time as they lamented them'. Accordingly, Schuster describes how complaining is 'ideological' rather than a 'merely private affair'.

Schuster's book is a thorough analysis of psychoanalytic understandings of pleasure, providing the reader with a

number of convincing arguments, and in its last chapter, placing them in a capitalist context. Schuster writes that pleasure's defining feature is its 'self-reinforcing character': 'a person who acts with pleasure is less vulnerable to distraction, more focused upon what he or she is doing, and more driven to do the same'. Understanding the nature of pleasure is crucial in contemporary Western societies, which can be described as 'post-disciplinary', where social control operates through 'inducements to the libido and injunctions to enjoy' rather than through prohibitions. Accelerationist theory posits that capitalist processes should be accelerated or repurposed to bring about social change, but Schuster's book establishes a clear opposition to this mode of thought.

Rather than risking complicity with capitalism through accelerated injunctions to 'enjoy!', *The Trouble with Pleasure* is a reading of Deleuze and Lacan that aims to 'think negativity and the violence of the negative differently'. Unsurprisingly, in *The Trouble with Pleasure* pleasure is rarely pleasurable. However, 'autoeroticism', the 'original form of the drive', fares better than other kinds. As Schuster quotes from Sigmund Freud: 'It's a pity I can't kiss myself.'

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*Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.*

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