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Citation: White, Rosie (2010) Violent Affect: Literature, Cinema, and Critique after Representation [Book review]. MFS: Modern Fiction Studies, 56 (2). pp. 466-468. ISSN 0026-7724

Published by: Johns Hopkins University Press

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/mfs.0.1686> <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/mfs.0.1686>>

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Marco Abel. *Violent Affect: Literature, Cinema, and Critique After Representation*. Lincoln and London: U of Nebraska P, 2007. xvi + 292pp.

One of the problems with reviewing this book is the premise on which Abel's argument is based; he challenges the notion of critical judgement. In Chapter 3, playfully titled 'Are We All Arnoldians?', Abel offers a wonderfully clear account of Matthew Arnold's work on culture and criticism and links it to the continuing prevalence (acknowledged or denied) of critical work as (moral) judgement. Even an apparent post-structural paragon, such as Paul de Man, is subject to the 'gravitational pull of the very problem he diagnoses' (65). Where does all this leave the reviewer with a review to complete and the deadline already several weeks gone? Abel's thesis, closely based on the work of Gilles Deleuze, by implication challenges the core philosophy of 'review' as a retrograde and rather solipsistic insistence on frequently unclear or unacknowledged moral criteria. In these terms one cannot begin to propose this volume as a 'good' book – or as a 'bad' book. In the end, it is 'just a book', in the same way that sometimes a pipe is 'just a pipe', but flying in the face of this text's critical trajectory, I would argue it is a book with much to recommend it.

Abel begins in the preface by citing the 'Spinozist provocation that we do not yet know what violent images are and how they work' (xi-xii), and goes on to deploy that provocation in regard to a range of novels, films and performances. *Violent Affect* thus spans several disciplines and forms, including cultural and literary studies, film studies and performance studies. The methodology that Abel employs in addressing his subjects is that of 'masocriticism', which he defines in the first chapter: 'to defer the advent of pleasure that criticism clearly derives from the arrival at a moment at which the critic gets to articulate his [sic] judgement of violence, or certainty (even if it comes in the form of the assertion that the representational meaning remains undecidable)' (22). Such deferred critical gratification is employed to address violent moments, responses or acts through *American Psycho* (novel and film), Patricia Highsmith's Ripley novels, Robert DeNiro's acting and Don DeLillo's essay about the events of 9/11. In each case a complex reading of the relation between texts and contexts is teased out. In the chapter on *American Psycho*, for example, critical responses to the novel and the film are examined as a means of establishing the prevalent desire amongst critics of all political persuasions for some resolution to the moral problematic which Easton Ellis's novel represents. Abel argues that such critical judgements attempt to close down the threat of such a discomfiting text in their 'domesticating response to violence' (57). In effect, the methodology (masocriticism) which Abel employs seeks to avoid such domestication and instead seeks to follow the example of texts like *American Psycho* in 'Respond[ing] to the other (violence) as other, or that which does not signify anything, as that which can be encountered merely through its forces that produce specific affective effects' (56).

Initially my response to masocriticism was suspicious, as it tended, in the first few chapters, to involve a labyrinthine approach to its subjects which appeared to obscure rather than elucidate the 'affective effect'. Chapter 3, however, offered something of a breakthrough in its lucid critique of disciplinary traditions within academic criticism – this chapter lays out the problem Abel attempts to address in *Violent Affect* and subsequent chapters further elucidate both the problem and possible solutions. Most powerfully, with reference to Lawrence Grossberg's work in cultural studies, Abel notes how academic work deploys critical theory as a mean of making sense of the world, of bringing order to asignifying affect. Abel glosses Deleuzian theory in this respect, stating that 'Affects produce effects; they are about linkages, about the logic of the "and" rather than that of "either/or"'

(85). Ironically this puts Abel's project at risk of the same critical *cul de sac* as that to which he earlier assigned de Man – as subject to the 'gravitational pull of the very problem he diagnoses' (65). In deferring judgement and refusing to assign moral categories, masocriticism may be merely the latest attempt to gain the critical high ground. This would be to deny the force of Abel's argument however. In his account, masocriticism is not a refusal to judge but a decision to judge in a less immediate manner; to refuse to offer a singular or simple response. In the chapter on Highsmith's Ripley novels, for example, Abel implicitly proposes a slow criticism movement not unlike the Slow Food Movement, arguing that 'Judgement, in other words, is always a practice that *proceeds with too much speed* – just like violence. It is this quality of judgement that constitutes its violence, that makes it productive of violence' (112). Instead Abel proposes masocriticism as a means of 'foregrounding the style – the ethical "how" – of response [as a means of] slow[ing] down the impetus to declare what an event is' (217). This is most powerfully argued in the final chapter where Don DeLillo's essay 'In the Ruins of the Future' is proposed as a means of reading – or at least *recognizing* – the events of 9/11.

In short – and yes, here comes the speedily-made judgement – the worth of *Violent Affect* lies in its stubborn refusal to regard criticism as an endgame. Indeed, in the light of events such as 9/11 it would seem remarkably arrogant (if not foolhardy) to continue to harbour this belief. Through sophisticated readings of Easton Ellis, Highsmith, DeNiro and DeLillo, Abel elegantly attempts to establish a new ethical map for cultural criticism. As he writes of DeLillo on 9/11: 'Resisting the demand to speak with moral clarity and declare what the event "means", his essay instead shows that response is always a question of response-ability, or the ethical *how*' (190). Surprisingly, in a work which initially appears to retreat from judgement, the narrative ends on an ethical note, and one which politicians as well as cultural critics, might attend to.