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Cover Image: Photograph of the Sanzhi UFO houses by cypherone. From Wikipedia: The UFO houses were constructed beginning in 1978. They were intended as a vacation resort in a part of the northern coast adjacent to Danshui, and were marketed towards U.S. military officers coming from their East Asian postings. However, the project was abandoned in 1980 due to investment losses and several car accident deaths during construction, which is said to have been caused by the unfortuitous act of bisecting the Chinese dragon sculpture located near the resort gates for widening the road to the buildings.



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## Editorial Introduction

**I**F THE FIRST VOLUME OF SPECULATIONS was enough of an explicit wager, a willing blind leap in the *terra incognita* of the publishing world, then this volume forces us to stop and evaluate the reasons for the journal's protracted existence. This is all the more important when we consider how the range of meanings of the term 'speculative realism' seems to be growing—with increasing numbers of thinkers situating themselves in its trail, or holding a somewhat cautious interest in it—while its effective reference seems nowhere to be found.

Realism is an old 'ism' that predates Kantian critiques, Cartesian doubts and perhaps even Pyrronian skepticisms. Waxing and waning throughout the ages, it has been the philosophical attempt to conceptualize a return to that 'natural' attitude which is common before any exposure to massive doses of philosophical thinking. What makes this latest instantiation of this process more than a mindless repetition is its 'speculative' side. Here to speculate means to reject the *doxa* of the times, both philosophical and commonsensical. In a way then to be a 'speculative realist' means—if anything—to place oneself in an interstitial position where theorizing about reality is unconstrained by the limits imposed by both common-sense and dogmatic forms of philosophical realism.



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To paraphrase a traditional Zen saying, before philosophy there are mountains and rivers, whilst doing philosophy mountains and rivers disappear, but when philosophical dogmatism is replaced by speculation the mountains are once again mountains and the rivers once again rivers.

But to speculate is an intrinsically dynamic activity. It's a creative moment of thought wherein new ideas are put to the test and new concepts are tentatively forged: to this extent 'speculative realism' cannot and should not be understood as a fixed body of knowledge. In such a phase labels should be programmatically rejected and copious amounts of intellectual material (hailing from as disparate places as laboratories to ateliers) should be examined, the litmus test being their intrinsic philosophical fertility. The danger of this operation, however, is to confuse the process of the replenishment of philosophy's conceptual tool box with 'wild speculation,' the cognitive protocol of self-deluded astrologers and crystal healers. Basic standards of rational argumentation and intellectual integrity are not exclusive possessions of 'scientistic' thought but are *desiderata* for any kind of intellectual production, especially so in an historical conjuncture that offers new generations of philosophers the possibility of constructing skepticism-proof bridges between the continental and the analytic tradition. Witnessing the discipline of philosophy under attack from governments across the 'developed' world—more interested in fast revenues and immediate 'impact' than in slow and careful thinking—it is more than ever imperative to make common cause against the bureaucratization of knowledge and to assert clearly the importance of critical thought.

What *Speculations* aims at doing, then, is not to represent the dreadnought of a new theoretical position but to open up a window onto the work of thinkers attempting to push farther the limits of accredited knowledge, to take—with each and every volume—a temporary snapshot of the current state of this journey of thought. As editors, the best we can hope is that, like outdated Polaroids, the value of this effort will only be more and more discernible as time goes by.

# Tractatus Mathematico-Politicus

## on Alain Badiou's *Being and Event*

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### I

**I**N THIS ESSAY I HOPE TO PERSUADE a certain group of readers—those with an interest in philosophy of mathematics, logic, or the formal sciences and (no doubt a largely overlapping community) those of an analytic orientation—that they should make themselves acquainted with the work of the contemporary French thinker Alain Badiou. My purpose is twofold: to provide those readers with a summary account of Badiou's extraordinarily original, far-reaching and ambitious project while also suggesting to members of the same group that this might point a way forward from some of the more sterile or doldrum-prone regions of debate within mainstream analytic philosophy. It strikes me that those topic-areas—among them the issue between realism and anti-realism as normally framed and the problem (or pseudo-problem) from Wittgenstein about what it means to correctly follow a rule—have been trodden into ruts over the past two decades and are unlikely to produce anything much in the

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way of philosophic insight.<sup>1</sup> More than that: their very nature or the manner of that framing—its conformity to certain (in my view highly cramping) presuppositions with regard to the proper aims and scope of philosophical enquiry—is such as to ensure that the debate will become increasingly narrow and self-occupied to the point where there sets in something like a law of sharply diminishing returns.

That is to say, the received idea of what counts as a valid, constructive, or philosophically reputable contribution to the field is one that has its source in the notion of all philosophy as aspiring to the condition of the analytic statement or the wholly self-evident (since purely tautological) proposition. As a result, philosophy of mathematics in that locally dominant tradition has tended to focus on conceptual issues which have less to do with the kinds of problem that typically attract the interest of working mathematicians than with the kinds of problem that mathematics is typically seen to pose for philosophers with their own distinctive agenda to pursue. Hence the near-obsessive concern with topics, like those mentioned above, that fall very much within its comfort-zone since they readily allow for that shift of focus from issues that have to be engaged mathematically, i.e., through a distinctive, highly formalized but none the less creative or inventive mode of exploratory thought to issues that belong to the stock-in-trade of a certain philosophical discourse. Indeed one need only consult any recent collection of essays on the subject to see how remarkably uniform they are—despite some otherwise sizeable differences of view—in their sense of where the discipline's centre of gravity lies and their assurance of raising the right sorts of question in the right (philosophically relevant) way.<sup>2</sup> So it is that the discussion comes to turn almost exclu-

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<sup>1</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, trans. G.E.M. Anscombe (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), Sections 201-292 *passim*; Saul Kripke, *Wittgenstein on Rules and Private Language: an elementary exposition* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982); Alexander Miller and Crispin Wright (eds.), *Rule-Following and Meaning* (Chesham: Acumen, 2002).

<sup>2</sup> See Paul Benacerraf and Hilary Putnam (eds.), *The Philosophy of Mathematics: selected essays*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983);



sively on matters epistemological or logico-semantic, that is to say, on topics that have been at the heart of philosophical enquiry throughout its history from Plato, *via* Descartes to Kant and latterly (following the ‘linguistic turn’) from Frege and Wittgenstein down. To be sure, such concerns are by no means inherently alien to mathematicians and may indeed occupy some part of any time that they might take off from the business of actually doing mathematics and choose to spend reflecting, in a general way, on the epistemic status or the assertoric warrant of their various doings and sayings. However they are likely to regard such reflection as very much a sideline or a passing distraction from that other primary business, and not as in any way contributing to it through the kind of actively participant role—the *engagement with* mathematical problems rather than the purely contemplative or disengaged process of *thinking about* them—that would involve a very different kind of relationship between mathematics and philosophy.

What analytic philosophers most stand to gain from a reading of Badiou on the conceptual revolution (or the series of such revolutions) brought about by Cantor’s discovery of the multiple orders of infinity and by kindred advances in post-Cantorian set theory is a heightened sense of just how creative and productive that relationship might yet become.<sup>3</sup> In part this has to do with Badiou’s regular practice of working through those stages of advance—for the benefit of less mathematically clued-up readers—with a care for detail and a power of vivid re-creative grasp that finds few rivals in the analytic literature. One way to characterize that difference is to say that his work holds out an answer to the problem so insistently posed by Jacques Derrida in his early writings

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W.D. Hart (ed.), *The Philosophy of Mathematics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); Hilary Putnam, *Mathematics, Matter and Method* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975).

<sup>3</sup> See especially Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2005) and *Theoretical Writings*, ed. and trans. Ray Brassier and Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2004).

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on Husserlian transcendental phenomenology.<sup>4</sup> This is the question as to how we can conceive mathematical truths on the one hand (in realist, objectivist, or Platonist terms) as absolute ideal objectivities—i.e., as recognition-transcendent or ‘epistemically unconstrained’—while on the other they are conceived as making themselves available (sometimes at any rate) to the ways and means of human investigative thought. Where Derrida treats this as an antinomy—a philosophically productive yet in the end irresolvable conflict of commitments or priorities—Badiou typically takes it as the starting-point and constant source of motivating energy for the kind of advance that typifies certain breakthrough events in the history of mathematics, namely those that ‘turn paradox into concept’. Moreover he regards it as having close analogues in other (e.g. natural-scientific, political, and artistic) modes of intellectual-creative endeavor. Indeed, what is required if the reference to mathematics is to have any kind of formal validity or probative warrant is something far more rigorous, exacting and precise than a mere analogy between those other subject-areas and certain well-established mathematical procedures, namely (for Badiou) the possibility of reckoning with multiple orders of infinity that were opened up to investigation in the wake of Cantor’s inaugural discovery.<sup>5</sup> Rather it is a question of structural homologies that provide for a rigorous thinking-through of issues in the topic-areas concerned, that is to say, issues of their constitution—ontologically speaking—as domains for further exploratory treatment or investigative thought. Yet this also provides for a heightened grasp of those utterly singular events, in mathematics as likewise in politics and the

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<sup>4</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Edmund Husserl’s The Origin of Geometry: an introduction*, trans. John P. Leavey (Pittsburgh, PA: Duquesne University Press, 1973) and *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

<sup>5</sup> See Note 3, above; also Michael Potter, *Set Theory and its Philosophy: a critical introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004) and—for an excellent entry-level text—John D. Barrow, *The Infinite Book* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2005).

arts, which can be seen to have marked a decisive break with the kinds of ontological commitment embodied in received or orthodox ways of thinking.

This distinction is very much at the heart of Badiou's project and may rightfully be said to mark his own book *Being and Event* as an occurrence of just that ontologically groundbreaking order. Hence the other main aspect of his work that issues a powerful challenge to the normative values and assumptions of much analytic philosophy. This has to do with the relationship between knowledge and truth, or the scope and limits of thought at any given stage in its development and the standard by which it would (counterfactually) be judged or to which it might (conceivably) be held accountable in the absence of just those limits. Badiou's major claim, in short, is that philosophy of mathematics has sold mathematics grievously short by focusing on questions like: What is mathematical knowledge? How can we be certain that we have it? What can or must be the nature of mathematical entities such as numbers, sets, or classes if indeed we can have knowledge of them? It has thus been prevented from raising questions with regard to the primary (ontological as opposed to epistemological) issue of truth as that which might always surpass—and perhaps, in consequence of some future advance, eventually be known to have surpassed—a given, temporally indexed state of knowledge or present-best belief concerning it. Moreover, as follows directly from this, even if mathematics never achieved such a breakthrough advance in respect of some particular problem, dilemma, or so-far unproven theorem nevertheless its procedures would be under the necessity of working toward a truth that at present eluded its utmost epistemic grasp.

Thus Badiou takes a robustly objectivist view in maintaining that truth is epistemically unconstrained or—what amounts to the same thing—that it is verification-transcendent in the sense of always potentially exceeding what we are able to prove, demonstrate, or even plausibly conjecture regarding it. Such is the character of mathematics as a formal yet always exploratory, rigorous yet incomplete and open-ended



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process of discovery that enables truth—more precisely: the existence of currently unknown or unknowable truths—to exert a steady pressure for conceptual innovation on account of precisely that shortfall in the scope of mathematical knowledge. According to Badiou’s strongly objectivist conception, any genuine ‘event’ or signal advance toward making good that shortfall will involve both a sense of having newly discovered (rather than created or invented) some hitherto unknown or unproven mathematical truth and also, by no means incompatible with that, a sense of the limits placed upon knowledge by the plain incapacity of human reason to encompass the strictly inexhaustible range of such truths. Although this has been the case ever since the first stirrings of mathematical curiosity it was brought home with particular vividness by the advent of post-Cantorian set theory. What resulted was the double realization first that thought is indeed capable—as against the previous orthodox view—of working with a concept of positive or actual as distinct from merely potential infinity, and second (yet more counter-intuitive until one gets used to the idea) that there must exist infinite different ‘sizes’ or orders of infinity beyond that entry-level order equated with the infinite sequence of natural numbers.

## II

Hence Badiou’s response to the question of the one and many, or the issue of priority between them, that preoccupied many of the Pre-Socratics, led on to some tortuous or aporetic reasoning in Plato’s later dialogues, and thereafter—from Aristotle down—played a prominent role in numerous later philosophical disputes.<sup>6</sup> Quite simply, the multiple is that which both precedes and intrinsically exceeds any order placed upon it by the ‘count-as-one,’ that is to say, any ordering procedure that seeks to contain the multiplicity of being within certain prescribed or stipulative limits. The same

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<sup>6</sup> See Note 3, above; also Alain Badiou, *Number and Numbers*, trans. Robin MacKay (London: Polity Press, 2008).

principle holds for the relation between ‘inconsistent’ and ‘consistent’ multiplicity, the former preceding and exceeding the latter in so far as it can only stand as the result of a procedure for likewise subsuming any discrepant, excessive, or unruly multiples under a numeric-conceptual regime that operates according to the count-as-one. All this Badiou takes as a matter of strict axiomatic-deductive reasoning from the basic premises of set theory as developed, refined, and extended by a series of thinkers—from Dedekind, Cantor and Gödel to Paul Cohen—who can be seen to have explored their implications not only through stages of ever-increasing logical and conceptual power but also, crucially for his own argumentative purposes, through a process of deepening ontological scope and grasp. Moreover the implications reach out far beyond the domain of pure mathematics to connect with real-world instances such as the condition of those in a country like present-day France—chief among them the mainly North African *sans-papiers*, or undocumented ‘economic migrants’/‘illegal immigrants’—who find no place within the count-as-one that effectively decides who shall qualify for treatment as a citizen-subject in good civic-political-social-cultural standing.<sup>7</sup>

Here Badiou introduces a number of closely-related distinctions—‘inclusion’ as opposed to ‘belonging,’ ‘parts’ as opposed to ‘members,’ the ‘state’ as distinct from the ‘state of the situation’—all of which serve to point up that central, set-theoretically derived contrast between whatever (or whoever) ‘counts’ in terms of some given mathematical or socio-political order and whatever (or whoever) fails so to count on the same jointly inclusive/exclusionary terms. Along with these he deploys a range of other concepts to articulate the nature of those radically disruptive ‘events’ whereby some existing consensus of knowledge in the formal or physical sciences finds itself subject to challenge or some regnant socio-political order finds its stability threatened. Among

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<sup>7</sup> See especially Alain Badiou, *Metapolitics*, trans. Jason Barker (London: Verso, 2005); *Polemics*, trans. Steve Corcoran (London: Verso, 2006); *Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007).

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them are ‘excess,’ ‘evental site,’ and ‘point of excess,’ all of which signify the sudden emergence—as it seems, entirely out of the blue and without any prior intimation—of consensus-busting truths or inconvenient facts about the nature of presently-existing ‘democratic’ societies which may then (if taken up and worked through by ‘militants of truth’) turn out to have a radically transformative effect on subsequent thought and action. Above all what Badiou wishes to emphasize is the objective character of any such truth, or perhaps more aptly—since talk of ‘objectivity’ is always liable to summon up that old Cartesian-Kantian dualist paradigm, most likely in one or other of its present-day linguistified forms—the fact that truth-values are there to be discovered through a faithful or dedicated process of enquiry rather than (as anti-realists and constructivists would have it) brought into being through an act of inventive or creative thought.<sup>8</sup>

Thus, in his view, philosophers misrepresent the issue when they take it that mathematical truths must *either* be objective, recognition-transcendent, and hence ultimately unknowable *or else* brought back within the scope and limits of human cognition and therefore treated as knowledge-relative or epistemically constrained. That dilemma has been a chief talking-point of philosophy of mathematics in the mainstream analytic tradition where it has been closely bound to kindred debates—often with their proximate source in Wittgenstein—about rule-following and the problem (if so one consents to regard it) of how thought can possibly conceive the existence of truths beyond its present power to encompass or ascertain.<sup>9</sup> Here again the idea is that we are stuck with a strictly insoluble quandary since any realist (or typecast ‘Platonist’) claim to the effect that we can indeed attain that conception is inevitably subject to the skeptical rejoinder that it places truth forever beyond reach of knowledge, or at least beyond

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<sup>8</sup> For further discussion see Christopher Norris, *Truth Matters: realism, anti-realism, and response-dependence* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002) and Badiou’s *Being and Event: a reader’s guide* (London: Continuum, 2009).

<sup>9</sup> See Notes 1 and 2, above.



reach of any knowledge that would meet its own impossibly exacting requirements.<sup>10</sup> However, as Badiou does well to remind us, when Plato performed his set-piece demonstration in the *Meno* of how a slave-boy could be brought to find out for himself the truth of Pythagoras's Theorem his intention was to show not only the existence of this and other truths as a matter of absolute ideal objectivity but also to exemplify the mind's active power in pursuing them.<sup>11</sup> This he clearly took to involve a passage beyond its present range of fully-achieved conscious deliberative grasp or, as the issue is more often framed nowadays, beyond the epistemic limit-point of what communally counts as accredited knowledge. Thus Plato's aim in constructing this didactic *mise-en-scène* was to bring out the sheer necessity of thinking—against the assumptions embodied in that current realist/anti-realist stand-off—that mathematical truth can indeed be objective (hence always *potentially* verification-transcendent) and yet lie partially within the compass of human cognitive grasp in so far as mathematicians have discovered some demonstrable means of finding it out or some formally adequate proof-procedure.

Of course if they have not yet arrived at that stage with respect to a given hypothesis, conjecture, or so-far unproven theorem then its truth or falsity will lie beyond the bounds of presently achieved (perhaps humanly achievable) knowledge. This much will surely be accepted by the realist as quite simply following from what it means to have an adequate grasp of the distinction between truth and knowledge, or knowledge and various lower-rank candidates for knowledge such as best opinion, expert belief, or consensual judgment among

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<sup>10</sup> See Note 2, above; also Michael Dummett, *Truth and Other Enigmas* (London: Duckworth, 1978) and *Elements of Intuitionism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2000).

<sup>11</sup> Badiou, *Theoretical Writings*, ed. and trans. Ray Brassier and Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2004); Plato, *Meno*, ed. E. Seymer Thompson (London: Macmillan, 1901); also Crispin Wright, *Truth and Objectivity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992) and Christopher Norris, *Truth Matters: realism, anti-realism, and response-dependence* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002).

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those deemed best qualified to know. However this not what the anti-realists and constructivists have in mind when they mount their case against (typecast) 'Platonism' on the grounds of its involving a nonsensical or self-contradictory pair of premises. What they want us to accept is the idea that realism or objectivism about mathematics involves the twofold and self-refuting since flatly contradictory claims (1) that there are unknown mathematical truths, and (2) that we know what those truths are since they lie within our powers of demonstrative proof or our scope of epistemic warrant.<sup>12</sup> But, as scarcely needs saying, the realist is committed to no such ridiculous belief but rather to what s/he takes as the default position in mathematics and other branches of the formal as well as the physical sciences, namely that we know there are things we don't know even if—again as a matter of plain self-evidence—we don't and cannot presently know what they are or attach any definite truth-value to hypothetical statements concerning them. Although the anti-realist case would seem nothing more than a blatant confusion of these two quite distinct claims—the one downright absurd, the other straightforwardly acceptable—it is a line of thought that can be seen to undergird a whole range of kindred arguments from Dummettian intuitionism in philosophy of mathematics to the wilder forms of postmodernist or Rortian 'strong-descriptivist' thinking.<sup>13</sup>

However there is absolutely no reason to accept the pseudo-dilemma thus forced upon a realist or objectivist outlook which in truth involves no such pair of incompatible or jointly self-refuting commitments. One way of making the point is simply to lay out the anti-realist case, as I have done just above, and then put the question as to whether it constitutes a genuine challenge to mathematical realism or whether that challenge should not be thought to rest on a mistaken—even

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<sup>12</sup> See especially Dummett, *Truth and Other Enigmas* and *The Logical Basis of Metaphysics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994).

<sup>13</sup> For a critical overview of these and related lines of argument, see Norris, *Truth Matters and Philosophy of Language and the Challenge to Scientific Realism* (London: Routledge, 2004).

sophistical—turn of argument. However there is room for other, more formal demonstrations to similar effect conducted on the home-ground of first-order mathematical procedure rather than in the hinterlands (mathematically speaking) of epistemology or philosophy of mind. It is here that Badiou provides an object-lesson in the use of certain procedures drawn from the repertoire of post-Cantorian set theory so as to refute the sorts of anti-realist doctrine maintained by those philosophers of mathematics—along with similarly minded thinkers in other branches of philosophy—whose predisposed strength of doctrinal adherence tends to dictate their approach to issues in that primary domain. More specifically: he shows by a close and detailed working-through of certain major set-theoretical developments how it is possible for truth to surpass the limits of presently attainable knowledge and yet, by its very absence from the range of existing conceptual resources, serve to indicate those unresolved problems or symptomatic points of strain where a future breakthrough has its place marked out in advance.<sup>14</sup> Chief among these are the concepts of ‘forcing’ and ‘the generic’ devised by Paul Cohen as a means to give formal expression to precisely this power of mathematical thinking to reach out beyond its present-best state of achieved (or achievable) knowledge and gain an intimation of truths which can as yet figure only as inducements to a further exercise of reason in its jointly speculative and axiomatic-deductive modes.<sup>15</sup> Those concepts between them define the condition of possibility for that otherwise strictly inconceivable procedure whereby thought is able to envisage not merely the vague or shapeless possibility of some such future transformation but the locus of a presently existing shortfall in knowledge to which it will come as the sole adequate solution.<sup>16</sup>

Badiou treats this procedure as one that finds its most

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<sup>14</sup> Badiou, ‘Ontology is Mathematics,’ in *Theoretical Writings*, 3-93.

<sup>15</sup> Paul J. Cohen, *Set Theory and the Continuum Hypothesis* (New York: W. Benjamin, 1966).

<sup>16</sup> Badiou, ‘The Subtraction of Truth,’ in *Theoretical Writings*, 97-160.

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striking and powerful since formally articulated instance in the case of mathematical thought, but also as having much wider application to issues in the physical sciences, politics, and art. What it gives us to understand with regard to such (on the conventional estimate) less formal or rigorous fields of investigation is how knowledge can be brought up sharp against its current limits by the encounter with that which surpasses its utmost epistemic-cognitive grasp yet which none the less exerts a pressure on thought to conceive the possibility of passing decisively beyond those same limits. Thus great (as distinct from 'great') political events are not always the events that have gone down as such in official or text-book history, that is, from a retrospective viewpoint in line with the received, politically or ideologically dominant conception of what does or should so count. Rather they are most often the kinds of event that may very well have been accounted failures in their own time and ever since—abortive revolutions, suppressed risings, stirrings of dissent put down in blood and fire—yet the effects of which can still be felt to echo on through their power to enlist an answering strength of commitment in those willing to follow through on their up-to-now unredeemed promise or potential. For Badiou the chief example here is the Paris Commune of 1871, an event that he asks us to understand in just such mathematically inflected terms in so far as its sudden emergence on the socio-political scene can be grasped only through a rigorous yet highly responsive exercise of counterfactual thought. Only through such a jointly conceptual and imaginative stretch of mind can we grasp both its signal character—its extant power to act as a source of revolutionary ferment—and the conditions that have worked to ensure its consignment to the category of might-have-been (or have-been) quasi-events.<sup>17</sup>

The analogy is precise despite what will no doubt strike analytically-trained philosophers of mathematics as its wildly analogical character, or its dependence on a merely

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<sup>17</sup> Badiou, 'The Paris Commune: a political declaration on politics,' in *Polemics*, trans. Steve Corcoran (London: Verso, 2006), 257-90.

metaphoric relation between the two topic-domains in question. Thus the way that certain politically salient past events flash up at subsequent times of crisis is treated by Badiou as finding an exact, formally specifiable equivalent in the way that certain mathematical problems—such as the paradox that Bertrand Russell famously discovered in the conceptual foundations of classical set theory—may likewise act as an index of some present shortfall in knowledge and hence a token of some future possible breakthrough.<sup>18</sup> In both cases the anomaly occurs at a certain location (or ‘evental site’) marked out by its standing at the focal point of all those tensions, conflicts, or unresolved dilemmas that signify the limits of a given conceptual or socio-political dispensation, but which also—and for just that reason—signal the prospect (or at least the possibility) of a thinking that would pass decisively beyond those limits. If Russell’s highly unsettling discovery typifies the shape that such problems take in mathematics, logic and the formal sciences then a typical (and Badiou’s most oft-cited) instance in the socio-political domain is that of the *sans-papiers*, or the large numbers of immigrant, mainly North African workers who exist on the outermost fringes of French society and lack any recognized communal, legal, or civic-electoral status.<sup>19</sup> Whilst excluded and, for all official purposes, deemed non-existent by the currently operative ‘count-as-one’ these marginal groups can make their presence felt and even constitute a standing threat to the politico-juridical order that has decreed their all-but socially invisible character. This they do by creating a suppressed yet active, i.e., subliminal sense of just that glaring discrepancy between the way things actually stand with those disenfranchised minorities and the ‘official’, state-sponsored claim—so basic to the rhetoric of liberal democracy—that all sections of the community and all individual members have an equal right to ‘count’ in matters of communal concern.

Thus the question of what constitutes a genuine as distinct

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<sup>18</sup> See Potter, *Set Theory and its Philosophy*.

<sup>19</sup> See entries under Note 7, above.

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from a specious or ideologically constructed ‘event’ is one that can be answered only in light of that subsequent history—that aftermath of unforeseeable yet none the less rigorously consequent workings-through—which defines it in retrospect as having possessed such a character. This applies just as much to mathematical theorems or conjectures in the formal and physical sciences as it does to those instances (like the *sans-papiers*) that might seem to stretch the mathematical analogy to breaking-point and beyond. Yet here also it is a matter of some standing socio-political anomaly that may—or may not—eventually arrive at the critical point of transition from a state wherein it was concealed, suppressed, or passed over through the effect of a prejudicial count-as-one to a subsequent state wherein that anomaly is shown up for what it was, i.e., as the result of an ideologically determined failure or refusal to reckon with the multiple in question. Hence Badiou’s resolute insistence—as against a large company of philosophers from Plato and Aristotle to the late nineteenth-century—that thinking is under a strict obligation to deal with the infinite, that this order of infinity is real rather than merely potential, and moreover that it leads straight on (as Cantor showed) to the idea that there must exist an endless succession of ‘larger’ infinities beyond that defined by the sequence of integers or natural (counting) numbers. Most powerfully suggestive in this regard is the concept of the power-set or the set that comprises all those subsets produced by taking all possible combinations of the members of some given set. For the numerical excess of the power-set over its parent set is one that increases exponentially with the size of the latter and which thus places maximal strain on the capacities of rational-calculative thought where the set in question is an infinite set of whatever ‘size’ or cardinality.

### III

So it is that Badiou can state it as axiomatic—against the weight of received philosophical doctrine from Plato down—that thinking must start out from an axiom according to which inconsistent multiplicity should be taken by very definition

to exceed any instance of consistent ('properly' ordered or countable) multiplicity.<sup>20</sup> And so it is likewise that he can argue on a rigorous rather than vaguely analogical basis that, in the socio-political as well as the formal-scientific sphere, the count-as-one should be seen as imposing a conceptual or juridical limit on the otherwise open multiplicity of candidate multiples.

That limit is precisely what holds back the power of mathematical thought—or of presently existing social-democratic ideologies—to arrive at a fully inclusive conception of the criteria for membership of some given set, class, group, collective, community, electorate, or civil society. As things stand with any current state of knowledge or socio-political *sensus communis* those membership-conditions are determined as a matter of 'belonging' in a more-or-less restrictive or exclusionary sense of the term, that is to say, as a matter of meeting the requirements laid down by certain received ideas of conceptual or socio-political acceptability. If thinking about politics is ever to accomplish a break with those ruling conceptions then it will need to take a lesson from mathematics—more specifically, from modern set theory and its achievement of 'turning paradox into concept'—and thereby develop an equivalent capacity for passing through and beyond the limits of some given (ideational or ideological) state of accredited knowledge. And this despite the deep-laid prejudice that would seek to maintain a strict demarcation between the formal sciences (mathematics and logic) and on the other hand any mode of thought that cannot or should not aspire to that degree of conceptual precision since its interests lie in a subject-domain where such standards are simply not applicable. On the contrary, he argues: there is absolutely no reason, prejudice aside, to suppose that the striving for social justice or political advance should be confined to a realm of more-or-less persuasive beliefs or merely approximative truth-values.

Nor is it the case that there must be something absurd about any attempt, like Badiou's, to import the conceptual

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<sup>20</sup> Alain Badiou, 'Theory of the Pure Multiple: paradoxes and critical decision,' in *Being and Event*, 38-48.



## Speculations II

rigor of mathematical discourse into the kind of inherently loose-knit reasoning and constant veering between factual and evaluative language that typifies the discourse of politics. For this is merely to take on trust the authority of a philosophic dogma (the fact/value dichotomy) which is then deployed in blanket fashion to enforce just such a sharp and socio-politically as well as philosophically damaging division of labor across the whole gamut of human intellectual, cultural, and practical activities. So it is that Badiou can cite two exemplary cases of moral heroism—Jean Cavallès and Albert Lautmann, both of them eminent mathematicians who were shot by the occupying German forces as a result of actions undertaken for the French resistance—and argue that those actions were exemplary chiefly as instances of a rigorously logical determination to follow through on certain basic ethical precepts and commitments.<sup>21</sup> However this should not be taken as suggesting any tendency on Badiou's part toward a Kantian-deontological conception of moral duty, obligation, or responsibility. Indeed it is an aspect of his vehemently anti-Kantian approach to ethical issues, an approach that very often involves a rejection of 'ethics' in so far as such talk overtly or implicitly subscribes to an idea of the thinking, judging, and willing human subject as the locus of any moral agency meriting the name.<sup>22</sup> For Badiou this betrays a conception of acts and events that is philosophically bankrupt since mortgaged in advance to an obsolete and ideologically compromised notion of individual autonomy and personhood. The latter turns out, on closer inspection, to involve a curiously self-contradictory or self-abnegating 'logic' whereby *subjectivity* thus conceived is also—and by the same token—shown up as a mode of *subjection* to rules, dictates, imperatives, or maxims whose source is altogether outside and elsewhere.

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<sup>21</sup> See Badiou, *Metapolitics*.

<sup>22</sup> See especially Alain Badiou, *Ethics: an essay on the understanding of evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2001); also *Manifesto for Philosophy*, trans. Norman Madarasz (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999) and *Infinite Thought: truth and the return to philosophy*, trans. Oliver Feltham and Justin Clemens (London: Continuum, 2003).

If Kantian ‘autonomy’ is thereby revealed as a mode of heteronomous compulsion that dare not speak its name then the way would seem open for Badiou—like Lacan and Foucault before him—to denounce that entire quasi-autonomist, quasi-enlightened, quasi-liberal discourse as merely another subterfuge adopted by the will-to-power masquerading as the will-to-truth, or by ‘power-knowledge’ as a strictly indisociable conjunction of terms and truth-constitutive forces.<sup>23</sup> This is indeed one prominent feature of his thinking, at least to the extent that Badiou shares those thinkers’ suspicion of humanist concepts and categories. However where they arrived at it for the most part through a locally predominant post-structuralist version of the ubiquitous ‘linguistic turn’ Badiou has absolutely no time for the idea that language should figure as the ultimate horizon of intelligibility or as that which places an ineluctable limit on our scope of perceptual, cognitive, and intellectual grasp.<sup>24</sup> Indeed he loses no opportunity to anathematize this currently widespread notion in its various derivative or surrogate forms such as those that appeal to ‘discourses’ (Foucault), ‘language-games’ (Wittgenstein and Lyotard), ‘signifying practices’ (post-structuralism), *die Sprache* (Heidegger), ‘strong description’ (Rorty), and even that otherwise congenial strain within analytic philosophy that insists on the virtues of logical clarity and rigor but then spoils its case—so Badiou maintains—by taking language, properly a second-order interest, as its primary topic-domain.<sup>25</sup> However this aversion goes along with

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<sup>23</sup> For a critique of these developments in (mainly) French cultural theory with particular emphasis on ‘revisionist’ readings of Kant, see Christopher Norris, *The Truth About Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993).

<sup>24</sup> For an early and widely influential sampling on the mainly ‘analytic’ side, see Richard Rorty (ed.), *The Linguistic Turn: essays in philosophical method* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967). I take a contrasting (highly critical) view of these developments in Christopher Norris, *Resources of Realism: prospects for ‘post-analytic’ philosophy* (London: Macmillan, 1997) and *New Idols of the Cave: on the limits of anti-realism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1997).

<sup>25</sup> See Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy and Infinite Thought: truth and the return to philosophy*; also Norris, *The Truth About Postmodernism* and *What’s Wrong*

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a deeper though closely connected commitment, namely his adherence to a view of truth according to which subjectivity is no longer conceived as a realm of inward, reflective experience or as finding its formal expression in a Kantian system of faculties individually specialized for this or that purpose. Rather he treats it as the adjunct or concomitant of certain imperative truth-procedures that bring the subject into being through the virtue of fidelity to that which hitherto existed only as a matter of so far unrealized potential.

At any rate Badiou sees absolutely no reason to regard the linguistic turn as a major advance on account of its having thrown off all those old metaphysical burdens and embraced an alternative conception that avoids the giddy heights (or the murky depths) of the Kantian 'transcendental' subject. For if one thing is clear from the way that philosophical discussion has gone amongst language-first thinkers in the various lines of descent from Frege, Wittgenstein (early and late), Russell, Austin, and Ryle—along with Heidegger, Gadamer, Derrida, Foucault, Rorty, and others—it is the fact that this 'turn' was indeed a revolution although more in the original (etymological) sense of that term, i.e., a coming-around once again of that which had previously shown up in a superficially different but in fact deeply kindred form. Thus it is still very much a matter of the realism *versus* anti-realism debate—or the issue of truth as objective/recognition-transcendent *versus* truth as epistemically constrained—that first emerged clearly to view with Kant's doctrine of the faculties and which now rumbles on, albeit minus a part of its erstwhile metaphysical baggage, in the kinds of argument typically engaged by present-day disputants. All that has changed is the way that these arguments are currently couched in logico-semantic terms, rather than in the idiom of 'subjective' as opposed to 'objective' idealism that took hold amongst thinkers like Fichte and Schelling in the immediate Kantian aftermath and found its dialectical come-uppance in the grand synthesis attempted

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*with Postmodernism?* (Hemel Hempstead: Harvester, 1991).

by Hegel.<sup>26</sup> Nor is there anything more to be hoped for from naturalistically-inclined variants of the linguistic turn, like that proposed by John McDowell, which pin their faith to a (supposedly) non-dualist reinterpretation of Kant grounded on his (again supposedly) non-dualist ideas of ‘spontaneity’ and ‘receptivity,’ rather than the standard problem-inducing since categorically fissiparous pair of ‘concept’ and ‘intuition.’<sup>27</sup>

As I have shown elsewhere, this latest edition of Neo-Kantianism succeeds no better than its precursor movements in overcoming what patently remains a deep-laid dualism and one that cannot be conjured away by any amount of verbal or conceptual legerdemain.<sup>28</sup> Worse still, as Badiou sees it: the linguistic turn works to obscure any idea of how truth might emerge through the kinds of procedure—most aptly figured in the sequence of major set-theoretical discoveries since Cantor—that cannot possibly be explained or understood by reference to preexisting modes of thought or articulate expression. That is, they require neither an exertion of the Kantian ‘faculties’ somehow united despite their multiplex differences of scope nor again (least of all) a reduction to the compass of this or that preexisting language/discourse/paradigm/framework but, on the contrary, a single-minded dedication to that which transcends the limits of our present-best cognitive, epistemic or discursive grasp. This is why Badiou is so fiercely opposed to that whole contemporary *doxa*, whether in its ‘analytic’ or its ‘continental’ form, which elects to treat language as the enabling as well as the limiting condition of any thought that can intelligibly count as such,

<sup>26</sup> For further discussion, see Christopher Norris, *Minding the Gap: epistemology and philosophy of science in the two traditions* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2000); also Frederick C. Beiser, *The Fate of Reason: German philosophy from Kant to Fichte* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987); Jürgen Habermas, *The Unfinished Project of Modernity: twelve lectures*, trans Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987); Norris, *Deconstruction and the Unfinished Project of Modernity* (London: Athlone, 2000).

<sup>27</sup> John McDowell, *Mind and World* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1994).

<sup>28</sup> Norris, ‘McDowell on Kant: redrawing the bounds of sense’ and ‘The Limits of Naturalism: further thoughts on McDowell’s *Mind and World*’, in *Minding the Gap*, pp. 172-96 and 197-230.

## Speculations II

and which thereby condemns itself—or so he would claim—to a state of passive and uncritical acquiescence in the currency of in-place or taken-for-granted belief. Beyond that, one can see how Badiou's deep aversion to this strain of anti-realism goes along with his even more pronounced antipathy to any form of self-advertised liberal or social-democratic thinking which likewise involves the passage through a certain conception of the human faculties—or their linguistic-expressive analogues—as establishing the scope of that which lies within our powers of humanly attainable cognitive grasp.

Such is the burden of his charge against Kant, Hannah Arendt, and other apologists for a cognitive as well as an ethical-social-political order that seeks to place limits on the power of thought to envisage certain as-yet unattainable states—whether states of knowledge, understanding, or political justice—the possibility of which may none the less leave its mark on the present through a sense of indigence or shortfall that is rendered yet more acute through its failure to achieve fully articulate or conceptually adequate form.<sup>29</sup> For there is a close and mutually reinforcing tie between the kind of thinking about mathematics and the formal sciences that tailors truth to the scope and limits of human knowledge and the kind of thinking that tailors justice to the scope and limits of what counts as such according to present-best conceptions of the socio-political good. Common to both is the idea that quite simply it cannot make sense—must constitute a nonsense or a self-refuting thesis in the strictest logical terms—to suppose that we could ever formulate a statement whose truth-value would be recognition-transcendent, that is to say, objectively true or false even though we had no means of finding it out or settling the issue either way.<sup>30</sup> To Badiou this anti-realist doctrine of epistemic constraint or this argument for ensuring that truth always falls within the compass of humanly attainable knowledge is also an argument for guaranteeing in advance that thought will never stray beyond the limits

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<sup>29</sup> See Note 7, above.

<sup>30</sup> See Notes 12 and 13, above.

established by a due regard for currently prevailing notions of good, i.e., communally sanctioned intellectual, epistemic, conceptual, procedural, ethical, or socio-political conduct.

Hence his insistence that any truth-accountable conception of the knowing or willing subject—any conception that can block this slide into an ultimately communitarian or paradigm-relativist notion of ‘truth’—must define the subject solely and strictly in relation to some specifiable truth-procedure in some specific discipline or field of thought. On the one hand it involves a thoroughgoing critique of that entire doctrine of the faculties that took rise from Descartes’ bare, ultra-rationalist *cogito* and found its high point of complexity in Kant’s baroque variations on the theme. This way of thinking continues nowadays, as I have said, in the various scaled-down revisionist attempts by legatees of the linguistic turn to explain how an appeal to language as the bottom-line of philosophical enquiry is able to keep the relevant distinctions in play while disowning any such inherently dilemma-prone Kantian metaphysical commitments.<sup>31</sup> On the other hand Badiou just as strenuously takes issue with liberal-reformist or social-democratic ideas of political justice which likewise point back to the Kantian tribunal of critical reason where criticism of existing beliefs, values, and institutions is tempered by a constant moderating appeal to the *sensus communis* of shared opinion amongst those deemed fittest to judge. Indeed it is his chief objection to this whole epistemologically oriented mode of enquiry from Descartes, *via* Kant to Husserl that it *cannot but* lead to a communitarian (or cultural-relativist) upshot since the focus on mental goings-on at whatever presumptive *a priori* or transcendental level must always founder on some version of the argument against ‘private language.’<sup>32</sup> At which point—witness the path taken by analytic philosophy over the past six decades—this failed project will at length give way to a saving idea of language (aka ‘discourse’ or ‘culture’)

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<sup>31</sup> See Notes 27 and 28, above.

<sup>32</sup> Note 1, above.

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as the sole means of rescuing the subject from its state of self-imposed epistemic solitude.

So it is hardly surprising that Kant and Wittgenstein figure as the two most conspicuous *bêtes noires* in Badiou's very overtly partisan survey of those various thinkers throughout the history of Western post-Hellenic philosophy who have either advanced or set back the kind of intellectual progress that he finds most strikingly exemplified in the case of mathematical developments after Cantor. Basically they are held to a common standard which has to do with their effectiveness (or lack of it) in aiding the process of emancipation from false ideas of the limits placed upon thought by its subjection to existing or in-place habits of belief. In its modern guise this has involved firstly the confinement of truth to *knowledge* as conceived in Kantian (finitist) terms and then its subjection to *language* conceived, after Wittgenstein, as the ultimate horizon of intelligibility. These doctrines are anathema to Badiou since they not only fail to explain how thinking has at times pressed decisively beyond any such presently-existing horizon but turn that failure into a full-scale doctrine based on the steadfast refusal to conceive how advances of that sort might possibly occur. Such is the programme of Dummettian anti-realism or intuitionism in philosophy of mathematics, and such—with various detailed tweaks or reservations—the motivating interest of a good many kindred projects in recent epistemology and philosophy of science. Where they err, on Badiou's submission, is precisely in failing or refusing to see how knowledge can always fall short of truth, just as present-best belief or optimal judgment can always fall short of knowledge where knowledge is thought of not (in Wittgensteinian fashion) as a matter of communal warrant but rather as a matter of conformity to truth objectively or non-epistemically conceived. Anything less—he maintains—is a falling-short of the standards laid down by previous episodes of signal advance in the formal, physical, and even certain branches of the social and human sciences.

This outlook is closely related, in political and ethical terms, to Badiou's deep suspicion of the liberal or social-democratic



rhetoric that tends to go along with a basically Kantian conception of the knowing, thinking, and willing subject as locus of autonomous agency and choice. That conception is not so much wrong in itself—since choice and activist commitment are absolutely central to his own idea of the subject as ‘militant’ of truth—but wrong in so far as it goes by way of an appeal to imputed aspects or dimensions of the subject that deny knowledge any access to truth except on condition of its making the passage either through some version of Kant’s highly elaborate doctrine of the faculties or else through one or other of its scaled-down ‘linguistified’ latter-day variants. Hence Badiou’s distinctly jaundiced view of ethics, or at any rate ‘ethics’ in the sense of that term that has figured most prominently down through the history of post-Kantian philosophic thought, including some recent chapters in that history whose protagonists would most likely count themselves well outside the Kantian fold.<sup>33</sup> What he puts in its place is a formal ethics but not, as with Kant, one that seeks to combine formal (deontological) rigor with a bid to conserve the subject as that which somehow—‘transcendentally’—exerts a power of jointly cognitive, reflective, and volitional control over anything that falls within its epistemic or agentic purview. Rather, as in the case of those two *resistants*-mathematicians Cavaillès and Lautmann, the rigor in question is a matter of following through with the utmost formal precision or logical consistency on certain basic commitments (major premises of guiding principle and minor premises of fact, circumstance, and probable outcome) which between them constitute an ethically decisive since rationally arrived-at conclusion. Moreover, Badiou finds additional grounds for his implacable hostility to Kantian ethics and epistemology in the fact that they have lately—since the advent of the ‘linguistic turn’ in its multiform guises—given way to a strain of anti-realist, conventionalist, constructivist, communitarian, or cultural-relativist thinking which sets itself up in flat opposition to any idea of truth as objective, i.e., as epistemically unconstrained or recognition-transcendent.

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<sup>33</sup> Note 22, above.

## Speculations II

### IV

I must now offer some detailed commentary on the more technical aspects of his argument since otherwise these claims—in particular my talk of conceptual and logical rigor—will most likely conjure suspicions of charitable license or special pleading. Best therefore if I concentrate on a fairly short section of one major text where the relevant issues emerge with particular clarity and force. Meditations Twenty-Eight to Thirty of *Being and Event* are largely concerned with extending and clarifying Badiou's critique of those currently influential movements of thought in philosophy of mathematics and the formal sciences that seek to evade such a powerful challenge to their preconceived notions of rational accountability.<sup>34</sup> That is, they typically choose to take the path of least epistemic resistance by adapting their notions of validity or truth to some prevailing conception of present-best or future-best-attainable knowledge.

On Badiou's submission, this amounts to vote of no confidence in the capacity of speculative reason to surpass or transcend any such current horizon through an anticipatory grasp of those singular, anomalous, or so far unrecognized (since strictly 'supernumerary') events that prefigure the occurrence of a major shift or decisive advance in the history of thought. What typifies those constructivist, anti-realist, or intuitionist approaches is a failure or (sometimes) a dogmatic refusal to envisage that possibility, along with a likewise entrenched supposition that truth cannot properly or *consistently* be thought to outrun the epistemic or conceptual resources of this or that paradigm, 'ontological scheme,' discourse, language, or expert community of knowledge. "In its essence, constructivist thought is a logical grammar," one whose self-appointed role it is to "ensure that language prevails as the norm for what may be acceptably recognized as a one-multiple amongst representations" (287). This it does by

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<sup>34</sup> All references to Badiou's *Being and Event* henceforth given by page-number in the text.

restricting such recognition to just those elements that are normally, routinely, or ‘properly’ taken as belonging to the authorized count-as-one, or those parts that legitimately qualify as such just in virtue of their pre-assigned, pre-acknowledged status in that regard. “*Constructivist thought will only recognize as ‘part’ a grouping of presented multiples which have a property in common, or which all maintain a defined relationship to terms of the situation which are themselves univocally named*” (p. 287; Badiou’s italics). So it is—through a stipulative rule imposed by means of a conceptual-linguistic policing of ontological bounds—that such thinking effectively pre-empts or contains any truly consensus-threatening challenge from that which exceeds its utmost allowance for the advent of new and unlooked-for discoveries.

