*Beautiful Feelings of Sensitive People*, Andrew Duncan (Shearsman)

On the back cover of his new book about poetry, Andrew Duncan suggests that 'The main feature of the 21st C scene is the great number of poets at work.' Am I alone in thinking there are no more poets writing or performing now than there were in the 1960s onwards? Maybe what has changed is the means of reaching an audience, be that online publishing, videos or podcasts or the fact that digital print is much cheaper than printing used to be? And that print-on-demand has removed the problems of gambling with regard to print run and storing unsold books.

Quite rightly, Duncan also mentions 'linguistic micro-climates' and suggests that to understand and write about them we need to 'stroll through enough of the new poets', in this case eighty. This doesn't seem very many or enough to work with, so Duncan is reduced to using a subtitle, 'Screen grabs of British Poetry in the 21st century', as a defence or excuse.

He also argues that 'surely we prefer beautiful feelings to other feelings and sensitive poets to insensitive ones', a strange suggestion since beauty and feeling are terms not defined by Duncan which seem spurious to what is being written about here. It would have been interesting to see Duncan writing about beauty – perhaps grappling with Dave Hickey's *The Invisible Dragon*, which is an important text about beauty and the arts – and explaining how sensitivity might be evidenced in poetry apart from content, narrative and subject.

In fact his blurb does hima disservice, since in his 'Introduction', once he has explained that '*Beautiful feelings of sensitive people* is just a five-word way of explaining to someone who never reads poetry what we are hoping to find in a book of poems', he goes on to say that the title phrase 'describes a wide range of 21st century poetry but perhaps not the majority.' So why use it? Duncan is on safer and wittier ground when he states 'that wish[ing] to be a poet does not necessarily mean you have much interest in the work of other poets'.

Too bloody right. At least Duncan is consistently interested and paying attention, although I am slightly disturbed to find him relying on PBS lists to find out what is being published. As the Small Publishers Fair in London later this month will once again evidence, many presses – not to mention performance venues and youtube channels – operate outside any established poetry circles. And like poetry prize shortlists, the inclusion of small presses or new poets is mostly to provide diversity and a token nod to actual innovators and authors before the arts council funded big boys scoop up those they can see are selling.

What is fascinating is the publications Duncan chooses to take a 'screen grab' of here, the majority of which I have never heard of or read, some of which I have but would not waste shelf room on. That's a good thing by the way, not a complaint. I'm always fascinated by writers that other writers and critics take seriously. Duncan is good too at finding categories to assemble small clusters of writers or publications in; for example, 'Cultural Asset Management', 'Splendours and Chagrins', 'Triumphs and Panics', 'Privatisation and Religion', 'The Human Voice' and – my favourite – 'Pistachio Euphoria Sorbet'.

But Duncan fails to comprehend how diverse work links to other work, especially within his easy groupings of 'British South Asian Poets', Scottish or Anglo-Welsh Poets. The small samples taken here do not provide enough evidence to draw any conclusions and the books under consideration often seem separated from others they could be compared to. Keith Jafrate's retelling of the myth of Eurydice can surely be seen as a long poem, as part of a new lyricism, and perhaps religious in some senses, rather than evidence of 'communal wellbeing'.

Many poets here could be regarded as 'alternative' but the attention to contemporary alternative writing, and whether it even exists, is pretty much avoided. In a similar way, Duncan's discussion of sound poetry and AI is simplistic and out of date. Obvious links would be to flarf, remixology, processual writing and performance work but one gets the feeling that Duncan is resistant to reading more, thinking harder, or focussing and drilling down. Although it's an American anthology, Norton's *American Hybrid*, edited by Cole Swensen and David St. John, feels like a key text in the way it engages with the blurring of boundaries between experiment and tradition, form and formless, narrative and disjunction, confession and character, performance and the page.

Duncan's book is welcome and interesting, feels better written and more focussed than some of his previous critical overviews, but it is also behind the curve theoretically, critically and in what he engages with. Poetry is so much more diverse and exciting than Duncan suggests here.

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