Postcolonial Criticism: History, Theory and the Work of Fiction (review)

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writing rather than diminishing it. In the end, it may be that different philosophical outlooks remain incompatible, despite everything that has been done to bridge them. What Derrida and others so admired about Levinas — his restless, relentless, inconclusive probing at the very foundations of thought and ethics — is what for some makes him frustrating and unreadable.

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Postcolonial Criticism: History, Theory and the Work of Fiction. By NICHOLAS HARRISON. Cambridge, Polity Press, 2003. iv + 221 pp. Hb £50.00. Pb £15.99.

Nicholas Harrison's wonderfully subtle, engaging and theoretically engaged reflection on many of the most resonant questions of postcolonial literature and criticism is a refreshing departure from the tendency within postcolonial studies to continually seek out undiscovered voices in the name of expanding diversity. Harrison's approach is, instead, to select a small number of well-known 'classic' texts and authors — principally Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Camus's *L'Étranger*, Chraïbi's *Le Passé simple*, and Djebar's *Femmes d'Alger dans leur appartement* — and to subject them to sustained close reading, in order to tease out and force us to reconsider the critical assumptions underlying the use of such terms as 'representative', 'identification', 'racism', 'realism', 'universality' and 'historical context'. A significant part of his strategy is to guide us more attentively through the history of the critical reception of these texts, and to broaden his discussion to encompass larger questions of interpretation and readerly expectation. The result is always enlightening, and often stunningly effective: Achebe's charge of racism in Conrad opens out onto a rethinking of the relationship between fiction and the historical circumstances of its composition; Harrison's reading of *L'Étranger* (as good an account as any of the status of the 'realism' of Camus's text when read in the context of its highly problematic racialism) is in itself an important intervention in Camus criticism; and his reading of Djebar is constantly alive to the complex textuality of her autobiographical writing. There is a restless intelligence at work throughout, as well as a refusal to settle for easy resolutions of theoretical tensions and aporias, and I would recommend this text emphatically to anyone wanting not just to understand what is at stake in postcolonial theory today, but to see a fine example of fluent, attentive reading in action. Harrison rightly questions the 'conscience-salving' aspect of the appeal of postcolonial studies, and indeed the very status of postcolonial criticism as a viable independent field of scholarship, insofar as it can be seen in fact to deal somewhat inadequately with broader questions of literary interpretation that have been more powerfully theorized by apparently non-postcolonial writers such as Barthes, Genette and Blanchot. To my mind, the truly interesting moments of Harrison's text are those points at which it hesitates, as it were, on its own theoretical threshold, such that at the far end of his readings we often find him straining to push the discussion towards larger, quasi-philosophical concerns (literature, or criticism, or theory 'as such'), although never quite wanting to abandon his own postcolonial 'interest'. I was left wondering as I put this book down whether something called 'postcolonial criticism' is even possible; but the fact that this is perhaps the

most resonant question of the book is a measure of its significance, and also of its intellectual strength and honesty.

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Reframing Difference: 'Beur' and 'banlieue' Film-Making in France. By CARRIE TARR. Manchester – New York, Manchester University Press, 2005. ix + 230 pp. Pb £15.99.

Films made by second-generation immigrants of Maghrebi descent — 'beurs' — and about the problems endemic to the *banlieue* have been the focus of much interest over the past twenty or so years, and the recent outbreaks of rioting have shown that a decade after Kassovitz's *La Haine* their relevance is as great as ever. Tarr presents the first book-length survey of this important corpus in either English or French, and her volume is an admirably thorough and well-researched overview, demonstrating a good grasp of film theory, French social and political history, and gender issues that will make it of interest to those working in a variety of fields. 'The fault lines in the universalist discourses of French Republicanism' (p. 1) become plain in a variety of ways, through the films' diverse ways of negotiating space as well as through their articulation of memory, gender and history. The unavailability of many of the films in English-speaking countries, frustrating though it inevitably is, is to some extent palliated by lucid plot-summaries and analyses along with a judicious choice of illustrations. From time to time there may be a sense that the author is 'ticking boxes' or awarding marks to films on the basis of their ideological acceptability. Thus, while Chibane's *Hexagone* does much to 'engage pleasurably with a *beur* audience' (p. 60), it also receives a mild rap over the knuckles for failing to 'problematise the dominant culture's construction of French national identity' (p. 61). This is perhaps an inevitable consequence of, on the one hand, the fact that the essays that go to make up the volume were written, and sometimes previously published, separately, thereby requiring separate individual conclusions, and on the other, the problems inevitably associated with so ideologically fraught an area as Tarr is tackling. It is unfortunate that the lay-out of the filmography is periodically marred by glitches, but this is a minor criticism of a book that will certainly become a standard resource in its field and could indeed profitably find a French publisher.

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Montreal-Glasgow. Edited by BILL MARSHALL. University of Glasgow French and German Publications, 2005. xiv + 262 pp. Pb £15.00.

This well-edited volume deals with the culture (in the broadest sense) of two great cities and is divided into several sections: Architecture, History, Literature, Theatre, Film and Television, and Exchanges. The approach is largely but not exclusively comparative. Holly Kinnear shows how personalities involved with both cities were responsible for the impact made on their urban landscapes by the