Thus constructivism in mathematics, logic and the formal sciences is another version of that same turn toward language—on whatever specific, more-or-less technical understanding of the term ‘language’—that has characterized so much present-day thought in philosophy and other disciplines. What this brings about with respect to set theory, its status *vis-à-vis* other modes of knowledge and its wider bearing on issues of ontology is a drastic restriction of its scope for engagement with issues that lie outside or beyond the agenda of current debate. It regulates the terms of that debate in such a way as to ensure that no too conspicuous gulf opens up between belonging and inclusion, presentation and representation, members and parts, or (again with political as well as mathematical pertinence) the situation and the state of the situation.<sup>35</sup> Hence for instance Leibniz’s idea of a ‘well-made’ language, a ‘universal characteristic’ that would substitute symbolic or algebraic for natural-linguistic signs and thereby provide a perfectly adequate, clear and unambiguous means of conveyance for well-formed mathematical and scientific concepts or propositions. This would have as its governing aim and rationale the need to “[keep] as tight a rein as possible on the errancy of parts by means of the

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<sup>35</sup> See especially Badiou, *Theoretical Essays*.

## Speculations II

ordered codification of their expressible link to the situation whose parts they are” (288; on Leibniz see also Meditation Thirty, 315-23).

Such is the formal, logically regimented conception of ‘language’—of what constitutes a language truly fit for purpose in philosophico-logico-mathematical terms—that has come down from Leibniz to Frege, Russell and others in the mainstream analytic tradition. However Badiou’s strictures apply just as much to that (in some respects) squarely opposed way of thinking that treats natural language, or what’s expressible therein, as its final court of appeal. Here also, he maintains, there is “always a perceptible bond between a part and terms which are recognizable within the situation,” such that “this proximity that language builds between presentation and representation . . . grounds the conviction that the state does not exceed the situation by *too* much, or that it remains commensurable” (288). Beyond that, the linguistic turn may be remarked in forms as various and seemingly ill-assorted as the ancient Greek sophists, the logical empiricists with their drive for a sense-datum based (phenomenalist) language of pure observation-statements, and Foucault with his relentless nominalist ‘archaeologies’ and ‘genealogies’ of knowledge. What these would all have in common, on Badiou’s account, is their commitment to a negative thesis (‘the indiscernible is not’) and hence to its positive although in mathematical, scientific and political terms highly retrograde counterpart, i.e., the thesis that everything is discernible since nothing can conceivably exist except in so far as it figures in the tally of objects, properties, or relations picked out by some given language or conceptual-ontological scheme. Such is “the thesis with which nominalism constructs its fortification, and by means of which it can restrict, at its leisure, any pretension to unfold excess in the world of indifferences” (289).

It is for this reason also that constructivist thinking leaves no room for the event, if by this we understand—like Badiou—the kind of rupture with established theoretical, conceptual or procedural norms that would constitute a paradigm-change in something more than the notionally radical sense of that

phrase taken up from Thomas Kuhn by his cultural-relativist apostles.<sup>36</sup> Constructivism doesn't and, by its own lights, cannot allow for such strictly exorbitant events since its motivating interest is chiefly in preserving a *modus operandi* for the formal and (in different ways but to similar effect) the natural and social sciences. Thus it seeks to deflect any frontal or genuinely testing encounter with anomalies—like the paradoxes of self-reference or the various sorts of 'excrescence,' singularity, or eventual 'ultra-one'—that would otherwise constitute a sizable threat to its claims of consistency and logical-conceptual grasp. In Badiou's words: "[c]onstructivism has no need to *decide* upon the non-being of the event, because it does not have to know anything of the latter's undecidability" (289). That is to say, it avoids setting out upon that other, more rigorous set-theoretical path whereby thinking is inevitably led to a moment of logical under-determination requiring that its project be staked on the existence of certain as-yet formally unproven truths that none the less decide the course of its present and future investigations. For the mark of a realist as opposed to a constructivist outlook is just this willingness to view the current state of knowledge as always falling short of certain truths that lie beyond its present-best powers of epistemic grasp. These are truths that thought is sometimes (exceptionally) able to glimpse through a sharpened sense of those anomalies, stress-points, unresolved dilemmas, or symptoms of conceptual strain that indicate both the limits imposed by its current, historically defined stage of advancement and also—what distinguishes Badiou's thinking from any form of cultural relativism—the possibility of passing beyond those limits through a process of self-interrogation or immanent critique.

Hence his chief objection to constructivist thought: that it is "in no way disturbed by having to declare that a situation does not change," or rather, "that what is called 'change' in a situation is nothing more than the constructive deployment

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<sup>36</sup> Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., revised (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970).

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of its parts” (290). No doubt there is some kind of ‘infinity’ involved here, but not—most emphatically—the kind envisaged by Cantor and those who followed his (albeit wavering) example and took it to possess an ontological dimension beyond anything that might be captured in purely linguistic, discursive, or representational terms.<sup>37</sup> On this latter conception, “the *thought* of the situation evolves, [but only] because the exploration of the effects of the state brings to light previously unnoticed but linguistically controllable new connections” (290). Thus any notion of ‘infinity’ here is one that in the end reduces to that of an infinite multiplicity of languages, discourses, or modes of representation. These in turn must be construed as drawing their operative sense or content from the range of procedures or practices (e.g., those of mathematics and the formal sciences) presently in place amongst some given community of recognized exponents. Such conservatism doesn’t altogether exclude the possibility of sometimes quite radical changes to the currency of received (i.e., scientifically accredited or communally sanctioned) belief. What it does rule out—in accordance with the mandate that such changes respect the scope and limits of present intelligibility—is any prospect that thought might achieve some decisive advance through a grasp of possibilities *latent in* but *inexpressible by means of* the language or conceptual register currently to hand. In constructivist (or nominalist) terms, “[a] new nomination takes the role of a new multiple, but such novelty is relative, since the multiple validated in this manner is always constructible on the basis of those that have been recognized” (290).

It is here that Badiou is able to pinpoint most precisely the nexus between constructivist approaches to issues in the set-theoretical domain and that wider turn toward a notion of language as the bottom-line or ultimate horizon of enquiry that has characterized so much recent (especially Wittgenstein-influenced) philosophic thought. Thus “[t]he heterogeneity of language games is at the foundation of a diversity of situ-

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<sup>37</sup> Potter, *Set Theory and its Philosophy*. Also note 3, above.

ations,” since in so far as “being is deployed multiply” this must always be strictly on condition that “its deployment is solely presented within the multiplicity of languages” (291). In which case—to repeat—there is just no way that thinking might achieve a truly critical distance (a ‘view from nowhere,’ in Thomas Nagel’s far from dismissive phrase) on its in-place practices or currently favored modes of reasoning.<sup>38</sup> Nor is this reliance on established procedures—this pull toward familiar, well-tried methods of proof or verification—by any means confined to mathematics, logic, and the formal sciences. On the contrary, its implications extend well beyond that relatively specialized sphere to the entire range of natural-scientific, social-scientific and even humanities disciplines where the appellation ‘human science’ is liable to raise eyebrows, if not hackles. These are regions of enquiry where there is always some question of truth involved but where the operative notion of ‘truth’ turns out to be deployed in such diverse and often mutually exclusive ways—correspondence-based, coherence-based, pragmatist, hermeneutic, depth-ontological, framework-relative, or socially/culturally/linguistically constructed—as to render it more like a piece of fortuitous wordplay than a staking-out of significant common ground. For Badiou, this seeming diversity of truth-concepts should rather be seen as just a product of the nowadays dominant dualist or separatist conception which drives a pitiless wedge between understanding and knowledge, interpretation and analysis, intuition and concept, feeling and thought, or the arts and the sciences. Moreover, the need to overcome these disabling dichotomies—to perceive them more clearly as ideologically motivated artifacts—is one that impinges with maximal force in all of those above-mentioned ‘discourses’ or regions of enquiry, politics most emphatically included.

Thus “[t]he non-place of the event calms thought, and the fact that the event is unthinkable relaxes action . . . [so that] the constructivist orientation underpins *neo-classicist*

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<sup>38</sup> Thomas Nagel, *The View from Nowhere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); also Norris, “Not Quite the Last Word: Nagel, Wittgenstein, and the limits of scepticism,” in *Minding the Gap*, 231-59.



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norms in art, *positivist* epistemologies, and *programmatic* politics” (291). In each case what results is a falling back upon uncritical habits of thought or routinely conventional modes of creative (or pseudo-creative) activity which thereby betray their own failure to grasp the crucial distinction—as Badiou sees it—between knowledge and truth. Here it is well to recall that he is using ‘knowledge’ not in the strictly factive sense that is most often deployed by analytic philosophers, i.e., the sense in which genuine or veridical knowledge is by very definition or at very least (since there are famously problems with showing this definition to be adequate) a matter of justified true belief.<sup>39</sup> Rather Badiou treats knowledge as belonging to the ‘encyclopedia’ of currently accepted (whether expert or everyday-commonsense) lore, and hence as always potentially in error when set against the realist or objectivist standard of verification-transcendent truth. As regards neo-classicism this amounts to a reactive trend which “considers the ‘modern’ figures of art as promotions of chaos and the indistinct,” a viewpoint that is justified—or at any rate understandable—in so far as “within the evental and interventional *passes* in art (let’s say non-figurative painting, atonal music etc.) there is necessarily a period of apparent barbarism, of intrinsic valorization of the complexities of disorder” (291). All the same this reaction merely betrays a failure to grasp what such artistic developments reveal or portend, that is, a transformation that goes beyond matters of style or technique and which involves an altogether more radical break with past modes of expression. To confuse these two quite distinct orders of significance is, Badiou thinks, the mark of a decadent condition wherein *art* has very largely given way to *culture* as the term under which such issues are typically raised.

It is the same with those other primary spheres of human activity—science and politics—which he sees as subject to a kindred falling-away from the kinds of intellectual and

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<sup>39</sup> See the classic and much-discussed essay by Edmund Gettier, “Is Justified True Belief Knowledge?,” *Analysis*, Vol. 23 (1963), pp. 121-3.

creative ferment that characterize their practice during periods of revolutionary advance. Thus, so far as science and philosophy of science are concerned, “under the injunction of constructivist thought, positivism devotes itself to the ill-rewarded but useful tasks of the systematic marking of presented multiples, and the measurable fine-tuning of language.” In short, “[t]he positivist is a professional in the maintenance of apparatuses of discernment” (292). And when it comes to politics—to what nowadays passes for political involvement, activity, or participation amongst the great majority of those inhabiting the present-day liberal democracies—there is a similar process of decline to be witnessed, one which has as its programmatic goal the reduction of all significant issues or debates to a dead level of expertly controlled ‘management’ where nothing is allowed to deflect or disturb the interests of corporate and military-industrial power.<sup>40</sup> Here also it is crucially a question of language, this time a language that has been worked over to the point where it perfectly describes, represents, expresses, or articulates all and only those conjunctures, situations, or states of affairs that are recognized—or count as legitimate—according to those same dominant interests. “A programme is precisely a procedure for the construction of parts: political parties endeavor to show how such a procedure is compatible with the admitted rules of the language they share (the language of parliament for example)” (292-3). Again this amounts to a version of the basic constructivist precept—one with its home-ground, formally speaking, in a knowledge-based rather than truth-based conception of mathematics—according to which politics is indeed the art of the possible, though only so long as ‘the possible’ is here defined as that which works for all present, practical, or sheerly pragmatic (i.e., vote-winning, power-maintaining) purposes. In other words it requires that thought renounce any lingering attachment to other, more strenuous or principled modes of political activity such as might open a visible rift between the presently existent state

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<sup>40</sup> See entries under Note 7, above.

## Speculations II

of things and things as they could and should be according to the interests of political justice.

Thus it is once more a question of discerning multiples but only multiples that properly belong, that figure in the prevalent count-as-one, and which thereby serve to distract attention from those symptomatic stress-points—induced by the irruption of other, uncounted or ‘illegal’ multiples—which mark the emergence of a crisis in the system and hence the location of a likely eventual site. These are the points where thinking is most forcibly brought up against the excess of inconsistent over consistent multiplicity, or the numerical surplus always left out by any calculative method adopted in accordance with the dominant count-as-one. They are also, conversely, the points at which normality is most strongly reinforced by those ‘rules of the language’ that assign or withhold the status of proper, legitimate membership—or adjust the relevant descriptive/evaluative criteria—so as best to conceal that otherwise glaring lack of measure. “This is in perfect conformity with the orientation of constructivist thought, which renders its discourse statist in order to better grasp the commensurability between state and situation” (293). As in mathematics, so likewise in politics: the chief effect of constructivist thinking is to entertain seriously only such reformist projects and commitments as involve no threat to disrupt or destabilize the existing epistemic or socio-political order of things. To this extent “[t]he programme—a concentrate of the political proposition—is clearly a formula of the language which proposes a new configuration defined by strict links to the situation’s parameters (budgetary, statistical, etc.), and which declares the latter *constructively* realizable—that is, recognizable—within the meta-structural field of the State” (293). Thus a ‘programmatic’ conception of politics (at the furthest remove from a radical-democratic or revolutionary conception) has this much in common with constructivist approaches to mathematics, logic, and the formal sciences as well as conservative, e.g., neo-classicist movements in the modern arts: that it offers a refuge from the prospect of anything that might stretch its conceptual, ethical or creative

resources beyond the limits laid down by acculturated habits of thought.

If this applies in a fairly obvious way to the case of neo-classicist art—where the retreat to pre-existent styles, idioms, or languages is a matter of overt choice—then it is just as relevant in the scientific context where positivism demands a “unique and definitive ‘well-made’ language,” one that “has to name the procedures of construction, as far as possible, in every domain of experience” (292). Hence Badiou’s relentless opposition to any form of constructivist thinking in mathematics or philosophy of mathematics, i.e., any approach along intuitionist or anti-realist lines which rejects as strictly unintelligible the claim that there can and must exist objective (mind-independent, recognition-transcendent, or epistemically unconstrained) truths. Not that he dismisses such arguments out of hand as merely the result of philosophical confusion or failure to grasp what is truly at stake in these debates. On the contrary: he goes so far as to concede that constructivism in mathematics and elsewhere is “a strong position,” and indeed that “no-one can avoid it” (294). However what Badiou plainly means by this is not that all thought is ultimately fated to embrace a constructivist outcome, strive as it may to avoid any such melancholy conclusion, but rather that thinking has to go by way of an encounter or critical engagement with constructivism so as to take full measure of its challenge and thereby advance more decisively beyond the kinds of obstacle it puts up. Above all, it serves as means of focusing attention on the single most vexing issue between realists (or objectivists) and anti-realists (or constructivists), namely the issue as to whether truth can possibly exceed or transcend the scope of our best knowledge, investigative methods, proof-procedures, and so forth. It is precisely the difficulty (for some) of conceiving this to be the case—of seeing how on earth it could make rational sense to assert the existence of truths which lie beyond our utmost powers of cognitive or epistemic grasp—that lends constructivist approaches their strong *prima facie* philosophical appeal.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>41</sup> Notes 12 and 13, above.

## Speculations II

Thus “[k]nowledge, with its moderated rule, its policed immanence to situations and its transmissibility, is the ordinary regime of the relation to being under circumstances in which it is not time for a new temporal foundation, and in which the diagonals of fidelity have somewhat deteriorated for lack of complete belief in the event they prophesize” (294). Those ‘diagonals’ have to do with Cantor’s celebrated proof of the existence of multiple infinities and also—crucially for Badiou’s project—the capacity of thought to seize upon truths that exceed the compass of present-best knowledge or intuitive grasp.<sup>42</sup> What their mention signifies here—by way of very pointed contrast—is the extent to which thinking may lose any sense of its own capacity for just such a process of diagonalization, that is, for conceiving the existence of truths (whether mathematical, political, or artistic) that require an allowance for whatever lies beyond its intuitive-conceptual range. This is the main reason for Badiou’s turn to mathematics—and, by the same token, his turn against the current siren call of socio-cultural-linguistic relativism—as a means to promote the interests of socio-political emancipation as well as those of intellectual freedom and the prospects of advancement in the formal, physical, social, and human sciences. The trouble with constructivism, strategically considered, is that it is not so much “a distinct and aggressive agenda”—one that could always be confronted, so to speak, across the barricades—but is rather “the latent philosophy of all human sedimentation, the cumulative strata into which the forgetting of being is poured to the profit of language and the consensus of recognition it supports” (294). Such is the subterranean continuity of numerous otherwise diverse schools of thought, from Kant to his two main lines of modern philosophical descent—‘analytic’ and ‘continental’—wherein language has indeed very often become synonymous with knowledge, and knowledge in turn with that ‘consensus of recognition’ that depends upon language (or the communal norms embodied in some given language) for its stabilization

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<sup>42</sup> See Badiou, *Number and Numbers*.

and maintenance. Thus “[k]nowledge calms the passion of being: measure taken of excess, it tames the state, and unfolds the infinity of the situation within the horizon of a constructive procedure shored up on the already-known” (294).

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Badiou is quite ready to concede that, in mathematical-scientific as well as in political or psychological terms, there is a definite place for this constructivist idea of knowledge as the limit or horizon of truth, even though—especially when joined to some version of the linguistic turn—it must always constitute an obstacle to any major advance. It offers not only a sometimes welcome respite from that other, more strenuous or implacably demanding truth-based realist conception but also—through this very contrast—a keener sense of just how much is required in the way of intellectual strength, commitment and courage in order to achieve any such advance by breaking with the currency of accredited ‘knowledge’ or consensually warranted belief. Hence Badiou’s nicely-judged ironic coda to Meditation Twenty-Eight: that “[e]ven for those who wander on the borders of evental sites, staking their lives upon the occurrence and the swiftness of intervention, it is, after all, appropriate to be knowledgeable” (294). All the same he makes it clear that significant progress in mathematics and elsewhere can come about only by adopting that other conception which stakes its claim on the standing possibility—indeed, the strong likelihood with regard to really challenging, creative or cutting-edge work—that truth will turn out to exceed the limits of presently achievable proof or ascertainment. Thus he goes straight on in Meditation Twenty-Nine (‘The Folding of Being and the Sovereignty of Language’) to elaborate the contrast between Cantor’s long-drawn, mentally exhausting, often baffled or self-divided wrestling with issues in set theory and the kind of inertly consensual or placidly conformist ethos that would result if constructivism were pushed to its logical or methodological conclusion.

## Speculations II

The particular problem that so preoccupied Cantor was the famous ‘Continuum Hypothesis’ according to which it could eventually be shown that “the quantity of a set of parts is the cardinal which comes directly after that of the set itself, its successor,” or again (more specifically) that “the parts of denumerable infinity (thus, all the subsets constituted from whole numbers), had to be equal in quantity to  $\omega_1$ , the first cardinal which measures an infinite quantity superior to the denumerable” (295). In other words it was a question of whether or not there could be proven *not* to exist any ‘size’ or order of infinity that would come between  $\omega$  and  $\omega_1$ , or the infinity of natural (counting) numbers and its power-set, this latter consisting of  $\omega$  plus all its constituent subsets.

That Cantor spent many sleepless nights on this ‘terminal obsession’—that at times his efforts seem aimed toward falsifying rather than proving the hypothesis—would be merely a matter of anecdotal interest except that it conveys both the sheer intractability of the problem and also (crucially for Badiou’s case) the way that creative thinking typically proceeds in such situations. What drove Cantor to dedicate the best efforts of his final years to resolving a perhaps, so far as he knew, insoluble problem was his conviction that this was a well-formed or truth-apt hypothesis and therefore that it must possess an objective truth-value regardless of whether or not that value lay within his own or anyone else’s power of ascertainment. In this respect—if not in others—the process of thought whereby mathematical advances are achieved is analogous to the process whereby political revolutions come about through a sense of currently blocked possibility, or whereby the waning resources of some culturally dominant artistic genre, style or technique point forward to a radical transformation of those same henceforth historically dated and, at least for creative purposes, obsolete modes of expression. What is involved in each case is that same aptitude for thinking beyond the limits laid down by present-best (even future-best-presently-conceivable) knowledge or practice and allowing that truth may often be glimpsed—or its conditions of discovery obliquely prefigured—through the anomalies,



aporias, unresolved paradoxes, or suchlike obstacles that stand in the way of its punctual achievement. And in each case also what prevents thought from attaining this sense of as-yet unrealized truth is the resort to some version of the anti-realist, intuitionist, or constructivist doctrine which rejects the idea that there might indeed be truth-apt (objectively true or false) statements or hypotheses whose truth-value we are unable to prove or ascertain.

Such is the doctrine advanced by philosophers like Dummett, and such—as we have seen—the outlook on issues of truth, knowledge and belief that Badiou regards as nothing short of a downright affront to what serious thinkers should take as their primary vocation. Thus, in constructivist terms, “[w]hen you write ‘there exists  $\alpha$ ’, this means ‘there exists a constructible  $\alpha$ ’, and so on” (301). From which it follows (by the logic of constructivism or anti-realism, though of course only if one takes their premises as valid) that truth cannot possibly—conceivably or intelligibly—transcend the limits of presently attainable knowledge. That is to say, “it is impossible to demonstrate the existence of a non-constructible set, because the relativization of this demonstration would more or less amount to maintaining that a constructible non-constructible set exists” (301). Or, differently phrased: realism cannot be coherently upheld since it entails the existence of verification-transcendent truths which *ex hypothesi* might always exceed our utmost powers of epistemic grasp and which therefore place an insuperable gulf between truth (in this merely notional sense) and attainable knowledge. Yet if one seizes the constructivist horn of this seeming dilemma—if one embraces the fallback option of deeming ‘truth’ to be verification-dependent or epistemically constrained—then, as Badiou says, “the supposed coherence of ontology, which is to say the value of its operator of fidelity—deduction—would not survive” (301). For it is precisely the always possible surpassing of knowledge by truth—or of known truths by those which as yet lie beyond the utmost limits of proof or ascertainment—that explains how deductive reasoning can do what would otherwise seem impossible, that is, offer the

## Speculations II

means to achieve positive advances in knowledge rather than serve purely to check the validity of pre-existent or already accomplished operations.

What brings this about despite and against the constructivist ban on any such crossing of the barrier supposedly fixed between attainable knowledge and objective truth is the way that thought will at times run up against conceptual obstacles which prompt (or which ‘force’ in Paul Cohen’s set-theoretical sense of that term) a decisive advance beyond its foregone range of standing beliefs and commitments. For Badiou, conversely, it is sheer dogma—or a bad case of begging the question—when anti-realists and constructivists routinely take it that truth must be conceived as proof-dependent or epistemically constrained. In short, “[t]he *hypothesis* that every set is constructible is thus a *theorem* of the constructible universe” (303), rather than—as all hypotheses should be—a conjecture up for testing against the most rigorous proof procedures or methods of investigation. The effect is to render the constructivist ‘theorem’ immune to falsification or serious challenge since it constitutes the very element (or ‘universe’) within which mathematical or other sorts of thinking are required to conduct their operations. Hence Badiou’s question directed (as so often) at practising mathematicians: “[m]ust one have the wisdom to fold being to the requisites of formal language?” (304). That some of them resist that demand even if they can’t bring themselves to reject it outright is evident, he thinks, in the fact that for the most part these practitioners “are reluctant to maintain the hypothesis of constructability as an axiom in the same sense as the others” (304). All the same what results from this qualified acceptance is a failure to conceive how truth or reality might always exceed the compass of best-attainable knowledge or optimal epistemic grasp. To Badiou’s way of thinking, on the contrary, it is clear enough from the history of mathematics and other disciplines that there can and do occur—no matter how rarely—transformative events, breakthrough discoveries, or episodes of radical theory-change that go beyond anything remotely accountable in suchlike con-

constructivist terms. These episodes cannot be explained except on the premise that truth may at times elude the best powers of human cognitive grasp and yet—what the constructivist or anti-realist finds strictly inconceivable—offer a means of epistemic or investigative orientation precisely through the various symptomatic tensions, aporias, logical conflicts, unproven theorems, or unresolved issues that point the way beyond some given conceptual impasse.

This is a theme that Badiou will pursue most energetically in Part VII of *Being and Event* with reference to Cohen's set-theoretical concepts of 'forcing' and the 'generic.'<sup>43</sup> For now, what chiefly need stressing are the reasons for his coming out so strongly against constructivism in its sundry present-day guises. Thus he principally objects to "the normalizing effects of this folding of being, of this sovereignty of language, such that they propose a flattened and correct universe in which excess is reduced to the strictest of measures, and in which situations persevere indefinitely in their regulated being" (304). As against the powerfully restrictive influence, i.e., the force of intellectual and socio-political conservatism exerted by this leveling regimen Badiou asserts the countervailing force of the event—the decisive intervention—as that which arrives to disrupt and reconfigure any given ontological scheme or prior conception of the pertinent object-domain. Moreover, in so doing "it *refutes*...the very coherency of the constructible universe" since "between the hypothesis of constructability and the event a choice has to be made" (304). If that choice is such as to acknowledge the event—its impact or transformative effect—rather than accept the binding power of in-place beliefs, precepts, methods, assumptions, or doxastic norms then this must entail rejecting any version of the argument that truth is epistemically constrained. Indeed, as Badiou notes, "the discordance is maintained in the very sense of the word 'choice': the hypothesis of constructability takes no more account of intervention than it does of the event" (305).

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<sup>43</sup> Cohen, *Set Theory and the Continuum Hypothesis* (New York: W. Benjamin, 1966).

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Hence his emphasis on the set-theoretical axiom of choice as that which opens up a path of elective commitment on the part of those ('militants of truth') who adopt and carry forward some particular procedure.<sup>44</sup> This axiom holds that, for any given set whose members don't include the empty set, it is possible to construct another set such that it will select one element from each member of the original set without any further requirement or condition as to what qualifies that element for being so treated. The great value for mathematicians of adopting this axiom is that it allows the real numbers to be constructed as a well-ordered sequence through an iterative process that selects first one, then another, then another number from the infinite set that remains at every stage. That is to say, it offers a means for axiomatically generating the real-number sequence—and hence a working basis for the whole range of dependent mathematical procedures—in the absence of any determinate rule or prior specification that would place limits on its future-possible scope of exploration and discovery. So when Badiou speaks of the 'infinite liberty' that is opened up by the axiom of choice it is not at all in the sense of some ultimate freedom to construct or invent mathematical 'truths,' like that proclaimed by an intuitionist such as Dummett for whom anti-realism is the only escape-route from the dilemmas that supposedly afflict any form of objectivist or Platonist thinking. Rather it is the liberty to go on discovering (not creating) truths which are none the less objective or recognition-transcendent for their having been arrived at by way of this procedure.

Thus, as Badiou conceives it, the axiom of choice is a chief resource in exposing the fallacious character of two dilemmas—or pseudo-dilemmas—that he regards as having hobbled a great deal of mainstream (analytic) philosophy of mathematics. On the one hand it shows anti-realism to rest on the mistaken idea—one that is rife across many present-day schools of epistemology and philosophy of science—that objectivity is quite simply not to be had except by placing

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<sup>44</sup> See especially Badiou, *Number and Numbers*.

truth inherently beyond human epistemic reach. On the other it shows up the kindred confusion, this time with its main source in late Wittgenstein, which supposes the issue of truth or validity in rule-following to constitute another likewise insoluble dilemma unless by adopting some version of the Kripkean/Wittgensteinian ‘sceptical solution,’ i.e., the appeal to shared understanding or communal agreement-in-judgment.<sup>45</sup> In both cases the result, as he sees it, is to disarm thought and block any prospect of radical advances such as occurred when thinkers like Dedekind and Cantor saw fit to stake their projects on a truth that surpassed any presently existing conceptual resources or capacities of formal proof. And in both cases also there is a strong analogy—more than that, a precise structural homology—between mathematics thus conceived and political justice as a matter of programmatically discounting any preconceived idea or any prior (e.g. ethnic, class-based, or religious) specification of who should properly, legitimately count as a ‘member’ of this or that social community. This is why Badiou lays such emphasis on the precept that sets, members, and elements be defined always in strictly extensional rather than intensional terms, that is to say, as partaking in an order of pure multiplicity where each has its membership-conditions laid down solely as a function of its operative role within that order and not through any distinguishing mark or property that would set it apart from other constituents.<sup>46</sup> Although we are here dealing primarily with an issue in mathematics and philosophy of mathematics there is no reason, disciplinary prejudice aside, to deny the possibility of its having a genuine and even a decisive import when applied to issues in the socio-political domain.

By this time I would hope to have allayed the suspicion—especially amongst analytically-minded philosophers—that such ideas can amount to no more than an instance of abusive extrapolation, or that Badiou’s use of phrases like ‘axiom of

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<sup>45</sup> See entries under Note 1, above.

<sup>46</sup> Badiou, “Theory of the Pure Multiple: paradoxes and critical decision,” in *Being and Event*, 38-48.

## Speculations II

choice' involves a grossly mistaken understanding of their technical sense as defined in set-theoretical terms. If he takes it to bear upon issues beyond that relatively specialist sphere then he is equally at pains to insist that it can do so only in consequence of certain strictly formal considerations—having to do, paradoxically enough, with the scope and limits of formal proof—which entail the need to decide between alternative (constructivist and objectivist) ways of proceeding. Thus the 'choice' here invoked is on the one hand what marks a certain rigorously specified point at which mathematics requires a commitment beyond the furthest range of demonstrative proof and, on the other, what signals the point of contact between mathematics and those other subject-areas that are normally regarded as laying no claim to formal rigor. Badiou confronts us with the need to re-think such deeply entrenched distinctions yet to do so without the least compromise to intellectual standards of fidelity, precision and truth. This is the single most challenging aspect of a project that undoubtedly makes large demands of the reader but which just as surely offers commensurate rewards.

# The Philosopher, the Sophist, the Undercurrent and Alain Badiou

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## Introduction

**B**ADIOU MAINTAINS A SHARP DISTINCTION between things as pure multiplicities, on the one hand, and the relations between things within a determinate world, on the other. Much against various insidious naturalizations and essentializations, Badiouian ontology insists that things as pure multiplicities are not accompanied by any qualitative determinations. The latter come into play only when things are viewed in relation to one another in virtue of the general laws of a determinate world. But such laws are not laws of the things themselves; for, “all laws, physical or biological or psychological, or juridical, are laws of appearing in the context of a singular world.”<sup>1</sup>

Consequently, all asymmetries we come across in the realm of social ontology, e.g. asymmetries in wealth or power, have nothing to do with the being *qua* being of those multiplicities which constitute the pairs of the asymmetrical relation (e.g.

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<sup>1</sup> Alain Badiou, “The Three Negations,” *Cardozo Law Review* 29, 5: 1880.



## Speculations II

people as rich and poor or strong and weak). Such asymmetries result, rather, from the inscription of pure multiplicities in the relational framework of a specific, determinate world. Badiou names this inscription ‘the appearing’ of the multiplicity in a singular world. A thing *is* in the world of mathematics or ontology but it also *exists* as an object in a concrete world because of its appearing in a social ontology. But being and appearing are not equivalent; the qualitative determinations of existence in a world make sure that something which just is (as a multiplicity) in absolute terms (logically something simply is or is not) will now appear in relative terms (it will be recognized *more or less*).<sup>2</sup> For instance, people as multiplicities are; yet, as rich or poor and strong or weak appear more or less in the light or in the shadow of the order of a given world. Whilst things present themselves regardless of whether they are recognized as such, objects are represented more or less as valued identities in a situation.<sup>3</sup> When something is not represented and appears as nothing in this world, or when it appears with the minimal degree of intensity, it is named an “inexistent multiplicity.”<sup>4</sup>

To Badiou, “this distinction between being qua being and existence, which is also a distinction between a thing and an object, is fundamental,”<sup>5</sup> amongst other things, for preserving a distinction between the ontology of truth and the epistemology of what passes as assertible or veridical at a given time according to the laws of the determinate world. Such distinctions ground the tension between, on the one hand, a *surplus of truth* that cannot be drawn from the resources of a world governed by a specific order and, on the other hand, a *social currency* that is based on what makes sense and has gained hegemony in that given world. Such hegemony effecting inclusions and exclusions is warranted

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<sup>2</sup> Badiou, “The Three Negations,” 1881.

<sup>3</sup> Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2007), 134.

<sup>4</sup> Badiou, “The Three Negations,” 1882.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 1880.

by recourse to mistaken equations of the current order of the specific world with a supposedly natural order of things. For Badiou, “nature buries inconsistency and turns away from the void.”<sup>6</sup> Hence, nature can be defined in Badiouian terms “as that which imposes limits on the range and scope of what is counted fit for presentation (as opposed to what presents itself without being recognized as such) under this or that prevalent conceptual, juridical or socio-political order.”<sup>7</sup>

While acknowledging and emphasizing the import of the above ideas, I claim that Badiou does not make much room in his philosophy for the onto-epistemological significance of undercurrents of life and thought within a given world. I argue that forcing Badiou’s position up against what I consider to be its own limits allows us to view the idea of the undercurrent as a multi-faceted challenge: to the place Badiou allocates to the sophist and the philosopher; to the priority he gives to the event and to eventual consequences; to his outlook on social ontology, nature, representation and knowledge; to the irruptive and exceptional character of eventual truth incriminating the quotidian and setting it in sharp contrast to the new; and to his seeing truth from the perspective of action rather than from that of judgment.

### Truth, Sense and Judgment: the philosopher and the sophist

The distinction between the ontology of truth, and the epistemology of socially current, accumulated knowledge must remain sharp, Badiou argues, for otherwise thought risks to fall prey either to conventionalism or to dogmatism. Philosophy must insist that there are local truths, not just conventions, and seize them from the maze of sense.<sup>8</sup> Yet, at the same time, philosophy must defend the locus of Truth only as an empty—

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<sup>6</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, 177.

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Norris, *Badiou’s Being and Event* (London: Continuum, 2009).

<sup>8</sup> Alain Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, trans. Norman Madarasz (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), 126.

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albeit operative—category. It is no longer legitimate for the philosopher “to say, as does the dogmatist, that there is a sole locus of Truth and that this locus is revealed by philosophy itself.” One of the risks involved in dogmatic positions is the transformation of “philosophy from the rational operation it must be into the dubious path of an initiation”<sup>9</sup> and into the ecstatic sacralization, up to levels of terror, of a unique place of Truth.

But, as stated above, the philosopher must be equally prepared to confront her most astute adversary, the thinker who claims that there are no truths but “only technics for statements and loci of enunciation.” Badiou personalizes this adversary with the figure of the sophist, ancient and modern. However, he does not recommend the kind of intellectual warfare that would lead to anti-sophistic extremism. Philosophy “goes astray when it nourishes the dark desire of finishing off the sophist *once and for all*.” When acting thus, philosophy is led to the dogmatic claim “that the sophist, since he is like a perverted double of the philosopher, *ought not to exist*.” Badiou condemns unequivocally such philosophical attitudes and makes clear that “the sophist must only be assigned to his *place*.”<sup>10</sup> Barbara Cassin criticizes Badiou on this by arguing that “the degree of freedom separating the act of eradication from that of assigning a place is perilously slim.”<sup>11</sup> I would like to add a somewhat different objection: that the place assigned to the sophist regarding truth cannot be as fixed and perhaps as distinct from the one assigned to the philosopher as it may seem at first sight. This objection will not be deployed here but it will be kept constantly in view. What is important, for the moment, is that, for Badiou, philosophy “may raise the objection to the sophist of the local existence of truths; it goes astray when it proposes the ecstasy of a place of Truth.”<sup>12</sup>

But how do truths manifest themselves as truths in a world

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<sup>9</sup> Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, 133.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>11</sup> Barbara Cassin, “Who’s Afraid of the Sophists?,” *Hypatia* 15, 4: 120.

<sup>12</sup> Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, 133.

of unelastic order and fixed laws, a world which precludes truths in the first place and excludes elements from the count-as-one that consolidates consistent multiplicities? After all, Badiou himself approaches any truth as “a transgression of the law.” Of course, this does not mean a radical disconnection of truth and law; on the contrary, it presupposes that a truth depends on the law and on the knowledge that goes hand in hand with the law, a knowledge that will be shattered by the truth that transgresses it. Yet, transgression also signifies that a truth “is nevertheless a negation of the law.”<sup>13</sup> Arguably, for Badiou, while truth will always depend on the very law that it will come to disrupt, no truth will ever be a law in the sense of *enjoying the status* of something that may be *recognized* as valid now and—subject, of course, to fallibilist precautions—perhaps valid for all time. Or, put in other words, truth evaporates the very moment that it enters social ontology and becomes established knowledge. As knowledge, it will invite yet another new truth-event that will come to shatter epistemic order.

Hence, the difficulty persists: how does truth enter the picture (the world of appearing) without losing its character, and how does philosophy seize it? The difficulty becomes more serious by Badiou’s assertion that “nothing is presentable in a situation otherwise than under the effect of structure, that is, under the form of the one and its composition in consistent multiplicities.”<sup>14</sup> Even the central truth of ontology i.e., the truth of its essentially subtractive character, is concealed from enquirers “simply through the fact that *by very definition* those excluded elements cannot figure within the count-as-one or be perceived as integral or constituent parts of any existent situation.”<sup>15</sup> Then, how does philosophy seize local truths from the maze of sense, if the latter is so overwhelmingly dominant in its unifying tendency toward consistency?

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<sup>13</sup> Badiou, “The Three Negations,” 1878.

<sup>14</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, 52.

<sup>15</sup> Norris, *Badiou’s Being and Event*, 62.

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Partly,<sup>16</sup> the answer comes from another Badiouian concept, that of the inconsistent multiplicity which manifests itself in the guise of crises, unresolved contradictions, anomalies and problems encountered in the process of enquiry. What in-consists also disrupts the smooth flow of quotidian normalcy that accompanies a consistent multiplicity. Therefore, philosophy should bear witness to problematic situations, gaps in knowledge, paradoxes, etc., so as to be ready to seize the truth involved in them. A possible objection to this is, in my view, the fact that philosophy has, at times, exercised (surely not consistently enough) a radical power of thought precisely by thematizing the un-problematic, by focusing on the taken-for-granted rather than by operating exclusively on what has already emerged and been perceived as a difficulty or a crisis. The dependence of philosophy on something that has already appeared in the guise of a problem makes philosophy parasitic upon crisis and jeopardizes its potential for radically rethinking a seemingly un-problematic flow of quotidian normalcy. Thereby, the dependence of philosophy on what in-consists brings Badiouan thought much closer to Deweyan or latter-day pragmatism (given the centrality pragmatism attributes to criticality as problem-solving) than to philosophy as has sometimes been practiced from antiquity on. For, philosophy has sometimes been an aporetic operation regarding what precisely belongs to the realm of un-problematic, tension- or controversy-free and smooth current of things. Unlike it, a philosophy that is parasitic upon crisis becomes more tamed and domesticated, less stirring, as it appears more problem-inspired rather than problem-and-controversy-creating.

This is a challenge that concerns what the very ontology of Badiou allows and the way in which it relies on the opposition of evental truth to being, and, further, of presentation to theoretical representation. Let us see, first, how the new *and* the evental-truth (and, in my view, this conjunction raises

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<sup>16</sup> Another answer may come from Badiou's notion of 'forcing,' but, as it does not affect what is discussed in this article, I shall leave it aside.

many issues of qualification) come up as a break with ontology and why we may consider philosophy *qua* representational discourse as ill-fitting in the whole operation. Badiou explains that “in a given world, we have something new only if the rational or conventional laws of this world are interrupted, or put out of their normal effects, by something which happens.” Badiou names it ‘an Event,’ a kind of occurrence whose consequences “sustain a negative relationship to the laws of the world.”<sup>17</sup> As I see it, viewed as operating within the realm of representation, philosophy is taken to be lagging behind presentation. For it awaits something to occur, to come up as a break, in order to seize it, rather than itself paving the path for something to occur and to break the balance of power within a determinate world.

Then, Badiou names the multiplicity composed of the consequences of the event ‘an evental-truth.’ The new, which interrupts the conventional laws, has truth as its consequence. And, “a truth, in a first sense, is a part of the world, because *it is a set of consequences of the event* in the world, and not outside. But in a second sense, we can say that a truth is like a negation of the world, because the event itself is subtracted from the rational or conventional laws of the world.”<sup>18</sup> The only way in which a truth is part of the world is exclusively owed to truth’s being a set of consequences of the event in the world. Is truth never a part of the world when it appears dissociated from a prior event—if the latter is understood as that which suspends or cancels the normal effects of the law—or dissociated from perceivable consequences or from major changes? Does philosophy never introduce something new, which, in some cases, it may happen to be not just new but also true, even if it does not attract, regrettably, the attention of large numbers of agents in a determinate world so as to effect a radical redirection?

I argue that truth can be a part of a specific world as a specific judgment, even as an aphorism, regardless of whether

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<sup>17</sup> Badiou, “The Three Negations,” 1878.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 1878. My emphasis.

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it is recognized as such by the majority of individuals in the world and whether it inspires them to swing into action or not. Something that does happen or is uttered as a truth, i.e., it raises validity claims that meet requirements of truth (apart from the requirement of consequences), may have no lasting impact, or it may be bypassed; it may be recognized as true only retrospectively. That it existed only as part of an undercurrent of thought does not undo its being a part of that world or its being true. And, as to its potential to inspire and motivate change, this is a matter of the attitude towards it that a society might be capable of cultivating. To explain, it is an educational matter whether individuals learn to seek the undercurrent of their times so as to judge its truth claims beyond ideological constraints of prominence. It is also an educational matter of powerful criticality whether individuals learn to go beyond the rationalizations that are often involved in those justifications that achieve the status of recognized social currency and conventional wisdom at a given time.

Surely, Badiouian moves such as making truth dependent on the event and theorizing truth as a set of consequences have the merit of coupling truth with disclosure, of breathing enthusiastic action into truth and of backing it up with an ethic of commitment. But these theoretical moves are accompanied with difficulties such as: the incrimination of the entire rational sphere of a determinate world regarding a specific issue, i.e., an incrimination of ontology as always the opposite, the negative, of the event and its truths; the exclusion of truth as a judgment and/or a propositional content that remains valid even if a specific era blocks its possibility of bearing effects and consequences; and, in turn, a forced drastic choice between presentation and representation that confines theory to dominant and received views reflecting the order of the one in any given world.

Let me explain the latter. Badiou distinguishes “what the theory presents” from “presentation.”<sup>19</sup> Thus, “what the term

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<sup>19</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, 48.



‘presentation’ signifies is the totality of those elements that offer themselves as potential candidates for membership, whether or not that potential is realized by their actually being so treated.”<sup>20</sup> By contrast, to follow Christopher Norris’s parlance again, “‘what the theory presents’ is what finds an accredited, duly acknowledged place in those various prevailing systems.” Prevailing systems decide “what shall count as a member or constituent of some given set, group or class.”<sup>21</sup> Following this through to its implications, we may conclude that presentation is never theorized, concurrently with “what a theory presents,” in a way that could contest the *allocation of place* within a prevailing system.

As I see it, this runs the risk of equating the theoretical claims of an era with its dominant theories, and of trapping us into an either/or: here is the presentation, there is the theoretical representation. Such an either/or precludes the study of the idea of an undercurrent of thought, an idea that is, in my view, neglected in Badiou’s philosophy not because of some kind of dereliction but because of binary oppositions such as the above. Those do not make room for the non-prevailing-yet-theoretical-or-theorizable voice—prior to its becoming strong enough to have consequences. A voice of this kind I define as an *undercurrent*. It concerns a thought or practice within a determinate world that hovers between presentation and representative order. It speaks for what the dominant representation excludes but it has not gained the wider attention or acceptance presupposed by any effective contestation of established order. The undercurrent can be either a half- or badly-buried theoretical claim or a lived experience that is available—though so taken-for-granted as to be almost imperceptible—in a given world and reflects a judgment of possibly universal validity and eventual consequences. I say ‘possibly’ because, evidently, not all undercurrents serve truth. To meet truth conditions, it is not enough just to oppose a specific order; more qualifications regarding the truth of a

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<sup>20</sup> Norris, *Badiou’s Being and Event*, 62.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

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propositional content are required.

The undercurrent cannot be easily accommodated in Badiou's bipolar ontology of being and event, and of presentation and "what theory presents," also due to his treatment of truth as distinct from judgment, propositional content and epistemology. How Badiou's thinking proceeds in such matters can be shown by reference to universalism. Traditional conceptions of universality, from Aristotle, to Kant and down to present-day analytic philosophy see universalism as the "realization of a universal judgment about some real thing." To those grammatical conceptions of universalism Badiou opposes a creative conception, one that sees universalism as "always the result of a great process that opens with an event."<sup>22</sup> It is a great merit of Badiouian universalism that, within it, to create something universal is to go beyond evident differences and separations. The elaboration of this assumption, into which we cannot delve now, offers a robust and valuable refutation of facile multiculturalist accounts of identity and difference. But, such theoretical benefits need not be grounded in formulations that 1) give philosophically an almost pejorative sense to judgment, 2) rigidly disconnect ontology and politics from epistemology and 3) make a grammatical conception of truth completely expendable.

