

Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Prose of the World: Denis Diderot and the Periphery of Enlightenment* (Stanford University Press, 2021) Hardcover ISBN: 9781503615250

It is exciting to see Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht turning his attention to Diderot. In fact, it is somewhat surprising that the Germano-Californian scholar had not done so before. And yet for a book on the materialist *philosophe* by a scholar of the materialities of communication, it is not quite what I was expecting. Nor is it what one is led to believe it will be by the dedication that refers to ‘ein Buch mit Fußnoten’. It isn’t simply that the footnotes are actually endnotes, though that does make for a significantly different material reading experience. Nor is it that most of the endnotes in the ‘book with footnotes’, a phrase he glosses in the Introduction as a ‘serious academic [*wissenschaftliches*] book’ (p. x), are not terribly *wissenschaftlich* and simply supply the original French for the quotations that appear in English in the main body of text (with the exception of the quotations from Hegel which appear in German in the main body of the text with the English in the endnotes). It’s also that, although he opposes *wissenschaftlich* to essayistic (p. x), the book is actually pretty essayistic – pleasantly so. I wondered whether ‘ein Buch mit Fußnoten’ should not be glossed as ‘Ceci n’est pas un essai’, not least because Gumbrecht goes on to claim a personal affinity with Diderot or, rather, in a manner that may provide some evidence of that affinity, he has someone else voice the claim on his behalf – and not just anyone at that: ‘the famous pianist Alfred Brendel [...] remarked in passing and in public that I reminded him of Diderot’ (p. xi). But enough of the preliminaries. What is this book about? It seeks to answer two questions: ‘[i]s there a place for Diderot in Hegel’s system?’ (p. 10) and ‘whether our twenty-first-century present could become the age of Diderot[?]’ (p. 15).

Gumbrecht’s answer to the first question seems to be ‘no’, then ‘yes’, then ‘no’ again. ‘No’ the first time round because ‘[n]ot a single philosophical concept appears in all of these passages referring to Diderot [which do not at this point in Gumbrecht’s argument include the *Phenomenology*] that could – at least tentatively – assign to his thinking a place within Hegel’s thought’ (p. 18). Then ‘yes’ because while Hegel may not have attached a concept to Diderot’s thinking, Gumbrecht has found a Hegelian concept to attach to him, namely ‘prose of the world’, which Hegel glossed as “‘finitude”, “mutability”, “entanglement with the relative” and “liveliness”” (p. 19). And then ‘no’ again because ‘prose of the world’ has “no place in Hegel’s system and therefore turn[s] into an inevitable and permanent impulse towards sublation” (ibid.). The second question, which Gumbrecht relates to the first, receives the answer: yes, on the condition that Diderot can be made to function in Hegel’s philosophy, which he describes as ‘a driving force within the emergence of what we may call the “historical worldview” as the dominant epistemological structure of Western culture throughout the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century’ (p. 24), not as a cog but as a spanner. And not only does Gumbrecht think he can, but he also thinks that Rameau’s nephew is not the cog Hegel appeared to think he was:

More than describing “torn consciousness” just as a necessary step on the spirit’s pathway towards *Bildung*, a step whose otherness would soon become neutralized by sublation, [...] Hegel highlighted, as “greatest truth,” the shamelessness with which

Diderot's character exposes the self-sufficient harmony in the constantly sublating "quiet consciousness" of the Philosopher with whom he engages in a conversation. And while this surprising and indeed system-breaking view of "torn consciousness" ended up remaining an episode in the larger trajectory of Hegel's philosophy, he never revoked or even modified his strong statement on the *Neveu de Rameau*. (p. 34)

And so, Gumbrecht continues:

Hegel's reaction to Diderot's character might provoke us to speculate about a form of *Bildung* and a way of existence resulting from it that we have not been able to envision until recently [...] a way of existence in which torn consciousness (the one existential condition that mainstream Western culture has, since the late eighteenth century, consistently tried to overcome) assumes a positive function. (p. 35)

It's a Zizekian injunction, but with Hegel's nephew in the place of Lacan: 'Enjoy your torn consciousness!'

Any parallel with Zizek's *Enjoy Your Symptom!* ends there, unfortunately. Instead, the chapters explore finitude, mutability, liveliness and entanglement with the relative in the canonical texts, namely, *Le Neveu de Rameau*, *Jacques le fataliste*, *Le Rêve de d'Alembert*, and the *Salons*, as well as in some choice pieces of Diderot's correspondence. More original are Gumbrecht's gestures towards Mozart, Goya and Lichtenberg as figures who pose comparable challenges to the historical worldview as the institutionalised outcome of the Enlightenment or, rather, who are like Diderot simply indifferent to it. Most useful perhaps is Gumbrecht's decision not to attempt to make 'Enlightenment' more capacious, more plural or self-critical in order to accommodate Diderot, but simply to relieve Diderot of the label 'Enlightenment thinker' altogether. It is a welcome relief. And what of the promise to explore how or why Diderot might be especially appealing to twenty-first century citizens? For Gumbrecht, Diderot has:

the potential to remind us (or to help us re-imagine) what an intellectual can at best be within society today [...] a thinker who provides others' minds with excess energy and with possibilities of imagining in ways that nobody has done or dares to do – especially in an environment whose specific challenges threaten to produce a cast of mental paralysis. (p. 201)

But what are those specific challenges, those threats? They appear to include bourgeois morality, political correctness, trigger warnings and academic tenure committees (pp. 200-201). Ok, but readers in search of a more enlivening take on Diderot's modern appeal should seek out Ross Chambers' *Loiterature* (1999) and, in particular, Sianne Ngai's *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (2012), in which Rameau's nephew meets Roadrunner, the eponymous Cable Guy, and Lucy of *I Love Lucy*, zanies all.

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