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Berard Reviews Michael Trask's "Ideal Minds"

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Book Reviewed:	
<p><u><i>Ideal Minds: Raising Consciousness in the Antisocial Seventies</i></u> Michael Trask Cornell University Press 2020 258 pages</p>

As academic history prods, in its ginger, self-conscious way, into the history of the late twentieth century, the 1970s become a site of contestation. From being the decade where “it seemed like nothing happened,” as one early account put it, scholars are increasingly in agreement on the idea of those years as “the pivotal decade.” Figuring out what the pivot went from and towards — that is often up in the air, but something, certainly, happened; something that helped bring us to our current pass.

These scholars shed a great deal of ink on socioeconomic versus cultural explanations for whatever changed, over neoliberalism and its definition (and usability as a concept). Michael Trask’s latest intervention, *Ideal Minds*, does not exactly stay above the fray. Trask enters into the defining-neoliberal-culture game, at least indirectly. But *Ideal Minds* takes both the ideas of its subjects, and ideas more generally, seriously in a way that more agenda-laden readings often do not. This will come as no surprise to anyone who has read the author’s *Camp Sites*, a devastatingly effective rereading of midcentury American literature through superimposed lenses of analysis of academic form and of queer theory. Trask has proven himself marvelously creative at finding new angles of attack on American intellectual history.

The title *Ideal Minds* is a double entendre, referring both to a seventies obsession with purifying and perfecting consciousness, through spiritual or medical practices, and to the idea Trask sees as central to seventies thought: neoidealism. Trask defines neoidealism as a “retooling” of the thought of Immanuel Kant along lines specifically aimed at combating the behaviorism that characterized the “Great Society” liberalism of the 1960s. Where behaviorism (supposedly) treated people as part of larger units,

functionally indistinguishable in their psychology and easily manipulated as groups, neoidealism, as Trask tells it, emphasizes the autonomy, individuality, and in some cases unknowability of the human mind . . . or, at any rate, of some human minds.

Neoidealism runs the gamut in terms of expression from the serious political-theoretical work of John Rawls and Murray Bookchin, to Edward Abbey's ecowarrior fiction and Jean Auel's cavemen erotica series *The Clan of the Cave Bear*. As this (very much partial) list shows, people can bend the construct to numerous political uses. But in general, Trask argues, neoidealism tends towards individualism, to the valorization of supposedly natural human hierarchies, and to the abjuring of the concept of societal goods. A reader can pick up on this (not that Trask doesn't make it clear and explicit) through the understated elitism running throughout the neoidealist cultural artifacts Trask excavates. It takes a special kind of person, with a special kind of consciousness, to love dead rock like Edward Abbey's "Monkey Wrench Gang," to get something out of the isolation tanks deployed in Paddy Chayefsky's "Altered States," to appreciate the fine points of James Merrill's finely curated (and expensive brand name) aesthetic. There's no guide to become such a person, no education you can get. You have such a mind or you don't, and for those who don't to put limits on those who do can only be understood as perverse.

Ultimately, though, Trask is not a tendentious writer — which is not to say that he can't be scathing. He has the good sense to see that a really thorough rinsing out of the premises of a given cultural work, which involves the sort of close engagement that mere "dunking on" doesn't and can't attain, both enhances our understanding . . . and can make a condemnation all the more damning. Trask leads the reader on a tour of a variety of conceptual sites of neoidealism: the cults that made such a splash in the seventies, the "paleo-republic" imagined by many environmentalist writers, the imagined worlds of scifi writers from Philip K. Dick to Thomas Disch, James Merrill's overdecorated interior spaces, the rural "nowhere" where "Deliverance" takes place, and many more. In these spaces, cultural actors constructed demonstrations of the primacy of individual consciousness and the weaknesses and artificiality of consciousness's rivals for priority, ranging from society to matter.

In this, seventies culture continued the sixties trend of fixation on consciousness, specifically on "raising" it, but with some important twists. Neoidealism took the individualism always latent in sixties consciousness raising, and placed it at the center of consciousness thinking. The sites we visit from Trask illuminate various aspects of that maneuver. Radical environmentalists enlist malthusianism to insist humans can

never live an authentically conscious life without a collapse of civilization and its attendant genocidal die-off. Evangelicals of the period like Hal Lindsey embrace the “search for answers,” confident they’ll secure a flock increasingly openly understood as a “market share.” The apocalyptic looming over almost all (the serene liberal Rawls is an exception), the cults, the Jesus freaks, the scifi writers, and the greens, adds a ticking clock both to the call to discover one's subjectivity and to the lifespan of what collective institutions remain. *Ideal Minds* fits right in with the pandemic year (plus!).

Among other distinguishing factors, none of the cultural artifacts Trask discusses (with the exception, again, of the work of Rawls) can be considered the “core” of anything, of belonging to a cultural mainstream that neoidealism deemed somewhere between corrupt (a holdover from the sixties) or nonexistent. The margins were the core, in American seventies culture, Trask argues — and if you were ever tempted to believe such a situation would automatically be a good thing, Trask will disillusion you.

Against what neoidealists understood as the contemptuous disregard for individuality embedded in such sixties shibboleths as behaviorism, utilitarianism, and planning, neoidealists valorized subjectivity and negative freedom. Here, it is worth noting that Trask teaches English, and his interventions have political intent but are most firmly grounded in literary concerns. That is to say, he makes relatively little in the way of concrete political calls — he ends the book with a plea for not dismissing utilitarianism out of hand — but can be gloriously scathing in his assessments the products of neoidealism in literature and ideas. Moreover, most of his digs are indirect — they come from simply and systematically describing books and other cultural artifacts. These range from the winningly eccentric (Jean Auel’s horny, vaguely psychic cave people) to the embarrassingly revealing (“Deliverance” and its many male insecurities) to racist and nihilistic (much of Edward Abbey’s work, despite which Abbey is still beloved by many notionally progressive environmentalists to this day) to the incoherent (Murray Bookchin’s long career of tergiversation before landing on “libertarian municipalism”).

The gallery of artifacts Trask presents is so intriguing and so fruitful that it takes a second pass for the reader to question it. Selection of shots is key to any good takedown artist, from the wrestling mat to the academic press, and one wonders, looking back at the list of Trask’s subjects, whether he selected the best representatives of neoidealist thought. John Rawls and Murray Bookchin are “respectable” political thinkers. Philip K. Dick has come into the respect he deserved and didn’t get in life, and he’s brought into “*Ideal Minds*,” but not in quite the same

thoroughgoing (and almost inevitably embarrassing) way some of his scifi peers were. William S. Burroughs comes in for an extended examination and comes out of it looking feckless and silly, though from the cheap seats it doesn't look like Burroughs cuts the literary figure he once did. Something similar can be said for poet James Merrill. The rest of Trask's subjects — cultists and evangelicals, misanthropic environmentalists and pulp novelists — are easy to laugh at. Was there such a thing as good neoidealist writing? It seems unlikely that Trask, as a critic, would see that sort of universal value judgment as his job, but one wonders what the book would look like if a talent on the scale of Toni Morrison or Philip Roth qualified as "neoidealist." That is just one question this short and provocative book leaves the reader wondering about.

Peter Berard is San Antonio Review's book review editor. He is a writer, organizer and historian in Watertown, Mass. Read more of his reviews at [Melendy Ave. Review](#).