For instance, a true idea that remains an undercurrent may as such have a counterfactual universal validity—even if this validity has not yet been recognized by a given world or by most of the thinkers of that specific world, perhaps not even by most of the thinkers of a subsequent world. That Badiou sees the difference between a "grammatical conception of truth" and a "conception of truth as a creation, a process, an event"<sup>23</sup> as crucial and absolute can be shown by the fact that this difference allows Badiou to claim that he is not at all interested in the content of Saint Paul's *kerygma*. He asserts that he is only interested in the operational, procedural character

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<sup>22</sup> Alain Badiou, "Universal Truths and the Question of Religion: Interview with A.S. Miller," *Journal of Philosophy and Scripture* 3, 1 (2005): 39.

<sup>23</sup> Badiou, "Universal Truths," 39.

of it and its eventual consequences.<sup>24</sup> But it is not obvious why this difference renders the grammatical conception of truth less important or why the latter cannot be incorporated into the Badiouian conception. Within the broad argument of the ontological accommodation of the undercurrent, which I am promoting here, the two conceptions can be reconciled and the *grammatical* conception can be treated as the content of the *creative* conception of truth, on grounds of which the whole venture of turning a truth into universal inspiration to creating new realities is felt as worthwhile.

### Saint Paul and the Ancient World

The above can be corroborated by reference to Badiou's own exemplary figure, Saint Paul. To Badiou, "Paul's unprecedented gesture consists in subtracting truth from the communitarian grasp, be it that of a people, a city, an empire, a territory, or a social class."<sup>25</sup> My critique of Badiou and my interpolation of the undercurrent, as I have indicated it above, can thus be argued out by considering Badiou's verdict regarding what preceded Paul's gesture and by discussing the pre-evental. To Badiou, Paul's statement—"there is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free"—is a "genuinely stupefying statement when one knows the rules of the ancient world."<sup>26</sup> Indeed it is stupefying, and especially so when one knows the rules of the ancient world, and I emphasize each word of the latter phrase. It is stupefying when one: focuses on the knowledge that the accumulated, dominant and standardized opinion establishes by treating nuance as insignificant detail, unable to change the big picture; harkens to the rules that divert our attention from the exception within social ontology or from the non-dominant tendency of thought, from the undercurrent; and treats the ancient world as a unified and

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<sup>24</sup> Alain Badiou, *Saint Paul: The Foundation of Universalism*, trans. Ray Brassier (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003), 1.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 5. My emphasis.

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homogenized historical site on which the rules of representation are imposed in hindsight and leave the then existent yet non-dominant view unaccounted for.

To substantiate these objections, I turn to the ancient world so as to establish a connection between the truth of Paul's statement and those undercurrents of Greek antiquity that had already voiced such a truth. Universalist egalitarianism was part of the ancient world; that it was one of little bearing does not justify its current theoretical obliteration that underlies the presentation of the Pauline statement as a miraculous interruption of the supposedly univocal theoretical flow that crowned the quotidian normalcy of antiquity. There is no question about the pre-evental character of the truths of those undercurrents of thought, especially when judged on grounds of consequence. The dissemination of the truth of their propositional content and the prospect for powerful effects surely remained nothing other than a counterfactual possibility throughout the ancient world. Yet the truth of those undercurrents can be of value for us, with the benefit of hindsight. For, we may thus extrapolate a wider ontological claim that the theoretical 'appearing' is not always so antipodic to the 'being' of a thing. And we may thus divert some attention from the rigid segregation of ontology and epistemology to the possibility of instances of reconciliation of them (without losing sight of their distinctiveness) within the broad scope of a realist theory of truth.

The tendency is usually to approach a determinate world (e.g. ancient Greek) at its strongest, i.e., focusing on the most glaring and, at the same time, fruitful characteristic of it, in other words, on its unique, unprecedented, perhaps evental contribution to thought. For instance, regarding Greek antiquity, one may focus on the *matheme* (Badiou) or on the poem (Heidegger) as such a contribution. However, if the notion of the undercurrent is to have the onto-epistemological significance I attribute to it, the most appropriate move seems to me to approach the ancient world at its weakest, where the question of whether a situation is deprived of evental truth and of whether the quotidian and its totality of ideas constitute an

ontology at sharp contrast to inconsistent multiplicity can be explored. Given Badiou's reading of Paul's statement, since the idea that there is neither Greek nor barbarian appears to be at the furthest remove from Greek theorization, and since Greek antiquity appears to have never seriously challenged the institution of slavery, but, on the contrary, to have determined it as natural, these two will be my focal points.

### The Greek and the Barbarian

One may find abundant textual support to the claim that the ancient Greek world held a deep prejudice against the non-Greek and that ancient philosophy never questioned such a prejudice<sup>27</sup> and its concomitant social rules. Worse, philosophy furnished that world with ample justificatory material that was crucial for the reproduction and perpetuation of its prejudicial self-understanding.

At first sight, the ancient everyday normalcy contained no contradiction, no challenge to that prejudice. Yet, upon closer inspection, it becomes evident that there had been an undercurrent of practices that questioned the prejudicial division of the Greek and the barbarian. For, "in the seventh and sixth centuries the tyrannies and the Orphic cults had begun to lay the foundations for cosmopolitanism." Amongst other things, the former "had not restricted the immigration of barbarians" and the latter "were open to all men, not to Greeks alone." By the time of Aristotle there had arisen a large body of opinion "which maintained that the popular prejudice against the barbarians was entirely unjustified;"<sup>28</sup> Diogenes the Cynic was said to envision a world-state where "barbarian and Greek could live together on equal terms."<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> For a very interesting exception, see Plato's *Statesman* (262c-e), where Plato says that it is ridiculous to divide humankind into Greeks and non-Greeks. See also Robert Schlaifer, "Greek Theories of Slavery from Homer to Aristotle," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 47 (1936): 170.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 168-169.

<sup>29</sup> Lester H. Rifkin, "Aristotle on Equality: A Criticism of A.J. Carlyle's Theory," *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 14, 2 (1953): 276.

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Still, this alone can hardly be formulated as a theoretical undercurrent of elaborate exposition of an *argument* that contravened the dominant view on the ‘barbarian.’

Yet such an argument existed. It was not formulated by a philosopher, but by a sophist, Antiphon, who was, amongst other things, a skilled mathematician (he tried to square the circle). Antiphon wrote a tract *On Truth* [*Peri Aletheias*] in the context of a late-fifth century effort to inquire into reality, *ta onta*.<sup>30</sup> From its extant fragments we can draw the conclusion that it defended equality for all, Greeks and barbarians alike.<sup>31</sup> Here is the relevant passage:

(of more familiar societies) we understand and respect; those of distant societies we neither understand nor respect. This means that we have become barbarians in our relations with one another, for by nature we are all equally equipped in every respect to be barbarians and Greeks. This is shown by examining those factors which are by nature necessary among all human beings and are provided to all in terms of the same capacities; it is in these very factors that none of us is differentiated as a barbarian or a Greek. We all breathe into the air with our mouths and with our nostrils, and we all laugh when there is joy in our mind, or we weep when suffering pain; we receive sounds through our hearing; we see when sunlight combines with our faculty of sight; we work with our hands and we walk with our feet.<sup>32</sup>

We cannot perform a close reading of the passage here, but, what is important is that, translated into Badiou’s idiom, Antiphon’s position is that the differentiation between Greek and barbarian is a product of the laws of appearing within a given world and not of nature. Being has no qualitative determinations.

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<sup>30</sup> Carroll Moulton, “Antiphon the Sophist, on Truth,” *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, Vol. 103 (1972): 330.

<sup>31</sup> Philip Merlan, “Alexander the Great or Antiphon the Sophist?,” *Classical Philology*, 45, 3 (1950): 163.

<sup>32</sup> POxy, 1364 and 3647. I take the English translation from Martin Ostwald, “*Nomos* and *Physis* in Antiphon’s *Περὶ Ἀληθείας*,” in *Cabinet of the Muses* (eds) M. Griffith and D. J. Mastrorarde (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1990), 293-294.

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Then again, does Antiphon use nature so as to relativize all truth? If that were true, then, Antiphon's position is just a radicalization of the standard sophistic tenets against truth pushed through to their ultimate implications. "For what the *ancient* or modern sophist *claims to impose is precisely that there is no truth*, that the *concept of truth is useless and uncertain*, since there are only conventions, rules, types of discourse or language games."<sup>33</sup> Yet, on the contrary, Antiphon presses the *aletheia* of nature against the *doxa* of laws and custom rather than rejecting truth for the sake of sense and convention. The rest of the extant part of Antiphon's *On Truth* involves so much tension between *physis* and *nomos* for the sake of the former that the inevitable conclusion one draws from reading it is that he had a realist conception of truth as mind- and community-independent as well as critical and corrective of the various versions of *nomos*. Here is an indicative passage:

if someone breaches lawfulness and passes unnoticed by its contractors, he escapes social degradation and punishment. If he is observed, he does not. But if a man, exceeding limits, harms the organic growths of nature, the evil is neither less, if he passes totally unnoticed, nor greater, if all men see. *For he is harmed not through men's belief (doxa), but through truth (aletheia) [ou dia doxan vlaptetai, alla di' aletheian].*<sup>34</sup>

The Antiphontic antithesis between *nomima* (legal, customary) and *physis*, as expressed in the fragments, establishes that *physis* corresponds "to the word *aletheia*, with *nomos* parallel to *doxa*. This would suggest that nature, for Antiphon, has the value of truth."<sup>35</sup> The significance of such an equation is that nature becomes precisely the means for refuting the kind of facile naturalism that effects exclusions and for promoting the kind of universalism that we encountered in Saint Paul's declaration that there is neither Jew nor Greek.

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<sup>33</sup> Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, 119. My emphasis.

<sup>34</sup> POxy. 1364, col. My emphasis. I take the English translation from Moulton, "Antiphon the Sophist," 331.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 334.



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Let us unpack this point. As indicated in the first section of this article, Badiou deplors the fact that the idea of the natural is recruited as a yardstick for discounting or excluding the odd one out, that which does not belong to the consistent count-as-one. Badiou combats such tendencies by claiming ultimately that “nature does not exist.”<sup>36</sup> For, “the idea of the natural is prone to certain kinds of abusive extrapolation. Among them is that which more-or-less surreptitiously derives a notion of cultural, civic, socio-political or ethnic community from a notion of the properly or naturally belonging-together.”<sup>37</sup> Much like Badiou, Antiphon’s employment of nature combats those extrapolations that elevate opinion to the status of a natural truth and thus ‘justify’ disrespect toward distant societies. But, unlike Badiou, Antiphon does not associate the idea of nature exclusively with the negative political implications of its use. On the contrary, Antiphon ‘exploits’ the positive political implications of nature. To that purpose, and for reasons that concur with Badiou’s commitment to equality and universality, Antiphon demarcates in a truly minimalist manner the commonalities that typify the universal set of humanity. As Ostwald explains, “the attack is not directed at *nomoi* as such but at people who, in attributing too absolute a value to their own *nomoi*, fail to consider the fact that *physis* accords no higher rank to one society or ethnic group over another.”<sup>38</sup> Merlan, for whom “the Antiphon fragment anticipates the slogan ‘fraternity, equality,’”<sup>39</sup> argues that Antiphon is the first to have an entirely secular idea of equality. In Antiphon’s case, “the idea of brotherhood of man originated without the idea of the fatherhood of God as its counterpart.” As a nonreligious idea, it is “a protest against prejudice in the name of nature—this nature being conceived, as far as we can see, without any divine quality. The equality of biological functions is the all-important factor in

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<sup>36</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, 140.

<sup>37</sup> Norris, *Badiou’s Being and Event*, 132.

<sup>38</sup> Ostwald, “*Nomos and Physis*,” 301.

<sup>39</sup> Merlan, “Alexander the Great,” 164.

interhuman relations.”<sup>40</sup>

The cross-temporal originality of Antiphon’s move also lies, amongst other things, in its difference from well-known modern attempts, e.g. such as Martha Nussbaum’s and Judith Shklar’s to ground cosmopolitanism in human nature or in human vulnerability respectively—for it is far more minimalist and neutral in qualitative determinations than those. The recourse to the human body as universal proof of a common humanity (which undoes the essentialism of the distinction between Greek and barbarian by reducing it to a socio-cultural determination) is in fact not quite a recourse to human nature, as we normally approach it, but rather a recourse to corporeality. By restricting the human commonalities that nature grounds to a handful of basic bodily parts, functions or reactions to life (e.g. weeping), Antiphon, in fact, leaves out all those determinations that are usually given a natural character even in our times. His move amounts to saying that nature, other than the one accounted in his list, does not exist.

At first sight, this connects truth and *ta onta* principally with the common human biological makeup. Against this, we just need to recall that, for Badiou, biological laws belong to the sphere of appearing rather than of being. Yet, by having described in another passage the freedom that, beyond any law, nature allows to eyes and ears and hands and feet that move about unrestricted,<sup>41</sup> Antiphon makes nature-authorized freedom—rather than biology as such—an existential truth in tension with the constraints imposed by varying customs and prevailing systems/opinions.<sup>42</sup> Perhaps it would not be

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 164. I am not saying that this position is without problems or that it can ground cosmopolitanism. Here I am more interested in its operations rather than in its specific way of founding cosmopolitanism.

<sup>41</sup> POxy. 1364, col. 3; Moulton, “Antiphon the Sophist,” 336.

<sup>42</sup> It has been suggested that Antiphon’s list of bodily organs reflects a biological conception of the human being, but Moulton suggests another possible interpretation: the list may be seen as “a hold-over of the archaic formula of expression of the human personality through the metonymy of parts of the body,” Moulton, “Antiphon the Sophist,” 337.

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too far-fetched to suggest that, against our present-day, drastic associations of corporeality either with finitude and servility (recall here Badiou's contemptuous references to the "biped without feathers"<sup>43</sup>) or with a supposedly unifying and universalizing awareness of human mortality,<sup>44</sup> Antiphon's position represents a third option. For, to Antiphon, the conception of the human as, more or less, a 'biped without feathers' granted by nature with freedom becomes a vehicle of subjectivization and of demands for transcendence against the weight of intuition, habit and vested interest, and a proof that humanity cannot be censored, impeded and constrained. It is generally true that "wherever the appeal to nature is pressed hardest or assumed to carry greatest intuitive weight one is likely to find a deep-laid resistance to precisely the kind of challenge represented by a thinking beyond the furthest limits of currently accredited truth."<sup>45</sup> But, in the case of Antiphon, we have the opposite: the appeal to nature is pressed hardest so that doxastic qualitative differentiations of ethnicity stop carrying their time-honoured intuitive weight. Antiphon pressed this appeal to nature for the sake of the counter-intuitive, for that which went against the empirically warranted and, apparently, 'natural' difference between Greek and barbarian. Thus, his thinking challenged and went beyond the furthest limits of the sense that used to pass as accredited truth.

### The Slave and the Free

As to slavery, are there any undercurrents in the ancient world disrupting the smooth flow of conventional life and resembling events in suspending time? Hesiodic poetry disseminated, already from the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C. on, a Golden Age (the time of the reign of Cronus) narrative of equality. The

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<sup>43</sup> Alain Badiou, *Ethics: an essay on the understanding of evil*, trans. Peter Hallward (London: Verso, 2001), 12.

<sup>44</sup> Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1970), 74.

<sup>45</sup> Norris, *Badiou's Being and Event*, 130.

citizens of the Cronus time utopia “willing, mild-mannered, shared out the fruits of their labours together.”<sup>46</sup> For Naddaf, that Hesiod was a catalyst for Greek political *paideia* at its most egalitarian is shown, amongst other things, by the Spartan king Cleomenes’s famous saying: “Homer for Spartiates, Hesiod for helots [the slaves of the Spartans].”<sup>47</sup> More importantly, at the harvest time festival of the Cronia in Attica, masters and slaves exchanged places, to recall the primitive equality of Cronus’ time.<sup>48</sup> Resembling the event in its extracting “from a time the possibility of another time,”<sup>49</sup> such heterotopia becomes the momentary locus of relativization and subversion of lived reality. I see heterotopias as practices through which the social imaginary suspends the dominant time and place and experiences possibilities that everyday normalcy continuously blocks. Yet, they can also be practices through which societies repress and keep out of sight their gloomy realities. Just like most heterotopias of this kind, and as an undercurrent of everydayness rather than of theory, the Cronia festival is more suggestive, subconscious, functionalist and enacted rather than thought out, articulated and applied. Nevertheless, Hesiod, his importance for the helots and the Cronia festival that it inspired could have acted as a proleptic power of thought to assist philosophy to problematize slavery and to undo the unitary space that slavery enjoyed throughout the ancient world, Greek and non-Greek.

Again, the truth potential that the above offered was not subtracted from the maze of sense by the pincers of the major philosophers<sup>50</sup> but by those of others. Love, art, science and

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<sup>46</sup> Hesiod, *Hesiod, Theogony, Works and Days, Testimonia*, trans. Glenn W. Most (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006), 118-119. My emphasis.

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Gerard Naddaf, “Hesiod as a Catalyst for Western Political *Paideia*,” *The European Legacy*, 7, 3 (2002): 353.

<sup>48</sup> Doyne Dawson, *Cities of the Gods: Communist Utopias in the Greek World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 14.

<sup>49</sup> Alain Badiou, “The Event in Deleuze,” *Parrhesia* Vol. 2 (2007): 39.

<sup>50</sup> On a summary of what philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle thought about slavery, see Gregory Vlastos, “Slavery in Plato’s Thought,” *The Philosophical Review* 50, 3 (1941); for a contrast of Plato and Aristotle, see Rifkin,

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politics generate “truths concerning situations; truths subtracted from knowledge which are only counted by the state in the anonymity of their being.”<sup>51</sup> Representing the state on the issue of slavery, Aristotle counted his adversaries in the anonymity of their being. In Aristotle’s words:

there are others...who regard the control of slaves by a master as contrary to nature. In their view the distinction of master and slave is due to law or convention (*nomos*); there is no natural (*physei*) difference between them; the relation of master and slave is based on force, and being so has no warrant in justice.<sup>52</sup>

Who are those others to whom Aristotle does not refer by name? Heidegger was interested in what took place between the Presocratics and Plato. Badiou is interested in what took place between eponymous sophists and Plato.<sup>53</sup> To answer our question and then to examine whether there had been a theoretical undercurrent that could have set in course a different destination of thought we must become interested in what took place between the anonymized others (mostly sophists) and Aristotle on the issue of slavery.

To begin our discussion of what took place between the anonymous adversaries and Aristotle let us set out from the only Badiouian reference (that I have come across) to Aristotle’s politicization of nature—one that might be relevant, although implicitly, suggestively and somewhat cryptically, to our issue here.

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We live within an Aristotelian arrangement: there is nature, and beside

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“Aristotle on Equality,” 278-280.

<sup>51</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, 340.

<sup>52</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, 1253b20-23. I take the English translation from Giuseppe Cambiano, “Aristotle and the Anonymous Opponents of Slavery,” *Slavery and Abolition* 8, 1 (1987): 22.

<sup>53</sup> Yet I am not doing this in order to replace the Heideggerian genealogy of the forgetting of being nor to dispute the importance of Badiou’s methodological imperative to “forget the forgetting of the forgetting,” Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, 115.

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it right, which tries as much as possible to correct, if needs be, the excesses of nature. What is dreaded, what must be foreclosed, is what is neither natural nor amendable by right alone. In short, what is *monstrous*. And in fact Aristotle encountered, in the guise of the monster, delicate philosophical problems. Foucault and Sartre harboured, with regard to this neo-Aristotelian naturalism, a genuine hatred. In actual fact, both the one and the other, as they should, start out from the monster, from the exception, from what has no acceptable nature.<sup>54</sup>

Such delicate philosophical problems Aristotle encounters in his effort to refute the argument against slavery by recourse to nature. But “the incapacity of nature to differentiate the body of the slave remains an unanswered question within Aristotle’s philosophy of nature.”<sup>55</sup> Indeed, Aristotle asserts

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<sup>54</sup> Alain Badiou, *The Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 177. *Contra* Badiou, I believe that we live in an Aristotelian arrangement in reverse, given that a now dominant connection of nature with politics assumes that the supposedly crooked timber of human nature renders all attempts at a radically more just world either futile or dangerous. I would call this widely held argument an ‘inverted or twisted Aristotelianism.’ It is Aristotelian to the extent that Aristotle used to justify a political measure or form of government, institution (e.g. slavery) and the like by ultimately appealing to nature. Liberal political theory is fraught with such recourse to nature when capitalism and its basic tenets are at stake. However, unlike much liberal political theory, Aristotle linked the natural with the just. He assumed that everything natural is good and that the unjust is unnatural. He could thus embrace an ‘anticoercion principle.’ “Coercion is not, in Aristotle’s eyes, an essential feature of political rule. It is no more the function of a ruler to coerce his subjects than it is for a physician to coerce his patients.” As David Keyt remarks, “for someone brought up on Thomas Hobbes this idea can be difficult to grasp,” David Keyt, “Aristotle and the Ancient Roots of Anarchism,” *Topoi* 15 (1996): 139. Indeed, it is no accident that from early modernity onwards, the Aristotelian connection of nature and justice is by and large inverted, since now the natural tendency is presented as being towards injustice, and nature (the unruly *appetites* of men) becomes the ultimate argument for a coercive and protective sense of law. Thought through, when politics is at stake, the inverted Aristotelian recourse to nature often leads to anti-utopianism. For a more developed discussion of this see Marianna Papastephanou, *Educated Fear and Educated Hope* (Rotterdam: Sense P, 2009), especially Chapter 8.

<sup>55</sup> Cambiano, “Anonymous Opponents of Slavery,” 30. On other such confusions to which Aristotle was led by his insistence on the natural slavery see

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that “it is nature’s intention also to erect a physical difference between the body of the free man and that of the slave.” Yet, further, he admits: “the contrary of nature’s intention, however, *often* happens: there are some slaves who have the bodies of free men—as there are others who have a free man’s soul.”<sup>56</sup> The word ‘often’ has a special significance for commentators, as it makes the major problems of Aristotle’s position emerge more clearly. As Cambiano notes, “Aristotle often claims that nature never does anything in vain. He admits exceptions to this rule, as in the cases of monsters.” Then again, “exceptions which escape the control of nature are precisely exceptions, that is, rare.” In other words, whilst monstrosities are rare, a slave possessing a free man’s body is frequent. “Moreover, monstrosities are placed on a lower level than the norm: compared to man, the monster—Aristotle claims—is not even human. Here, instead, we are faced with a body having properties higher than those that he should have.”<sup>57</sup> More generally, Aristotle’s notorious naturalist defence of slavery was not even defensible within his own architectonic for reasons such as those indicated here as well as for other reasons, which are unrelated to our discussion and too many to account here.<sup>58</sup>

Aristotle’s opponents hold that “not only is there opposition between nature and *nomos* but that nature is the positive value.”<sup>59</sup> Unlike them and against their focusing on a minimalist conception of natural commonality, Aristotle focuses on differences. He ignores the constructed character

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Schlaifer, “Greek Theories of Slavery,” 193ff.

<sup>56</sup> Aristotle, *Politics*, 1254b 27-34. I preserve Cambiano’s italics here and, instead of translating from Greek into English myself, I borrow the English translation from Cambiano, “Anonymous Opponents of Slavery,” 29.

<sup>57</sup> Cambiano, “Anonymous Opponents of Slavery,” 30.

<sup>58</sup> For the latter reasons, see Olav Eikeland, *The Ways of Aristotle* (Berlin: Peter Lang, 2008). As Eikeland puts it, Aristotle’s “attempts at keeping ‘natural slaves,’ manual workers, and women outside full membership in the primary and best political constitution of *he hodos*, is impossible to defend even within the limits of his own system of thought,” Eikeland, *The Ways of Aristotle*, 493.

<sup>59</sup> Cambiano, “Aristotle and the Anonymous Opponents of Slavery,” 37.



(through socialization) of such differences and turns them into a supposed token of justified inequality.

To some commentators, the sophist Lycophron was the first to denounce slavery.<sup>60</sup> In Plato's *Gorgias*, Calicles holds that slavery may be contrary to natural justice.<sup>61</sup> However, the scholiast of Aristotle's *Politics* personalized the anonymized adversaries as the poet Philemon and the sophist Alcidas. Philemon wrote: "Though one is a slave, he is a man no less than you, master; he is made of the same flesh. No one is a slave by nature; it is fate that enslaves the body."<sup>62</sup> Alcidas declared: "god left all men free; nature made no one a slave."<sup>63</sup>

Before we proceed, let us examine whether we have here just an exception or a real undercurrent. Agamben distinguishes between example and exception regarding the amenability of things to be grouped with like others—which is, in fact, the condition for their nameability. The example functions as an exclusive inclusion whereas the exception is an inclusive exclusion.<sup>64</sup> The exception is the exact inverse of the example because the former demonstrates "non-membership or exclusion by reference to the class from which it is excluded" whereas the latter demonstrates "membership by choosing an individual member that it simultaneously excludes."<sup>65</sup> Now, Philemon's and Alcidas's views are at the same time an example and an exception. They are an exception in the sense that they are not the dominant views in antiquity, they

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<sup>60</sup> Schlaifer, "Greek Theories of Slavery," 200.

<sup>61</sup> Plato, *Gorgias*, 484ab.

<sup>62</sup> The Greek original: "*kan doulos h tis, sarka tin aytin echei; physei gar oudeis doulos egenithi pote, h d'au tychi to soma katedoulosato*," Schlaifer, "Greek Theories of Slavery," 200. I use the English translation from Rifkin, "Aristotle on Equality," 277.

<sup>63</sup> In Greek: "*eleftherous afike pantas theos; oudena doulon h fysis pepoiiken*," Schlaifer, "Greek Theories of Slavery," 200. I take the English translation from Vlastos, "Slavery in Plato's Thought," 294.

<sup>64</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 21-22.

<sup>65</sup> Paul M. Livingston, "Agamben, Badiou, and Russell," *Continental Philosophy Review* 42 (2009): 307.

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do not enjoy social currency and they are not endorsed by many thinkers. Yet, if we place them within a sequence or a set of similar, and, in our eyes, equally exceptional views, e.g. those of the Cynics,<sup>66</sup> of the Cyrenaics,<sup>67</sup> of Euripides (“by the laws of nature, through the world equality was established”<sup>68</sup> and so on, we see that Aristotle justifiably takes these views as exemplary of a trend. This reveals a trait that characterizes, in my account, undercurrents more generally: for, at a given time, undercurrents are both example and exception. Seen from the perspective of the establishment or of generalizations about an era, the undercurrent is considered exceptional. Yet, to merit the name ‘undercurrent’ it must be something more than just a rarity; it must encompass enough like cases and some repetitiveness so as to have a kind of living presence under the currents and to be distinct from an evanescent exceptionalism.

Be that as it may, from those others grouped as a trend by Aristotle, let us single out the sophist Alcidas. Alcidas proclaimed that no one is a slave by nature and that divinity left everyone free. The context of that proclamation is the oration [Messiniaka] of which the proclamation is the only extant part. There Alcidas defended the liberation of the Messenian helots (the slaves of the Spartans) by the Thebans in 370 BCE, and this attests to the revolutionary enthusiasm<sup>69</sup> implicit in the call to endorse the vision of a change as radical as the liberation of slaves on grounds of what is true and naturally justified against habit and law.<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Rifkin, “Aristotle on Equality,” 276.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 277.

<sup>69</sup> The second paragraph of the American Declaration of Independence of 1776, which reads “we hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights,” offers itself to an interesting comparison with Alcidas’s view, but this is beyond the scope of this paper.

<sup>70</sup> The helots, the subjects who rebelled against the Spartans in Messenia created an event of which a sophist rather than a philosopher took notice and subtracted its truth from the maze of sense.

It is interesting that what Alcidas says goes against not just Greek *nomos* but also common *nomos* (i.e., *nomos* that embraces, beyond the Hellenic world, all the slave-owning societies). As Cambiano explains, common meant valid “not only inside a single *polis* but even beyond its borders and beyond the present time.”<sup>71</sup> Thus, Alcidas must have rejected a universalism of conventional commonality (in other words, of the trans-historical and inter-spatial social currency) for the sake of a naturalistically grounded truth: that of universal freedom and the unwarranted and contingent nature of enslavement.

By contrast, Aristotle takes up the idea of a universally (=commonly) accepted rule so as to give it rational legitimacy through naturalism and essentialization. Aristotle’s move is exemplary of the more general tendency to depriving thought of its critical edge “through the habit of reverting to ‘natural’ (i.e. socially normalized) concepts and categories.”<sup>72</sup> The subversive move of Alcidas (just as that of Antiphon that we saw earlier) is to recruit nature for the opposite purpose, i.e., to challenge an unjust practice by denaturalizing it. Slavery is not an ontological category: in fact, there is no slavery, strictly speaking, but there is enslavement that produces slavery as a mode of (in)existence in a determinate world. There is no group of people that are ontologically determined as qualitatively different from their owners. The existence of the slave is relational.

The above has implications for the theorization of the relation between the philosopher and the sophist. We may agree with Badiou that when the sophist reminds us that the category of Truth is void, but he does so only in order to negate all truth, “he must be combated.” We may also agree

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<sup>71</sup> Cambiano, “Anonymous Opponents of Slavery,” 24.

<sup>72</sup> Norris, *Badiou’s Being and Event*, 155. It is this “*naturalizing* tendency of ‘natural’ language that Badiou regards as having always exerted—nowadays (alas) with the encouragement and blessing of large sections of the intellectual community—a conformist or downright soporific influence whose source is the idea that thought cannot possibly (intelligibly) claim to break with the informing values and beliefs of its own cultural community,” *Ibid.*, 133.

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that when philosophy is led to dogmatic terror and tries to annihilate its opponent, the sophist “will have an easy time showing the compromises of philosophical desire with tyrannies”<sup>73</sup> and will justifiably attack truth by saying that there is no truth but only sense. However, the case of Alcidas (just as that of Antiphon previously) adds more complexity. For, Aristotle negates truth (all men are free) for the sake of sense (the conventional view that some naturally deserve to be slaves) that he mistakes as truth and enhances its social status. *Contra* the philosopher, the sophist negates sense for the sake of a truth that is too radical and transcendent to enjoy social currency as yet but which is declared by the sophist a truth—a truth *against* sense.<sup>74</sup>

Aristotle discussed the view against slavery in his *Politics*—much against the contemporary tendency of some trends and academic circles to ignore present-day undercurrents. Aristotle did not annihilate the sophist opponents. He just allocated them their usual place: that of the thinkers who are supposedly unable to perceive—or unwilling to concede the existence of—a truth and they thus attribute it to convention. Interestingly, Aristotle’s setting his opponents in a typecast role and refuting their views secured their extant place in history the very moment that it fixed them in the place of the undercurrent, never to become metonymy or eventual site. In responding to those opponents, to the episteme that they tried to redeem against the current, to the counterintuitive that they defended, Aristotle counterposed an alternative account of nature which in fact intellectualized conventional and intuitive ‘wisdom’ and transformed it into a supposedly eternal truth, attributing fallaciously to a specific *doxa* the status of *episteme*. Alcidas’s declaration was a truth that broke with the axiomatic principle that governs any situation of slavery and organizes its repetitive series. Against

<sup>73</sup> Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, 134-135.

<sup>74</sup> We may formulate it thus: slave owning society can change because having slaves is not a practice based on an eternal truth grounded in nature and logically defended but it is only a practice of the existing societies. The truth about humanity is that no one is a slave by nature.

the sophist, Aristotle responded to the subtracted truth by refining, systematizing and further rationalizing the conventional ‘truth’ that the dominant axiomatic principle (‘some are meant to be slaves’) establishes.<sup>75</sup> Aristotle thus contributed to the making sure that the repetitive series of slavery would have had a great future before it, possibly against the ‘practical syllogisms’ that might have underpinned his own decision as a dying man to free his slaves<sup>76</sup>—a move that, outside psycho-biographical terms, may be amenable to an interesting reading as a demonstrative act.<sup>77</sup>

### The Philosophers and the Sophists

The sibling rivalry between philosophy and what resembles it, i.e., sophistry<sup>78</sup> often informs the idea of some modern commentators that “the great philosophers of Antiquity were not Plato and Aristotle, but Gorgias and Protagoras.”<sup>79</sup> Against those commentators, instead of asking to cure the West from Plato and Aristotle, we may insist, with Badiou, on the lasting significance of Platonic and Aristotelian thought. But what

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<sup>75</sup> This refinement shows us that not only truth can find an elaborate ground as thought progresses but also that falsity can find more and more sophisticated support and be made irrefutable in the consciousness of the lay people, just like contemporary justifications of inequalities in educational outcomes have found highly elaborate naturalizations which in turn naturalize distinction and privilege.

<sup>76</sup> For Aristotle’s will, see Diogenes Laertius, *The Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers*, trans. C.D. Yonge (London: H. G. Bohn, 1853). Scanned and Edited for Peitho’s Web. Downloaded (01/05/2010) from: <http://www.classicpersuasion.org/pw/diogenes/index.htm>

<sup>77</sup> Demonstrative acts are the kind that “Aristotle counted as the proper outcome of ‘practical syllogisms,’ that is, modes of reasoning whereby certain statements (minor premises) about some given situation, along with a statement of principle (major premise) relevant to that same situation, should most fittingly be taken to conclude not in a further statement but in a suitable, appropriate or rationally deducible action,” Norris, *Badiou’s Being and Event*, 164.

<sup>78</sup> Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, 116.

<sup>79</sup> Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, 116.

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the above examples of ancient *sophistike* can do is to show us that there had been a third way between a trend of thought that insisted on convention at the expense of truth and a trend of thought that, despite its philosophical greatness, it often succumbed to strictly un-philosophical rationalization and turned convention into a supposedly eternal truth. Antiphon and Alcidamas's positions cure both philosophy and sophistry from sense by insisting on more truth and less sense. Viewed as a mediating trend, they constitute a challenge to the analogy of ancient with modern sophistry (which informs Badiou) and to the rigidity of places it allocates to thinkers. And, as an undercurrent (then as now), this version of sophistry that I describe as *sophistike* renders problematic the sibling rivalry as it has so far been presented in (post)modern terms.

After all, on the issues that I have discussed here, the views of Gorgias did not differ that much from those of Plato and from convention—at least, if Plato rightly attributed to Gorgias the thesis that the virtues of man and woman, free man and slave, are different.<sup>80</sup> As to Protagoras, that he can be regarded as a precursor of the thinkers who condemned slavery in the fourth century BCE is considered controversial, to say the least.<sup>81</sup> Hence, the 'either (Plato and Aristotle)/or (Protagoras and Gorgias)' of our era (along lines of great esteem) is a symptom of reductivism and inattention to the richness and complexity of a determinate world. I argue that, while preserving, for good but varying reasons, the appreciation of Plato and Aristotle, as well as of Gorgias and Protagoras, it is possible to show that some 'minor' ancient sophists did not just resemble philosophers but they were great philosophers too in using the pincers of philosophy and seizing truths.

Alcidamas and Antiphon—who figure nowhere in the historico-philosophical 'count-as-one' of the philosopher's adversary—contested the purely cultural constructions that were passed off as natural truths. That granted, now, let us

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<sup>80</sup> Plato, *Meno*, 73d.

<sup>81</sup> See for instance Thanassis Samaras, "Protagoras and Slavery," *History of Political Thought* 27, 1 (2006): 1-9.

make a crucial clarification in order to avoid a possible misunderstanding. Badiou would not dispute that sophists could correct the tendencies to sacralizing ideas that philosophers often displayed. But he seems to think that sophists did so exclusively by relativizing all truth in favour of sense. “The ancient sophist had already replaced truth with the mixture of force and convention.”<sup>82</sup> I have shown that this had not always been the case. What is unusual and has passed unnoticed is the fact that figures of sophistry such as Alcidamas and Antiphon countered sense-passing-as-truth by recourse to truth itself as distinct from, prior to, and corrective of sense. In other words, they performed philosophical operations of seizure of the truth that was obscured by conventional constructions of meaning. It is important to recall here Badiou’s own position on the intuitive. Alcidamas and Antiphon went beyond intuition—if, along with Badiou, who objects to the claim that intuition might yield valid insights or conceptual progress, we take intuition to be just the name applied to preconceived habits of belief.<sup>83</sup> Though sophists, Antiphon and Alcidamas opposed to sense the real of the truths whose seizing they carried out. They exposed the monstrosity of the intuitive and redeemed the counterintuitive.

Antiphon and Alcidamas did not just ignore differences. They did something much more radical. They claimed precisely that the differences according to which barbarians were naturalistically contrasted to the Greeks and slaves were excluded from the category of ‘human equals’ were contingent and thus not true. Antiphon and Alcidamas went against *doxa*, i.e., a mere opinion or a consensus belief, by contrasting the *doxa* of the times to axioms that utilized the tension between *physei* and *thesei* and by favouring *physei*. Equality of all was defended as a truth given by *physis*, that is, one that persists despite *thesis* and the illusions the latter produces by the habitual over-reliance on the ‘evidence’ of intuitive sense (the slavish behaviour, the servility, the fear of the master,

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<sup>82</sup> Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, 118.

<sup>83</sup> Norris, *Badiou’s Being and Event*, 52.



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the appearance of the slave's body, etc.). By arguing so, they disrupted the consistent multiplicity that was dominant in their times. At another level, by being those who argued so, they can now disrupt the contemporary 'count-as-one' that equates ancient and modern sophists and associates them only with sense against philosophers as guardians of truth.<sup>84</sup>

### Evental-truths or resembling evental-truths?

This is not just about critiquing a sweeping idea of antiquity, paying attention to historical detail, setting the record straight about some version of ancient sophistry and performing a deconstruction of the category 'sophist.' Much less is it the trivial objection that Badiou associates events and truth exclusively with philosophy. Surely, subtracting truth is not the exclusive prerogative of philosophers, and Badiou's emblematic figure, Saint Paul, was not a philosopher anyway. Then again, some neat categorizations of allocated space, of the place in which philosophy and sophistry might find themselves regarding truth, are, indeed, complicated by the undercurrent. But, much more deeply, the complexity of the operations of the undercurrent raises some questions about the drastic opposition between being and event and about the exceptionalism that ends up incriminating the quotidian as well as all theoretical articulation within a world.

We have so far approached Antiphon's and Alcidas's ideas (that, naturally, there is neither Greek nor barbarian, neither slave nor free) as truths. Would that seem acceptable or rather odd in the Badiouian context of evental-truth? "The question for an event is: what is the destiny, after the event,

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<sup>84</sup> "The one can now be treated as the product of a certain formal operation, that is to say, a procedure of counting or grouping that imposes some order on an otherwise inchoate since open-ended multiplicity but which is always—and for just that reason—exposed to the potentially disturbing effect of that which finds no place in the existing conceptual domain since it exists as a 'supernumerary' element excluded from the count-as-one," Norris, *Badiou's Being and Event*, 40. It is important for this paper, as it describes a procedure that holds equally for the tailoring of Greek thought to a wisdom that is politically event-less.

of an inexistent of the world? What becomes of the poor worker after the revolution?”<sup>85</sup> In our case: what becomes of the barbarian and the slave after Antiphon and Alcidas? Not having consequences such as the abolition of slavery or such as overcoming the political associations of the term ‘barbarian,’ do the Antiphontic and Alcidasian ideas qualify as truths in the Badiouan idiom?

For Badiou, “there is no stronger transcendental consequence than the one which makes what did not exist in a world appear within it.”<sup>86</sup> In the 2003 English translation of this section from *Logiques des Mondes* (that is, 3 years before the French original publication of the whole book) the following precedes the above sentence: “Everything depends, therefore, on the consequences.”<sup>87</sup> What does this say about our examples of Alcidas and Antiphon? If everything depends on the consequences produced for the inexistent, our examples are ill-assorted in a set of eventual truths. Further, Badiou sees politics as “collective action, organized by certain principles, that aims to unfold the consequences of a new possibility which is currently repressed by the dominant order.”<sup>88</sup> Was Alcidas’s idea, for instance, *not a truth* but just a new possibility repressed by the law of that determinate world? Or, rather, the new possibility was the politics that could derive *from the truth* of Alcidas’s statement? If the latter is more accurate, that would entail that Alcidas’s statement and its truth is a matter quite independent from the possibility it could open or not. A missed opportunity, a lost chance for humanity; yet, a preserved and postponed truth, one that raises issues: of people’s ability to seize the opportunities of thought that a specific, determinate world and time offer; and of how to heighten that ability.

Furthermore, was Alcidas’s dictum a truth’s appearing,

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<sup>85</sup> Badiou, “The Three Negations,” 1882.

<sup>86</sup> Alain Badiou, *Logics of Worlds: Being and Event 2*, trans. Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2009), 376.

<sup>87</sup> Alain Badiou, “Logic of the Site,” *Diacritics* 33, ¾ (2003): 147.

<sup>88</sup> Alain Badiou, “The Communist Hypothesis,” *New Left Review* 49 (2008): 31.

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one that defended an insurrection that founded no duration,<sup>89</sup> but could nevertheless be described as a strong singularity since it proposed to thought a rule of emancipation and of radical egalitarianism and universality? How do we recognize a strong singularity? And, can we assume rather safely the status that could be attributed to Alcidas's idea within Badiou's philosophy? Badiou again: The strong singularity can be recognized "by the fact that its consequence in the world is to make exist within it the proper inexistence of the object-site."<sup>90</sup> Given a singularity whose "*intensity of existence, as instantaneous and as 'evanescent' as it may be, is nevertheless maximal,*" we may consider it "*an event, if, in consequence of the (maximal) intensity of the site, something whose value of existence was null in the situation takes on a positive value of existence.*"<sup>91</sup> But in the ancient situation, strictly speaking, the value of the slave-being had been null and remained so long after Alcidas. However, in the history of truths understood, *inter alia*, as a set of universal principles Alcidas offered an important addition. Yet, most probably, the positive value of existence that Badiou talks about is not the theoretical-abstract one, gained when something is voiced and then archived in the record of humanity's textuality, but rather the actual existence in the socio-political space. In the case of Alcidas, it would mean to set on course a chain of such consequences up to the insurrection of slaves and the demand of their freedom (even if such an insurrection eventually fails). On the contrary, the insurrection preceded Alcidas's dictum, or, differently put, Alcidas phrased the truth of that insurrection.<sup>92</sup> As

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<sup>89</sup> "Because it carries out a transitory cancellation of the gap between being and being-there, a site is the instantaneous revelation of the void that haunts multiplicities. A site is an ontological figure of the instant: it appears only to disappear," Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, 369. The logic of the site involves the distribution of intensities around the vanished point which the site is. Thus, true duration can only be that of consequences.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 377.

<sup>91</sup> Badiou, "Logic of the Site," 147. His emphasis.

<sup>92</sup> There had been many insurrections of the helots but, only of the Messenian one we know that it was accompanied by a theoretical claim that failed to

to Antiphon, neither option seems relevant, as there is no indication that his tract is evental or post-evental.

Instead of being theorized as event or singularity,<sup>93</sup> the Antiphontic or the Alcidasian idea could be seen from a Badiouian perspective as a false event or, at most, a fact: “We will call *fact* a site whose intensity of existence is not maximal.”<sup>94</sup> Seen from the perspective of change, and, *not* from the perspective of the truth of the corresponding *judgments*, on which Badiou is silent, the fact is “ontologically supernumerary but existentially (and thus logically) weak,” while singularity is “ontologically supernumerary” and its “value of appearance (or of existence) is maximal.”<sup>95</sup> Is that all we may say about Alcidasian’s and Antiphon’s ideas? That they were simply facts that made a supernumerary find a weak and volatile existence until the site vanished? By examining whether the Alcidasian and Antiphontic ideas could qualify as truths, we reach a stage where it becomes apparent that, within Badiouian philosophy, truth concerns only the actuality of states, and not counterfactualty. Truth as unfulfilled promise voiced and articulated as propositional content, yet still in search of subjects capable of discerning and defending it, is given up, as if it were incompatible with truth as creative action. In my opinion, the binary between truth as action, on the one hand, and truth as judgment, suggestion, or insight in need of defence and dialogue, on the other, is disabling as it makes truth too dependent on attempted/effectuated rather than envisaged/intended change.

If the lack of evental effects does not diminish truth-quality,

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attract the attention of the world (thinkers included), then and now, even if, as a secular idea, and disconnected from its original setting, it was destined to become knowledge (in the sense of having the deserved character of an indisputable certainty and indispensable truth) over two thousand years later.

<sup>93</sup> By its existential insignificance, a site is hardly different to the simple continuation of the situation. “Only a site whose value of existence is maximal is potentially an event,” Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, 372. Therefore, “we will call *singularity* a site whose intensity of existence is maximal,” *ibid.*, 372.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 372.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 372.

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then, this means that statements of counterfactual rather than actual effects (that is, statements or facts having validity [*Gültigkeit*] even when deprived of the social currency [*Geltung*] that effects revolutionary practice) qualify as truths. At least, they are no less truths than those which were recognized as such and had world-historical effects. Seeing them otherwise leads to the paradox of making an idea's validity and universality conditional on who has voiced it or on the context within which she has voiced it. The paradox becomes obvious when we consider how identical the content of Alcidamas's and Antiphon's statements is in terms of universality and equality with the Pauline truth: there is neither Greek nor Jew, there is neither slave nor free. Why, when it comes to their truth, should one make the drastic choice of Saint Paul over *sophistike* or vice versa? Between the Alcidamian truth (which did not mobilize a revolutionary procedure) and the Pauline truth (which did result in a new situation), Badiou's theory forces him to choose the Pauline and allocate the Alcidamian into the maze of sense. Doing otherwise, Badiou would have to concede that truth is also judgment no matter what else it might be and that an epistemology of a kind is in order when statements claiming the status of truths are at stake. It seems paradoxical that the same ideas do not qualify as truths of an equal footing just because the former were not followed, whereas the latter actually effected a change of a kind. To avoid this paradox, Badiou would have to theorize more explicitly the pre-evental in social-epistemological rather than social-ontological terms. This might lead to the possibility of truth being potentially unveiled and disseminated by argumentation and dialogue in ways that would re-introduce a specific politics, e.g., a Habermasian one, that Badiou sees, and to some extent justifiably, as pacifying,<sup>96</sup> but which Badiou does not wish to rehabilitate by pressing it up against its confines and recasting it in his own terms.

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<sup>96</sup> It might also lead to a specific conception of subjectivity (which would be at odds with, or not quite fitting to, the post-humanist conception of subjectivity), one that, admittedly, needs to be worked out if it is to avoid both the poststructuralist-anti-humanist and the humanist conceptions.

## Conclusion

The Greek determinate world was not a situation of pure immanence, but it included its own transcendence in potentials that were never followed, in counterfactual possibilities. More generally, the undercurrent is not the non-theorized remainder or reminder of the supernumerary, the internal anomaly that haunts the logical structure of a system. It is, rather, the theorization/theorizability (even if in an elliptic or incomplete manner) of the until-then supernumerary; a theorization, however, that remains largely unacknowledged and defeated. The undercurrent is neither included nor excluded by the given world's order but rather treated: as secondary, as exception, a minor disruption of the smooth flow of majoritarian thought, or inadequately framed, under-theorized, unconvincing and non-systematic. It may be true that the undercurrent often appears as almost indistinguishable from the utterly perverse, highly unlikely, quaint, preposterous ideas that might be uttered so as to exploit the social benefits of eccentricity, e.g. when one is admired because nobody else would have made that kind of thought. But, when all undercurrents are thus treated, people and ideas are swept under the rug and the walls of 'what theory presents' become heavily fortified.

We have seen that, for Badiou, "what are initially opposed to normal multiplicities (which are presented and represented) are singular multiplicities, which are presented but not represented."<sup>97</sup> Surely, they are not represented if by 'representation' we mean socio-political membership and recognition. But a proper account of being and event as two drastically disparate realms opposed to one another would require something more: that something fails to be represented also in consciousness, thought and quotidian life and not just in established socio-political order. I have argued that inconsistent multiplicities may not just exist but also be represented in customs, habits and in unconscious suspen-

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<sup>97</sup> Badiou, *Being and Event*, 174.

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sions of time and/or in theory through underdeveloped or marginal ideas. True, this does not automatically amount to actions for changing radically a situation but it means that the potential for change is located *within* quotidian normalcy. The latter, which may be described by adapting the *Vorgefundene* or *magma* (if we may use a term from Husserl and Castoriades respectively, for lack of any other at hand), encompasses social imaginary significations beyond those embodied in institutions. It encompasses undercurrents and counterfactual possibilities, awaiting critical attention and propagation so as to possibly acquire the status of cataclysmic event.

We have also seen that Badiou maintains a “categorical distinction” between “such basically normalizing concepts as nature, consistency, representation and the ‘state’ conceived in onto-mathematical or onto-political terms” and “such intrinsically resistant or inassimilable terms as event, presentation and singularity, taken as defining the realms of history and politics.”<sup>98</sup> I have argued that there is nothing basically and necessarily normalizing about the concepts of nature or representation and inescapably inimical to the intrinsically resistant idea of truth as a surplus (though not necessarily an epiphanic one) of validity beyond hegemony.

The cases of Alcidas and Antiphon render problematic the epiphanic nature that Badiou attributes to truth and the *tout court* dependency of it on consequences. For, rather than being an absolute break with the everyday reality of appearing, they are a part of it and represent its counterfactual possibilities, the routes of thought that have not been pursued.

Ultimately, what is pushed aside by the philosophical emphasis on the epiphanic and exceptional, almost miraculous interruption of the supposed normalcy of the quotidian is the perception of the operation of the undercurrent. In hindsight, the undercurrent has an educational value for heightening our present-day awareness of what is vibrant yet unnoticed, half-buried as it is in realities of power. As a residue (or side-effect) of older metaphysics of presence, the subject-object

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<sup>98</sup> Norris, *Badiou's Being and Event*, 155.



philosophy makes us feel that a truth is a truth only when there are minds—out there and here and now—to recognize it as such. Badiou combats older humanist metaphysics, and his philosophy represents a valuable invigoration of realist conceptions of truth. However, it is not always clear that Badiou leaves room in his philosophy for the truth that is sometimes available in some forms yet does not enjoy wider acceptance because the subjects who would recognize it need to be created. Education should aspire, amongst other things, to the creation of such subjectivities. Surely, not all undercurrents have a truth quality; yet, education as critique, foresight and preparation should not be neglected, and a way (yet, surely, not the only one) of giving it its due attention is by redeeming the interest in the undercurrent and in the possibility of subjects discerning its truth and making it of consequence.

# On the Reality and Construction of Hyperobjects with Reference to Class

Levi R. Bryant

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**I**N A COMMENTARY ON JEAN-PAUL SARTRE'S *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Joseph Catalano writes:

For Sartre, the reality of class is more than a subjective awareness that we are united with others and less than a supraconsciousness in which we all already share.... We...*experience* our membership in class, because our class structure already exists as a fundamental structure of our world.<sup>1</sup>

From an object-oriented perspective, this is already the wrong way to theorize the existence of class. If class exists, it is not an *experience* nor the result of an experience (though it *can*, perhaps, be experienced) nor is it depending on individual persons *identifying* with a class or *recognizing* that they are a part of a class. Rather, *classes, if they exist, are entities in their own right independent of the members that belong to the class.* In mereological terms, classes would be larger scale objects that

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph S. Catalano, *A Commentary on Jean-Paul Sartre's Critique of Dialectical Reason, Volume 1: Theory of Practical Ensembles* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 135-136, my emphasis.

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are *autonomous* or *independent* of the smaller scale objects from which they are composed.

As such, class would be an example of what Timothy Morton has called a “hyperobject.” As Morton puts it,

Hyperobjects are viscous—they adhere to you no matter how hard you try to pull away, rendering ironic distance obsolete. Now I’ll argue that they are also nonlocal. That is, hyperobjects are massively distributed in time and space such that any particular local manifestation never reveals the totality of the hyperobject.

When you feel raindrops falling on your head, you are experiencing climate, in some sense. In particular you are experiencing the climate change known as global warming. But you are never directly experiencing global warming as such. Nowhere in the long list of catastrophic weather events—which will increase as global warming takes off—will you find global warming.<sup>2</sup>

As a hyperobject, class is massively distributed in time and space, having no precise location. Moreover, classes are *withdrawn* from other objects—e.g., the people that “belong” to a particular class—such that we can be entirely *unaware* of the existence of classes without this impinging, in any way, on the existence or activity of class. Indeed, it is precisely because classes, like any other object, are withdrawn, precisely because they are hyperobjects massively distributed in time and space, that *ideology* is able to convince us that they *don’t exist* or that there are only, as Margaret Thatcher notoriously said, ‘individuals’ and families (mid-scale objects of which persons are an instance) that create their own destinies. Here, of course, the term ‘individual’ is placed in scare quotes *not* because individuals *don’t exist*, but rather because the term ‘individual’ all too often functions as code for *persons* alone, ignoring the fact that individuals exist at a variety of different levels of scale. In other words, a class is no less an individual than Jack Abramoff.

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<sup>2</sup> Timothy Morton, “Hyperobjects are Nonlocal,” November 9, 2010, at <http://ecologywithoutnature.blogspot.com/2010/11/hyperobjects-are-nonlocal.html>.

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While classes are hyperobjects, individuals, or entities in their own right, this does not entail that classes don't have to be *produced*. Classes are the result of antipraxis, or the material trace of millions of technologies, media, signs, signifiers, natural environmental conditions, infrastructure, and countless human practices that, in their material trace, take on a life of their own, structuring the possibilities and activities of persons embedded within the class.<sup>3</sup> The places where we live, the manner in which roads, public transportation, and infrastructure are organized, the availability of jobs, linguistic dialectics into which one is born, etc., take on a life of their own, structuring and organizing human relations such that the wealthy become more wealthy, children of the wealthy are likely to themselves become wealthy, the poor and middle class remain poor and middle class, and so on. There is a whole spatio-temporal geography here, a network structure, mesh, or ecology, around which classes emerge as entities in their own right and perpetually reproduce themselves.

Class, as an entity in its own right, comes to function as a *statistical sorting machine* as its endo-structure<sup>4</sup> functions as a regime of attraction<sup>5</sup> setting up something like a gravitational or attractive field for those persons or human bodies

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of Sartre's concept of 'antipraxis,' cf. Levi R. Bryant, 'Antipraxis,' November 18, 2010, at <http://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2010/11/18/antipraxis/>. Antipraxis refers to products of human labor or activity that take on a life of their own, becoming features of the human environment that persons must navigate and that have a teleology or counter-finality that was not what human agents intended. In this regard, Sartre's concept of antipraxis shares much resemblance to McLuhan's mediums or Latour's nonhuman technologies.

<sup>4</sup> The endo-structure of an object is its internal structure or organization considered apart from other entities in the world.

<sup>5</sup> A regime of attraction is a set of relations between or among objects that leads them to actualize themselves in a particular way. For example, because of the nature of gravity on earth, fire burns upwards towards the sky. The regime of attraction here involves the relationship of the fire to the planet earth. By contrast, if fire breaks out on the international space station it flows and roils like water because the gravitational pull of the earth is significantly diminished.

that find themselves within its orbit, channeling them into certain patterned relations with respect to one another. An object functions as an autopoietic machine when it draws flows from other entities producing outputs so as to reproduce itself. In the case of class, the flows upon which classes draw to reproduce themselves in the order of time are humans, resources, and technologies. The output these machines produce are the manner in which human beings are formed at the affective, cognitive, and even the physiological level and patterned relations between humans. Although classes are one object and individual humans another, classes nonetheless function as a regime of attraction by both affording and constraining human action in a variety of ways. Just as one cannot walk through the windshield of one's car, class becomes an object, a vector of resistance and affordance, that persons must navigate.

Just as every object is a system that transforms perturbations into system-specific events, contents, or qualities according to its own endo-structure, classes treat human bodies as perturbations that they then mold and structure according to their own endo-structure.<sup>6</sup> Along the beautiful beach in Nagshead, North Carolina where I spent much of my childhood, you will find a band of sea shells and small, polished stones distributed in a precise line across the shore. This band of sea shells is the result of a regime of attraction structured around ocean life and geology offshore, the incline of the sea shore, the specific force of the waves pounding against the shore in that location and nowhere else, and so on, generating a machine or system that picks up sea shells and stones of this particular size and shape (no smaller and no larger) distributing them at this particular point on the beach. This is how it is with class. The field of antipraxis, millions of small decisions, actions, technologies, infrastructures, natural

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<sup>6</sup> For a discussion of how systems constitute their own elements by transforming perturbations into system-specific events, see Niklas Luhmann, *Social Systems*, trans. John Bednarz, Jr and Dirk Baecker (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

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conditions, etc., sort human bodies in particular patterns, reinforcing boundaries between them negentropically, both affording and constraining possibilities of relation between these bodies.

The question, then, of how we *experience* or are *conscious* of class, of whether or not we identify with class or recognize ourselves as being a part of a class, is *distinct* from the question of how and whether class *exists*. Class can exist and function just fine without anyone *identifying* with a class or being aware that they are caught up within the mechanisms of class. How else could so many act contrary to their class interests, going so far as to even deny that class exists, if this were not the case? Rather, the question of our experience and consciousness of class is a question of how we can become aware of the regime of attraction within which we are enmeshed such that we can begin to *act* on it to change it rather than merely being acted upon it behind our backs. Here the issue is similar to the one Morton raises with respect to climate as a hyperobject. Part of the problem with climate is that precisely because it is withdrawn we aren't even aware of its existence and therefore are unable to act on it. We are aware of *weather* without being aware of the hyperobject *climate* of which weather is a local manifestation. Climate requires a sort of leap and detective work that ferrets all sorts of traces allowing us to finally infer its existence. So too in the case of class.

Yet how are hyperobjects like class constructed or built? How do they come into existence? We have already seen reference to antipraxis and regimes of attraction, yet these abstract concepts need to be rendered more concrete. Despite the fact that Latour nowhere, to my knowledge, references Sartre or the concept of antipraxis, it would not be misguided to suggest that the central theme of Latour's sociology is the investigation of antipraxis or how nonhuman actors such as technologies contribute to patterned relations among humans and nonhumans. Above all, Latour denounces the idea of the social as a sort of stuff, emphasizing the manner in which the social must be built or constructed through a variety of different agencies. Here there is strong resonance

between the later Sartre and Latour, for as Sartre remarks, “man is ‘mediated’ by things to the same extent as things are ‘mediated’ by man.”<sup>7</sup> To explain the social is thus to explain these mediations which form particular associations and generate enduring entities. As Latour will later remark,

In most situations, we use ‘social’ to mean that which has already been assembled and acts as a whole, without being too picky on the precise nature of what has been gathered, bundled, and packaged together. When we say that ‘something is social’ or ‘has a social dimension,’ we mobilize one set of features that, so to speak, march in step together, even though it might be composed of radically different types of entities. This unproblematic use of the word is fine so long as we don’t confuse the sentence “Is social what goes together?” with the one that says, “*social designates a particular kind of stuff*” [my emphasis]. With the former we simply mean that we are dealing with a routine state of affairs whose *binding* together is the crucial aspect, while the second designates a sort of substance whose main feature lies in its *differences* with other types of materials. We imply that some assemblages are built out of social stuff *instead* of physical, biological, or economical blocks, much like the houses of the Three Little Pigs were made of straw, wood, and stone.<sup>8</sup>

The central target of Latour’s actor-network-theory (ANT) is what he calls ‘the sociology of the social.’ The sociology of the social would be that form of sociology that suggests that the social is composed of a special sort of ‘stuff’ (‘social stuff,’ not unlike phlogiston) that holds people together in a particular way. *Generally sociologists of the social appeal to power, social forces, ideas, signs, language, norms, representations, and human intentions as the stuff that holds the social together.*

By contrast, Latour argues that all of these agencies are rather weak and fail to account for why the social (assem-

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<sup>7</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason: Volume 1*, trans. Alan Sheridan Smith (New York: Verso, 2004), 79.

<sup>8</sup> Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 43.



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blages of humans and nonhumans) are held together in the way they're held together. In place of the sociology of the social, Latour instead proposes a *sociology of associations*. The social, for Latour, is *nothing more* than associations between human and nonhuman entities (and sometimes, many times, is composed *solely* of associations between *nonhuman* entities that include semiotic components, human intentions, norms, laws, *but also* technologies, animals, microbes, natural entities like rivers and mountains, etc. Objects are thus constructed or built out of other objects. As Graham Harman puts it in *Guerrilla Metaphysics*,

We have a universe made up of objects wrapped in objects wrapped in objects. The reason we call these objects 'substances' is not because they are ultimate or indestructible, but simply because none of them can be identified with any (or even *all*) of their relations with other entities. None of them is a pristine kernel of substantial unity unspoiled by interior parts. We never reach some final layer of tiny components that explains everything else, but enter instead into an indefinite regress of parts and wholes. Every object is both a substance and a complex of relations.<sup>9</sup>

Objects are built out of other objects, they are emergent from other objects, yet also take on an internal structure of their own that renders them independent from or irreducible to the objects out of which they are built. Indeed, the smaller objects out of which a larger object is composed can often be destroyed and replaced while the larger object continues to exist. Causal redundancy arguments argue that the activity of an object is nothing but the activity of the smaller objects of which it is composed, therefore allowing us to dismiss the existence of the larger scale object altogether. However, the central point here is that the larger scale objects have powers and capacities that can nowhere be found in the smaller scale objects composing the object.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Graham Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* (Chicago: Open Court, 2005), 85.

<sup>10</sup> For a critique of eliminativist causal redundancy arguments, cf. Amie

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Latour will argue that it is *nonhuman actors* or objects that do the lion's share of the work in associating *human beings* in particular ways with one another in social assemblages, and that signs, intentions, representations, ideas, norms, laws, etc., while contributing to the formation of these assemblages or objects, are weak tea in maintaining the patterned relations in assemblages or associations between humans. As Latour writes,

A shepherd and his dog remind you nicely of social relations, but when you see her flock behind a barbed wire fence, you wonder where is the shepherd and her dog—although sheep are kept in the field by the piercing effect of wire barbs more obstinately than by the barking of the dog. There is no doubt that you have become a couch potato in front of your TV set thanks largely to the remote control that allows you to surf from channel to channel—and yet there is no *resemblance* between the causes of your immobility and the portion of your action that has been carried out by an infrared signal, even though there is no question that your behavior has been *permitted* by the TV command.

Between a car driver that slows down near a school because she has seen the '30 MPH' yellow sign and a car driver that slows down because he wants to protect the suspension of his car threatened by the bump of a 'speed trap,' is the difference big or small? *Big, since the obedience of the first has gone through morality, symbols, sign posts, yellow paint, while the other has passed through the same list to which has been added a carefully designed concrete slab. But it is small since they have both obeyed something: the first driver a rarely manifested altruism—if she had not slowed down, her heart would have been broken by the moral law: the second driver to a largely distributed selfishness—if he had not slowed down his suspension would have been broken by a concrete slab [my emphasis].* Should we say that only the first connection is social, moral and symbolic, but that the second is objective and material? No. But, if we say that both are social, how are we going to justify the difference between moral conduct and suspension springs. They might not be social all the way through, but they certainly are *collected* or *associated* together by the very work of road designers. One cannot call oneself a social

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L. Thomassan, *Ordinary Objects* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

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scientist and pursue only some links—the moral, legal, and symbolic ones—and stop as soon as there is some physical relation interspersed in between the others.<sup>11</sup>

Latour's point is that if we wish to take account of the fabric of the social, of those assemblages that exist, we have to take into account the role that nonhuman entities play in organizing particular patterns of relations and behavior. Each example contrasts, more or less, a humanist explanation (referent to power, signs, laws, interests, morals, etc) and a nonhumanist explanation. Thus, in the first example, Latour contrasts control of the sheep through *power* (the role of the shepherd and the sheep dog) and control of the sheep through a barbed wire fence. This example is particularly nice because it shows that for the sociology of *associations* the behavior of *sheep* is every bit as much a *sociological question* as the behavior of *humans*. The second example contrasts human *intentions* with the unintended consequences of technology (becoming a couch potato). The third example contrasts agency through law and signs with agency through a nonhuman actor such as a speed bump.

At this point we encounter an unexpected point of convergence between the thought of the later Sartre, Latour, and Marshall McLuhan. In *Understanding Media* Marshall McLuhan famously argues that the essence of media consists in being an extension of man.<sup>12</sup> A medium is anything that extends the human bodies and senses in one way or another. Crucial to these extensions is that they also transform modes of affectivity, cognition, and social relations, while pushing other things into the background. A car or mountain pass, for McLuhan, is no less a medium than a newspaper. As Ian Bogost and I argue, there is no reason to restrict this concept of media to humans, but rather a medium can be treated as *any* entity or object that extends another *object*, whether the object being

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<sup>11</sup> Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 77–78.

<sup>12</sup> Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1994), 7.

extended is a nonhuman object extended by other nonhuman objects, or a nonhuman object extended by a human.<sup>13</sup> The saturation of the climate with oxygen millions of years ago, for example, extended the domain of certain microbes, just as the street light extends the domain of certain insects. In each of these cases, new associations are formed as a result of these extensions. Likewise, a human can be a medium for another human by extending the first human in a variety of ways as in the case of a congressional member extending the voice of his or her constituents. In this case, the voice of the constituents is clearly transformed such that much of what they say is translated, reformed and lost.

What McLuhan wishes to investigate is the manner in which various media structure relationships among entities, generating a sort of negentropy where pattern is resistant to change. In this respect, signs, texts, technologies, animals, planets, sunlight, films, plants, languages, infrastructure, laws, communication technologies, theories, leaders, partners, universities, symposiums, etc., are all instances of mediums that extend entities in particular ways, structuring patterns of organization among bodies. For example, patterns of urban and suburban sprawl in Georgia and Atlanta perhaps extend or enhance certain weather patterns allowing for stronger tornadoes to form. In *Laws of Media*, Marshall and Eric McLuhan argue that each medium enlarges or enhances the powers of another object, while also limiting or occluding other dimensions of the object.<sup>14</sup> I will discuss this point in greater detail with respect to class momentarily, but for the moment it suffices to point out that these relations of affording and constraining, enhancing and obscuring, in relations between media (broadly construed) are the fountainhead through which the emergence of hyperobjects are rendered possible.

Returning to Latour, the point is *not* that we should ignore

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<sup>13</sup> Ian Bogost and Levi R. Bryant, *The Pentad: McLuhan and Object-Oriented Ontology*, in preparation.

<sup>14</sup> Marshall and Eric McLuhan, *Laws of Media: The New Science* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998), 98–99.

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intentions, laws, signs, morals, etc., *not* that we should *restrict* our field of analysis to nonhumans, but that we ought to *expand* our field of analysis to nonhuman actors such as technologies if we truly wish to understand associations. Along these lines, Latour will argue that nonhuman objects should be treated as full-blown *actors* in associations or assemblages. As he writes,

The main reason why objects had no chance to play any role before was not only due to the definition of the social used by sociologists, but also to the very definition of actors and agencies most often chosen. If action is limited a priori to what 'intentional,' 'meaningful' humans do, it is hard to see how a hammer, a basket, a door closer, a cat, a rug, a mug, a list or a tag could act. They might exist in the domain of 'material' 'causal' relations, but not in the 'reflexive' 'symbolic' domain of social relations. By contrast, if we stick to our decision to start from the controversies about actors and agencies, then *any thing* that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference is an actor—or, if it has no figuration yet, an actant. Thus the question to ask about any agent is simply the following: Does it make a difference in the course of some other agent's action or not? Is there some trial that allows someone to detect this difference.<sup>15</sup>

It is important to understand Latour's strategy here in proposing that nonhumans are flull-blown actors and that action is not the exclusive domain of humans, intentions, the symbolic, and meaning. The point is that absent the role that these other entities play in associations we are unable to understand why social assemblages take the form they take and why they are often so resistant to change. The ideas might very well change, yet the social relations remain the same. This suggests that some other form of agency must be a significant part of the story.

The standard rejoinder to Latour's proposal to treat nonhumans as actors is that this proposal can only be *metaphorical* because nonhumans do not *act* but only *behave*. Because nonhumans do not have meanings or intentions, the rejoinder

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<sup>15</sup> Latour, *Reassembling the Social*, 71.

goes, we can only be speaking metaphorically when we say nonhumans act. Nonhumans, the critic continues, can only ‘act’ insofar as humans *project* meaning and intentions on to them. In response to this criticism, Latour’s strategy is *not* to argue that *nonhuman objects* have intentions and meanings, but to question the degree to which *human actors* have intentions and meanings. As Latour puts it in his essay “A Collective of Humans and Nonhumans” in *Pandora’s Hope*,

What interests me here is the *composition* of action marked by the lines that get longer at each step.... Who performs the action? Agent 1 plus Agent 2 plus Agent 3. Action is a property of *associated entities* [my emphasis]. Agent 1 is allowed, authorized, enabled, afforded by the others. The chimp plus the sharp stick reach (not reaches) the banana. The attribution to one actor of the role of prime mover in no way weakens the necessity of a composition of forces to explain the action. It is by mistake, or unfairness, that our headlines read “Man flies,” “Woman goes into space.” Flying is a property of the whole association of entities that includes airports and planes, launch pads and ticket counters. B-52s do not fly, the U.S. Air Force Flies. Action is simply not a property of humans *but of associations of actants*, and this is the second meaning of technical mediation. Provisional ‘actorial roles’ may be attributed to actants only because actants are in the process of exchanging competences, offering one another new possibilities, new goals, new functions.<sup>16</sup>

Just as McLuhan observes, objects afford and constrain one another. Latour’s point here is two-fold: On the one hand, action never occurs in a vacuum, but requires an *assemblage*, a composition of actants to take place at all. As Sartre argues in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, in order to act at all we must transform our body into a material medium so as to act on other material bodies,<sup>17</sup> yet in doing so we are in turn acted

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<sup>16</sup> Bruno Latour, “A Collective of Humans and Nonhumans: Following Dædalus’s Labyrinth,” in *Pandora’s Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 182.

<sup>17</sup> Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, 82.

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upon by the material bodies we act on, but also the products of our productions come to act on us. As Sartre will put it, this is “that terrible aspect of man in which he is the product of his product.”<sup>18</sup> On the other hand, and perhaps more importantly, we can’t speak unequivocally about *intentions* coming from *human beings*. Did the intention to become a couch potato and channel surfer issue from the *man* sitting in his lazy boy, or did it issue from the remote, or from the combination of the two? We can’t answer this question. Therefore, in a manner similar to Gilbert Ryle in *The Concept of Mind*, we must, in our social and political theory, first exorcise the *ghost in the machine* that continues to haunt our social and political thought by treating intentionality and meaning as issuing solely from human agency as a *given*.

Indeed, how often do people act based on reasons and intentions? Isn’t it rather that we fabricate reasons and intentions *after* we act as grounds of our actions in the vast majority of instances, such that these reasons and intentions are not *grounds* of our action, but rather *results* of our action? Isn’t this precisely what fMRI scans show, where the decision is made *prior* to us becoming conscious of the action or reasons for the action? If this is the case, then, all things being equal, we should abandon the idea that meaning and intention is the sole domain of humans, as humans never had this capacity to begin with as a given. Just as we no longer speak of a homunculus in the mind, we should abandon the notion that intentions and meanings solely belong to humans.

All of this, of course, gives rise to the question of how human agency is *possible*. Are we mere puppets of assemblages, or is some sort of self-directing *praxis* or agency possible? The point here is not that we must reject agency, but rather that we must not *cheat* and treat something as given and a priori that is not given and a priori. Agency is not something that we *have*, it is not a given, but rather in a manner strangely resonant with

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<sup>18</sup> Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, 184.



Badiou's theory of the subject,<sup>19</sup> it is something that we must accomplish or produce. Put differently, agency is something rare and unusual, not the norm. It is an accomplishment that must come-to-be, not something that is already there. In this respect, the reasons that we give as grounds for our actions might not genuinely be grounds of *those* actions, but might indeed become grounds for *subsequent* actions. In this respect, freedom would be something that emerges retroactively. But more on that another day.

In light of this detour through Latour and McLuhan, we are now in a position to examine the way in which entities like class emerge as hyperobjects. In the *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, Sartre presents an extraordinary example of the role played by nonhumans in the genesis of class, referred to as antipraxis and the practico-inert, or the world of worked matter that takes on an intentionality of its own, quite often at odds of the intentions of those humans that first initiated it, leading to circumstances that humans must adapt to and navigate in the pursuit of their own ends. Antipraxis, the practico-inert, or 'counter-finality' structures the possibilities we encounter in our world through a series of material structures that make up the furniture of the environment we must navigate. As Graham Harman recently put it, we "are probably more defined *not* by the choices we *make*, but [by] the choices we *face*." Antipraxis or the practico-inert is one of the primary ways in which we come to be faced with choices that we did not ourselves choose (in Heideggerese, we're thrown into it), and therefore functions as a catalytic operator through which new hyperobjects (collective relations) emerge. Thus, in a vein very similar to Harman's, Sartre writes,

At the origin of this membership [in class-being], there are passive syntheses of materiality. And these syntheses represent both general conditions of social activity and our most immediate, crudest, objec-

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<sup>19</sup> Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (New York: Continuum, 2005).

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tive reality. They already exist; they are simply *crystallised practices* of previous generations: individuals find an existence already sketched out for them at birth; they have their position in life and their personal development assigned to them by their class. What is 'assigned' to them is a type of work, and a fundamental *attitude*, as well as a determinate provision of material and intellectual work; it is a strictly limited field of possibilities. Thus Claude Lanzmann is right when he says: "A working woman who earns 25,000 francs a month and contracts chronic eczema by handling Dop shampoo eight hours a day is wholly reduced to her work, her fatigue, her wages and material impossibilities that these wages assign to her: the impossibility of eating properly, of buying shoes, of sending her child to the country, and of satisfying her most modest wishes." Oppression does not reach the oppressed in a particular sector of their life; it constitutes this life in its totality. They are not people plus needs: they are completely reducible to their needs.<sup>20</sup>

For Sartre, it is not, as Althusser argues, that the woman as a subject is an effect of ideology, of a 'hailing,' that makes her what she is<sup>21</sup>—which isn't to say this doesn't *also* often take place—but rather that she is caught in the gravitational orbit of *another* entity, a vampiric, devouring entity, that is a hyperobject or object in its own right: class. Indeed, the woman translates this object, class, in her own unique way, yet she also encounters this object in a manner akin to ocean surf and undertows that continuously restrict her possibilities of actualization and *praxis*.

Yet what does all this have to do with nonhuman actors? Remember that for Harman, objects are wrapped in objects that are, in their turn, wrapped in other objects. These objects are simultaneously built of *other objects* and that are autonomous from the objects out of which they are constructed. However, we must not forget that objects have to emerge or

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<sup>20</sup> Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, 232.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. Louis Althusser, "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus (Notes Towards an Investigation)," in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2001).

be built and this requires connection or relation between a variety of different objects.

In order for class to exist as an object in its own right there has to be an entire network of human and nonhuman actors that build this object. Later, in the context of the same discussion, Sartre gives a marvelous and harrowing example to illustrate this point. As Sartre observes,

Corresponding to the iron and coal complex there is the so-called ‘universal’ machine. This means a machine—like the *lathe* in the second half of the nineteenth century—whose function remains indeterminate (in contrast to the specialized machines of automation and semi-automation), and which can do very different jobs provided it is guided, prepared and supervised by a skillful, expert worker. The universality of the machine produces specialization in its servants: it is accessible only to those who know how to use it, and who have therefore had to undergo an often very long apprenticeship. (Conversely, the specialization of the machine, fifty years later, in the period of semi-automation, has brought with it the universalization of its servants: they are interchangeable.) Thus the producer of the machines, through this product and improvement he makes to it, identifies a certain type of men, namely the skilled workers who are capable of carrying out a complete operation from beginning to end, unaided, that is to say, a dialectical *praxis*.

This practical effect is built into machines themselves in the form of exigency. They reduce specifically physical effort, but require skill. They require that men freed of all secondary labours should devote themselves entirely to them: in this way, they fix, *first*, the mode of recruitment; then, through the employers, they create employment opportunities and relatively high wages on the labour market; and so a structured future opens up for certain *sons of workers* [my emphasis], who turn out to have the abilities and means required to become apprentices. (This means sons whose fathers, themselves workers, are in a position to let their sons work for a number of years without being able to support themselves. Generally, the father himself will have to be a skilled worker.) But, in the same process, machines create a lower proletariat which is *not only* the direct result of the rise of an elite of

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better paid workers, who are selected by apprenticeship, but is *also* directly required by the universal machine, in the form of the ensemble of unskilled workers who, in every workshop, have to be attached to the skilled workers, obey them, and relieve them of all the lowly chores which *Others* can do for them.<sup>22</sup>

Sartre's point here—and it is not intended to be an *exhaustive* analysis of the emergence of class—is that class is not the result solely of any sort of class experience, class consciousness, sets of intentions and meanings, or identifications, etc., but that class is *already* inscribed in the nature of the *lathe*. As Deleuze and Guattari put it, tools never appear in isolation, but already belong to an entire assemblage of relations that gives them their sense and function.<sup>23</sup> This new technology that drills, cuts, sands, and shapes *demands* a particular form of skilled labor. Those who possess this skilled labor come, in the nineteenth century, from those *families* that apprentice *their own sons*, passing on this knowledge of 'lathing.' As a consequence, as a result of these two actors (and many more besides), the lathe and skilled families, a differentiation of two hyperobjects gradually emerges—skilled and unskilled labor or class—that take on a life of their own distributing the destinies of human bodies behind their backs. Like the plurality of ocean forces I described in relation to the distribution of sea shells on Nagshead Beach, the *lathe* is a *sorting machine*, a *difference engine*, that captures human bodies within a field of forces that sorts them into skilled and unskilled labor. The lathe both extends humans by enabling them to work metal and wood in new ways, but also constrains and affords humans by structuring their relations in a new way. The groups that emerge thus come to embody an inertia, a negentropic mode of reproducing themselves, that human individuals must navigate in their daily life depending on

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<sup>22</sup> Sartre, *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, 239–240.

<sup>23</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 90.

where they fall in the social field.

The concept of hyperobjects invites us to think objects and their interactions at a variety of different levels of scale, ranging from human individuals to larger scale entities such as classes. However, in thinking hyperobjects, we must not merely think the contributions of humans, but also how nonhuman actors contribute to the formation of these entities. This requires us to draw on the contributions of McLuhan, Latour, and object-oriented ontology, examining the manner in which human and nonhuman objects interact, and how they constrain and afford certain forms of patterned relation.

# Structure, Sense and Territory

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It is certain that all bodies whatsoever, though they have no sense, yet they have perception; for when one body is applied to another, there is a kind of election to embrace that which is agreeable, and to exclude or expel that which is ingrate....It is therefore a subject of very noble inquiry, to inquire of the more subtle perceptions; for *it is another key to open nature*.<sup>1</sup>

I REMEMBER WHEN I WAS A CHILD, running through the forest that surrounded my south-eastern New Brunswick home. I would break branches, position rocks, carve shapes in the trees with a knife and leave marks in the dirt with sticks. I was marking territory, organizing Nature in such a way that it made sense to my young mind. By marking Nature, by structuring it thus and so, it became easier to navigate.

The Canadian arctic primarily consists of tundra, meaning that the soil is frozen and treeless. These plains of snow, ice, water and frozen soil are difficult to navigate and so the inhabitants have marked the land for generations with identifiable symbols known as *inuksuit* (singular: *inuksuk* or *inukshuk*) and *innunguat* (singular: *innunguaq*). The former is perhaps best known through its use in the official flag of the Canadian territory of Nunavut while the latter is probably

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<sup>1</sup> Francis Bacon, *Sylva Sylvarum, or, a natural history in ten centuries*, quoted in Murray Code, *Process, Reality, and the Power of Symbols: Thinking with A.N. Whitehead* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 28.

known mostly to non-Canadians through its recent use as the official symbol of the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics. These cairns built by the Inuit function as indicators, informing travellers of the land of danger, of thin ice, of safe places to camp, etc. Similar cairns can be found all over the world, marking burial sites, memorials, sacred places, or in the Canadian Maritimes, used to hold fire in order to function as lighthouses.

A stray cat in my neighbourhood will frequently mark his territory using scent glands in order to indicate regions where his mates live and for defending food sources. This behaviour is seen in other territorial animals in the wild, including wolves and leopards which spray urine to mark territory. These scent markings are used to convey different information, for example, to communicate in the case of the non-territorial deer or to ward off potential conflict. These pheromones can convey territorial claims, status, mood, or sexual desire.

Off the west coast of Greenland, more than thirty thousand icebergs are calved annually. These chunks of ice, ranging from a few meters in size to thousands of kilometres, then drift in the ocean, arriving off the coast of Newfoundland after approximately two years. From there they continue to break up and melt, with growlers (the smallest pieces from the iceberg) washing ashore. Tiny ecosystems of bacteria, fish and birds depend on these melting chunks of ice. Some clever apes have even had the idea of using this glacial water in the process of making beer, vodka, rum and gin. Made up of thousands of years of snowfall from the last ice age, these ice mammoths are twelve thousand years old and contain untold information of our world's history.

We're comfortable discussing communication in human-intended ways, and even to some extent in terms of animal life. It seems reasonable enough to say that a dog's bark or a bird's song *communicates* in the sense that it conveys meaning of some sort to other similar beings. Some of these forms of animal communication are even understood by humans, like when my cat cries to be fed or when one encounters



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a roaring beast in the mountains. There is still a tendency however to assume these animal forms of communication are somehow lesser than human-to-human communication, for instance via human language. Animal communication is seen as an approximation of human language, as if it were striving to become human, as if human language is perfect or even better and not simply different. In this essay, I will move farther than this, towards a general theory of communication. In opposition to *structuralism*, which I will define as a broad metaphysical tendency in contemporary philosophy and not simply as a linguistic theory, I will argue that language is a type of communication among many. Further than this however, I will present the work of Michel Serres on the subject of communication and information as part of a broader realist metaphysics. Serres remains virtually untouched by the speculative realist movement: speculative realism, in its haste to move away from the linguistic idealism that has dominated continental philosophy, has yet to approach language as a serious issue. My hope is to begin to show that a philosophy of communication or a philosophy concerned with communication is compatible with realist metaphysics. By turning to Serres, and along with him, close allies like Deleuze, Guattari and Peirce, I will present a metaphysical view that argues that communication is part of the very being of things.

Ultimately, we should attempt to understand communication not in terms of language, but as a part of what it means for something to exist. The universe is made up of *communicative beings*, the cosmos being in some way an information exchange system. This is not to reduce or equate Being with Language. Rather, communication should be thought of as how things relate to one another. Wherever there is Two, there is communication. Language is simply a subspecies of communication generally understood. This will become clear in subsequent sections as I present both one of the dominant metaphysical systems today, structuralism, with its emphasis on language and anthropocentrism, as well as the opposing view, which will be termed semiotics. While

structuralism as an historical, linguistic system is really a part of the larger philosophy of language known as semiotics, this essay will show that the metaphysical offspring of Saussure differ from those of Peirce, and it is in these offspring today that the metaphysical issues arise. From a universal theory of communication we will return to the problem of structure-as-such, or more accurately, the concept of *structuring* in order to present communication as an existential process of territory-making.

### What is Structuralism Today?

It is an honest question, both in the sense of what do we now *call* structuralism as well as in the sense of *what structuralism has become*. In the first sense, we are dealing entirely with an historical phenomenon, something which clever French thinkers had done away with by the late 1960s and which therefore has little concern for us today. We're all postmodern, post-structuralists these days. If we look at the question in the second sense though, of just what structuralism is today, then we may find that this first view is entirely wrong. Structuralism is not some jettisoned relic, it is alive and well, but it has metamorphosed from linguistics to metaphysics.

The origins of structuralism are simple enough. Beginning in 1907, Ferdinand de Saussure began giving his *Course in General Linguistics*, the work being published posthumously in 1916. From there, his work influenced thinkers like Roman Jakobson who decisively influenced both Claude Lévi-Strauss and Roland Barthes, leading to a general 'structuralist' tendency as Saussurian concepts and ideas melded with other fields (in the case of Lévi-Strauss and Barthes, anthropology and literary theory respectively). Saussure's basic insight is the *linguistic sign* as composed of both *signifier* and *signified*. The former is the phonetic designator, the word, while the latter is the conceptual object, the idea. A sign is the connection and relation of the word to the idea, the two being inseparable. The reader will note that the actual *thing* is nowhere to be found. Saussure is explicit when he says that linguistics is

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not nomenclature, that it is not simply the system by which we attach names to objects.<sup>2</sup> Rather, structuralist linguistics operates whether or not any object actually exists, working at a purely human level between speech and concepts. Signs have their own ecosystem, producing a system of pure difference: since signs have no attachment to particular real things (they are arbitrary), what they ultimately designate is their difference from other signs. What makes a thing a table has nothing to do with the actual physical constitution of the thing, simply the fact that it is not a chair, house, dog, stone, etc., etc. The system of signs that we inhabit as linguistic beings is one of alterity.

This system of alterity, of signs existing in opposition, is the linchpin of Lévi-Strauss' structural anthropology. Lévi-Strauss claims that we can read mythology structurally, in the same way we understand language systems according to Saussure. More than this, Lévi-Strauss extends structuralism across all *culture*, maintaining that human culture and society both function as symbolic systems of meaning in opposition to the meaningless chaos of nature. This truth is revealed in the fundamental structure of mythology, as evidenced in the relationship shown to exist between humans and nature in the mythology of American tribes. The clearest examples of this are given in Lévi-Strauss' *Introduction to a Science of Mythology*,<sup>3</sup> beginning with *The Raw and the Cooked*. Lévi-Strauss will tell us that the division between nature and culture begins with that of *raw* and *cooked*, where the latter has been "cultured," given relevance or meaning within the symbolic system in which we reside. Raw meat must be cooked before it can be

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<sup>2</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, eds. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehayé, trans. Roy Harris (Chicago: Open Court, 1983), 65.

<sup>3</sup> This *Introduction* spans four volumes: *The Raw and the Cooked*, *From Honey to Ashes*, *The Origin of Table Manners* and *The Naked Man*. Most of what concerns us is found in the first of these volumes, though the dichotomy of *raw* and *cooked* as a means of understanding *nature* and *culture* appears throughout the series. See for instance the further development of the *culinary triangle* in *The Origin of Table Manners*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (London: Harper & Row, 1978), 471-495.

consumed, being both literally and symbolically dangerous in its raw state: it is unpredictable and potentially harmful.<sup>4</sup> Cooking, say by curing, also allows one to stockpile meat, aiding against the unpredictable availability of those elements of nature which are consumed. This ‘culturing’ is necessary for animals in general, as evidenced by domestication, but is also the case among humans. Lévi-Strauss will tell us for instance of the example of pregnant women who are sometimes considered too ‘natural’ in their condition. After giving birth, they will be required to lie on a bed under which was a small fire, as a means of ‘cooking off’ the excess of nature.<sup>5</sup> Lévi-Strauss will also tell us of Pueblo women who would give birth over hot sand as a means to “transform the child into a ‘cooked person’—in contrast with natural creatures and natural or manufactured objects, which are ‘raw persons.’”<sup>6</sup> These are preventative measures aimed at keeping out the excess of nature, which is also true of the body. Those who need ‘cooking’ (the pregnant, the newborn, the pubescent girl) are “those deeply involved in a physiological process,”<sup>7</sup> with these bodily excesses functioning in the same role as other natural ones. Just as raw foods must be mediated by cultural cooking before they may enter the logic of society, so too must the raw body. This can work the other way as well, with someone being too cooked. Lévi-Strauss uses the example of those who have been struck by lightning, “that is, those who have been struck by celestial fire,”<sup>8</sup> who must be

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<sup>4</sup> This claim that the raw has no cultural value is also empirically false. Besides the more well-known counter-example of Japanese sashimi, Inuit hunters will regularly eat raw caribou, fish and seal. This consumption certainly has cultural value beyond the biological necessity of food and warmth. There is nothing impure or horrific in eating a freshly field dressed caribou’s liver.

<sup>5</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, trans. John and Doreen Weightman (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 335.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 335.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 336.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 337. This is because according to the logic Lévi-Strauss is working with, weather is often included as part of the celestial order (extreme culture, as it is gods and spirits who lay down the structure and laws of culture) rather

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treated with raw food. Cooking in this way also transforms the object (food, persons) in such a way as to prevent them from becoming rotten (moldy, corrupt).<sup>9</sup> Underlying the logic of raw/cooked and nature/culture, there is a logic of transformation and mediation.

It is clear from this brief summary that Lévi-Strauss is presenting us with a dichotomy between a chaotic, horrifying nature on the one hand and a safe, meaningful culture on the other. Nature is irrational, terrifying and excessive while culture is organized, structured, ordered and rational. It is only the rational human being who is able to make sense, to create meaning, out of the inherently irrational stuff of nature. The legacy of structuralism is not in the linguistics of Saussure, but in this Lévi-Straussian variant which emphasizes both this anthropocentrism and the accompanying position that nature is meaningless or somehow unorganized. When I speak of structuralism as a dominant position within continental philosophy, this is the position I mean. It is that taken up by Lévi-Strauss, Lacan, Badiou and Žižek.<sup>10</sup>

All of these thinkers are concerned with the subduing of trauma; they advocate that thought, rationality, humanity is under constant threat of being overwhelmed by a traumatic world, that we could be annihilated by it at any moment. In Lacan and Žižek this is the problem of the Real as those places where the Symbolic Order does not exist, the gaps in rationality. For Badiou, it is the overwhelming effect of the event which has the capacity to devastate the structured order of Being. The Real is both the body as well as the excess of nature.

than as part of nature.

<sup>9</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, 338-339.

<sup>10</sup> I would add that I suspect both Badiou and Žižek to be influenced by Neo-Kantians like Rickert and Cassirer, who both contend that value and meaning are purely human. This is in opposition to thinkers like Dilthey, Nietzsche, Bergson and Uexküll who contend that life is inherently meaningful or Peirce and Serres, who see meaning everywhere. Badiou and Žižek are both certainly contemporary heirs to Kantian philosophy. For more on Žižek's relation to both structuralism and Kantianism, see my forthcoming essay "The Question of Lacanian Ontology: Badiou and Žižek as Responses to Seminar XI" to appear in *The International Journal of Žižek Studies*.

This perhaps explains the antagonism between Badiou and Žižek on the one hand and Deleuze and his ‘mystic vitalists’ on the other.<sup>11</sup> This theme of trauma dominates structuralist metaphysics, including their appropriation of Descartes, who is made to discuss the topology of the unconscious, as well as their devotion to Kant (giving new, terrifying substance to the *thing-in-itself* that would cause even Schopenhauer to have nightmares). It is only within the rational, human realm that there is meaning and order; outside of this human-exclusive, Symbolic realm of culture, language and Being, there is nothing but excessive meaninglessness. This is also why structuralism is the true heir of Kantianism today: it is not the case that there is nothing outside of humanity, but that whatever is outside of us is not communicable except in recoil. Like Kantianism, structuralism maintains that there is a structuring apparatus, something which orders the world, and in both cases, it is the human being. The only structure to be found in the world is supplied by the human, either through the rational mind or language. Society/culture/humanity is not grounded in nature (Aristotle), but as Badiou will say of politics, “is a supernatural event.”<sup>12</sup> This view of humanity as fundamentally alienated from the natural world is clear enough in the above description of Lévi-Strauss, seen most recently in Žižek’s writings on ecology, with his image of nature being some terrifying mess that we can’t even begin to comprehend, and extends at least as far back as Rousseau. In Rousseau’s *Second Discourse* for instance he will tell us that humanity existed in a perpetual state of fear prior to the event of human society and culture.<sup>13</sup> All of nature is alien

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<sup>11</sup> Badiou distinguishes between philosophies of life (Bergson, Deleuze, Foucault) and philosophies of the concept (Lévi-Strauss, Althusser, Lacan), maintaining that he belongs to this latter group. See Alain Badiou, “The Adventure of French Philosophy” available online at <http://lacan.com/badenglish.htm> as well as Badiou’s *Logics of Worlds*, trans. Alberto Toscano (London: Continuum, 2008), 7-8.

<sup>12</sup> Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, 2006), 345.

<sup>13</sup> Jean-Jacques Rousseau, “Essay on the Origin of Languages,” in *The Col-*

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and unfamiliar to “savage man” until he or she is able to apply names to things, to create “meaningful signs,”<sup>14</sup> that is to say, the human being divorces itself violently from the chaos of nature when finally able to create a stable environment in the womb of language.

Few thinkers exert as much influence on the contemporary terrain of continental philosophy as Lacan, Badiou and Žižek. The logic of structure is perhaps the central point of Lacanian structural psychoanalysis, from his early writings on the mirror phase to his late writings on topology, knot theory and locks. As I have argued elsewhere,<sup>15</sup> Lacan’s work moves essentially from the problem of structuralism to *structure-as-such*. What he is interested in at a fundamental level is the structure of relation and the logic of signs. His work in the 1970s that appears so alien is the logical conclusion of his initial inquiries. While it seems the dominant reading of Lacan is one in which language is given centrality, this is not really the case at all. When Lacan said famously that the unconscious is structured like a language, this is often interpreted to mean that we should view the world as a language, in much the same way many read Derrida’s “there is nothing outside the text” as a sign of linguistic idealism, of reducing the world purely to our linguistic grasp of it. What Lacan really means by this famous phrase is simple that the unconscious is *structured*. The unconscious is structured, just as language is also structured. All along, Lacan is interested in *structure*. The problem for Lacan is really his structuralist heritage, from which he is never able to escape. His view of *structure-as-such* is shadowed even in the late works by structural linguistics and the Lévi-Straussian structuralist myth which says that the human being only comes into being in

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*lected Writings of Rousseau* Vol. 7, trans. John T. Scott (Hanover and London: University Press of New England, 1998), 294.

<sup>14</sup> Rousseau, “Essay on the Origin of Languages,” 290.

<sup>15</sup> What follows is a brief summary of my above-referenced essay “The Question of Lacanian Ontology: Badiou and Žižek as Responses to *Seminar XI*” where I raise the issue of *structure* in Lacan, Badiou and Žižek. Interested readers are encouraged to consult this essay as a means of fleshing out the issue.



the origin of language, that in the primal utterance the human is ripped from the horror of nature and forever wrapped in the net of signification. This is why the Real, even as it is further investigated in the seminars of the 1960s appears as either excess or lack, is always encountered as a trauma. The fascinating aspect of Lacan's topological studies is that they are united by the centrality of lack, the torus, the Mobius strip, they are all empty. They are structured entirely on this gap.

Alain Badiou's metaphysics share in this Lacanian structure, his mathematical ontology being structured on a gap, on the nothingness of the event. The importance of structure really shows itself in Badiou's *Logics of Worlds*, through his discussion of *appearance*. Badiou is concerned with the logic of presentation, of how existence shows itself. It is a *revelatory act*, an unfolding or unveiling. It is essentially a reworking of the concepts which make up the subject of German Idealism, as the subject of freedom is transformed into the mathematical function, with its own logic of necessary unfolding.<sup>16</sup> For Fichte, the world is the necessary unfolding of freedom, with the construction and positing of the object by the subject as a necessary hindrance to be overcome in the name of universal justice, while for Hegel history is the revelation of *Geist* before itself. What is key for both thinkers is the *necessity* of such grand presentations, which is also the case for Badiou. In his discussion of Leibniz for instance, we discover that one of the points of agreement between Badiou and Leibniz is on the *impossibility of nothingness*, at least as it is usually understood.<sup>17</sup> This is a point which provides us with a new understanding of *Being and Event*, where it seems that *being* and *event* are other names for *existence* and *nothingness*. We

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<sup>16</sup> I want to thank James Bradley for helping me to understand this concept through discussions of Fichte, Hegel, Frege and Whitehead. I have also made use of his "The Generalization of the Function: A Speculative Analysis," in (ed.) Guy Debrock, *Process Pragmatism: Essays on a Quiet Philosophical Revolution*, (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2003), 71-86; "The Speculative Generalization of the Function: A Key to Whitehead," *Tijdschrift voor Filosofie*, vol. 64 (2002): 253-271; as well as the unpublished essay "Intuitive Knowledge—Of What?"

<sup>17</sup> Badiou, *Logics of Worlds*, 328-329.

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learn here that they are closer to *appearance* and *possibility*. The void of the event is an injection of possibility into a world of necessity, allowing for novelty to arise out of a system of the same.<sup>18</sup> Events are moments of contingency. From these bursts of possibility arise new situations, new worlds, as they appear and present themselves, unfolding from possibility to actuality. Appearances follow the same necessary structure as freedom and *Geist* for Fichte and Hegel, but are secularized and modeled on machines, following Frege and Wittgenstein on *functions*.<sup>19</sup> A function is an automatic transformation. A machine or equation receives input and transforms it according to the assigned function. A function is a system of mapping, an appearance or representation, but always a transformation. Events serve as sites of transformation, of appearances possibilities, and the unpacking or actualizing of these possibilities.

Truth-procedures are truth-functions, serving as singular sites of productive transformation. As John Mullarkey has pointed out however, events for Badiou are always only ever human-events.<sup>20</sup> Events and subjects are equiprimordial. Since structure arises through the unfolding of events through faithful subjects, then structure arises only as a consequence of human activity and existence. Badiou will maintain that the arrival of politics is a supernatural event (and we could add that the same is true for science, art and love) but we must remember the supernatural is not the divine, it is simply another word for 'the human,' which stands as a traumatic

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<sup>18</sup> The subject is alienated for Badiou, but unlike Lévi-Strauss, this isn't because of the inherent traumatic churning of the world. The world appears traumatic to the Badiouian subject in its *unchanging nature*. Being, Nature, never changes according to Badiou, but is smooth, static. Novelty cannot arise naturally, but must come from *elsewhere*. Such creative capacity exists only in the human being.

<sup>19</sup> For Frege, functions refer to 'unsaturated entities.' For instance, concepts are 'unsaturated' until they are actualized in an object. While this references a correspondence theory of truth and knowledge, it also gives us a structure with an emphasis on mapping and naming, central for Badiou.

<sup>20</sup> John Mullarkey, *Post-Continental Philosophy: An Outline* (London: Continuum, 2007), 104-106.

break with the rest of the universe and all of history. We get glimpses of this when he discusses his allegiance to Rousseau and Descartes, both of whom become mouthpieces for the structuralist myth, telling us of the fundamentally alienated existence of the human being as speaking, thinking things in a world devoid of sense. Non-human reality, whether it be the brutality of nature or the secret will in the heart of the mind, present themselves, thrust themselves upon us in an unending series of traumas. The only escape from a senseless world for Badiou's subjects is through continual re-invention, unending novelty in the utopian quest for a more perfect world, a more beautiful art, a grasp of the workings of reality, and the comfort of love. Like Fichte, Badiou presents us with this quest as optimistic and hopeful, failing to see the tragedy of the search, and the fact that reality may not be so human-centered or traumatic as he would have us believe.

Žižek is concerned primarily with this traumatic aspect of reality, finding it at the heart of subjectivity as well as outside of it! Žižek's writings are almost entirely wrapped up with his fascination for the Real, from his works on subjectivity (*The Ticklish Subject, The Parallax View*), to those on German Idealism (*The Indivisible Remainder, Tarrying With the Negative*), and his reading of film (*How to Read Lacan, The Fright of Real Tears*). Žižek is concerned with the limits of perception and coherence. He revels in those things which break with our ability to grasp and comprehend, seeing such moments as glimmers of insight into reality, not to mention his fascination with both video games and quantum theory for their ability to show this lack of structure beyond a certain point. In the case of the former, he will frequently address the limitations of three dimensional programming, that in a video game, no matter how realistic, there are places one cannot go simply because they have not been programmed into the game. In the case of quantum physics, he will stress the fact that at a certain point the universe stops making sense, as if God created the world like we create video games, with their being a point at which the creator shrugs his shoulders and assumes there to be a point where the user/creature will not

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be able to go. Žižek will joke for instance that God assumed we would never be clever enough to look inside an atom so at that point there is just some junk that makes no sense.<sup>21</sup> The Real presents itself always as horrifying, either as excessive junk, as that which does not belong, or as a gap from which we recoil.<sup>22</sup>

Is this the case though? Is the world meaningless without us? Let us recall the examples which opened this discussion and the plethora of meaning-conveyors conjured. From the structuralist perspective, some of these examples function as carriers of meaning, specifically those of human origin or those able to be brought into the realm of humanity. Surely things *don't mean anything* to my cat in the same way they mean something to me. Or if we want to say that Pickles the cat is able to grasp any sort of meaning it is only on the level of instinct. We could say perhaps that edible items have meaning for him, that certain smells attract his attention in so far as he perceives them to be edible. Things like computers, cairns or cookbooks don't factor into his life in the slightest. The question then becomes, what exactly are these items to him? Are they anything? The structuralist model only speaks of human interaction with that which has been made human, that which is outside of the human sphere appears only as meaningless, chaotic or traumatic. According to the structuralist, *structure only arises via the human*, whether through language, rationality, or truth-procedures.

Structuralism remains undefined within speculative realist discourse. Badiou and Žižek are lumped together with countless others as 'materialists' but this is problematic for several

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<sup>21</sup> See for instance the chapter titled "Quantum Physics with Lacan" in Žižek's *The Indivisible Remainder: On Schelling and Related Matters* (London: Verso, 1996), as well as "The Fear of Four Words: A Modest Plea for The Hegelian Reading of Christianity" in Slavoj Žižek and John Millbank's *The Monstrosity of Christ: Paradox or Dialectic?*, ed. Creston Davis (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2009).

<sup>22</sup> The clearest examples of the Real in Žižek are the analysis of the Kinder Surprise in *The Puppet and the Dwarf: The Perverse Core of Christianity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2003), 145, and his reading of Ridley Scott's *Alien* in *How to Read Lacan*, available online at <http://www.lacan.com/zizalien.htm>.

reasons. For one thing, materialism remains a very difficult school to define, spanning thousands of years and competing iterations. The form of materialism they embody is really a reactive one, positioning itself in opposition to the perceived idealism of postmodernity, but itself remaining within the purview of post-Kantian critical philosophy. It could also be said that Badiou and Žižek represent a form of correlationism and should be dismissed from the realist discussion out of hand. I think this designation is dubious at best and possibly flat-out wrong. If we take correlationism to be the position defined by epistemological limitations, specifically concerning knowledge of things-in-themselves, then I contend that we cannot simply lump Badiou and Žižek with Kant, Husserl, Hegel or Heidegger as either weak or strong correlationists. The weak correlationist defends an agnostic position, claiming that while things-in-themselves very well could exist, we cannot know anything about them and so cannot maintain a position of knowledge one way or the other, neither claiming they exist (realism) nor that they do not (strong correlationism). The structuralist position is quasi-realist or possibly even transcendently realist depending on how strong the claims are made. Things have existence in-themselves for the structuralist, and we have experiences of them, it is simply the case that our knowledge of things without us is meaningless; we know only traumatic experiences. We could then distinguish two possible positions within structuralism, the first would contend that the world is simply traumatic, that existence outside of the human realm is really horrifying and that human culture serves a therapeutic function to allow us to maintain our rationality or even our sanity. The other, weaker position, is that the world *appears* traumatic, but is not traumatic *as such*.<sup>23</sup> This latter position would contend that it is only traumatic to cross from the human-realm to the non-human, and it is likely that a crossover in the other direction would seem just as traumatic. I should stress that

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<sup>23</sup> A third position is also possible, that of absurdism. From this perspective, all is horror.

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this is not an arbitrary distinction, nor is the category of structuralism an arbitrary designator. This view of that which is most real as traumatic and/or meaningless is emerging both within speculative realism as well as outside of this contemporary group, among many forms of materialism, some scientific naturalists, and those who claim influence from psychoanalysis.

My contention is that both aspects within structuralism are wrong-headed, that the split posited by structuralism, the rift between nature and culture, does not exist, nor is the world ever experienced by any being as traumatic. There are then two things at issue for us now: First, we should question this traumatic structure that the structuralists maintain is constitutive of reality, and second, we should question whether or not this structure is applicable to other beings, or whether it is not the case that communication and structure are part of the reality of non-human entities as well. Is the world nothing but pure, incoherent sensation for Pickles as structuralism tells us, or does he inhabit a world filled with meaningful objects? Beyond this, what is the world *for the objects*?

### Against Anthropocentrism

I spend a lot of time thinking about animals. Growing up, my family always had dogs. After a couple of years with a parrot and several fish, I now have cats and my girlfriend and I foster kittens, taking them in and finding them homes. Besides this, we've also rescued stray or abandoned cats. It becomes very difficult, having spent my whole life surrounded by animals of different sorts, to imagine how Descartes or Heidegger among others, not to mention their innumerable followers, could see these creatures as deficient, mechanical, or without world. For our purposes, this boils down ultimately to saying that animals exist without meaning, both in the sense that they are simply mechanical physiology as well as the sense that they experience no meaning in the world. How could my childhood dog Jasper not find meaning in the world, this animal who mourned the death of my mother as much as I did,

who was changed by this event, affected by it until her own death years later?<sup>24</sup> How can so many claim that animals, not to mention non-living entities, have no world, no meaning?

There is a tradition which stands in opposition to structuralism, itself a metaphysical system with strong roots in the philosophy of language. In opposition to the anthropocentrism of structuralism, *semiotics* presents a system of *universal meaning*. For our purposes, I am using semiotics in this looser, metaphysical way, to include thinkers like C.S. Peirce, Jakob von Uexküll, Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, and Michel Serres. What these thinkers have in common is an extension of meaning beyond the human world. More than this, these thinkers all see the importance of structure for non-human beings. As we will see, some of these thinkers go further than others: while some semioticians will limit meaning as a category to the living, others will see it as a universal system of meaning and communication. In the next section, I will explore examples of attempts to move structure and communication beyond the human (and beyond the scope of structuralism), but which for different reasons fail to fully universalize them as ontological categories. In the final section, we will approach a truly universal theory of communication.

In order to understand this theory of communication, we must attempt to rethink the concepts of structure, sense and territory. These three concepts are closely related, possibly essentially so. While it is indisputable that human beings structure their world through language, concepts, culture or politics, I contend that this structuring is an existential feature of all beings and is not a privilege of being human. This way of seeing structure will come from our reconsideration of sense or meaning. By *sense* I mean something like *affect*, but stripped of the necessary implications of *power*. It is closer perhaps to *signal*, with its own relation to *noise* being essential to our study. Communication is vague, with signals emerging

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<sup>24</sup> There are of course many examples of animals mourning, notably elephants, who react strongly to elephant bones when encountered, and chimps who appear to comfort their dying relatives and mourn them when they have passed on.



## Speculations II

from the clamour of noise surrounding things. Sense is the combination of signal and noise. Sense is directed outward towards other beings, who then structure it into cohesive sense systems, creating the category of *territory*. Communication is thus the process of creating territory by structuring sense and signals. Territory is any structured ecosystem of signs and sense. This conceptual outline is the base structure of existence, as all existents are communicative beings that project outward their very existence in a show of noise.<sup>25</sup>

Jakob von Uexküll presents us with a significant attempt to escape the problem of anthropocentrism when it comes to meaning and communication. His biosemiotics, along with what could be described as an animal phenomenology, gives us an idea of how meaning operates amongst the non-human, as he finds that all living things relate to objects and forces on the level of *significance*. That is to say, living beings grasp objects as carriers of meaning, rather than simply in terms of mechanical response to stimuli. The mechanist position is the chief antagonist for Uexküll, as the mechanist sees no meaning operating in non-human animals, nor do they allow for the category of environment (life-world, *Umwelt*)<sup>26</sup> in the realm of the non-human, which he sees as essential to the understanding of all animals. Animals are more than simple causal means, but use judgment and affect and interact with objects, that is to say, they are *subjects* in the sense usually reserved for humans. Just as our subjectivity is connected to our sense-perception and our central nervous system, but is not thereby limited by it, so too are all living things, but this does not mean that animal subjectivity is identical to human subjectivity. A spider, a parrot, a cat and a person are all subjects for Uexküll, but we operate within different worlds of meaning because different objects are meaningful in different ways depending on our physiology, evolution and history.

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<sup>25</sup> We will come to say that communication is an expression of existence, an attribute of existents.

<sup>26</sup> Jakob von Uexküll, *A Foray Into the Worlds of Animals and Humans, with A Theory of Meaning*, trans. Joseph D. O'Neil (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 41-43.

Uexküll will use the example of a room of objects as grasped by a human being, a dog, and a fly.<sup>27</sup> All three beings grasp the same room, but do so differently, detecting different ‘tones’ or ‘shades’ in the objects which make up this environment. Picture a room containing a table with plates and glasses atop it, with chairs, a couch, a bookcase filled with books, a lamp and a small angled writing desk. The human being sees meaning in the environment as such: seating maintains a sitting shade; the table a food shade; the plates and glasses, eating and drinking shades respectively; the desk a writing shade; the bookcase and books a reading shade; the lamp a lighting shade; the floor a walking shade; and finally the walls appears as obstacle shades. The dog will grasp the objects for sitting, the floor for walking, the lamp as a source of light, and the plates and glasses as sources of food and drink, with the other objects appearing only as obstacles. The fly however sees the light source and the food sources as unique objects, with all else appearing as a possible surface for walking. Each creature encounters a world of meaning, the meaning simply shifts from creature to creature. From this view then, Pickles the cat encounters meaning in the world, contra the structuralist position, but he does not encounter the same meaning that I do. This is why he will happily walk across my keyboard or sleep on my books, while I see productivity and reading tones in such objects. The overall point being that Pickles encounters an environment made up of objects and not some mad flurry of light and sound. The two positions are phenomenologically at odds with one another.

Like Kant, Uexküll maintains that form is relational. In the Transcendental Aesthetic, Kant will distinguish between the matter and form of appearance<sup>28</sup> with the former corresponding to *sensation* and the latter being that which allows an appearance to be so ordered. There is then a distinction in the realm of appearances between the raw sensation and

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<sup>27</sup> Von Uexküll, *A Foray...*, 96-98.

<sup>28</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Norman Kemp Smith (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), A20/B34.

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the ordering of that sensation by human cognition, devising meaning, *making sense* of the situation. Specifically, form arises, sensations are ordered, by the formal intuitions of space and time. Uexküll parts company with Kant on the basis of his anthropocentrism, that it is *human cognition* (viz. intuition) which provides form. Intuition is the experience of sensation as a complex unity, an experience of sense as organized all at once into a single object of experience.<sup>29</sup> The animal's environment, according to Uexküll has this same Kantian feature, viz. the appearance as a unified world. The animal is not bombarded with a kaleidoscope of sense data, responding to the barrage out of pure survival instinct. Rather, the animal encounters a world made up of objects, carriers of meaning, which it then navigates and interacts with. All Uexküllian animals are Kantian subjects.<sup>30</sup>

The problem I find with Uexküll's otherwise admirable attempt to move beyond anthropocentrism, is that he remains committed to the idea that the categories of meaning and life are forever married. While certainly an improvement on the Neo-Kantian inspired structuralist position outlined above which maintains that meaning is only to be found in the human constructed worlds of language, culture and politics, Uexküll is trapped in a fantasy that sees not only easy divisions in regards to who or what possesses an *Umwelt* (a hermit crab does but a sea anemone does not for instance), based first on a distinction between animal and non-animal ("there are no carriers of meaning for the plant"<sup>31</sup>), then connected to various iterations of a nervous system. In other words, subjectivity is conditional on various biological factors, and is limited to a select number of beings. While I too maintain that cats and dogs are subjects, I would extend subjectivity, in the sense of organizing and interpreting information or

<sup>29</sup> Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, A32/B47.

<sup>30</sup> Von Uexküll, *A Foray...*, 52.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 146. While the plant encounters no meaning, it still has a dwelling-world since it lives and therefore experiences stimuli to some extent. My contention is that this is still *meaningful* if we reconsider what it means for something to experience meaning.

sense, to all objects. This does not make all objects identical, nor does it make them ethically equal, it is simply to state that all things experience and organize on some level. We will return to this premise in the final section when developing a universal metaphysical system of communication, we will first continue our assessment of anti-structuralist theories of meaning and communication.

Gilles Deleuze presents us with a complicated case when it comes to structuralism, structure and meaning. On the surface, he feels revolutionary, standing against the sea of post-Kantian, post-phenomenological linguistic philosophy that dominated 20<sup>th</sup> century continental thought. While I will readily embrace Deleuze as a realist metaphysician and as a significant figure, there are serious issues with his work when it comes to our present study. First, his relationship to structuralism is not cut and dry. We would perhaps instinctively say that Deleuze stands opposed to the structuralist movement since he feels very much to be against the linguistic turn, but this would be to ignore the frequent references to structuralist thinkers in his writings. The first two works written in ‘his own voice,’ *Difference and Repetition* and *The Logic of Sense* are rife with references to Lacan, Lévi-Strauss and Saussure, all positive references. *Anti-Oedipus*, often thought to be a break with Freudo-Lacanian psychoanalytic theory praises Lacan, and nods to Lévi-Strauss’ early work on kinship. Guattari himself remained always a Lacanian, albeit a heterodox one (much as Lacan was a heterodox Freudian). Deleuze’s position on the philosophy of language seems to teeter between ‘undisclosed’ or ‘inexistent’ on the one hand and outright praise for structuralist theory on the other, the only criticism coming up in *A Thousand Plateaus* as the two thinkers move closer to a semiotic stance. In *The Logic of Sense*, Deleuze seems to readily accept the alien quality of language, that it is apart or distinct from bodies.<sup>32</sup> These earlier (pre-Guattari) works seem to be providing an ontology to compliment structural-

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<sup>32</sup> See for instance Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester with Charles Stivale (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 23-27.

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ism, tackling the concepts of sense and non-sense, identity and difference, structure and genesis, the very concepts that underlie the work of Saussure, Lévi-Strauss and Lacan.

This Deleuzian ontology itself remains antagonistic to the universal system of meaning that I am attempting to outline. It seems odd to say and remains counter-intuitive, but Deleuze is far too reductionist for the study of things with which we are presently engaged. The task at hand is to understand the attributes of existents, the essential qualities of all beings, or said another way, the uncovering of what it means for things to exist. One of the significant prongs of this study is a theory of communication, along with a study of *conatus* and causation. Deleuze allows for no such complex study of things, his ontology being composed of nothing but bodies and force, with the former being the constitution or actualization of the latter.<sup>33</sup> The bird of prey is the will to kill the lamb and cannot be otherwise.<sup>34</sup> Deleuzian ontology is the relation of forces on one another, active and reactive, creativity and affect being other common terms for the same principle: reality is, at bottom, a swirling mass of forces which align themselves in bodies and assemblages. This reduction means that communication is always tinged with the taste of power. My chief contention is that communication exists as an expression of existence, and that to exist means more than to will, or perhaps that 'to will' cannot be reduced to force.

Of course Deleuze and Guattari approach something akin to our proposed project in their discussion of codes and coding. In *Anti-Oedipus* however, this remains under the sway of structuralist linguistics. Codes remain signs in the structuralist sense.<sup>35</sup> It isn't until *A Thousand Plateaus*

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<sup>33</sup> "Every relationship of forces constitutes a body—whether it is chemical, biological, social or political. Any two forces, being unequal, constitute a body as soon as they enter into a relationship." Gilles Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinsons (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 40.

<sup>34</sup> Deleuze, *Nietzsche and Philosophy*, 122-123.

<sup>35</sup> "The nature of the signs within [the code] is insignificant, as these signs have little or nothing to do with what supports them." Gilles Deleuze and

when language is connected to the early Deleuze's work on expression and affect in any meaningful way. Here we learn for instance that language (semiology, regime of signs) is simply one mode of expression among many, "and not the most important one."<sup>36</sup> Here we are told (finally) that signs should not be privileged above other modes of expression because all signs are simply signs of other signs which refer not to things, but simply to other signs.<sup>37</sup> This critique of structuralist linguistics is compromised however when Deleuze and Guattari make a seemingly fundamental distinction between content and expression, bodies and events. While content and expression are on the same plane (flat ontology), Deleuze and Guattari write as if the relation between the two is haphazard and unnecessary, as if *bodies are not expressive*. Of course they are; there is a necessary connection between objects (taken in the broadest possible sense) and their own expressivity. The qualities of things and the interaction of objects *express something about existence*, about what it means for that thing to be what it is. It is not enough to maintain that "forms of content and forms of expression" operate "in the other."<sup>38</sup> What this ultimately means is that there are two orders of things, bodies and language, and that while they interact on some level and impact each other, they remain fundamentally different. What I am instead saying is that language as a form of communication is derivative of things (causal expression, qualities are unleashed by the thing) but also that they attain some level of autonomy once expressed. That is to say, expressive objects cause new objects to arise in the form of autonomous sense-objects or signals.

There are two thinkers we should turn to in order to see how to fully oppose structuralism, C.S. Peirce and Michel Serres.

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Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 38.

<sup>36</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 111.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 112.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

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Both Peirce and Serres present us with a metaphysical priority placed on communication and relation, while opposing both the therapeutic view of order and the anthropocentrism of structuralism. Both thinkers remain outside of the purview of speculative realism, neither included as realists, nor excluded as correlationists, but simply unknown, like a continent lying dormant just out of view and waiting to be explored, excavated and re-inhabited. Consider this the first transmission from this foreign land.

Peircian semiotics open us to a world of significance, a presentation of the cosmos in which all things are continually engaged in the exchange of information. His triadic structure of object, sign and interpretant give us a way of understanding not only human language, but the structure of all relations, from epistemology and the human mind, to causality and the relation of material things to one another. Like Graham Harman, Peirce maintains that all relations are mediated, and that all things are capable of playing either of the three roles of semiotics depending on the circumstances. Unlike structuralist linguistics (and its offspring in deconstruction and, arguably, hermeneutics), signs have a real relation to the things they represent. While Saussure claims that all language and communication is based on the structure of signifier-signified (word-concept), Peirce will emphasize that the sign is an expression of the object, which is always vague and never entirely expressible.<sup>39</sup> It is this vagueness inherent in the object which means the sign is more an expression of it than a representation. Communication is about the activity of expression and not repetition, copying, or representing. Rather, a sign stands for the thing,<sup>40</sup> representing the thing in a similar way to the way our politicians represent a whole swathe of people, even those who did not vote for them and do not agree with them. Put another way, the sign mediates

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<sup>39</sup> C.S. Peirce, *Collected Papers: Volume 8*, ed. Arthur E. Burks (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), 314.

<sup>40</sup> C.S. Peirce, *Collected Papers: Volume 2*, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), 228.



between object and interpretant, standing in for the thing imperfectly. Signs invite interpretation through their vague nature, signs being only possibilities for the thing which is itself irreducible to any particular presentation, signification or interpretation. It should be noted as well that interpretation as Peirce uses it is not reserved for human minds, but exists outside “the psychological or accidental human element.”<sup>41</sup> There is an immense power at the heart of Peircian objects, as they exceed all nomination through the power of resistance,<sup>42</sup> but also cultivate meaning through all interaction, conveying sense and information. Something as seemingly basic as brute physical interaction is really an information exchange, as trajectory, speed and location translate into new possibilities and meaning for the objects that collide, interacting at certain levels and ignoring others.

Peirce may feel stodgy when compared to the more contemporary Uexküll, but the former is superior in his semiotics precisely because he does not affix the prefix *bio-* to his task. Peirce sees communication and semiosis occurring in and between all things, including the working of matter and the laws of nature. Unlike Uexküll, Peirce does not suggest that communication happens only among higher organisms, denying meaning to a tree simply because it has no nervous system. The wind does indeed have meaning for the tree, it conveys information, and expresses something that the tree then receives, and the wind encounters something significant in the tree as well, namely resistance. This physical interaction operates through signs and interpretation just as much as humans and language do.

Michel Serres is perhaps the most under-rated thinker in contemporary metaphysics, presenting us with an incredible depth and holding a unique position today among metaphysicians by emphasizing communication and relation above all else. Not only this, but he gives us a clear philosophy of

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<sup>41</sup> C.S. Peirce, *Collected Papers: Volume 1*, ed. Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1960), 537.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 419.



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communication that does not fall into the correlationist/anthropocentrist trap of maintaining that reality is directed at human beings. Instead, he gives us a thoroughly realist metaphysics, as evidenced in his dialogue *Angels: A Modern Myth*, where Pia will respond to Pantope's charge that "Humans are the only beings that communicate with language" with

That's rather arrogant! Dolphins and bees communicate, and so do ants, and winds, and currents in the sea. Living things and inert things bounce off each other unceasingly; there would be no world without this inter-linking web of relations, a billion times interwoven.<sup>43</sup>

Pia goes on to say that for the Ancients, angels (carriers of information, transmitters of meaning) often took the forms of humans, but also "resembled waves, winds, the sparkling of light, or twinkling constellations"<sup>44</sup> going on to include contemporary technology. To easily divide between human subjects and mere objects is to ignore the structure of reality. Pia uses several examples, one of the clearest being a group of children playing with a ball. It is not the case that the children manipulate the ball, forcing it to conform to their rules like all-knowing subjects, rather, the best players know that they must anticipate the ball's movements, that it is the ball that determines the game, and structures the game as well as unites the team, creating a new unit. "It is the ball that is playing."<sup>45</sup> Furthermore, it is only the world of objects that give rise to the very idea of 'subjectivity,' produced by "biros, writing desks, tables, books, diskettes, consoles, memories," with Serres noting that "certain objects in this world write and think."<sup>46</sup> Against the narrow anthropocentric view that dominates much of continental philosophy, Serres insists that subjectivity (if we can continue to use that word) is found

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<sup>43</sup> Michel Serres, *Angels: A Modern Myth*, trans. Francis Cowper, ed. Philippa Hurd (New York: Flammarion, 1995), 47.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 48, 50.

throughout the universe and can be seen in the exchange and organization of information.<sup>47</sup>

Objects grasp order in a sea of noise, navigating a bustling universe and selectively embracing qualities and things which they can relate to. Comparable to music, which can jar someone who is not used to certain styles (like the free jazz of Ornette Coleman), it can be difficult to detect any sort of order and not simply be overwhelmed by a churning ocean of nonsensical noise. But the ear can grow to appreciate such music if it does not already, over time developing a taste for the seeming chaos that is filled with creativity, power, emotion and meaning. For Serres, the cosmos is a bustling cloud, with all things generating swarms and storms of information, the excess of meaning gathering in “innumerable murmuring multitudes.”<sup>48</sup> Returning to the example of music, Serres will speak of the seeming chaos of a universe overflowing with angels, bumbling and bumping into each other, occupying all space, noting that angels are also the keepers of order, presenting them as a union of opposites. “They are invisible and visible, silent and thunderous, concealed and light-bearing,” both creating order out of chaos in their communication, their music, their message-bearing, as well as destroying that order, “unstitch[ing] harmony.”<sup>49</sup> The universe is made up of both chaos and order, with Serres arguing that it is possible to see the world as either good and ordered or evil and chaotic, or, as he holds, as both as well as seeing the movement between these two extremes.<sup>50</sup> The myth of angels allows us to better understand our world, providing not only theological insight, but social and (meta)physical as well. The world of contemporary physics is both chaotic *and* ordered, the human body and consciousness are the same. Things are neither entirely fluid and dynamic, nor are they old-timey unchanging substances. Like light, angels are both particle (solid, ordered)

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 51-52.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 88.

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and wave (transient, chaotic). This is how we should begin to think objects; things are neither reducible to their subatomic structures, nor are they entirely fixed, but possess properties of both simultaneously. Objects strive for unity while being pulled apart from all sides by those things around them. Or is it the other way around, with objects striving for dissolution but everywhere being formed into unities by their relations? We need a “philosophy of communication” to understand the networks and noise, the order and chaos of the cosmos.<sup>51</sup>

The call to an understanding of noise, the reference to the concept of chaos, succeeds for Serres for two important reasons. He neither references noise and chaos as synonyms for horror or trauma (structuralism), nor engages in a reductionism whereby *everything* is shown to be nothing more than noise, chaos or flux (Deleuze). Noise is “in the subject” and “in the object,” in “the transmitter and in the receiver, in the entire space of the channel.”<sup>52</sup> In this way, the noise of existence echoes in and out of things, allowing for meaning to rise up from the churning sea and rain down on the solid land of substance. The world is made up of different kinds of things just as language is made up of different kinds of words: unchanging nouns stand firm in their substance, able to take on all change in the shape of verbs and adjectives while remaining what they are just as I remain who I am despite my location or garb; while in between these solid masses of land flow prepositions, appearing and disappearing in an instance as they magically flutter and transform their surroundings, like angels, elves and elementals in the Renaissance, bursting into being and giving rise to movement and meaning.<sup>53</sup> These objects remain invisible to most; like fairies and goblins, their importance remains unseen, as wind and time affect the world of things like apparitions. Objects can function, like angels, on the level of “transparent abstraction and of visible

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<sup>51</sup> Michel Serres, *Angels*, 93.

<sup>52</sup> Michel Serres, *Genesis*, trans. Geneviève James and James Nielson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 61.

<sup>53</sup> Serres, *Angels*, 140.

concreteness.”<sup>54</sup> Angels work to unify and stitch together a world of significance, connecting networks and things of different kinds: artistic, scientific, physical, imaginary, human, animal, neurological, sexual, living and non-living.

With this lineage of thinkers in mind, both the agreeable and the disagreeable, we should begin to construct a philosophy of communication that does justice to the world. Meaning and sense flow from things, between things, washing over them. Sense pours forth from things, expressing their inner lives, the way a volcano, in spewing ash, rock and lava, overflows, revealing the molten core at the heart of the planet. While appearing dormant, our world is overflowing with inner activity, with combustion and productive desire. Clouds of ash signal the awakening of the volcano-thing, revealing dangerous new possibilities, unveiling the existence of the towering being for what it is, and always has been. In this same way, my speech, gestures and style *express* something of my inner life. Expressivity is not confined to the realm of human beings, as all animals, even cats named Pickles, can't help but express something of their being in the *act of being*. More than this, we should rethink what it means for something to exist along these lines, taking it not to be some simple and singular light-switch activity of presence or absence, but see existence as the activity of future presencing. What this means is that *to exist* means to *exist temporally*, with an eye to future existence, and existing in such a way as to maximize this possibility by resisting extinction. Physical and imaginary things resist and persist. I exist above and beyond my relations, not because of some withdrawal at the heart of my being, but because I am always in excess to them, generating more noise than other beings can make sense of. The very fact of my existence means I am a productive being, transmitting noise which is interpreted as containing signals (is organized) by different beings in different ways. To other humans, I exhibit significance in the form of moods, intentions, words, feelings, beliefs, ideas, and so on. My existence is meaningful in a different way to a

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 163.

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cat and different still if that cat is a beloved pet or a frightful stray. Beyond this, my physical being contains meaning in its brute physicality: when I type on my keyboard or grip a pen I am making sense to these things. The pen grasps physical causality and responds through movement (say by writing smoothly) or by resistance (in refusing to break when force is applied to it). Meaning is not limited to poetry and art or to rhetoric and song, but exists in the interaction of any two entities, from the light between the sun and a flower to waves crashing against rocks to a song between performer and audience. This excess is in no way frightening or traumatic; I don't need to be shielded from the fact that an elephant or tornado interact with a house differently than I do. We also cannot say that outside of my relation to things lies meaninglessness. Pickles the cat clearly interacts with things in a way that makes sense to him. He does not engage in random acts, but understands the world of objects in a way different than I do. Likewise, a rock interacts with things on a different level than I do, existing as a purely physical being, but engaged with a world in a meaningful way nonetheless.

Put simply, we have the following structure to communication: Objects generate noise around them, buzzing with possibilities. Other objects, in interacting with the thing, grasp part of this noise, finding signals of sense in the atmosphere of objects. When I hear sounds, I listen, I am trying to organize this flurry in such a way that it makes sense, and in this rumble I may very well find music twinkling amongst the excess of sound. In the same way, a physical interaction occurs on one level, force. When a ball collides with another, the balls interact only with that that makes sense to them, physicality. The smell or colour of the ball has no meaning, while the size, shape, speed and direction are meaningful attributes to such a happening. Objects interact on this level of signals, while ignoring the rest as simple background noise. In this way, I interact with other people on different levels depending on our relationship, be it that of teacher-student, parent-child, significant others, friends or acquaintances. These other possibilities exist only as noise around the significant relationship in

question, giving rise to its very possibility by generating the noise which is so ordered in the first place. The noise generated by one object is organized, signals are found, by another object. From this, networks of relations can arise, developing what I term (with reference to Deleuze and Guattari), *territory*. Territory is a system of sense, the systematization of signals into a coherent world of possible interactions. We could also compare this term to the ‘environment’ of Uexküll, but with the potential for reform (de- and re-territorialization) found in Deleuze/Guattari. Structure belongs not only to the human or the living, but to all things. From here we see clearly the opposition between the proposed system and that of structuralism. Outside of meaning and order is not horror, but disinterest and ignorance, and outside of the human are worlds of meaning, objects interacting with one another as significant sources of information.

Returning to the examples which began this investigation, we can say that as a child, I interacted with the forest around my home in a meaningful way. I created trails and saw characteristics in places and things. The world around my childhood home was teeming with meaning, and not simply that invented by a child’s imagination, but real significance. In carving marks in trees, I was organizing the area, making it my own through force and meaning. The Inuit who inhabit the Canadian North likewise see great significance in communicating their surroundings, and those of fellow travelers, through the construction of cairns. These rocks communicate the very landscape they populate, expressing the language of the land. Communication is more than words and vague gestures. Animals who communicate with smell give us a glimpse of other possible modes of communication. While I see no significance in the foul odour, it is not a flight of fancy to say that other animals find significance in such signals or marks. Indeed, why stop here? The trees which I marked, the rocks that are stacked and the fence that is sprayed all convey meaning on their own, whether or not a human or animal provides it. There is a flow of information in the melting of the iceberg, as information thought to have

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been non-existent unveils itself, revealing something of the inner life of the iceberg, from its temperature, to location, to history. Something of its past is always carried forward through the ages, and while much of its expression may be noise to us, we can see through its lifecycle that it provides essential sustenance to bacteria, fish and birds. Beyond this, we cannot say what networks this noise makes up, nor can we then conclude that the answer to such a question is nothing. There is more to things than our own relation to them reveal, and through a superior empiricism we can perhaps arrive at a clearer understanding of the rich and complex inner lives of objects.

Beyond this, we should take note that it is possible to have a metaphysical system which takes communication and relation seriously while not falling into the twinned pits of correlationism or structuralism. The options confronting the contemporary metaphysician are more numerous than 'linguistic philosophy' and 'contemporary science.' We need not evacuate all talk of language and communication in order to be realists, for communication is a fact of existence. Things express themselves in myriad ways and interact in this order of expressions, structuring their worlds through their very existence, interpreting signals in a sea of noise and thus communicating. Semiosis happens everywhere around us and between us. Contemporary realism must take into account the way things relate, and should not shirk at the mention of 'meaning' or 'interpretation' as if encountering some ghastly monster. What such things reveal, what things 'mean' to one another, their expressivity and relation, the way they make territory through structure, by making sense, is precisely the real we set out to understand. The real is noisy, humming within things and all around them. This noise goes deep into the hearts of things, both human and non-human. The depths of things have yet to be excavated in the same way Freud plunged the depths of human beings, but such a task cannot begin until we acknowledge first that such things have depth, and second, that something of this great depth is expressed in the act of existence itself.

# The Anxiousness of Objects and Artworks

## Michael Fried, Object Oriented Ontology and Aesthetic Absorption

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**I**N 1969, THE CONCEPTUAL ARTIST Douglas Huebler famously wrote that: “The world is full of objects, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add more.”<sup>1</sup> By experimenting with the limits of art as the processing of information, Huebler wanted to create works that had abandoned the typical ‘Modern Art’ aesthetic object in favour of relations and context. This article will argue two concurrent scenarios for the readers of this journal, artists and philosophers alike; that Michael Fried’s work on *Absorption* and *Theatricality* provides enough interest for a philosophy of objects, and Graham Harman’s writings on allure have considerable repercussions on art history and criticism. The reader is entitled to pick either, and consider not only the similarities of each, but the necessary, productive differences. Indeed, if one refuses to add more objects, they unwittingly

<sup>1</sup> Despite many myths surrounding the origin of this quote, it was initially put forward by Huebler as an artist statement for the January 5-21 exhibition at New York’s Seth Siegelau Gallery, 1969.



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transform Huebler's 'more or less interesting' objects into brand new absorbing ones.

Object Oriented Ontology (OOO)<sup>2</sup> posits that ontology is a mess<sup>3</sup> of objects; equally corporal and incorporeal,<sup>4</sup> artificial and natural. Forged concurrently to the explosion of Speculative Realism, a number of philosophers and academics have distanced themselves from the movement to focus on the ontological relations (and non-relations) between discrete objects. No single object is deemed ontologically inferior or superior, authentic or inauthentic; they must all be held accountable. Any object's actual relationship towards another has an equal validity to any other single relation; whether a relational neighbour in a configurative system, the object's distinct or elementary parts or an object's mediated connection. The focus is no longer on the limited human access to objects—that is if objects were the focus anyway—but the limited access of all object relations. Objects are no longer uninteresting, aggregated lumps of 'stuff' that bother the insular melodrama of human finitude, nor do they exist as an individualised entity directing attention away from a pre-individual realm. Objects are interesting realms of reality in their own right. Objects are real, discrete and independent. They are defined by their own autonomy, separated from other objects.

<sup>2</sup> The name and acronym of Object Oriented Ontology (OOO) has been suggested by Levi Bryant, as a improved name for 'Object Oriented Philosophy,' as coined by Graham Harman in a 1999 lecture. See Graham Harman, "Object Oriented Philosophy," in *Towards Speculative Realism* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books) and Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Chicago: Open Court, 2002). Professionally, the group includes Graham Harman (American University of Cairo), Levi Bryant (Collin College), Ian Bogost (Georgia Tech) and Timothy Morton (University of California at Davis) amongst other advocates.

<sup>3</sup> As briefly mentioned by Ian Bogost. See Ian Bogost, "Videogames are a mess" (paper presented at the Digital Games Research Association (DiGRA) conference, Uxbridge, United Kingdom, September 1-4, 2009). [http://www.bogost.com/writing/videogames\\_are\\_a\\_mess.shtml](http://www.bogost.com/writing/videogames_are_a_mess.shtml)

<sup>4</sup> With exception given to Graham Harman's argument which identifies a decisive split between 'real' objects which are completely withdrawn and 'sensual' objects that never fail to be present at all times.

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Given the young duration of the group, it's relatively easy to understand a lack of fusion within contemporary arts practice, or a possible broader influence on art criticism and art history.<sup>5</sup> However one could hypothesize a preliminary mapping of OOO onto a stereotypical arts practice quite easily. To focus solely on a collection of objects and their historical or critical journey is perhaps the Modern Art sensibility objectified. What's more, since the widely regarded failure of Modernism; born of an object based crisis in the early to mid 1970s, more and more artists (like Huebler) had moved further from the typical exhibited 'artwork-object' and focused—sometimes entirely—on the informational relationship between object and human viewer, or the political and economical context surrounding the artwork's reception. The focus had moved from aesthetic objects, to information and relational systems; from static, durable, trans-context units, to fluid, user-generated, trans-actual assemblages.

Given the sharp unpopularity of objects within late 20<sup>th</sup> Century and 21<sup>st</sup> Century Western Contemporary arts practice, one could happily speculate on a nostalgic return to ubiquitous art 'objects.' Whilst a return to idealised artwork-objects might be a tempting shift for die-hard high modernist artists and critics, any return to an object-based arts practice requires a careful treading and re-treading. Furthermore, whilst this article will fully endorse the return to objects, it will also highlight a potential aesthetic *crisis*. A crisis firmly situated between the forced choice of privileging 'idealised' objects and privileging correlationist<sup>6</sup> context. Let us remember that

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<sup>5</sup> Bar notable exceptions: Joanna Malinowska's exhibit *Time of Guerilla Metaphysic* was held at Canada Gallery in New York from December, 2009 until January, 2010. Other examples include Urbanomic's *The Real Thing: Artworks and Speculative Realism* at Tate Britain in London held on the 3rd of September, 2010, Sam Leach's exhibit *Present-at-hand* at Sullivan + Strumpf in Sydney between October 7th-24th, 2010. See also Warren Sack who delivered the keynote address to the Network Politics: Objects, Subjects and New Political Affects conference at Ryerson University in Toronto, Canada on October 22-23rd, 2010 where he linked Digital Art Software, Politics and Object Oriented Ontology.

<sup>6</sup> Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*,

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a crisis does not necessarily endorse despair, but can equally give reasons for dynamic change.

Fusing ontology and aesthetic expression has a long, convoluted and chequered history. Many dominant and occluded historical art movements have had a deep correlation with philosophers and cultural theorists alike. The history between ontology and artistic expression is beyond any brief generalisation here, but *our* focus should be one of fusing ontology and artistic sensibility. By sensibility we usually denote the particular adoption of style, expression and aesthetic intent that typically manifests in an artist's work. Although many critics like to distance the two disciplines, such that philosophical ideas encourage the artist's sensibility (theory informs practice), here we should focus on how an artist's sensibility is explicitly ontological, in so far as practice *becomes* theory. By all means, the argument is not a new one,<sup>7</sup> but as we blend and repel together the ideas between Harman's allure and Fried's art criticism, the reader should identify why the former distancing attains little functionality.

### Object Oriented Object-hood

The following question is, perhaps, a fore-gone conclusion; "*Can artworks retain autonomy of expression, where humans are no longer present?*"

The question seems quite at home in a journal dedicated to the developments of Speculative Realist philosophy, in so far as an application of thought regarding the 'in itself' would allude to an 'unthinkable' epistemology where sentient life is no longer present, and the problems of correlationalism are no longer an issue. But note that the above question does not deal with Meillassoux's 'absolute,' Brassier's 'Nihilism,' Grant's 'Nature' or even (to start off with) Harman's 'Objects.'

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trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008), 5.

<sup>7</sup> See Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2011) [forthcoming]. Ian Bogost's notion of carpentry, influenced by Harman's guerilla metaphysics, builds on the argument that philosophy can be constructed with an object praxis rather than just academic writing.

The question does not even ask about aesthetics *per se*; for better or for worse, it deals with artworks. Artworks; objects that manifest human cultural concerns into profitable iconic scapegoats.

To a number of art critics and historians working today, art criticism (particularly American formalist criticism) pivots on a split synonymous with Fried's early writings. We should focus on the reception of artworks in particular because as we will see; I claim that the split between the typical formalist ethos and its subsequent post-formalist rejection in the mid to late 1960s, had been due to the methodology encountered in the artist's sensibility and the Modernist work's reception. To clarify, my intention here is to embellish the ontological parameters of reception and furthermore to begin mapping the structure of Fried's formalism onto Graham Harman's ontological statement that 'aesthetics is first philosophy';<sup>8</sup> that aesthetic reception can exist formally, but without any need for critical judgement from humans.

It was the American art critic Michael Fried who in the essay *Art and Objecthood* (1967) split this type of 'receiving' into one fundamental area and a second subordinated, insidious offshoot. Since the 1967 essay, Fried has made no apologies to argue for the continuation of the Greenbergian paradigm that supports the formalist, autonomous and independent artwork; the elusive artwork that retains independence, despite changes in the surrounding historical or political context; the elusive artwork which continues the idealised, dedicated commitment in critical aesthetic progress. Never before in art criticism had a critic's wager been simultaneously destroyed and displaced by its antithesis.

To briefly summarise the infamous *Artforum* essay, Fried argued that there was a degenerative split between the Modernist commitment of pictorial shape and the then, latest enterprise: Minimalism, or as Fried dismissively termed it 'Literalist Art.'<sup>9</sup> Those attached to what Fried identifies with the

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<sup>8</sup> Graham Harman, "On Vicarious Causation," *Collapse II* (2007): 221.

<sup>9</sup> Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in *Art in Theory: 1900-1990: An Anthol-*

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literalist sensibility, Donald Judd, Robert Morris, etc., created work that was indicative of a broader philosophical project, “not an isolated episode but the expression of a general and pervasive condition.”<sup>10</sup>

So what exactly is this split, and how does it divide what Fried terms *Object-hood* from art? Following Greenberg, Fried identifies the Modernist commitment with the construction of pieces which above all, aim to “defeat or suspend its own object-hood.”<sup>11</sup> What does this mean? Fried argued that what constituted a work of art (and hence, the critical procedure that followed) was to be had purely from the work itself. Great works of art remain timeless for a reason. There is something particular, usually an ideal particular or unity, within the work that the artist has created to make the work an ‘artwork.’ This ‘ideal-particular’ is what should be regarded as altogether different from other mundane objects. Typically, this is where the criticism of Greenbergian formalism begins; that is, to say an object is transformed into art because it is art, strikes us as an absurd paradox worthy of Zeno. Thus the post-formalist supporter has little interest in recounting the transcendent nature of artworks; instead artworks, artists and viewers are woven into deep relations; that of curatorial networks, exhibition history, canonised textbooks, critical tutors, and idealised myths of conflicted artists that intersect with tortured existential quandaries and religious hegemony. This is miles away from Fried’s intentions, as he outlines;

What is at stake in this conflict is whether the paintings or objects in question are experienced as paintings or as objects: and what decides their identity as painting is their confronting of the demand that they hold as shapes. Otherwise they are experienced as nothing more than objects.<sup>12</sup>

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*ogy of Changing Ideas*, ed. Paul Wood and Charles Harrison (London: Wiley Blackwell, 2002), 823.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 823.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 824.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 829.

The identity of the work comes directly from the work itself, and not from what Fried terms the ‘beholder,’ the person who is viewing the artwork. To behold the work is to behold something in particular, as humans do not behold everything in daily perception. In the 1967 essay, Fried is quite specific about how objects can negate their own ontological status as an object and therefore operate as art; it is, above all, it is a special idealised unity that acts as a direct and determined vehicle for the artist’s expression. It should also be noted that whilst Fried follows the formalist position concerned with emphasising medium-specificity, he is also establishing an informed phenomenological enquiry.<sup>13</sup>

Fried puts forward a scathing attack on the literalist sensibility; they construct pieces of work which are wholly engaged in implicating the beholder from the start within a *contextual situation*, hence ‘betraying’ the Modernist sensibility. Meaning and reception is not to be found within the Minimalist work itself, but instead the work operates *for* the beholder’s circumstance. The work can only function for beholders and is only constructed with beholders in mind. The beholder is less that which can behold and more like a gap in a system needing to be filled, so that the aesthetic effect can properly function. The inclusion of the beholder’s experience processing the artwork is integral to the artworks expression. In contrast, Fried champions artworks which fundamentally ‘ignore’ the role of the beholder.

### Theatrical Objects

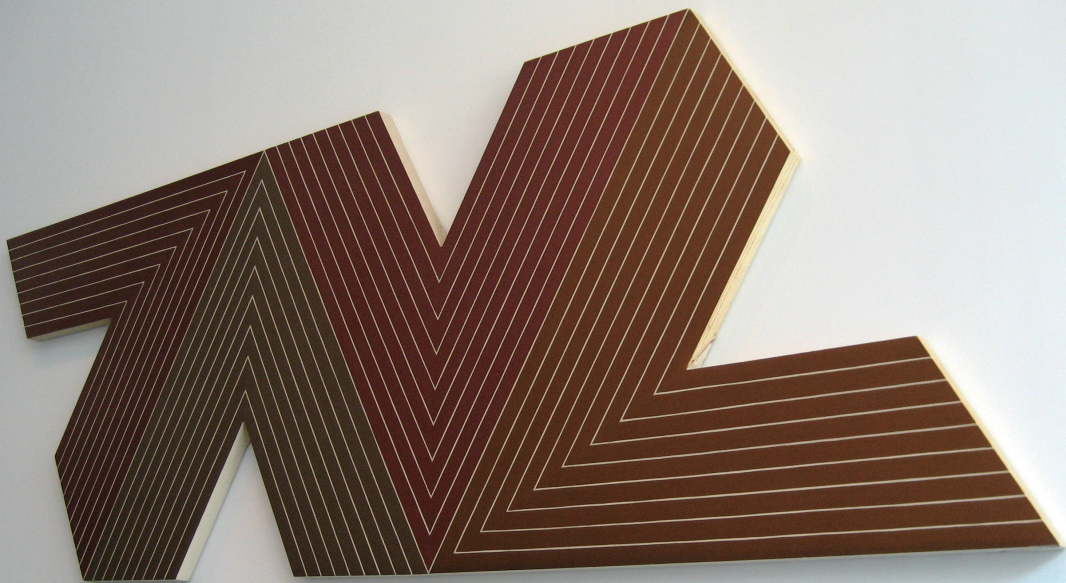
Fried opposes the literalist sensibility and terms it “Theatricality,”<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> This replicates the suggestion that an adherence to form makes any work more than a mere object, rather than just ‘as’ perception. Merleau-Ponty, Greenberg and Fried all share the formal value in artworks, such that greatness (presentness) is issued from artworks. See Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” trans. Carleton Dallery, in *Art in Theory: 1900-2000*, ed. Paul Wood and Charles Harrison (Malden: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 767-71.

<sup>14</sup> Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” 822.





[Fig.1] Frank Stella, *Empress of India*, 1965, Metallic powder in polymer emulsion paint on canvas, 6' 5" x 18' 8" (195.6 x 548.6 cm). Gift of S.I. Newhouse, Jr. © 2010 Frank Stella/Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York.

for two reasons. The first is a largely personal criticism labelled at artworks that are aesthetically theatrical, conceptual, kitsch and not directly a serious work of contemplation. The second reason references the suggestion that theatre's sensibility is to engage, act out, interact, implicate and relate to the audience from the start. Consider Frank Stella's *Empress of India* (1965) [Fig 1], championed by Fried as the discovery of a new pictorial structure based on the primacy of the pictorial shape over literal shape.<sup>15</sup>

When the general public have vacated, the lights are turned off,

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<sup>15</sup> Michael Fried, "Shape as Form: Frank Stella's Irregular Polygons," in *Art and Objecthood* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 77.

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and security officers are attuned to exterior disturbances, can we suggest that the artwork still expresses aesthetic autonomy? Financially, the painting is worth a considerable amount of course, but can we suggest that the work transcends ‘banal’ rules of political, fiscal and human perception from the result of its independence? Or—like the post-formalist—should we consider that Stella’s work only ‘registers’ this autonomy when the viewer brings with them years of contextual baggage? The problem does resemble a philosophical *déjà vu* stereotype worthy of a tree in the woods, but nevertheless highlights the ontological split that Fried identified in 1967.

Literalist sensibility is theatrical because, to begin with, it is concerned with the actual circumstances in which the beholder encounters literalist work. Morris makes this explicit. Whereas in previous art “what is to be had from the work is located strictly within [it],” the experience of literalist art is of an object in a situation—on that, virtually by definition, includes the beholder.<sup>16</sup>

One must remember that for Fried, ‘object’ is a heavily negative term. If one approaches Stella’s *Empress of India* and considers it as just an object, something severely wrong has happened. The Modern artwork contains within itself, something independent and absorbing, something to behold. By contrast, Judd and Morris’ work are *meant* to be regarded ‘as’ objects, and they *cannot function as objects* without the beholder. Fried anticipates this sensibility in the three-dimensional structure of literalist work, which is often as large as the beholder.

The literalist ‘user’ is meant to relate to the work ‘as’ an object, thus, the onus is not on the artwork itself, but on the beholder to complete the work, whereas the modernist artwork is already complete, unified and it is beheld as such. Logically then, the Modernist artwork does not serve a purpose for society, nor should it act as being ‘socially useful,’ but instead transcend ordinary life on its own terms.

The fact that Fried uses the term ‘object’ in a negative way,

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<sup>16</sup> Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” 825.



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should not distract us from the realisation that he isn't talking about objects at all; at least not in the object oriented sense. Fried does intend to figurehead object-hood as the antithesis of art, but this can be countered in two ways. First, he unnecessarily conflates object-hood with theatricality for no other reason other than he wants to distance art from 'mundane objects,' a trivial claim at best which will be dealt with in Graham Harman's treatment of Martin Heidegger's famous essay on artworks. In Fried's terminology, the artwork is simply the transcending unity that negates its own object-hood, thus for Formalism, the judgement of an artwork is to be had from the idealised work itself, not from the relational journey between beholder and mundane object.

Secondly, for an artwork to qualify as a formalist artefact, it must be autonomous, unified and independent—the perfect candidate for a comparison with Object Oriented Ontology. In opposition, theatricality denotes not objects themselves, but an intentional, reciprocal, *co-relation*<sup>17</sup> between beholder and object. The theatrical artwork cannot be conceived 'as' such without a beholder. However, the formalist artwork itself is an artwork with or without the beholder, thus we have an ontological wager worthy of speculative concern.

### The Privileging of Aesthetic Systems

The reciprocal co-relation between beholder and object effectively ended any hope of aesthetic progress for Fried. He watched as the mainstream art world became consumed with the literalist sensibility in ever progressive states. The 1970s reached the pinnacles of conceptual art, where Laurence Weiner<sup>18</sup> and Sol Lewitt<sup>19</sup> famously argued that the work need not be constructed, as the idea for it was enough. The idealised

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<sup>17</sup> I use the rejoinder 'co-relation' here, in the explicit sense that Meillassoux defines correlationism.

<sup>18</sup> Lawrence Weiner, et.al., *Having Been Said: Writings & Interviews of Lawrence Weiner: 1968-2003* (Hatje Cantz Publishers, 2005).

<sup>19</sup> Sol Lewitt, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," in *Artforum*, June 1967.

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object conflicted with the work's meaning (that is if meaning was the intention), the artist would create an object, but only in so far as it must instigate to the beholder a relation between the artist's concept, the object and the beholder's experience.

Concurrent to the 1970s, the *Art Forum* critic, Jack Burnham scathed the unworthy independence of the art object, and wagered that artists would dispense with them in favour of systems and relations favouring the conceptual focus metaphor of computational software.<sup>20</sup> Art objects were no longer static timeless pieces to be rejoiced, but necessary unified lumps do be done away with; either in the relentless stripping of critique, or with the fascination of reciprocal co-relation and the instability of meaning.

As the Digital Art Historian, Edward A. Skanken argues, the relationship between conceptual art and 'art-and-technology' is built on forgetting any focus of the artwork-object itself, and foregrounding the *process* of co-operation:

For many artists working at the intersection of conceptual art and art-and-technology, the particular visual manifestation of the artwork as an object was secondary to *the expression of an idea that becomes reality by simulating it...* But whereas computer software has an instrumental relationship with hardware, coordinating its operation, the artist's propositions function as meta-analyses of the phenomenological and linguistic components of meaning. In other words, they demand that the viewer examine the process of processing information, *while in the process of doing so.*<sup>21</sup>

Fried's criticism of the literalist sensibility is less a light attack on privileging object-hood, than it is a destructive account of forgetting the unity of artworks, in favour of bonding the beholder and object together into a *contextual system*. In reference to the foresight of Jack Burnham, Luke Skrebowski

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<sup>20</sup> Jack Burnham, "The Aesthetics of Intelligent Systems," in *On the Future of Art*, ed. E.F. Fry (New York: The Viking Press, 1970), 119. See also Jack Burnham, "System Esthetics," *Artforum*, September 1968.

<sup>21</sup> Edward A. Shanken, "Art in the Information age: Technology and Conceptual Art," *Leonardo* 35:4 (2002): 436-437.

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explicitly terms this, as a move from an “object oriented to a system oriented culture.”<sup>22</sup>

Multiple concurrent factors led to the endorsement of a system oriented art criticism. One of the major issues pertained to, was what the art critic Harold Rosenberg coined, ‘*The Anxious Object*’;<sup>23</sup> the deliberate construction of an artefact that instils epistemological ambiguity and uncertainty of whether the work concerned is actually ‘genuine art’ or not. One can instantly evoke the lesson from Marcel Duchamp’s Ready-mades, which refused to give art its autonomy and exposed the contextual systems that gave birth to it; the public’s unexpected willingness to consider it ‘as’ art or the gallery that gives the anxious object its title and space. Duchamp was less concerned that ‘any object’ can be art, but on the contrary, the challenge of making something that *isn’t* a work of art but a simple object. Either way, it is argued that the anxiousness of the beholder is privileged rather than the artwork itself which is undermined in favour of what Greenberg criticised as the ‘feat of ideation.’<sup>24</sup> Greenberg hinted that these types of objects took on the role of foregrounding the idea of ‘non-art,’ such that an “[...]idea remains an idea, something deduced instead of felt and discovered.”<sup>25</sup> For Greenberg, ideas alone cannot achieve the unity of aesthetic confrontation, it has to come from the work formally.

Contemporary forms of art criticism such as Nicolas Bourriaud’s *Relational Aesthetics* push social, relational context even further, in so far as, the *context itself is the artwork*.<sup>26</sup> The direct material object of contemplation is completely dispensed with,

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<sup>22</sup> Luke Skrebowski, “Tate Papers—‘All Systems Go: Recovering Jack Burnham’s ‘Systems Aesthetics,’” Tate (2006) accessed January 3rd, 2011 <http://www.tate.org.uk/research/tateresearch/tatepapers/06spring/skrebowski.htm>

<sup>23</sup> Harold Rosenberg, *The Anxious Object*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

<sup>24</sup> Clement Greenberg, “Recentness of Sculpture,” in *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology*, ed. Gregory Battcock (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 184.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.* 184.

<sup>26</sup> Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Paris: Les Presse Du Reel, 2002).

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and the confrontation is wholly relational. Artists construct social gatherings rather than canvas, events and communities rather than objects. Art critic, Claire Bishop had noted that, “rather than a discrete, portable, autonomous work of art that transcends its context, relational art is entirely beholden to the contingencies of its environment and audience.”<sup>27</sup> She quotes the associated artist; Liam Gillick, who states that;

My work is like the light in the fridge—it only works when there are people there to open the fridge door. Without people, it’s not art—it’s something else—stuff in a room.<sup>28</sup>

In opposition then, the task of mapping Object Oriented Ontology onto artistic sensibility should investigate the claim that even the relations between ‘stuff in a room’ must be worth as much aesthetic speculation as social events.

### The Alluring Split between Real and Sensual Objects

Since the publication of Graham Harman’s three major original philosophical treatises, *Tool Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (2002), *Guerrilla Metaphysics* (2005), and *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* (2008), the discussion of such works have consistently dealt with the importance of unitary objects in philosophy. With the exception of Ian Bogost’s pragmatic influence<sup>29</sup> and Michael Austin’s critique of vicarious causation,<sup>30</sup> one finds less coverage given to the sensual realm of Harman’s thought; the phenomenological induced, intentional realm that resides in the interior of real objects.

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<sup>27</sup> Claire Bishop, “Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics,” *October* 110 (2004): 54.

<sup>28</sup> Liam Gillick, *Renovation Filter, Recent Past and Near Future* (Bristol: Arnolfini Gallery Ltd, 2001), 16.

<sup>29</sup> See Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*.

<sup>30</sup> See Michael Austin, “To Exist Is to Change: A Friendly Disagreement With Graham Harman On Why Things Happen,” *Speculations* 1:1 (2010), 66-83.

## Speculations II

One must remember how significant Heidegger's Fourfold is to Harman.<sup>31</sup> The Fourfold provides object oriented ontology with a helpful schematic to analyse the inside and outside of objects. Harman argues that every unitary object in the cosmos can be split into two distinct realms of *Zuhandenheit*, (withdrawn, ready-to-hand) vs. *Vorhandenheit*, (present-at-hand), punctuated further by splitting those realms into another two; *something specific*, (certain qualities) vs. *something at all*, (a vigorous unit). In the end, we have the real object and its qualities, coupled with the sensual object and its qualities.<sup>32</sup> Harman notes how these four realms are *not* different types of objects, but rather four sides of the same unit. Everything within the fourfold, grounds what Harman terms *Vicarious Causation*.<sup>33</sup> That causation is a metaphysical occurrence between two or more sensual objects mediated by a real object, or two real objects mediated by a sensual one.

If *Tool Being* is Harman's attempt to launch the legitimacy of real, anti-exhaustive, withdrawn objects, then its successor, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, is the attempt to locate what exactly is present when objects collide. Harman's unique reading of Heidegger's tool-analysis becomes seminal in so far as *Dasein's*, 'presence' reveals a very limited layer of awareness, resting upon an indirect reliance of 'withdrawn' equipment.

Equipment is not effective 'because people use it;' on the contrary, it can only be used because it is *capable of an effect*, of inflicting some kind of blow on reality. In short, the tool isn't 'used'—it is. In each instant,

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<sup>31</sup> See Graham Harman, "Dwelling With the Fourfold," *Space and Culture* 12:3 (2009), 292-302.

<sup>32</sup> If one must give the same ontological authenticity to objects as human beings, (as the OOO commitment stipulates), I have great trouble doing this when Microsoft Word decides to 'auto-correct' the word 'it's' stipulating the owning of something (an object's qualities) to the corrective of 'its' noting a subordinate use. The technicalities of English punctuation aside, I've left the word 'its' for rhetorical purposes alone; I leave the viewer to decide what they prefer.

<sup>33</sup> Graham Harman, "On Vicarious Causation," *Collapse II* (2007), 187-221.

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entities form a determinate landscape that offers a specific range of possibilities and obstacles. Beings in themselves are ready-to-hand, not in the derivative sense of ‘manipulable,’ but in the primary sense of ‘in action.’<sup>34</sup>

From the get-go in *Tool Being*, Harman’s strategy is to suggest that the withdrawn realm of equipment is apparent when it is present *and even when it is used*. No process of experimentation, explosives or digestion reveals the executant *Being* of that object, for the Heideggerian insight that *Being* is not present and that it *cannot be conclusively made present*. The other speculative challenge Harman holds, is that human consciousness is not relevant at *this* level of the analysis. All objects make some localized sense of each other with the logics they possess, and equally the qualities that cannot be present, well, withdraw.

Unlike what Harman terms ‘the Carnal Phenomenologists’<sup>35</sup> of Levinas, Merleau-Ponty and Lingis, the insight that objects have a limited access to other objects discredits the suggestion that the whole ‘world’ is withdrawn in one pre-individual lump. Instead as Tim Morton has elaborated,<sup>36</sup> ‘world’ is no longer a legitimate option for ontology; instead there are only discrete entities and their qualities, both in explicit perception and withdrawn execution. For the object oriented ontologist, ‘perception’ is a largely broad term to describe the translating relationship between one object and another. How does the autonomy of aesthetic expression fit in the interplay between execution and relation?

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<sup>34</sup> Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Chicago: Open Court, 2002), 20 his emphasis.

<sup>35</sup> Graham Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* (Chicago: Open Court, 2005).

<sup>36</sup> See Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects 3.0: Physical Graffiti* lecture given at Loyola University, College of Humanities + Natural Sciences, New Orleans on November 2nd in 2010. Here he discusses the ecological dangers of ‘World’ in the Heidegger terminology, as something enclosed as a horizon separating us from the outside. You can find the audio on Timothy Morton’s blog, last accessed 3rd January 2011: (<http://ecologywithoutnature.blogspot.com/2010/11/hyperobjects-20-oil-remix-mp3.html>)

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### The strange Mereology of Trigger's Broom

The aim of *Guerrilla Metaphysics* is to understand how discrete entities from all levels actually relate. If all objects withdraw into their private discrete realities, the paradox of strange mereology unfolds.<sup>37</sup>

There is a wonderful scene in the British television sitcom *Only Fools and Horses* that highlights the paradox of objects and relations almost perfectly. In the episode *Heroes and Villains*, the sitcom's resident idiot, 'Trigger,' meets the central cast in a London greasy-spoon cafe. He proudly shows them a photo of himself, accepting the award from the Peckham Major, for services to the community as the council's long-standing road sweeper. Reflecting on his career and his sweeping broom, he muses, "You know, this broom has had seventeen new heads and fourteen new handles in its time." The other characters looked bemused. One replies, "How the hell is it the same bloody broom then?" Quick as a flash, Trigger snaps back, "Well there's a picture of it, what more proof do you need?"<sup>38</sup>

From an Object Oriented perspective, both parties are somehow, correct. Whilst the example is extremely abstract, the scene highlights the central paradox of the object oriented position. An object is both a vigorous, consistent unit with real qualities, and yet at the same time completely withdrawn from all of its composite relations, elements, qualities and parts. As a combination and composite of both broom-head and handle, the newly formed broom-object is a consistent unit, which withdraws from both broom-head, broom-handle and all of its constituents (horse hairs, quarks, knot-holes, varnish). The broom-object is irreducible to its use by road sweepers, its manufacturer and the instigating photo of it. It is a 'self-supporting' Heideggerian 'thing'<sup>39</sup> and yet if we were

<sup>37</sup> To borrow Graham Harman and Levi Bryant's objected oriented variant of the study of parts and wholes.

<sup>38</sup> You can view this particular scene on YouTube. Last accessed 20th March 2011: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cPJO99bFGQ8>

<sup>39</sup> Martin Heidegger, "The Thing," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert



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to separate the broom-head and broom-handle, the broom-object would cease to be a unit. Levi Bryant exemplifies this paradox with the example of the couple;

When confronted with a couple we can thus ask how many objects there are. Our common sense answer would be that there are *two* objects, to wit, the two people related to one another. However, the object-oriented ontologist would beg to differ. A couple is not *two* objects, but rather *three* objects. There are, on the one hand, the two people, but the *couple itself* is a *third* object. In other words, the couple is a third object over and above the two people entangled in the couple.<sup>40</sup>

It is up to the Object Oriented Ontologist to explain this paradox. What causes two objects to come together in such a way that the composite object is authentically unified in itself and yet at the same time over and above its parts? Rather than relations coming first in a ‘pre-individualising’ realm, it seems that every relation is an object in its own right, and yet, the paradox posits the difficulty of differentiating between any random collection of units and a genuine real unit. Ever the phenomenologist, Harman’s fundamental answer is to focus on the interior of the real objects themselves and the role of aesthetics within their core structure, inanimate or otherwise.

### Super-Asymmetrical Allure

In *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, Harman briefly argues that within the object lies two ‘strifes;’ horizontal and vertical.

Vertical strife is the difference between real objects and the other real objects that play a role in creating them—namely, their parts, which are caricatured in such a way as to transform them into the notes of the new object. Horizontal strife, by contrast, is what occurs between

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Hofstadter. (New York: Harper, 2001).

<sup>40</sup> Levi Bryant, ‘Three Strange Mereologies,’ *Larval Subjects Blog*, accessed 2nd January 2011: <http://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2010/05/01/three-strange-mereologies/>

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sensual objects and the others that are grafted onto them—when the notes of a sensual object immediately lead us to other sensual objects as their parts.<sup>41</sup>

As a rule, a real object is “simply whatever unifies notes, creating a private inner reality that no other object ever exhausts.”<sup>42</sup> For Harman, the only reality there can ever be is real objects sealed off from all relations and their interiors,<sup>43</sup> which as the example of Trigger’s Broom yields is “a duel between a thing and its parts.”<sup>44</sup> Whilst sensual objects are equally discrete independent entities, they are directly before us in all their presence whether we will them to be or not. Following Husserl, Harman adopts the strategy that what objects perceive are not pure qualities, but sensual objects:

The relation between one level of the world and the next is a relation of parts that are converted to notes in a new unified thing, while the relation within the sensual cosmos is one of notes that lead directly into sensual parts.<sup>45</sup>

In this passage, we must notice the first crucial element of object oriented causation, that *the relationship between the real and the sensual realm is asymmetrical*. The parts of real objects are unified to become qualities; conversely the qualities of the sensual objects are always-already its parts. In the 2006 paper *Physical Nature and the Paradox of Qualities*, Harman notes that the sensual object is “...beyond all its essential qualities [...] like a brooding power or style that lurks beneath the qualities and animates them.”<sup>46</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 229

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 193.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 172.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 229.

<sup>46</sup> Graham Harman, “Physical Nature and The Paradox of Qualities,” in *Toward Speculative Realism* (Winchester UK: Zero Books, 2010), 137.

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The role of the asymmetrical is crucial for vicarious causation, in order to come to terms with the paradoxical causality between withdrawn objects. There is no balance between the connections of ‘real’ objects; there is only a delegated, one-sided effect that causes real objects to connect without any real connection, and for Harman at least, this process involves the sensual object’s unitary notes. It is here, that the first aesthetic distinctions creep into this ontological cascade of atoms, brooms and couples:

...causation can only resemble allure. For while causation has impact only on certain aspects of the object, its impact is on notes, not parts—and notes, unlike parts, are always inherently linked to the thing as a whole.<sup>47</sup>

At last we find an aesthetic parallel between Harman and Fried, in that the authentic aesthetic experience is not just object oriented but *fundamentally different from perception*. Like theatricality, perception occurs when an object is treated ‘as’ an object and its constituent parts. In contrast, allure is something altogether different for Harman, as it deals with the separation of the essence (or note) from the whole sensual object directly. This distinctive event can only occur in the separation of sensual object-notes, for the reason that the real object is inaccessible and if it were separated, it would be destroyed.

Normal perception simply moves around the exterior of an object or between objects, one step at a time...By contrast, allure initiates a rift in the thing that was lacking before.<sup>48</sup>

In identifying allure as an aesthetic effect, a sensual object becomes alluring “by splitting off from its notes,”<sup>49</sup> or exists as, “the separation of the thing from...its notes.”<sup>50</sup> Harman is

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<sup>47</sup> Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 214.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 213.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 224.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 211.

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careful to insist that what emerges from this confrontation isn't the real object in all its bewitching serendipity, as this would be present-at-hand. What emerges is both unclear but familiar, and Harman has plenty of aesthetic examples at hand to initiate the further claim that allure is causation.

There are two questions that emerge from this encounter; the first is a clarification between perception and allure, and whether the cause is from real objects themselves or a broader distinction of an 'artwork.' The second question is a concern regarding the causal structure of allure and why it should formally occur as aesthetics rather than something else. In both questions, the crucial place to turn to is what Fried terms 'anti-theatricality.'

### Present-Zuhandenheit

Those who will have been following thus far will quickly realise we intend to have our cake and eat it with the ontological status of artworks. Like Harman's distinction between allure and perception, we appear to be dealing with two types of relation, one authentically aesthetic (in Fried's case) and one inauthentic in the circumstantial sensibility of situation. The additional query is whether this comes from the beholder or a special type of unit that can be formalised as 'an' artwork. Interestingly, Heidegger poses the same question on the ontological status of the artwork.

Both philosophically and chronologically, Heidegger's notion of the artwork's 'origin' exists somewhere between 'equipment' and 'the thing.' It is never entirely clear what the artwork is for Heidegger. The artwork clearly isn't equipment, as it cannot withdraw in the slightest, yet Heidegger cannot reduce these particular works to sheer presence-at-hand, even though they are clearly present. Heidegger does denote the 'thingly'<sup>51</sup> character of the work, in the sense that the work

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<sup>51</sup> Heidegger, Martin, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Martin Heidegger: The Basic Writings*, trans. David Farrell Krell (New York: HarperCollins, 2008), 143. More specifically, Heidegger focuses on three interpretations of the 'things' character' in relation to artworks; accidents, sense perceptions and

is self-supporting. Unfortunately, Heidegger never revised his famous essay on artworks in light of *The Thing* and *The Fourfold* and so this puts artworks on a precarious footing. If any entity (such as the jug) is an authentic ‘thing,’ then why should we be convinced that it is also an artwork?

To complicate things further, Fried notes a distinction between presence and ‘presentness’ (Fried’s last words in *Art and Objecthood* are ‘Presentness is grace’<sup>52</sup>). Literalist work foregrounds objects of presence to the beholder, in the same manner that Heidegger shoots down presence in ontology; presence can only exist within the beholder’s experience. In contrast, the Modernist artwork is both present and ‘presents presentness,’ it independently presents unity instantaneously. Monotonous wordplay aside, Heidegger and Fried cannot have it both ways; Object-hood cannot relate inauthentically by making the beholder explicit, whilst at the same time, arguing that the independent work relates authentically through its unity and completeness.

Heidegger argues that the artwork presents the strife between Earth and World. ‘Strife’ it seems is everywhere at all times, but it is only present ‘as’ strife within artworks. As Harman indicates in the paper *On the Origin of the Work of Art (atonal Remix)*,<sup>53</sup> and deduces from his revised tool-analysis, this makes little sense as a phenomenological distinction. If one were to hold a can of kidney beans for example, we can see that strife is also clearly present ‘as’ strife. There is still, the familiar hidden executant being (Earth), and the ‘presentness’ of relation (World). Hence, an aesthetic realism like allure is needed to secure the separation between perception

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formed matter (which is later conflated with equipment).

<sup>52</sup> Fried, “Art and Objecthood,” 825.

<sup>53</sup> Graham Harman, “The Origin of the Work of Art (atonal remix),” (paper presented at The Arts Institute at Bournemouth, Bournemouth, UK, February 1st 2008). This paper was largely improvised with cuecards and features no written document to cite from. You can however listen to the paper as recorded via the kind work of the ANTHEM group. Last accessed January 3rd 2011: ([http://www.esnips.com/doc/d36e2be0-2e9a-41e7-b39a-06c6cfa9c869/Harman\\_AIB](http://www.esnips.com/doc/d36e2be0-2e9a-41e7-b39a-06c6cfa9c869/Harman_AIB)).

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and something existing beyond the sensual object present. Allure is good term for Harman, as it indicates the sense of something alluring, (the aforementioned brooding style of the sensual object), whilst concurrently preserving the withdrawn excecitant being of the object itself, by way of allusion. The alluring object always alludes to something never present. Or to put it another way, in allure we approach the unity of the object as an elusive unit prior to the presence of its qualities.

Harman's exemplary aesthetic paradigm is metaphor. Objects do not just present themselves metaphorically, but 'as' metaphor.<sup>54</sup> Metaphor here is one of a larger set of examples that include; beauty, disappointment, courage, humour, and interestingly paradigm shifts.

Before we finally pair off Harman's aesthetics with Fried's, we must deduce what type of aesthetic sensibility would constitute anti-theatricality? It would take Fried thirteen years and a transfer from art criticism to art history to suggest his alternative.

### The Inner Effect of Absorption

Despite Michaels Fried's credentials as an established art critic and historian, the differences between *Absorption and Theatricality*<sup>55</sup> are relatively easy to understand. Like all the best ontological ideas however, what is easy to understand in principle, becomes bewitching and complex after a long period of interrogation.

In summary, the argument is simple. If the artwork has been made to explicitly implicate the role of the beholder in a contextual situation or system, then it is theatrical. If the artwork deliberately ignores the role of the beholder then it is absorptive. Both strategies are relational in the sense that both types of work are constructed to be seen, yet the ontological sensibility of each work's reception couldn't be more

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<sup>54</sup> See also Ian Bogost's interpretation of Carpentry and his notion of Metaphorism in Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology*.

<sup>55</sup> Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1980).

different. Fried is piercing in his commitment, that when the consciousness of viewing is suspended, the theatrical sensibility emerges. He hopes that this aesthetic ‘golden rule’ is what separates legitimate artworks from the banalities of theatre, mass-culture and simple objects. Unfortunately, it hardly separates itself from the latter.

In what sense does the artwork ‘ignore’ the role of the beholder and suspend his or her consciousness of viewing? For Fried, the answer can be found historically, although he makes it fundamentally clear in the opening statement of *Absorption and Theatricality*<sup>56</sup> that the reader should trace this lineage within the formalist works championed by *Art and Objecthood*.

It is the philosopher Denis Diderot, whom Fried welcomes as a necessary ally in the aesthetics of absorptive composition. In the background of the triumphalism of the Rococo movement in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, it was Diderot who primarily opposed the ornate and theatrical style of the movement.<sup>57</sup> Following Diderot, Fried piles historical reading after reading, (along with his own interpretation) of the works from Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, Jean-Baptiste Greuze and Carle Van Loo. For Fried and Diderot, these 18<sup>th</sup> Century works of art demonstrated the power of the compositional unity itself as the absorptive style.

Consider Chardin’s *The Soap Bubble* (1733) [Fig.2] and *The House of Cards* (1737) [Fig.3], Fried suggests that Chardin’s primary preoccupation was to afford a unity that manifests to the beholder the subject matter’s ‘depth of absorption,’<sup>58</sup> or in other words:

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>57</sup> Also referred to as ‘Late Baroque’ Fried defines the Rococo period as a decorative theatrical development. Artists generally involved with the Rococo period were François Boucher (1703-1770), Jean-Antoine Watteau (1684-1721) and Jean-Honoré Fragonard (1732-1806).

<sup>58</sup> Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality*, 47.





[Fig.2] Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, *The Soap Bubble*, c.1739. Oil on Canvas. 61 x 63 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



[Fig.3] Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin, *The House of Cards*, c. 1737. Oil on Canvas. 83 x 66 cm. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

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...by singling out in each picture at least one salient detail that functions as a sign of the figure's obliviousness to everything but the operation he or she is intent upon performing.<sup>59</sup>

For our purposes here, there is an ontological importance to absorption that supersedes any negligible criticism of pictorial representation. Chardin's technique of composing the primacy of absorption on the surface, confronts the beholder ontologically by alluding to the hidden illusory depth of the scene. For instance, Fried asks the reader to focus on the immediate foreground of *The House of Cards*; that bears the sophisticated device of the half opened drawer containing two playing cards:

By virtue of fronting the beholder and what is more opening toward him, the drawer serves to enforce a distinction between the beholder's point of view and perception of the scene as a whole and the quite different point of view and limited, exclusive focus of the youth balancing the cards. There is even a sense in which the contrast between the two cards—one facing the beholder, the other blankly turned away from him—may be seen as an epitome of the contrast between the surface of the painting, which of course faces the beholder, and the absorption of the youth in his delicate undertaking, a state of mind that is essentially inward, concentrated and closed.<sup>60</sup>

For Fried, the transcendent aspect of the beholder's encounter with the "portable and self-sufficient"<sup>61</sup> *tableau*<sup>62</sup> was the 'supreme fiction' it afforded: "A *tableau* was visible, it could be said to exist, only from the beholder's point of view. But precisely because that was so, it helped persuade the beholder that the actors themselves were unconscious of his presence."<sup>63</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality*, 47.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 48-49.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>62</sup> It is worth noting the importance that Fried affords the French translation here. A *tableaux* is more than just 'a picture' but a transcending entity that attains pictorial unity.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.



Diderot echoes the primacy of absorption, in so far as he sought it to be the artwork's *primary function*. The unity of the work neutralises the “visuality”<sup>64</sup> of the beholder, not to address it or make it explicit like theatricality. This becomes critical for Fried; the ontological perception of the audience is fictionalised into believing that he or she *does not exist*, “that it was not really there, or at the very least had not been taken into account.”<sup>65</sup>

We know we are onto an interesting similarity when we notice that we are dealing with one and the same ontological paradox. How can the beholder not be taken into account and yet circumstance dictates that they have a relation towards the work? For the same reason that the *thing in itself exists but can never be made present*. The beholder views a fiction, even if it is a sincere one or a representational scene of activity (in this instance, the scene of the youth balancing the cards). It is the impossible glimpse of something ‘not-present’ that causes the beholder to be absorbed to the work. But note that the beholder does not instantly fuse into *The House of Cards* canvas anymore than a broom head does with the broom. They are absorbed, but not fused.

Part of the problem with this reading is that Fried believes absorption to be a reciprocal, dialectical event. The work is absorbing and in turn a circular gesture is given from the beholder who is “negated.”<sup>66</sup> But this makes no sense, not least from the ontological reality of the object (which Fried dismisses anyway).<sup>67</sup> What the beholder sees is not the real

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 96.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 103.

<sup>67</sup> Indeed, at the end of the chapter “Towards a Supreme Fiction,” Fried briefly concludes: “This paradox directs attention to the problematic character not only of the painting-beholder relationship but of something still more fundamental—the *object*-beholder (one is tempted to say object-‘subject’) relationship which the painting-beholder epitomizes. In Diderot’s writings on painting and drama the object-beholder relationship as such, the condition of spectatordom, stands indicted as theatrical, a medium of dislocation and estrangement rather than absorption, sympathy, self-transcendence;

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object or a real artwork, but the *alluring sensual object*. The real object that is, *The House of Cards* is more than all of these surface effects, composed of causal relations in all of their interior and exterior vicissitudes; dust falling on frame, paint stains and trapped horse hair, canvas resting on metal supports. All of these objects have equivalent unity and equal aesthetic beholding.

For the object oriented ontologist, Fried's analysis is not so much object oriented, but *unity oriented*. Chardin's paintings can be placed anywhere (although Fried, ever the classicist, has previously noted that it should be eye level on a gallery wall), because they retain an absorptive unity that is autonomous and discrete. But at least Fried is aware that unity exists, the additional problem is that he is too idealistic with it. Only human artists and cultural artworks can produce conviction and unity, and furthermore only the human beholder is capable of interpreting it in their absorptive capacity.

There are also startling similarities between Harman's allure, Diderot's thoughts on art and the causality of nature—not withstanding different ideas on what that causality constitutes. Fried offers a brief commentary on the distinction between Diderot and his peers at the time:

The machine-painting analogy was a traditional one [...] for De Piles and other classical writers the point of the simile was chiefly the idea of an internal accord and mutual adjustment of parts [...] perhaps better described as ostensible occasions for the action or expression of individual figures—whereas for Diderot unity of action and beyond that the unity of painting as a whole involved nothing less than an illusion of inherent dynamism, directedness and *compulsive force of causation itself*.<sup>68</sup>

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and the success of both arts, in fact their continued functioning as major expressions of the human spirit, are held to depend upon whether or not painter and dramatist are able to undo that state of affairs, to *de-theatricalize beholding* and so make it once again a mode of access to truth and conviction, albeit a truth and a conviction that cannot be entirely equated or known or experienced before." (Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality*, 103-104, his emphasis).

<sup>68</sup> Ibid. 85, my emphasis.



[Fig.4. Jeff Wall, *Adrian Walker, Artist, Drawing From a Specimen in a Laboratory in the Dept. of Anatomy at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, 1992.* Transparency in lightbox. 199 x 164 cm]

In recent years, Fried has written that the issues of beholding, absorption and theatricality have been reopened once again but for the medium of contemporary photography. In his latest publication *Why Photography Matters as Art as never before* (2008), Fried argues that contemporary photography:

[...]seeks to come to grips with the issue of beholding in ways that do not succumb to theatricality but which at the same time register the epochality of minimalism/literalism's intervention by an acknowledgment of to-be-seeness[...]<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Michael Fried, *Why photography matters as art as never before* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2008), 43.

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The quote is in relation to the absorptive composition evident in Jeff Wall's body of work. Fried notes that Wall's instantaneous capturing of his figures displays "the absorptive effect in its classic form,"<sup>70</sup> most notably in Wall's *Adrian Walker* (1992) [Fig.4]. Fried's notion of 'to-be-seeness'—introduced here as a half-way house between the photograph made to be seen and the capturing of the absorptive event—accounts for the deliberate staging of the event in question. Fried argues that other contemporary photographers such as Thomas Struth—who captures public reactions to classic works in museums—also enter into new dialogues concerning the beholder's ontological status.

In support of my earlier criticism that Fried only envisages human beholders in mind, the chapter 'Jeff Wall and Absorption; Heidegger on Worldhood and Technology' establishes Fried's mapping of Heidegger's 'World' and 'Equipment' onto Wall's absorptive 'near-documentary' works. The issue is a simple correlationist one; Fried never offers to speculate on scenarios, *other than Dasein's* use of the object(s) presented, because of the Heideggerian imperative of equipment's 'in-order-to.'<sup>71</sup> To truly ignore the beholder, a speculative enquiry should move away from Fried's ever increasing support for absorption within relational equipment and instead move towards the ontological indifference of object-artworks *themselves*.

Elsewhere<sup>72</sup> I have previously claimed that Harman's argument for the discrete irreducible execution of things is conveyed potently within non-participatory, digital, 'runtime'

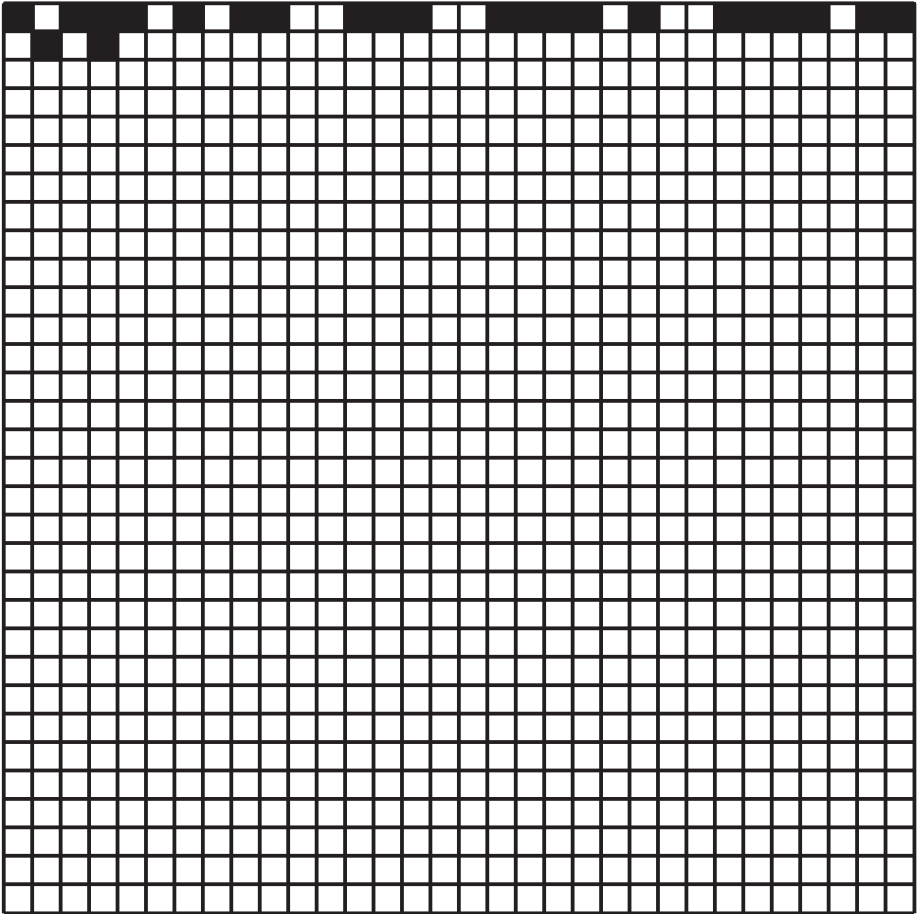
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<sup>70</sup> Fried, *Why photography matters as art as never before*, 40.

<sup>71</sup> It is for this very reason Fried becomes unstuck in the later parts of the chapter analysing Wall's *Diagonal Compositions* which feature no human activity at all. Fried is reduced to the suggestion, that the most important element is the continued human use despite an absence of praxis.

<sup>72</sup> Robert Jackson, "Heidegger, Harman and Algorithmic Allure," Paper delivered for the Association of Art Historians Conference Session: Heidegger and the Work of Art History, April 18 -20th, 2010.





Given: A 32 X 32 Grid

Allowed: Any element of the grid  
to be black or white

Shown: Every Icon

OWNER: JOHN F. SIMON, JR.

ARTIST PROOF EDITION

STARTING TIME: JAN. 27, 1997, 9:42:30

[Fig.5] John F. Simon, Jr, *Every Icon*, 1997. Software: web based and wall hanging (Macintosh PowerBook 170 and plastic acrylic) versions.

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artworks, such as John F. Simon Jr's *Every Icon*<sup>73</sup> [Fig. 5] and the Algorithmic artist Antioine Schmitt's *Vexation 1*.<sup>74</sup> These works in particular draw their aesthetic confrontation by foregrounding discrete execution explicitly, through the artistic sensibility of generative computation. I claim that these works also ignore the role of the beholder, but do so in the foregrounding of execution as a primary mechanism. The beholder is also thoroughly absorbed into the execution of the works by the ontological exclusion of *Being*. At any moment, a host of objects are also continually absorbed by us in an equivalent causality.

### The Anxious Object Recomposed

Hopefully the viewer will be convinced by the last passage, that, in purely formalist terms, Fried's absorption and Harman's allure are similar in scope. It would be rather unfair to criticise Fried solely on his idealist opinion that humans are the sole bearers of aesthetic judgment, yet this is what must be abandoned if objects are to reignite the formalist project.

In response to the articles earlier question concerning the expressive autonomy of the artwork without aesthetic judgement we can now understand why this issue is doubly complex. As object oriented ontology has claimed, humans are not the sole bearers of unity when it comes to objects, yet if, as the formalist criteria establishes, unity is required for the autonomy of expression, then we reach the unexpected outcome of such a manoeuvre. To follow Harold Rosenberg once more, *every sensual object is always-already an anxious object, capable of aesthetic effect*. Every sensual object satisfies the criteria for the modern artwork in itself, so much so, that anxiousness reappears as a metaphysical quandary.

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<sup>73</sup> John F. Simon Jr, *Every Icon*, Java Applet and Web Browser (1997). Last accessed January 3rd 2011: <http://www.numeral.com/eicon.html>

<sup>74</sup> Antioine Schmitt, *Vexation 1*, Computer, loudspeakers, behavioral algorithm, not interactive (2000). Last accessed January 3rd 2011: <http://www.gratin.org/as/>. (This is Schmitt's personal webpage—click on artworks and then the link for *Vexation 1*).

Even Fried's 'presentness' is not enough to break the depth of objects. *There are no artworks as such*, but instead of human context bearing the reason for anxiousness, it is the random binary encounter of causality that chances the autonomy of expression, not the intentions of the beholder or even the artist.

But a more telling feature of Absorption is an obvious integration within realist metaphysics, in so far as it provides a necessary accompaniment for 'allure.' Like allure, Absorption indicates two concurrent events; firstly it references the subject matter in question, the subject continually absorbed in practice. Yet, it also describes the role of the beholder as doing the very same thing with the object in question. At first glance, they appear to be one and the same intention, but notice how allure deals primarily with the splitting of the sensual object itself.

Harman does account for a causal effect in the real executive object, but at the moment of writing this article, there is no current explanation as to why this should occur. The real object of course is the site where the sensual interior is found, but at present allure does not fully explain why this effect would cause the real object to become a part of a larger unit. By contrast—and with a lot of tweaking—Fried's absorption looks to provide an accurate description of a real object continually absorbed into another without mutual reciprocation. This would explain the suggestion as to why an object's parts are absorbed, yet discrete. What Fried needs is a vicarious occurrence, not a dialectic one.

Like the example of Trigger's broom or Bryant's couple, the event of absorption requires the suspension of literal perception to function. If we have established that all artworks are in reality objects with their own specific autonomy, there should be no reason why participating objects cannot also be allowed to function as 'beholders.' Furthermore, the distinction between beholder and object is still asymmetrical, in so far as any object or collection of objects, whether paint and canvas, algorithm and browser, marble and glue, C-print and illuminated frame, plexi-glass and wood, still cause the beholder to behold and not be reciprocally included in a system.

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The absorbing object itself is not directly affected by the beholder in so far as they fail to confront the real object itself, but confront an absorbing, sensual apparition. In turn we should note that what results from this confrontation is a brand new object: "An object is real when it has, not an outer effect, but an inner one."<sup>75</sup> Unlike the extension set theory of a philosopher such as Alain Badiou, Harman indicates that an inner effect is responsible for the causality of discrete units; not an agent arbitrarily naming sets. For two or more objects to come together into a genuine unit there must be some absorptive inner unity that composes the formal executant thing.

Furthermore, by explicitly suggesting that this effect can be located between any sensual object and its real beholder, Rosenberg's notion of the anxious object takes on an altogether different connotation from its original circumstantial bearings. Aesthetic absorption is not determined like Fried seems to think it is. Beholding is an anxious, contingent affair. It is an alluding illusionary event that 'fictionalises' aesthetic depth into the object relative to other beholding objects. What is beholding for one object may no longer be beholding for another; it may never be beholding at all.

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<sup>75</sup> Harman, *Guerrilla Metaphysics*, 232.

# The Cubist Object

## Black Boxes, *Über*realism and the Metaphysics of Perspectives

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### 1. The Metaphysics of Perspectives

**M**ETAPHYSICS HAS TRADITION-ally pictured reality as being oblivious to perspectives. The idea was that whatever perspectives are, they are in no sense part of reality, being at most tools to attain what lies underneath. The exorcism of perspectives from reality is indeed often shared by realists and anti-realists alike. The former would have it that there is a reality behind (or underneath) any perspective and it can (or should) be reached by us while the latter would consider that we cannot go beyond perspectives and therefore any talk of reality is to be aborted. Sharing the premise that perspectives and reality cannot but taint each other, the *exorcist realist* wants to clear reality of all perspective while the *exorcist anti-realist* aims at clearing all perspective of reality.

One of the reasons perspectives, or standpoints, could appear non-real is that they appear to be too multifarious and unruly. They bring up biases, relativity and incoherence. Additionally, they sprout from everywhere. We can talk about

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the human perspective but also about the female perspective, the African perspective or the queer perspective. We can talk about my perspective but also about my perspective today, my perspective from where I stand or my perspective as a biologist (or as an artist etc.). We can consider the perspective of a frog but then we could be tempted to also take on board the perspective of a nervous connection within the frog (reacting to some stimuli but not others) or the perspective of a bunch of frogs (reacting to the weather change as a group). All these perspectives seem to the exorcists to be no more than epiphenomena placed on top of some subsisting reality that is itself devoid of any perspective. This postulated reality lying underneath all perspectives is something I will call *unterreality*, following an analogous expression introduced by Kit Fine.<sup>1</sup> The exorcist realists would accordingly be *unterrealists*.

Reality, then, is often associated with this subsisting *unterreality* that lies under all perspective. The exorcist metaphysics has that perspectives are then somehow floating above reality, they can decorate it and perhaps they can even make it accessible but they are no part of it. But perspectives are also commonly associated with having a world, and this follows from the reading of von Uexküll. He famously considers the perspective of a tick that reacts to no more than a few things that are around it: the direction from where the light is coming from, the passing mammal near the tree branches and the hairless parts of the skin of the mammal that is its prey.<sup>2</sup> The time of the day, the species of the mammal or the different hairless parts of the prey's body are utterly irrelevant; they are just not present at the tick's perspective. The tick distinguishes

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<sup>1</sup> See Kit Fine, "Tense and reality," in: *Modality and Tense: Philosophical papers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 261-320.

<sup>2</sup> See Jacob von Uexküll, "A Stroll through the Worlds of Animals and Men," in *Instinctive Behavior*, ed. Clair Schiller (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1957). Heidegger and Deleuze (and Guattari) have drawn from Uexküll's work. Deleuze talks about animals having a world, while many humans don't have a world; they live in the world of everybody else. See Gilles Deleuze, *Labécedaire de Gilles Deleuze*, filmed by Pierre-André Boutang with Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, (1996).

between the relevant differences and what is indifferent. Its perspective is one that acts on a *home ontology* composed of light, mammals in general and hairless parts of the skin. It is not an obviously nominalistic (home) ontology as the tick's life depends on its capacity to grasp the universal 'mammal' for example, in the sense that it could prey on any of its instances and on nothing that fails to be a mammal.<sup>3</sup> Surely, we can grasp the tick's world because we are also capable to discriminate easily the different instances of 'mammal.'

One perspective can encompass another and this suggests that some perspectives can lie within others. The assumption shared by both exorcist realists and anti-realists is that there is an *unter-reality* that at the same time encompasses all perspectives *and* is devoid of any—a view from nowhere, in the apt phrase made current by Thomas Nagel.<sup>4</sup> The notion of an *unter-reality* to which all perspectives can be reduced—a notion to which they resort either to exorcise perspectives in favour of a (*unter-*)reality or to exorcise reality by arguing that there cannot be something like an *unter-reality*—lead to the idea that metaphysics ought to aim at the description of this perspective-neutral landscape. The upshot is something akin to what takes place in the debates between exorcist realists and anti-realists: metaphysics is taken to be only possible to the extent that such landscape is attainable. There could, however, be more than the two apparent alternatives as there could be more to metaphysics than the search for a perspective-free landscape. Perspectives themselves could be part of the picture.

Consider an exemplary argument for the inextricability between perspectives and reality: McTaggart's argument that there is no (real) passing of time without an idea of now and

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<sup>3</sup> It is interesting to compare this with the study of frog's capacities to spot flies by Lettvin, Maturana et al. See Jerome Lettvin, Humberto Maturana et al., "What the frog's eyes tell the frog's brain?" *Proceedings of the I.R.E.* 47:11 (1959). There they describe the frog's eyes and brain as devices directed towards spotting flies.

<sup>4</sup> Thomas Nagel, *A View from Nowhere* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989).



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therefore of a perspective.<sup>5</sup> What is at stake is whether time can be real if we assume reality cannot be tensed. The B-series of dates in a calendar or hours in a clock is not enough to account for the passing of time—nor can it make sense of events that take place in the present while being rooted in the past. The B-series presents moments in time like pictures in an exhibition that can be seen in any order and in any pace; it is time viewed from nowhere. To picture time and the change it promotes we have to add to the B-series an A-series that indicates what past, present and future are and therefore gives rise to the idea of the passing of time, that is, the production of time that has passed. The A-series, like the arm of a clock, is what introduces change into B states. McTaggart's argument is that there is no change, no passing of time, no changing events without the A-series and therefore without the introduction of tenses. An event is located in time only with respect to other events, dates are meaningless unless we can compare them and ultimately place them in the framework of past, present and future events. To understand the passing of time we need to be able locate ourselves in a present tense. McTaggart himself despaired of the idea that time is real, as the idea of a tensed reality seemed unacceptable to his exorcist view and he preferred to embrace an anti-realism concerning time. His conclusion amounted to something like: if time requires something like the A-series, it cannot be real. If, however, we bite the bullet and take time to be both real and constituted partly by the A-series, we envisage a notion of reality that is not oblivious to perspectives.

If reality is taken to be somehow like a jigsaw that could not be completed without resorting to perspectives, the exorcist strategies have to be themselves abandoned. Here is where alternatives emerges as to how to put forward a metaphysics of perspectives that replaces the (exorcist) craving for a view from nowhere. Kit Fine interestingly explores some alternatives for such a metaphysics by considering what seems to be

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<sup>5</sup> See John McTaggart, "The unreality of time," *Mind* 17 (1908): 457-73.

lost when we stop viewing reality as tenseless.<sup>6</sup> The exorcist realist holds that reality ought to have three features as far as perspectives are concerned: it doesn't favour any perspective against any other (it is not biased), it is not relative to different perspectives (it is single rather than multiple) and it is, itself, coherent. Accordingly, when we challenge the idea that reality is independent of perspectives we can deny any one of the three following alternatives: a) reality is neutral with respect to perspectives—it is indifferent to them; b) reality is not relative to different perspectives—something cannot be real in the past but not real in the present and c) reality is coherent—in particular, incoherent states or events (in different perspectives) cannot take place. The idea of an *unter*-reality entails that reality is neutral, not relative and coherent. If we add perspectives to our metaphysical picture, we can decide which of these three features of *unter*-reality we are willing to let go—if not all of them. Rejecting (a) while keeping (b) and (c) has been the standard strategy in the metaphysics of tense: present events, for instance, are taken to be real while past and future events are somehow constructions thereafter. In this case, reality, albeit biased towards the present, is non-relative and coherent. Fine himself favours the rejection of either (b) or (c) while keeping (a)—the alternatives he calls neutral realisms for they take reality to be neutral and unbiased.

These two neutral alternatives in the metaphysics of perspectives can be labelled perspectivism and *über*realism (Fine calls the latter fragmentalism but he does coin the word *über*-reality while describing its tenets). The former retains (a) and (c) while the latter retains (a) and (b). Perspectivism has that there is no more to reality than what is relative to perspectives; one cannot step outside the different perspectives and therefore reality is to be found within them. One can step out of a perspective towards another but there is no non-perspectival, non-situated viewpoint.<sup>7</sup> Thus, blood is a

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<sup>6</sup> Fine, "Tense and reality," 261-320.

<sup>7</sup> Perspectivism is interestingly endorsed by anthropologists that have worked with the peoples of the Low Amazon (see Eduardo Viveiros de Castro,

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component of a living organisms in the perspective of some humans, a liquid that quenches thirst in the perspective of jaguars, a solvent in the perspective of some chemical molecules and so on but it is nothing over and above all that; there is no blood beyond what appears in all these perspectives. Transperspective identity is confined to specific moves between perspectives; it takes place only when one succeeds to move from one perspective to another. According to perspectivism, there is no reality outside perspectives, while none of them is privileged and each is internally coherent. There is no *unter*-reality (nor *über*-reality) beyond the reality of the different perspectives. In this sense, perspectivism could give the impression of being close to anti-realism. It is important to notice, however, that it is not exorcist as it takes reality to be fully lodged in the different perspectives.

In contrast with perspectivism, *über*realism maintains that although there is nothing underlying the different perspectives, reality is composed of the juxtaposition of them. An *über*-reality is independent of any perspective—therefore it is neutral and not relative to a perspective—yet it is no longer a coherent domain untouched by perspectives. It can then play some of the roles that we expect from *unter*-reality; in particular it can provide a viewpoint that is not hostage to one or many perspectives but rather some sort of view from anywhere. *Über*realism can be compared with a metaphysical cubism: reality is a projection of all the different perspectives onto something. *Über*-reality is known only partially through a perspective, not because perspectives have to be dismissed and a maximal common factor has to be sought (as with *unter*realism) but rather because perspectives provide insufficient elements to attain the complete cubist reality. In this cubism of perspectives, each one has a stake on reality but none has the full amount of it. It is as if perspectives were genuine parts of the complete reality—and the relation

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*Métaphysiques cannibales: lignes d'anthropologie post-structurale* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2009). These anthropologists not only embrace perspectivism but also ascribe to the Amazon Peoples they study strong perspectivist leanings.

between reality and perspectives could therefore become a mereological one where the different perspective-parts are held together by some (*über-*)relation of co-presence. This can give rise to questions concerning the *über-reality* ontology: are there objects and relations? Are there distinct (*über-*) events? In any case, these ontological questions are no longer put within an exorcist framework where appropriate answers preclude any appeal to perspectives.

We can now look again at the nature of perspectives. While *überrealism* emerged here from Fine's discussion of tense, it can be extended to cover perspectives in general. Let's consider the tick again. It relates to what is outside its body through its home ontology. Its perspective is not a straightforward relation to branches, mammals etc., but rather a relation to those things as they are viewed through a perspective. Home ontologies are part of the world—and *überrealism* holds that they are part of *überreality* that is composed of branches, mammals etc. as they appear discriminated in the tick's perspective. Similarly, the present time does not have relations to the 20<sup>th</sup> century or the 22<sup>nd</sup> century but rather relate to the first as past and the second as future—the perspective and the home ontology associated with it (see next section for details of this association) cannot be explained away in favour of perspective-free relata no more than the A-series can be explained away in terms of the B-series. However, from the *überreality* point of view, perspectives can be explained in terms of relations to parts of reality—there (*über-*)are mammals-for-ticks and 20<sup>th</sup> century-as-past so that ticks and the present time can relate to them. Similarly, there (*über-*) are ticks-for-us, ticks-for-mammals, ticks-for-branches etc. In general, *überrealism* attempts to do justice to the idea that most relations are mediated by perspectives.

In the remainder of this paper, I shall explore some consequences of *überrealism* concerning existence, relations, events, black boxes and objects. Clearly, different paths can be followed concerning these issues depending on what other claims we associate to *überrealism*. I shall merely propose and encourage one of these paths.

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### 2. *Überrealism* and the Ontology of Bringing About

According to *überrealism* perspectives are components of reality. It differs both from exorcist realism and exorcist anti-realism. In contrast with the former, it takes perspectives as being a constitutive part of reality and something that in fact gives rise to more (*über-*)reality. In contrast with the latter, it considers that there are no special items called subjects who would somehow constitute perspectives but rather that every item in reality has a perspective. In that sense, *überrealism* could be viewed as a generalized anti-realism where everything constitutes reality: everything acts as a subject. It can be also seen, however, as a form of realism about perspectives and what they manage to show—their respective home ontologies. It holds that everything has a perspective and that every perspective brings something about in its home ontology—the home ontologies are then put together in the *überontology*. Still, we need to understand further what it means to have a perspective.

Étienne Souriau proposed an interesting way to read the discussions concerning realism.<sup>8</sup> Instead of placing the entire stress on the all or nothing Ockhamian question concerning what exists, he found in Berkeley, Kant and Hegel elements that distinguish different modes of existence. Souriau invites us to focus on those modes and their interconnections. There is, for instance, in Kant, an intertwining relation between existence as a phenomenon and existence as a (transcendental) subject, a relation that is akin to what Souriau understands as the relation of bringing about (*instaurer*). To bring about is to give rise to something as a distinguishable item—an object (such as the mammal, any mammal, for the tick), an event (a mammal passing a tree) or a location (the branch's end). According to *überrealism*, everything brings about perspectives and these in turn bring about the items of a home ontology.

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<sup>8</sup> Étienne Souriau, *Les différents modes d'existence* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2009).

The thrust of Souriau's idea of bringing about can be illuminated by *überrealism*. It is the idea that whatever emerges from the process of bringing something about has full-on consequences on whatever else exists. Consider tense perspectives and how we can understand the existence of passing events. Surely they exist only from the perspectives that draw differences between past and present. These perspectives, however, bring about passing events. It is what I call the *Generalized Doppler Effect*. Just like in the common Doppler Effect that requires a still or a slower perceiver to hear the sound of a passing car, something needs to be held still or moving more slowly in order for the passing of the events to be noticed. In fact, it is only for what is still or slower that events happen—and therefore that something takes place. An event can only take place in contrast with surrounding states that remain the same (or change in a different pace). So we say that the river waters flow and we say that because the banks of the river stay put, it is only relative to the roughly fixed banks that the waters flow. It is the difference in speed, and ultimately the tense perspectives that give rise to passing events, a central item in the (*über-*)ontology. Passing events are like the buzzing sound associated with the Doppler Effect: they can be heard only from a certain perspective. And yet, passing events, like passing cars, are as (*über-*)real as anything can be. One could try and separate out the sound through which I find out there is a passing car and the passing (*unter-*) car underlying it. Clearly, this is what *überrealism* claims that cannot be done: if we get rid of the perspectives, we get rid of the thing itself; there is no event without tense perspectives.<sup>9</sup>

In order to clarify further the idea that everything brings about a perspective and that it is only through them that

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<sup>9</sup> The point here brings to mind some of Hegel's arguments concerning the inseparability of phenomena and things-in-themselves in the *Phenomenology of Spirit*. I shall not dwell much on these similarities here. It is important to emphasize, however, that for me, but not for Hegel, everything affords a perspective and therefore while I agree that access to things is constitutive of things themselves, this access does not depend on *Spirit* but rather on everything that exists.

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something becomes (*über-*)real, it is interesting to appeal to the interesting notion of physical intentionality articulated by George Molnar.<sup>10</sup> Molnar argues that Brentano's four features that define the notion of intentionality can be generalised so that it can be applied not only to what is mental (say desires and beliefs, etc.) but also anything that displays dispositions (or powers, or capacities, or affordances). And, arguably, most concrete items in the world display them.<sup>11</sup> Hence, a grain of sugar 1) is directed towards something external to it, such as water (as much as a desire for food is directed towards food), 2) is directed towards something that it may never find (just like there are desires that are never realized), 3) is directed towards any water, the prototype of water rather than a particular drop of water (just as one wants bread and not a particular piece of bread) and 4) responds to things depending on their mode of presentation, i.e. dissolves in liquid water but not in frozen ice (like one can believe that Superman can fly without believing that Clark Kent can fly). Physical intentionality helps us to think how perspectives are brought about. Everything affects its surroundings through its perspectives, and therefore acts like an intentional device. Features 3 and 4 are particularly interesting. The former captures the tick's capacity, for instance, to react to any mammal, but not to anything else. It shows how the world itself deals with its parts in terms of universals. Universals are *überreal* because they belong to the home ontology of physically intentional devices. These devices capture the sensitivity to the mode of presentation: the tick relates to the horse *qua* mammal and to its back *qua* hairless area. Things are *über-real qua* something.

Two general remarks concerning the emerging (*über-*) ontology are in order. First, it seems like we are dealing

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<sup>10</sup> George Molnar, *Powers: A Study in Metaphysics*, ed. Stephen Mumford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

<sup>11</sup> I shall not discuss dispositions in further detail in this paper. The issue has clearly important consequences for the debate concerning actualism and what is taken to be potentially existing in the world. It is enough, to my current use of Molnar's ideas, to indicate that concrete existing items display physical intentionality.



with a superpopulated, rain forest ontology where every individuated element is an individual. In fact, *überontology* is no Ockham-shaved beard, it is not something that could be reduced to a list of basic characters who command the plot from the start. Still, one could be puzzled by the emerging ontological proliferation. A potato-for-an-ant could be shelter while a potato-for-a-rodent could be food. How many potatoes do we have in *überreality*? The question touches in the issue of whether there are fixed identities and the associated indiscernibility in *überreality*—to which I will come back later. But for the moment, it is sufficient to remark that no perspective lies in isolation. That's the nature of the cubist interplay of perspectives: because the potato-for-a-rodent is food, the potato-for-an-ant stops being a shelter. The tick doesn't distinguish between different mammals, but its fate could be different depending on whether the prey-for-tick is also a well kept favourite horse. The tick is directed towards a mammal, but not any mammal in particular. But its prey is always a particular animal, horses or cows, each of them capable of being viewed from different perspectives. Clearly, there are not as many individuals in the *überreality* as the sum of all individuals in all home ontologies. The tick's prey is also an individual in another home ontology.

This takes us to the second general remark. *Überrealism* is not committed to a general holist thesis concerning the interrelatedness of everything. Clearly, things are directed towards other things, but because perspectives mediate directness, they are not directed towards particular things: ticks are directed to any passing mammal, sugar is directed to any portion of dissolving water. This is where an important measure of contingency lies, the tick's fate is not in any sense written in it being directed to a passing mammal, but depends on who ends up as the tick's prey. The world is clearly no jigsaw where every item has a role to fulfil; it is however not like a mosaic where each item is disconnected from all others. Maybe it is more like a composition of magnets, with attractions and repulsions and a wide room for accidental interplay of perspectives.

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### 3. Black Boxes (and Objects)

Bruno Latour has elaborated elements of a metaphysics that has leanings towards *überrealism*.<sup>12</sup> An important notion is that of actants that aims to replace the notion of a particular; an actant is always capable of offering resistance to whatever general plan it is mobilized to implement. Rivers are actants, but so are dams, and drops and waterspouts. In fact, the distinguishing feature of actants is that they offer resistance. Actants can be part of a metaphysics of perspectives as they can be said to relate to what they are somehow directed towards. Moreover, the notion of actant makes clear that action and resistance (and perspectives) are not tied to human subjects, but take place often whenever relations are present. The notion of actant can be made, I believe, very close to *überrealism* but I will rather concentrate on the related notion of *black boxes*, and on the idea that they are ubiquitous.

Graham Harman insightfully explores some elements of Latour's ontology.<sup>13</sup> He introduces the notion of black boxes by claiming that while "...[a]n actant is always born from crisis and controversy; only when it succeeds in establishing a foothold in the world do we forget the tribulations of its birth and eventually treat it as a seamless black box."<sup>14</sup> A black box is a stabilized unit that can be counted on as such and requires no more than minimal maintenance. It is a stable assemblage of things that can then be treated as a unit where its components become irrelevant—what matters is that the black box does its job. So accepted scientific theories are treated as black boxes by us as are cars, computers, pieces of furniture, shopkeepers, lawyers, doctors and parts of our body. To treat something like a black box is to become indifferent to its composition, to its workings—what

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<sup>12</sup> Bruno Latour, *Science In Action: How to Follow Scientists and Engineers Through Society* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987).

<sup>13</sup> Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* (Melborn: Re:Press, 2009).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

matters is that it works. Interestingly, a seeming pragmatic notion—something is a black box if it is treated as such for all relevant purposes—becomes the kernel of ontology. It is clearly a notion akin to perspectives: for something to be a black box it needs to be treated as one. Nothing is a black box in itself—the ontology of black boxes is the ontology of being treated as such by something. A black box can be said to be present whenever we face anything that has the form *x-for-y*—mammal-for-tick, water-for-sugar, armchair-for-me—where *x* is treated as a black box by *y* while *y* is often treated as a black box by something else.

Black boxes are themselves composed of further black boxes; they exist in each layer of the universe. As Harman writes Disneyland is a black box, as is each of its costumed characters, the cars that circulate in the park, the tyres of the cars, the security personnel and the molecules inside the plastic decorations.<sup>15</sup> Harman stresses that only when things go wrong—the mammal is too hairy or has a tougher skin than expected, water freezes before fully dissolving the sugar or an armchair’s leg breaks—then a new negotiation takes place where other actants come to the fore and eventually new black boxes emerge. They are like political aggregates that enjoy some capacity to endure under low maintenance. They are units because they are treated as units. They are individuals because they are treated as such—they need to be brought about, they don’t pre-exist being treated as black boxes, and there are no such thing as an *unter*-black box. Further, we are interestingly converging to *über*realism when we infer from ‘*x* is a black box for *y*’ to simply ‘*x* is a black box.’ Black boxes are brought about by being treated as such, but then they gain full (*über*-)citizenship and the world is then composed by them. The idea that black boxes are brought about entails that most of what exist is engaged in a routine of creation; in fact, the *über*reality is a reality created on every corner. The many varieties of anti-realism are right in suggesting that reality is somehow constituted but are wrong in giving the human subject (however defined) the privilege to

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 46.

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do so. *Über*realism is then an attempt to extend the idea that reality is constituted so that most things author the jointly constituted world.

The introduction of black boxes can help dealing with problems of identity in *über*-reality. Are there objects in *über*-reality? We can start by considering an analogy with possible worlds. Kripke, who was crucial to the introduction of the notion of possible worlds in contemporary philosophy, remarked that they are not to be viewed as distant countries or alien planets that could be observed with telescopes.<sup>16</sup> To him, this advice is enough to dispel the troubles to do with trans-world identity. We don't observe a distant possible world from a telescope while entertaining the pressing question of who is Reza Nigasterani and who is H.P. Lovecraft in this world, nor do we question who are this dog and this bone, or where are the apple or the pear. Possible worlds are always viewed from the actual world where the identities are fixed; they are always viewed from the perspective of the actual world. Similarly, we can notice that *über*-reality is not itself a perspective that can be contemplated on its own—its citizens are always brought about by perspectives and they have to be always present. Hence, *über*-individuation is always perspective-rich. It takes more than one perspective to individuate in *über*-reality. A mammal may be a tick's prey but it may also be a good keeper's horse and this interplay of perspectives has consequences for the tick's fate (as much as the keeper's). We can then maybe talk about (*über*-)objects as being the products of what has been individuated by more than one perspective. It takes more than one perspective to tango objects. Objects are juxtaposed black boxes. I even go as far as to venture a (tentative) definition: objects, and only objects, are those that can be conceived in the cubist manner where there is an interplay of perspectives. Objects are (*über*-)cubes.

The idea is that identities are themselves determined by how things go, they are not set in advance; there are no objects

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<sup>16</sup> Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1972).

underlying all perspectives, they emerge from the interplay of perspectives, they are a cubist product. As black boxes are brought about by a perspective, objects arise from the interaction of perspectives in *über*-reality. This interplay is somehow inevitable due to the nature of black boxes themselves. Black boxes have to be implemented somehow: Disneyland requires many components, as do its costumed characters, or tyres or the rubber molecules. The passing mammal is never just a tick's prey. There is a common space of implementation where the same potato implements the rodent's food and the ant's shelter. Different black boxes are made of the same material, a material that itself is composed of black boxes that in turn need to be implemented. This common space of implementation<sup>17</sup> is the locus of *über*-reality, and it is entirely populated by the capacity of its citizens to bring about things through perspectives. The common space of implementation is not organized in advance like a cosmos, it is a collection of (cubist) footprints that the many perspectives and their black boxes leave behind. It is because of this common space that the tick's fate can be associated with the good keeper's, they direct themselves to the same item in this common space: the same object.

Surely, this is not enough to provide more than a sketch of how to individuate objects without resorting to the *unter*-realist premise that they are independent of any perspective. Many questions subside—mostly questions related to the identity and the indiscernibility. But it is worth remarking that *über*realism is no ontology of objects, it is rather an ontology of black boxes that converge into objects through the interplay that has to take place in the common space of implementation. Objects don't pre-exist their individuation,

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<sup>17</sup> I believe there are interesting points of convergence between this common space of implementation and the notion of plane of immanence as developed by Deleuze and Guattari. For them, the plane of immanence is also the plan of haecceities, that is, the plane of singularities (we could also call it the plane of actants) such as that that implements both the prey for the tick and the horse of the good keeper. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Mille Plateaux* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1980).

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they inherit the individuation of black boxes and are tied to the impossibility for black boxes to be operative without being implemented (in a common space where other black boxes are also operative). Cubist objects have uncommon features concerning their identity, persistence in time and discernibility. Much cubist object-oriented philosophy would have to take place for us to have a clearer picture of how they act and relate to each other.

### 4. Latour's Claim About Airborne Germs and *Überrealism*

I conclude by briefly considering a controversial claim made by Latour that "...after 1864 airborne germs were there all along."<sup>18</sup> It is a puzzling claim when we first hear it and I will attempt to make sense of it. The claim can be understood as follows: the theorizing of Pasteur brought about airborne germs as objects that were then interacting with people, animals and other ecological agents all along. If understood this way, the claim is clearly not that Pasteur created these microbes *ex nihilo*—in fact, perspectives don't create things from nothing: they make use of materials they find in the common space of implementation; the elements available to compose aggregates that can be treated as black boxes. Pasteur brought about microbes, not out of nothing, but out of what there was (say, actants and black boxes). So, we can understand epidemics of the past in terms of microbes, which can help us prevent future similar epidemics in ways that wouldn't be possible without the (cubist) microbe object.

Harman criticizes Latour's claim by saying that Pasteur was there before 1864 and so were the microbes.<sup>19</sup> Pasteur was there; however, as an object in a way that microbes were not, he was many black boxes for his fellow humans, for his internal fauna, for other animals etc. We can now even tell his biography in terms of microbes that took him as a shelter. He was a black box for many things and so he was an *überobject*

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<sup>18</sup> Bruno Latour, *Pandora's Hope: Essays on the Reality of Science Studies* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999), 173.

<sup>19</sup> Harman, *Prince of Networks*, 125.

before 1864. Not so with microbes. Harman then asks what did the milk fermentation, the spoiling wine, the killing sheep job before 1864. We would now have a perspective to say, the microbes did. But, before, without this perspective, we would have had precious few resources to put all this together: other things existed-for-the-milk, or existed-for-the-wine etc, but nothing existed as a universal microbe as an object. Pasteur brought about the microbes as implementing many black boxes—for wine, for milk etc. In other words, if we exorcise the idea of an *unter*-reality altogether, there could be no sense in saying that microbes in themselves were there all along. Latour's claim would therefore be pointing towards an *über*-realist dismissal of individuals pre-existing any perspective.

In other words, airborne germs as black boxes from the perspective of the organisms of children and animals, or from the perspective of milk or wine were there before 1864, but not the object. Pasteur's work brought about the (cubist) object airborne germ, and made it available retrospectively. Individuation of items in *über*-reality cannot precede the process of bringing about—while microbes as microbes exist only to the point when they are treated as such. Objects do not precede their bringing about as nothing does—if we thoroughly reject the idea of an *unter*-reality. In the *über*realist metaphysics of black boxes, existence follows an act of bringing about; there is no subsisting of anything that is not available to a perspective. Objects, therefore, arise as citizens of the *über*-reality by acts of bringing them about, such as the one carried out by Pasteur. Latour's claim could be taken as making the point that nothing pre-exists those acts, and we don't have to sweep aside the black boxes in order to unleash an ultimate level of reality. *Über*realism offers a realism that both harbours a reality common to all perspectives and never make those perspectives dispensable. It entails that Latour's claim could be (factually) wrong and microbes as objects could exist before the year of 1864 (if they were brought about as objects by other devices) but they certainly could not precede any act of bringing about.



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I conclude with another tenet of Souriau's work that can help take in the notion of *über*-reality. It also sheds some light on the process of bringing about (cubist) objects. Souriau insists that everything that exists entertains certain under-realization to it (he talks about an *inachèvement existentiel de toute chose*). Everything falls short of being a completed work. I claim that *über*-reality is itself like a draft, like a permanent drawing board where things get constantly sketched. (Cubist) objects are always available to be affected by some part of the world that starts treating them in new way. A consequence of the rejection of an *unter*-reality is that there are no fixed realities oblivious to perspectives. Rather, reality is a multi-authored sketch that is open to interference from every corner. *Über*-reality is a collective composition of what every bit of the world does; it is only partially accessible and it is fully exposed to the elements.

# Correlationism reconsidered

## On the ‘Possibility of Ignorance’ in Meillassoux

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IF QUENTIN MEILLASSOUX’S EXTRA-ordinary assault on correlationism has become *the* reference point, from the point of view of fundamental argumentation, for speculative realism in general, it is odd that a theme as central to his argument as the problematization of the notion of ‘possibility of ignorance’ hasn’t been subjected to closer scrutiny. In what follows I want, if not to ‘de-problematize’ that notion, at least to question its problematization. First I summarize Meillassoux’s argument, showing how it leads up to the point at which speculative idealism and speculative materialism turn out to be the only consistent options for the correlationist to turn to. I then ask the question of what it is that allows Meillassoux to present the path to speculative materialism in this way, suggesting that he must himself rely on the notion of ‘possibility of ignorance’ on a purely logical rather than ontological level. I show how Meillassoux’s characterization of the correlationist’s predicament lies at the root of a lack of clarity about whether or not he claims to actually *refute*

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the idealist. Finally, I try to flesh out the argument through a close reading of the ‘post-mortem’ example that Meillassoux uses to clarify his own argument. Far from clarifying anything, however, this example complicates matters needlessly and makes Meillassoux’s rejection of the ‘possibility of ignorance’ even less plausible. Essentially I claim that the ‘dogmatic’ positions are irrelevant to Meillassoux’s argument strictly speaking, but that the inclusion of these dogmatic positions allows Meillassoux to present his own position in a more favorable light than seems warranted.

### Correlationism as arational encounter between Realism and Idealism

In his *After Finitude*, Quentin Meillassoux tries to show how the correlationist, if he wants to refuse the subjective idealist’s absolutization of the correlation, needs to insist on the *facticity* (the ‘givenness-without-reason’) of the correlation. But this notion of facticity brings with it a problem of its own; for the only case in which it makes sense to use facticity as an argument against the necessary existence of the correlation as deduced by the subjective idealist, is the case in which it allows one to think the real possibility of the nonexistence of the correlation. The correlationist would like to think that the only way in which facticity would need to allow him to think the possibility of this nonexistence is as a ‘possibility of ignorance’—the nonexistence of the correlation is merely ‘possibly possible,’ thus it might turn out to be really possible, we just don’t know, we can’t exclude the possibility, but neither, then, do we affirm it as a real one. To Meillassoux, however, this ambivalence regarding the status of possibility is inadmissible in as far as the correlationist wants to use the principle of facticity as a basis for denying the *necessity* of the hypostatization of the correlation: since it would make no sense to say that the existence of the correlation might *happen* to be necessary (if it *is* necessary, then it is *necessarily* necessary), this necessity cannot be included as *any* kind of ‘possibility’ if the *nonexistence* of the correlation is included

in the same way, as a possibility on the same level. But then, if the nonexistence of the correlation is held to be possible, it also cannot *happen* to be possible: it has to be thought as an *absolute* possibility if it is to be thought at all.

The correlationist wants to relativize both of his principles—that of the primacy of the correlation, which allows him to counter dogmatism, and that of facticity, which allows him to counter the idealist—simultaneously to one another: the in-itself cannot be known, since it is relative to the for-us; but neither can our knowledge of the for-us be understood as knowledge of the for-us *in itself*, since, just as the in-itself is relative to the for-us (the correlation), the for-us, in its turn, is relative to something, namely facticity, the facticity of the correlation. But what is the status of this facticity? Either it is for-us or it is in-itself. If facticity is merely for-us, then the relativization of the correlation takes place *within* the correlation, and so it again presupposes the correlation as for-us *in itself* in order to present facticity as for-us *for us*; but if facticity is facticity in itself, then it must be thought as existing outside the correlation, which is what allows it to be that to which the correlation itself is relativized. In both cases, the following holds: to relativize something is to relativize it to something else that is not itself relativized to anything. For even if I relativize relativity only to itself, I thereby reinstate relativity itself as absolute (thereby producing a variant of idealism); and if I relativize relativity to something other than itself, then, by definition, there is something that limits this relativity, an absolute ground of relativity itself.

For Meillassoux, then, the alternatives are clear:

Either I choose—against idealism—to de-absolutize the correlation; but at the cost of absolutizing facticity. Or I choose, against the speculative philosopher, to de-absolutize facticity—I submit the latter to the primacy of the correlation (everything I think must be correlated with an act of thought) by asserting that this facticity is only true for-me, not necessarily in-itself. But this is at the cost of an idealist absolutization of the correlation—for my capacity-not-to-be becomes unthinkable once it is construed as nothing more than the correlate of my act of thought.

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Thus, correlationism cannot de-absolutize both of its principles at once, since it always needs one of them in order to de-absolutize the other. As a result, we have two ways out of the correlationist circle: either by absolutizing the correlation, or by absolutizing facticity.<sup>1</sup>

Meillassoux presents us with a choice. His own choice, based on the 'obvious' rejection of any kind of ontological argument, is to absolutize facticity. In going on to develop his 'principle of factuality' and its consequences, he shows that speculative thought is capable of going in more than one direction only, and this is an achievement in itself. But there is a question that Meillassoux does not put to himself and that seems important for a possible defense of correlationism.

Here is the question: What is it that allows Meillassoux to distinguish these two very different possibilities for speculative thought as options that are open to us, in the sense that both speculative idealism and speculative materialism are seen to be internally coherent philosophies? In what sense are both of these philosophies 'possible' for thought if each implies the other's impossibility? From what *point of view* are we supposed to be able to understand what Meillassoux makes us believe we do understand, namely that both of these philosophies *are*, unlike correlationism (in its strong form), ultimately intelligible? For Meillassoux, of course, does not refute the idealist. Rather, he exploits the correlationist's failed attempt at refutation of the idealist to reveal a new possibility for thought, an *alternative* to idealism. But there seems to be no possibility of any direct confrontation between speculative idealism and speculative materialism: the internally incoherent position of the correlationist, this 'non-ground,' is the only 'ground' on which the two meet, and only in order to radically distinguish themselves from one another.

Again, the question is: How can Meillassoux *think* what he apparently takes himself to be able to think, namely the fact that neither the idealist (who absolutizes the correlation) nor

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<sup>1</sup> Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (London: Continuum, 2008), 59-60.

the realist (who absolutizes facticity) contradicts himself? For from the point of view of the idealist, the realist certainly does contradict himself, since he claims to be able to think the nonexistence of thought; and from the point of view of the realist, the idealist must certainly contradict himself, since he claims that I cannot think my own nonexistence when in fact, having absolutized facticity, I have thought thought itself as grounded in the possibility of its own nonexistence. The point is that I cannot, as an idealist, place myself in the realist's shoes in order to see how he does not contradict *himself*, but only idealism: I must fully become a realist in order to understand how realism does not contradict itself, in order to grasp the peculiar internal consistency of the realist's vision from within—in fact, I will not *understand* realism if *idealism* does not, even if only for an instant, become unintelligible to me, and *vice versa*. Neither idealism nor realism, then, can serve as a point of view from which both can be seen to be actual possibilities for thought. We are dealing with two irreconcilable conceptions of thought itself: neither conception can be *thought* as being coherent in terms of the other—there is a disagreement between these philosophies precisely regarding what is *thinkable*.

It is crucial, in assessing the merit of Meillassoux's argument, that we apply to every step of it the same standards that he expects an argument to meet. We must therefore turn Meillassoux's accusation against the correlationist against Meillassoux himself and ask: What is it that allows him to *think* this disagreement? Since the disagreement cannot be thought from the point of view of either of the disagreeing parties, we might say, it would have to be thinkable from the point of view of a third philosophy with yet another different conception of the thinkable encompassing both the idealist and the realist conception. But this would be unacceptable to both the idealist and the realist, even if only because the same problem would repeat itself between idealism and philosophy X (the third conception of the thinkable) on the one hand and philosophy X and realism on the other, which would lead to an infinite regress: an infinite number

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of 'philosophies' would be needed to understand the relation between any two of them.

But can't we simply say that the position from within which both idealism and realism can be seen to be actual possibilities for thought is *the position of the correlationist*? In what follows I want to argue that, this indeed being the only option that is still open to us if we want to uphold the meaningfulness of the assertion that both idealism and realism are actual possibilities for thought, we are nevertheless forced to understand this option itself as one that could not be acceptable to Meillassoux, because the only way in which it makes sense is also a way in which correlationism turns out to make sense after all.

### A supposedly contingent affirmation of necessity

Let us agree with Meillassoux that correlationism is incoherent, i.e., that the core of its argument is not thinkable. And let us note, again, that Meillassoux grants us two mutually contradictory but internally coherent ways out of the mere philosophical 'crossroads' that correlationism turns out to be. If realism is unintelligible to the idealist and idealism is unintelligible to the realist since there is no common ground between the two save the position that they both agree is self-contradictory (i.e., ultimately *unintelligible*), and if a conception of intelligibility is nonetheless required of one who claims that another such conception is (or is not) intelligible, then: 1) the only possible philosophical locus of a conception of intelligibility allowing for both idealism and realism is *itself* unintelligible; and 2) this unintelligibility—the unintelligibility of *correlationism*—is itself equivocal, since there are two *different* conceptions of intelligibility, that of the idealist and that of the realist, according to which correlationism is unintelligible: the reason why correlationism is unintelligible for the idealist is not the same as the reason why it is so for the realist.

If we need to occupy an unintelligible position in order to distinguish two versions of intelligibility from one an-



other; if we need to *contradict* ourselves in order to see that there is more than one way out of self-contradiction; then it would seem wrong to maintain that the distinction (between idealism and realism as actual possibilities for thought) is *thinkable*. If Meillassoux is right to say that we are forced to *choose* whether to absolutize the correlation or facticity, then in order to be able to say this without falling short of his own requirement of thinkability, he has to be able to conceive of the situation of one who has not yet made his choice. This situation is a situation of self-contradiction, and it is perfectly possible, one might argue, to conceive of someone contradicting himself. Indeed it is; but not without, at least implicitly, already having a conception of intelligibility, i.e., a *logic* that tells you when someone is contradicting himself. And since there is no such thing as a ‘generic logic’ common to the idealist and the realist on which one can fall back in order to maintain, without yet identifying the idealist or the realist logic as one’s own, that the correlationist does indeed contradict himself, to *have* a logic is to have an idealist or a realist logic. Thus, to be able to represent the situation of the correlationist as a situation of self-contradiction, one has to already, perhaps unwittingly, have made a ‘choice’ to absolutize the correlation or facticity, for only once one has made such a ‘choice’ does one have a coherent position from within which it makes sense to accuse the correlationist of self-contradiction. The fact that the correlationist *does* turn out to contradict himself from *both* points of view tends to blind us to the fact that self-contradiction cannot be thought neutrally: if something is thought as self-contradictory, it is already thought as self-contradictory for some special reason within a specific framework that suggests a particular way of overcoming this self-contradiction.

But then we should be able to show how Meillassoux’s representation of the correlationist’s situation is itself colored by his implicitly already having chosen to absolutize facticity. We would have to show what an *idealist* representation of the same situation of self-contradiction would look like and point out a significant difference.

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Meillassoux represents the situation as one *in which there is a choice to be made*. I want to argue, now, that the moment of self-contradiction (the situation of the correlationist who has not yet absolutized either one of his principles) can only *retroactively* be recognized as a *moment of choice* once one has chosen to absolutize facticity rather than the correlation; it is only *with* the absolutization of facticity, with this *choice* to absolutize facticity, that one also affirms the situation from out of which the choice is made as one in which *there is a choice to be made in the first place*: it is only in choosing to absolutize ‘facticity-rather-than-the-correlation’ that one also *chooses to choose*—it is a *particular* choice that constitutes choice as such by presupposing a freedom in which thought itself is grounded.

Meillassoux himself seems to at least partially affirm this and apparently does not hesitate to attribute to the idealist a logic that would only re-affirm the same:

Facticity (...) is, in my view, the fundamental answer to any absolutisation of the correlation, for if correlation is factual, we can no longer say—as the idealist does—that it is a necessary component of any reality. Of course, an idealist may object that conceiving the non-being of a subjective correlation is a pragmatic contradiction, since the very conception of it proves we exist as a subject—so that we exist, when we speak of non-existence, non-being, we are existing. But we can reply, this time, that we can conceive our facticity even from the inside of the correlational circle, since Fichte himself has proved it. Indeed, Fichte conceived his first principle—I=I, the relation of the I to itself—as essentially ungrounded—in my vocabulary, as essentially factual. Of course, for Fichte, the first principle is not a fact, but an act: the act of conceiving the I. But this act is essentially *free*, according to Fichte—and that means not necessary. We choose whether or not to posit our own subjective reflection, and this choice is not grounded on any necessary cause, since our freedom is radical. But to say this is just to recognize, after Descartes, that our subjectivity cannot reach an absolute necessity but only a conditional one. Even if Fichte speaks abundantly of absolute and unconditional necessity, his necessity is no longer dogmatic and substantial necessity, but a necessity grounded upon a freedom itself

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ungrounded. There can be no dogmatic proof that the correlation must exist rather than not. Hence this absence of necessity is sufficient to reject the idealist's claim of its absolute necessity.<sup>2</sup>

But what can it mean that, on the one hand, Meillassoux offers us a choice between absolutizing facticity and absolutizing the correlation—a choice, that is, between realism and idealism—while on the other hand he seems to be saying that the very freedom that underlies that choice, the very act of self-positing that is supposed to make this choice possible in the first place, is proof of the illegitimacy of the idealist's claim of being able to deduce the absolute necessity of the existence of the correlation?

A paradox seems to ensue once we allow for the absolutization of the correlation as an alternative 'choice;' for once we have 'chosen' to absolutize the correlation rather than facticity, the situation from out of which this absolutization takes place does *not* retroactively reveal itself as one in which indeed there was a choice to be made. From the point of view of the idealist, who claims to be able to *deduce* the necessary existence of the correlation, if at any moment one would have had a *choice* in the matter, one would not have been in a position to *deduce* the truth of idealism. So, to conceive of the situation of the correlationist, the situation in which one has not yet absolutized either facticity or the correlation, as one in which one does have a choice to go in either direction, is already to 'set the stage' in a way that prepares the only real choice one has from the point of view of freedom: the purely formal 'choice for choosing' itself, which expresses itself in the substantive 'choice' to absolutize facticity, which only reaffirms contingency, i.e., the space of freedom itself. With this, Meillassoux finds himself in the same position as Fichte, who, in saying that "what philosophy one chooses depends on what kind of man one is,"<sup>3</sup> cannot avoid revealing his own

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<sup>2</sup> Quentin Meillassoux, in Ray Brassier, Graham Harman, Iain Hamilton Grant and Quentin Meillassoux, "Speculative Realism," *Collapse III*, 429-430.

<sup>3</sup> As quoted, for example, in Slavoj Žižek, *The Parallax View* (Cambridge:

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choice for the philosophy of freedom-over-logic; for one might, after all, embrace a philosophy that does away with the very idea of ‘choice’—indeed, this is the standard characterization of the Hegelian philosophy, i.e., the idealist philosophy from the point of view of which the correlationist moment of self-contradiction is nothing but a necessary step on the way to the logical/real sublation of the opposition between necessity and contingency.

### Deduction, description and their interrelation

To construe the problem in terms of an incommensurability of logics as I have done, is not quite to turn from a comparison of realism and idealism as substantive views to a juxtaposition of the two qua pure form, as opposed to content, of thought; for the point is precisely that for the idealist, unlike for the realist, ‘logic’ is never merely *formal* logic. Rather, the isomorphism or even the ultimate identity of thought and reality implied in any hypostatization of the correlation means that, for the idealist, since thought = being, logic is always already ontology.

A logic that operates on the basis of an identification of such concepts initially defined in opposition to one another can only be a *dialectical* logic. It is this dialectical logic that allows the idealist to deduce rather than merely describe the form of the correlation. When Meillassoux draws the contrast between the (strong) correlationist and the idealist

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MIT Press, 2006), 75: “In all great ‘anti-philosophers,’ from Kierkegaard to Nietzsche to the late work of Wittgenstein, the most radical authentic core of being-human is perceived as a *concrete practico-ethical engagement and/or choice which precedes (and grounds) every ‘theory,’* every theoretical account of itself, and is, in this radical sense of the term, *contingent* (‘irrational’)—it was Kant who laid the foundation for ‘anti-philosophy’ when he asserted the primacy of practical over theoretical reason; Fichte simply spelled out its consequences when he wrote, apropos of the ultimate choice between Spinozism and the philosophy of subjective freedom: ‘What philosophy one chooses depends on what kind of man one is.’ Thus Kant and Fichte—unexpectedly—would have agreed with Kierkegaard: in the last resort there is no theory, just a fundamental practico-ethical decision about what kind of life one wants to commit oneself to.”

in precisely these terms,<sup>4</sup> he says nothing about the relation between description and deduction. This should not surprise us, since from his point of view there is nothing interesting to be said about it, except that it is a difference that exists— whoever accepts this distinction at face value accepts that it, also, can only be described.

To *deduce* the difference between description and deduction would be to deduce that there is something that can only be described, not deduced, i.e., it would be to prove the necessity of a certain contingency, a contingency subordinated to the laws of its deducibility.<sup>5</sup> Meillassoux, of course, wants to avoid this reinscription of contingency within the grid of necessity. But to avoid such a reinscription is also to give up on any possibility of *deducing* the necessity of contingency. The necessity that Meillassoux affirms of contingency is a necessity that, extricated from the Principle of Sufficient Reason as it is, does not in any way qualify or ‘contaminate’ contingency—rather the reverse: it is contingency which, once absolutized, determines the meaning of its own necessity as a necessity that cannot be the necessary existence of any entity.

But the implied ‘externality’ of contingency in relation to necessity simply mirrors the distinction between description and deduction which, to the idealist, is unreal or purely internal—for that is what it means to say that this distinction can itself be *deduced*: like contingency and necessity, description and deduction must, for the idealist-dialectician, be two sides of the same coin. By presenting the encounter between

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<sup>4</sup> Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 38.

<sup>5</sup> As Ray Brassier clarifies in his exposition of Meillassoux: “the Hegelian absolute is fully capable of embracing contingency as well as necessity. But the contingency which the Hegelian absolute incorporates within itself is merely the conceptless materiality of nature through which the Notion must pass in order to achieve and realize its own autonomy and independence, which is to say, its own necessity. The contingency which is predicated of its individual moments is subordinated to the superior necessity of the contradictory process as a whole. If Hegel affirms the necessity of material contingency, this is only insofar as it is determinately negated by the self-moving Notion.” Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction*, (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007), 70.

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the speculative idealist and the correlationist in terms of an accepted distinction between deduction and description, Meillassoux already prepares a misrepresentation of the idealist's position lacking which the path to speculative materialism would not appear as smooth. This misrepresentation only becomes fully apparent when we shift, bearing Meillassoux's interpretation of Fichte in mind, from the vocabulary of description vs. deduction to that of freedom vs. logical compulsion.

Meillassoux commits an error very similar to the one that he himself, in the course of arguing for his position in terms of his 'post-mortem' example (which in a moment we will consider in-depth), accuses the correlationist of:

The correlationist does the opposite of what she says—she says that we can think that a metaphysical thesis, which narrows the realms of possibility, might be true, rather than the speculative thesis, which leaves this realm entirely open; but she can only say this by thinking an open possibility, wherein no eventuality has any more reason to be realized than any other. This open possibility, this 'everything is equally possible,' is an absolute that cannot be de-absolutized without being thought as absolute once more.<sup>6</sup>

When Meillassoux says that we *can* choose to absolutize the correlation rather than facticity, he is in effect saying that we can *choose* to deny that there is a choice. But of course, if we do deny that there is a choice, then we will not see ourselves as having *chosen* to deny that there is a choice. Yet Meillassoux needs to present the idealist's position as a possible *choice*, since if we cannot choose to absolutize the correlation, then we are *forced* to absolutize facticity, and in that case we *do not have a choice*, i.e., there is no 'abyss' of radical freedom/contingency to discover. In other words: for his argument to work, Meillassoux has to keep the realm of possibility (choices) open; but if it *really is* open, if idealism *really is* a coherent

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<sup>6</sup> Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 58.

alternative to realism, then Meillassoux must concede that idealism, which destroys freedom/contingency, *could* turn out to be true, and thus that the ‘choice’ he presents us with *could* turn out to be a false choice, an illusion of freedom sustaining the dark mirage of contingency.

What this means is that the ‘overcoming’ of correlationism in order to arrive at speculative materialism cannot be the end of the story. The moment the speculative materialist affirms the ‘openness’ of possibility that includes idealism as an option, he is thrown right back into the correlationist’s predicament: does the ‘possibility’ of (the truth of) speculative idealism imply the possibility of the *impossibility* of (the truth of) speculative materialism? If so, then nothing has been reached. But if not, then in what sense is idealism a ‘possibility’ when left open as such by the speculative materialist? And if it is *not* left open as such, then what sense does it make to say that we *can* choose to absolutize the correlation?

A discussion of Meillassoux’s ‘post-mortem’ argument should convince us that no possibility other than the ‘possibility of ignorance’ can be implied in Meillassoux’s affirmation of speculative idealism as a possibility for thought.

### Is immortality ‘possible’?

Meillassoux presents five disputants in the following order: Christian dogmatist, atheist dogmatist, correlationist agnostic, subjective idealist, speculative materialist. The Christian and the atheist both claim to know something about the in-itself: that it somehow involves an afterlife, and that it doesn’t, respectively; the agnostic then uses the argument from pragmatic contradiction to disqualify both—one cannot claim to know what there is when one is not there to know, thus all beliefs concerning the in-itself are equally legitimate; but for the subjective idealist the very thought that either one of the dogmatists *could* be right is misguided, since if we draw out the full consequences of the argument from pragmatic contradiction, we should say that both of the dogmatists are contradicting themselves and so cannot be right—the cor-



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relationist agnostic's claim that the contradiction could turn out to be merely epistemological is itself baseless, thus the only thesis that fulfills the requirements of reason is that of the necessary existence, i.e., the immortality, of "my mind, if not my body;"<sup>7</sup> at this point the correlationist agnostic can counter the idealist, his "internal adversary,"<sup>8</sup> in one way only:

[She] must maintain that my capacity-to-be-wholly-other in death (whether dazzled by God, or annihilated) is just as thinkable as my persisting in my self-identity. The 'reason' for this is that I think myself as devoid of any reason for being and remaining as I am, and it is the thinkability of this unreason—of this facticity—which implies that the other three theses—those of the two realists and the idealist—are all equally possible.<sup>9</sup>

Thus the introduction of facticity seems to allow the correlationist agnostic to maintain that the dogmatist's self-contradiction could be merely epistemological after all: I cannot 'substantively' think the unthinkable, but formally there is no contradiction in my thinking-myself-away, and so I cannot exclude the possible meaningfulness of the dogmatic theses.

Finally, then, it is the 'speculative philosopher' who takes the stage. According to her, the fact that the correlationist agnostic embraces the theses of the dogmatists and that of the idealist as *thinkable*, implies that they are all taken to be really *possible* and thus must be *contingent*. In this way, by forcing himself, against the idealist, to *think* the 'capacity-to-be-other,' the correlationist has inadvertently revealed the absolute as "the *possible transition*, devoid of reason, of my state towards any other state whatsoever."<sup>10</sup>

In order to begin to understand why this example is so misleading, let us ask the following question: What is it that allows the speculative materialist to assert that the correlation-

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<sup>7</sup> Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 59-60.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

ist agnostic must have thought the *subjective idealist's* thesis as revealing one contingent possibility among others? When the idealist states that the mind is in some sense immortal, does he mean to say that it only *happens* to be so? Clearly not. So if the thesis that the mind is in some sense immortal is thought as a contingent thesis, it cannot be the thesis of the idealist that is therewith being *thought*. As we will see in a moment, it is doubtful whether the same should not be said in relation to the two dogmatic theses; but assuming for the moment that the correlationist may indeed be taken to have *thought* at least these two theses, both of which involve my 'capacity-to-be-wholly-other,' it seems clear that he cannot be taken to have thought both the dogmatic theses and the idealist one as 'possibilities' existing on the same ontological level. If I allow myself to think the contingency of my own existence as supposedly implied in both of the dogmatic theses, the price I have to pay is that I can no longer think my existence as necessary, at least not within a single movement of thought. There is no difference between the 'real possibility' of mortality and mortality itself; and there is no such thing as 'contingent immortality.' Thus, if the contingency of my existence, i.e., my mortality, is possible, it is also necessary (though by no means necessarily actualized), and in that case my immortality is in no sense possible; on the other hand, if the necessity of my existence, i.e., my immortality, is possible, then it is also necessary, and in that case my mortality is in no sense possible.

That this doesn't come out clearly in Meillassoux is most obvious from the ambiguity of the Christian dogmatic thesis as he presents it: on the one hand, this thesis, like that of the idealist, is that "our existence continues after death;"<sup>11</sup> on the other hand it is supposed to imply, like the atheistic thesis, a "capacity-to-be-wholly-other in death," in this case as "dazzled by God."<sup>12</sup> But if it is *my* existence that continues after death, then how does that make life-after-death 'wholly-other'?

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 56.

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The placement of the Christian dogmatist in Meillassoux's argument is a diversion. If mortality means the contingency of existence and immortality means necessary existence, then the atheist believes we are mortal and the idealist believes we are immortal. What does the Christian dogmatist believe? Supposedly he is a realist, not an idealist; but it is only formally that he is a realist, since substantively he agrees with the idealist—he believes that some core of subjectivity survives the perishing of its contingent embodiment; now, if he believes that this core only *happens* to survive, then the 'immortality' he believes in is indeed contingent—in that case he is of course not in any sense an idealist, but such a belief is perfectly compatible with the essential claim of the dogmatic *atheist*; the contingent survival of some core of subjectivity is merely a detour, perhaps even an actually endless detour on the road to death if in principle this core of subjectivity itself is perishable, if it *can* cease to exist; whether it *does* cease to exist is not of interest, philosophically speaking. But what this means, then, is that the Christian dogmatist's position does not on any interpretation reveal any 'eventuality' that is not covered by the conjunction of atheism and idealism.

Again, 'mortality' is the contingency of existence; 'immortality' is necessary existence. The idealist unequivocally claims that we are immortal; the atheist unequivocally claims that we are mortal. Now the idealist (along with the correlationist) supposedly accuses the two dogmatists of the same error: they claim to be able to think what there is when one is not. But if the Christian dogmatist believes that we *are* immortal, then he is claiming, for whatever reason, that we *cannot but be*; and thus he cannot be taken to be making a claim concerning 'what there is *when one is not*'—we can interpret him as claiming to know what there is when one is not only if we take him to believe that it is at least *possible* for him *not* to be, i.e., that he is mortal. Neither, though, can the atheist simply be taken to be claiming to know '*what there is when one is not*;' rather, he is simply claiming that it is possible for one not to be—and that's that.

What I am problematizing here is the idealist's relation to the two dogmatists as Meillassoux presents it. Idealism, as the product of the absolutization of the correlation, is determined by the thesis of the necessary existence of the thinking subject; thus idealism cannot be presented as positing a contingently existing subject, even if its contingency would not exclude its actually eternal existence. The ambiguous position of the Christian dogmatist, moreover, should be seen to dissolve into atheism on the one hand and idealism on the other, having no philosophical pertinence of its own. But we must go on to condense Meillassoux's example even further. Consider the dogmatic atheist: he claims to know that "our existence is abolished by death, which utterly annihilates us."<sup>13</sup> How are we to read this apparently simple statement? Is my 'utter annihilation' really a characterization of 'what there is when I am not'? How does the meaning of 'I am utterly annihilated' go beyond that of 'I am not'? If we are mortal, then our existence is contingent. But how is this thesis substantively different from that of the speculative materialist? The latter wants to present the atheist's thesis as one possibility among others. But if my mortality is one possibility among others that are incompatible with it, then that mortality—the contingency of my existence—is itself contingent; but if the contingency of my existence is itself contingent, then contingency is not necessary.

If we are right, then, to say that the speculative materialist in fact cannot present the idealist thesis as one possibility among others; and if moreover neither he nor the correlationist can present the Christian dogmatist's thesis as a distinct possibility to be taken into account without reduction; then the only thesis that remains as a 'possibility' for the speculative materialist to present as such, is the atheistic thesis: if I *can* be 'utterly annihilated,' then *that* is what 'death' is, and all the other eventualities may just as well be categorized as *continuations* of life on 'another plane,' and whether in fact we die or not will make no difference. "The absolute," says the speculative materialist,

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<sup>13</sup> Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 55.

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is the *possible transition*, devoid of reason, of my state towards any other state whatsoever. But this possibility is no longer a ‘possibility of ignorance;’ viz., a possibility that is merely the result of my inability to know which of the three aforementioned theses is correct—rather, it is the *knowledge* of the very real possibility of all of these eventualities, as well as of a great many others.<sup>14</sup>

But the atheist thesis, from the speculative materialist’s point of view, ought not to count as one possibility *among others*: for it is this thesis, and no other, that represents the possibility of the subject’s non-being. The meaning of ‘death’ may be paradoxical, but it is not ambiguous: ‘death’ means non-being—or *is non-meaning*. To say so is not to turn death into an ineffable mystery; it is rather Meillassoux who turns death into a mystery by supposing that a ‘great many’ eventualities could have any bearing on the fundamental vacuity of the ‘idea’ of non-being.<sup>15</sup>

### Correlationism as condition for interpretation

Once left with atheism and idealism, we are left with the only two theses that reveal the only two possibilities: either we can think our own non-being, and so believe that it is possible and thus that our existence is contingent (that we are mortal); or we cannot think our non-being and so believe that it is impossible and thus that our existence is necessary (that we are immortal). It is impossible to imagine any theses implying any ‘eventualities’ that could not be subsumed under these two fundamental and irreducible *ideas*.

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<sup>14</sup> Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 56.

<sup>15</sup> It should be mentioned here that Meillassoux in fact does contradict what I have insisted on, viz., that mortality is contingent existence and immortality is necessary existence. It is not clear, however, what a concept of ‘contingent immortality’ would consist in that could not be analyzed into contingency on the one hand and necessity on the other, or else dialecticized into a higher unity of both. Thus it is not clear how any theory that would assert such a contingent immortality would be able to escape the fate of the Christian dogmatist, i.e., dissolution into materialist atheism on the one hand and idealism on the other.

Seen in this way, there is no essential difference between atheism and materialism. For why should the atheist be presented as a dogmatist, other than for Meillassoux's convenience? Meillassoux exploits the ambiguity of the Christian dogmatist's thesis, drawing a seemingly plausible contrast with the atheist within the realm of 'dogma,' thus diverting attention from the dogmatic element in his own essentially atheistic form of speculation—for both forms of speculation, idealist and realist alike, are dogmatic relative to one another in as far as their mutual relation remains just as 'unphilosophizable' as that between a Christian and an atheist. Rather than allowing Meillassoux to inconspicuously excise both the dogmatic and the atheistic element in his thinking, let us grant the atheist position its full force by admitting that Meillassoux has uncovered what is perhaps *atheism's* most fundamental thought—the thought of the necessity of contingency.

What remains is the impossible confrontation of speculative idealism and speculative materialism. Both embrace a different logic and their logics are essentially tied up with their substantive theses. For the idealist, the immortality of the thinking subject is tautological; for the materialist, it is the mortality of the thinking subject that is tautological, i.e., it is this mortality, this contingency of thought's existence itself, which grounds thought as such. These are two paths of thinking; inevitably, they reduce one another to a mere 'aspect of' or 'possibility within' themselves, when in fact, for those who bother, even if only for an instant, to place themselves intuitively now within the one, now within the other, it is clear that these perspectives, these paths of thinking, are irreducible to one another.

But the 'correlationist' says nothing more than this: I can place myself now within the one, now within the other. What we have here is a conceptual equivalent of the Gestalt switch in which the condition for my 'seeing' one possibility is precisely the occlusion of the other—the antinomy divides reason itself. A purified version of Meillassoux's argument would therefore start out with the speculative idealist and

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the speculative materialist occupying the positions of the dogmatic Christian and the dogmatic atheist; the correlationist would then point out not “that theory is incapable of privileging one *eventuality* [my emphasis] over another,”<sup>16</sup> but that theory is incapable of privileging one *theory* over another. The subjective idealist’s rejoinder could then amount to nothing more than a tiresome reiteration of the primacy of correlation and this would be followed by an equally tiresome reaffirmation, by the speculative materialist, of the primacy of facticity. The correlationist, confronted now not with a vague mixture of first order and second order claims, but with a clean-cut *aporia*, would not need to affirm the ‘possibility’ of the truth of the subjective idealist’s thesis, nor that of the truth of the speculative materialist’s thesis: rather than saying that either one of these theses *could* be true, he would be able to say, quite simply, that *one* of these theses *must* be true *if* the other is false. Meillassoux has unveiled the falsehood of speculative idealism as the absolute condition for the truth of speculative materialism and the falsehood of the latter as the absolute condition for the former’s truth. What this means is that, from now on, any theory that explicitly disallows its own radicalization in one of these two directions, may legitimately be reduced in the other direction. However, it does not imply anything for a theory that ignores the speculative coordinates altogether and leaves these possibilities, qua possibility-of-ignorance, open. Such a theory is not defined by the vertical axis of speculation, but by the horizontal axis of interpretation. If the intersection of these axes is where truth and meaning meet, the acceptance of the possibility-of-ignorance would seem to be a necessary condition for any questioning of the meaning of truth.

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<sup>16</sup> Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 55.



# Sublime Objects

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I BELIEVE THAT OBJECT-ORIENTED ontology (OOO) is something truly new in the world. If so, it couldn't have come along at a better time. Because something truly new in human history is happening: something we call global warming, something we call the Sixth Mass Extinction Event.

For some months now I've been thinking about entities I call hyperobjects.<sup>1</sup> These are objects that are massively distributed in time and space. Hyperobjects become visible to humans in an age of ecological crisis. Indeed, it's really the other way around: hyperobjects have alerted us to the ecological crisis that defines our age: for instance, global warming and nuclear radiation from plutonium. I believe that object-oriented ontology gives us some much-needed tools for thinking hyperobjects. I've been studying the various properties of hyperobjects. They're nonlocal. They're foreshortened in time.

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<sup>1</sup> Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2010), 130-5.

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They're viscous—they have the strange quality of sticking to you the more you try to shake them off. The more you know about them, the more you figure out how enmeshed you are in them. The more you know about them, the stranger and even more terrifying they become. They occupy a high dimensional phase space so it's only possible for humans to see pieces or aspects of them at any one time.<sup>2</sup> To understand hyperobjects, we badly need an upgraded theory of the sublime, which deals in scary and unknowable things. And if we're going to do that, we might as well take on the whole issue of rhetoric as it pertains to objects. It's in this spirit of working towards a greater understanding of our ecological emergency that I offer this essay.

### Philosophy Should Be about Everything

*Slinky Malinki* is a children's story about a black cat, a charming figure who steals all kinds of objects in the dead of night: "Slippers and sausages, / biscuits, balloons, / brushes and bandages, / pencils and spoons."<sup>3</sup> At the climax of the story, the stolen objects begin to act with a spooky agency: "The glue toppled over / and gummed up the pegs; / the jersey unravelled and tangled his legs. / He tripped on the bottles / and slipped on the sock, / he tipped over sideways / and set off the clock." Now if a children's book can talk about objects in this way why can't philosophy? Let's put it in even starker terms. A simple children's book tells me more about real things than most contemporary philosophy. Why?

To deliver anything so we humans can see it you need rhetoric. You need some kind of glamour. It would be churlish to point fingers and go "Hey, gotcha! Using a human tool to describe nonhuman entities! Busted!" I mean, come on, what are we speculative realists supposed to do, just sort of belch, and hope you can smell the pizza or whatever? In this

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<sup>2</sup> For easily accessible discussions of hyperobjects, including lectures (mp3), search for 'hyperobjects' at <http://www.ecologywithoutnature.blogspot.com>.

<sup>3</sup> Lynley Dodd, *Slinky Malinki* (London: Penguin, 1990).

essay I'm going to suggest that rhetoric isn't just ear candy for humans, or even for sentient beings. I'm going to suggest that rhetoric is what happens when there is an encounter between any object, that is, between alien beings.

Heidegger's essay "Language" is about anything but language as a sign for something—more like language as an alien entity in its own right.<sup>4</sup> Language is a kind of object. And language is full of objects. Take onomatopoeia: granted, guns go *pan* in French and *bang* in English but in neither do they go *cluck* or *boing*. *Bang* and *pan* are linguistic contributions by guns. Before they are French and English, they are gun-ish, and get translated into human. Likewise *plop* and *splat*, *crack*, *growl*, *tintinnabulation* and *sussurate* and even perhaps visual terms such as *shimmer* and *sparkle*. Those sorts of words are a kind of sonic translation of a visual effect, the rapid diffusion of light across a moving surface. Shimmering is to light as muttering is to sound. Language is not totally arbitrary.<sup>5</sup> And it is not entirely human—even from a non-Heideggerian perspective.

Then there's the fact that language always occurs in a medium, what Roman Jakobson calls the *contact*.<sup>6</sup> In OOO-ese, this means that objects encounter one another inside another object—electromagnetic fields, for instance, or a valley. When the interior of the object intrudes in some sensual way, we notice it as some equipmental malfunction: "Check, check, microphone check. Is this thing on?" More generally, media translate and are translated by messages. We never hear a voice as such, only a voice carried by the wind, or by electromagnetic waves, or by water, or by kazoo.<sup>7</sup> Water makes whales sound like they do. Air and gravity make humans speak certain words in certain ways. Valleys encourage yodeling.

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<sup>4</sup> Martin Heidegger, "Language," *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 185–208.

<sup>5</sup> The linguist John Lawler has compiled an archive of research in this field, called phonosemantics, at <http://www-personal.umich.edu/~jlawler/>.

<sup>6</sup> Roman Jakobson, "Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics," in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas A. Sebeok (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1960), 350–377.

<sup>7</sup> See Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art," in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper and Row, 1971), 15–87.

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These directives don't simply float around words, but emanate from words themselves.<sup>8</sup> What's happening when I read *Slinky Malinki* to a listener? He or she is picking up on my delivery, my voice, the way my son inspires me to speak (since he requests me to read it so often). The story contains words that 'want' to be read a certain way, that make you hear them a certain way—the words and rhythms and rhymes are directives that guide my voices and gestures as I deliver the text.

There are five parts of rhetoric: invention, ordering, style, memory and delivery. I'm going to argue that delivery is in fact the *first part of object-oriented rhetoric*, not the fifth. Why? Because rather than simply being the envelope in which the message is handed to you, delivery is *the message*, directly. Delivery is the object in its weird, clownish hypocrisy. Delivery has memory, a certain persistence. Memory is the way an object maintains or not its consistency, the way it conjures and is possessed by phantasmal memories and dreams, the thousand shocks that flesh is heir to. Delivery has style—imagery floating free from the object's surface (we'll see how significant this is when we study ekphrasis in a moment). Delivery has *ordo* and *dispositio*: an arrangement of notes and a tempo of parts (I shall now begin to use the technical terms of classical rhetoric). Delivery has *inventio*, an irreducible withdrawnness.

Attitudes to rhetoric have profoundly affected the long history of philosophy. Consider in particular the separation of rhetoric from invention and ordering, or as they could be known, science and logic. This separation, a massive world-historical event inaugurated by rhetoricians such as Peter Ramus in the Renaissance, defined earlier metaphysicians as scholastic pettifoggers obsessed with angels and pins. It gave rise to science as a separate discipline and the reduction of rhetoric to style—and the subsequent withering of style into tropology, and the subsequent withering of tropology into metaphor. So that when we read a De Man or a Dawkins,

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<sup>8</sup> I borrow the term *directive* from Alphonso Lingis, *The Imperative* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998), 7–175.

a Derrida or a Dennett, we are still reading someone fully caught in the Ramist pinball machine that divides style from substance.

This affects everything. It's deeply about how ontology has become taboo. It's about how the aesthetic arose as a dimension separate from, even hostile to, rhetoric (consider Kant's opposition to rhetoric).<sup>9</sup> It's about how philosophy has become obsessed with perfect arguments rather than suggestive cognitive work (as Harman puts it so well in the final chapter of *Prince of Networks*).<sup>10</sup> It's why the only alternative to perfect freeze-dried arguments is sheer tropological play. It's why there is a desperate search for new and improved forms of metaphysics such as the lava lampy materialisms on offer currently, which are in fact a regression even from the choice between freeze-dried perfection and powdered nothingness. So in this essay I'm going to say a lot of counter-intuitive stuff.

I believe that OOO takes us out of that pinball machine. Precisely because it imagines style as an elementary aspect of causality rather than as candy on top of lumps of stuff bumping together indifferently.

### A Rhetorical Question

We could rewrite the whole of rhetoric as object-oriented by *reversing the implicit order of Aristotle's five parts of rhetoric*. Instead of starting with invention and proceeding through disposition to elocution, then on to memory and delivery, we should start with *delivery*. Delivery is precisely the physicality of your *rhema*, your speech. Demosthenes used to practice his delivery by filling his mouth with pebbles and walking uphill. Pebbles and hills played a part in Demosthenes' rhetoric. But we'll see that rhetoric is far more concerned with nonhuman entities than that.

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<sup>9</sup> See Don Abbott, "Kant, Theremin, and the Morality of Rhetoric," *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 40:3 (2007): 274-92.

<sup>10</sup> Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* (Melbourne: Re.Press, 2009), 163-85.

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We will find that reversing the order explodes the teleology implicit in common assumptions about rhetoric (common for instance in composition classes): first you have an idea, then you figure out how to argue it, then you pour on some nice ear candy, then you recite it or upload it or whatever. Withdrawn objects do not exist in-order-to anything.

We often assume that delivery is secondary to rhetoric, kind of like the volume control or the equalizer on a stereo—it's a matter of conditioning the externals of rhetoric. This isn't what Demosthenes and Cicero thought. Asked to name the most important parts of rhetoric, Demosthenes replied “First, delivery; second, delivery; third, delivery”—at which point his interlocutor conceded, but Demosthenes was ready to go on.<sup>11</sup> If we rethink delivery not as a bottle into which the already-existing argument is poured like a liquid, nor as an envelope that delivers the message like mail, but as a physical *object* and its *sensual medium*, we will be thinking of it like Quintilian, who says of great actors that “they add so much to the charm of even the greatest poets, that the verse moves us far more when heard than when read, while they succeed in securing a hearing even for the most worthless authors, with the result that they repeatedly win a welcome on the stage that is denied them in the library.”<sup>12</sup> The object-oriented explanation for this is that the voice, an object with its own richness and hidden depths, translates the words it speaks—a spooky evocation of the secret heart of objects not via revelation but via obscurity—as if (as if, mind you) it were summoning forth an obscure dimension of language. Quintilian discusses Quintus Hortensius, whose voice must have “possessed some charm” for people to rank him second only to Cicero, given how awful his written speeches appeared.<sup>13</sup> Now before you go accusing me of logocentrism, realize that it's not that voice

<sup>11</sup> Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria* 11.3. This fourth part of the Loeb Classical Library edition of Quintilian is not readily available in hard copy, but an online version can be found at [http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Quintilian/Institutio\\_Oratoria/11C\\*.html#3](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Quintilian/Institutio_Oratoria/11C*.html#3).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.3.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.3.

really gives access to the hidden depth of meaning—it's that voice is an object in its own right, vibrating with uncannily overtones. Like ekphrasis, like metaphor, voice leaps forth towards us, unleashing its density and opacity. Voice has, as Graham Harman puts it, allure.<sup>14</sup>

We can proceed from thinking of voice as an object in its own right to asserting that a pencil resting against the inside of a plastic cup is a delivery of a pencil, a certain kind of physical posture similar to a loud voice or a cajoling whine. A house is delivery, disporting its occupants and its rooms and its backyard into various configurations. A record player is delivery, as is an MP3 player. A book is delivery. A waterfall is delivery. A computer game is delivery. A spoon is delivery. A volcano is delivery. A ribbon is delivery. A black hole is delivery. Working backwards, we would end up at *inventio*. We could say that *inventio* was actually object withdrawal—a dark or reverse *inventio*, 'covery' rather than 'discovery.'

Object-oriented rhetoric is not the long march towards the explicit, but a gravitational field that sucks us into implicit secrecy and silence. Harman argues that metaphor makes even the sensual qualities of objects, which seem readily available to us, seem withdrawn.<sup>15</sup> What metaphor does, then, is not unlike another trope, which the old manuals call *obscurum per obscures*: describing something obscure by making it seem even more obscure.<sup>16</sup> Percy Shelley was very fond of this trope—his images endarken rather than enlighten.<sup>17</sup> If we generalize this to the whole of rhetoric, object-oriented rhetoric becomes the way objects obscure themselves in fold upon fold of mysterious robes, caverns, and fortresses of solitude and octopus ink.

Instead of looking at the five parts of rhetoric as a step by

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<sup>14</sup> Graham Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* (Chicago: Open Court, 2005), 142–44, 172–82.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Lanham, *A Handlist of Rhetorical Terms: A Guide for Students of English Literature* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 1969).

<sup>17</sup> Timothy Morton, "Introduction," *The Cambridge Companion to Shelley* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 1–13.



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step recipe for making meaning explicit (“first you pick a subject, then you organize your argument...”), we could see them as *simultaneous* aspects of any object that render that object mysterious and strange yet direct and in your face. Accounting for them this way prevents us from distorting them as present-at-hand entities or metaphysical substances decorated with accidents: there’s a plastic cup and now we add some color, now we see it has a certain shape, etc. This simultaneity of aspects accounts for what musicians call timbre, a word that conjures up the substantiality of timber. A note played on a plastic cup sounds very different from the same note played on a smoothly polished wooden cylinder. Timbre is the sensual appearance of an object to another object, in contrast to Xavier Zubiri’s *notes*, which are aspects of the hidden dimension of a thing.<sup>18</sup> So rhetoric in an object-oriented sense is the way the timbre of an object manifests.

If we started with delivery, the availability of a sensual object, we’d immediately unfurl a host of mysterious qualities that spoke in strange whispers about the object of which they are aspects. Delivery deforms what it delivers and the deliverer, stuttering and caricaturing them, remixing and remastering them.<sup>19</sup> Working backwards, the sensual object persists (*memoria*), it displays a unique ‘style’ (*elocutio*), it organizes its notes and parts (*dispositio* and *ordo*), and it contains a molten core that withdraws from all contact (*inventio*).<sup>20</sup> The plastic cup does this to the pencil. The garden does this to the house. The plastic cup even does it to itself. The parts of the cup ‘deliver’ the whole in a more or less distorted way, accounting for various aspects of its history and presenting the cup with a certain style, articulated according to certain formal arrangements—and finally, these qualities themselves are uncannily unavailable for present-at-hand inspection.

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<sup>18</sup> Xavier Zubiri, *On Essence*, trans. A.R. Caponigri (Washington: Catholic University Press, 1980), 46–7. See Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Chicago: Open Court, 2002), 243–68.

<sup>19</sup> Lingis, *Imperative*, 135.

<sup>20</sup> Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics*, 102–6, 119–21; 161.

The molten core is wrapped within the delivery. Latin gives us a clue about this by translating the Greek for delivery, *hypokrisis*, as either *actio* or *pronuntiatio*.<sup>21</sup> We get the word ‘hypocrisy’ from *hypokrisis*.<sup>22</sup> It stems from the verb *to judge* or *interpret*—objects interpret themselves. Yet in so doing they are like actors, both dissembling and generating an entirely fresh set of objects—as an orchestra ‘interprets’ a score by playing it. For instance, *hypokrisis* can signify the tone or manner of an animal’s cry. The cry expresses the animal, yet it’s also an object all its own. *Pronuntiatio* is more like the manifest appearance of an object to another object. It speaks to the dissembling part of *hypokrisis*. *Actio* sounds more like execution (Heidegger’s *Vollzug*); the dark unfolding of an object’s hidden essence. *Actio* speaks to the way objects magically foam with being.

Objects, then, are hypocrites, forever split from within. I’d rather live in a hypocritical Universe than a cynical one. We’ve had quite enough of that, a symptom of how the standard philosophical game for two hundred years has been “Anything you can do I can do meta.” That is, philosophy has more or less tacitly agreed that leaping away from objects into the beyond is the mark of true philosophy and intelligence.

Is it not possible to imagine that an object-oriented rhetorical theory might account for vicarious causation, the only kind of causation possible between ontologically vacuum-sealed objects? Harman talks about ‘elements’ or ‘quality objects’—the aspects of sensual objects that somehow communicate with one another.<sup>23</sup> Could my strange reverse rhetoric supply a model for this? Is it possible then that an element resembles a phrase, or a rhetorical period? Harman hints that the linguistic trope of metaphor might be alluring precisely

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<sup>21</sup> Charlton T. Lewis and Charles Short, *Latin Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1879), *actio*, *pronuntiatio*.

<sup>22</sup> Henry George Liddell and Robert Scott, *A Greek-English Lexicon: Revised and Augmented throughout by Sir Henry Stuart Jones with the Assistance of Roderick McKenzie* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1940), *ὑπόκρισις*.

<sup>23</sup> Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics*, 164–70, 171.

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because it gives us a taste of some kind of deeper causality.<sup>24</sup> Can we imagine the interaction between a pen and a wooden table as made up of rhetorical phrases and periods, whereby the elements of one object persuade another? Consider the Latin root of persuasion (*suadeo*), which has to do with how one object urges, impels, induces or sways another.<sup>25</sup> The aesthetic, in other words, is not a superficial candy coating on the real, but is instead the lubrication, the energy and the glue of causality as such. To think so is truly to exit the Ramist pinball machine.

### A Speculative Sublime

According to OOO, objects all have four aspects. They withdraw from access by other objects. They appear to other objects. They are specific entities. And that's not all: they really exist. Aesthetically, then, objects are uncanny beasts. If they were pieces of music, they might be some impossible combination of slapstick sound effects, Sufi singing, Mahler and hardcore techno. If they were literature, they might exist somewhere between *The Commedia Dell' Arte*, *The Cloud of Unknowing*, *War and Peace* and *Waiting for Godot*. *Pierrot Lunaire* might be a good metaphor for grotesque, frightening, hilarious, sublime objects.

The object-oriented sublime doesn't come from some beyond, because this beyond turns out to be a kind of optical illusion of correlationism. There's nothing underneath the Universe of objects. Or not even nothing, if you prefer thinking it that way. The sublime resides in particularity, not in some distant beyond. And the sublime is generalizable to all objects, insofar as they are all what I've called *strange strangers*, that is, alien to themselves and to one another in an irreducible way.<sup>26</sup>

Of the two dominant theories of the sublime, we have a

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<sup>24</sup> Harman, *Guerilla Metaphysics*, 172.

<sup>25</sup> Lewis and Short, *Latin Dictionary*, *suadeo*.

<sup>26</sup> Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 38–50.

choice between authority and freedom, between exteriority and interiority. But both choices are correlationist. That is, both theories of the sublime have to do with human subjective access to objects. On the one hand we have Edmund Burke, for whom the sublime is shock and awe: an experience of terrifying authority to which you must submit.<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, we have Immanuel Kant, for whom the sublime is an experience of inner freedom based on some kind of temporary cognitive failure. Try counting up to infinity. You can't. But that is precisely what infinity is. The power of your mind is revealed in its failure to sum infinity.<sup>28</sup>

Both sublimes assume that: (1) the world is specially or uniquely accessible to humans; (2) the sublime uniquely correlates the world to humans; and (3) what's important about the sublime is a reaction in the subject. The Burkean sublime is simply craven cowering in the presence of authority: the law, the might of a tyrant God, the power of kings, and the threat of execution. No real knowledge of the authority is assumed—terrified ignorance will do. Burke argues outright that the sublime is always a safe pain, mediated by the glass panels of the aesthetic. (That's why horror movies, a truly speculative genre, try to bust through this aesthetic screen at every opportunity.)

What we need is a more *speculative* sublime that actually tries to become intimate with the other, and here Kant is at any rate preferable to Burke. Those more sympathetic to Kant might argue that there is some faint echo of reality in the experience of the sublime. Certainly the aesthetic dimension is a way in which the normal subject-object dichotomy is suspended in Kant. And the sublime is as it were the essential subroutine of the aesthetic experience, allowing us to experience the power of our mind by running up against some external obstacle. Kant references telescopes and microscopes that expand hu-

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<sup>27</sup> Edmund Burke, *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, ed. James T. Boulton (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 57–70.

<sup>28</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 103–6.

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man perception beyond its limits.<sup>29</sup> His marvelous passage on the way one's mind can encompass human height and by simple multiplication comprehend the vastness of "Milky Way systems" is sublimely expressive of the human capacity to think.<sup>30</sup> It's also true that the Kantian sublime inspired the powerful speculations of Schelling, Schopenhauer and Nietzsche, and more work needs to be done teasing out how those philosophers begin to think a reality beyond the human (the work of Grant and Woodard stands out in particular at present).<sup>31</sup> It's true that in §28 of the Third Critique, Kant does talk about how we experience the 'dynamical sublime' in the terror of vastness, for instance of the ocean or the sky. But this isn't anything like intimacy with the sky or the ocean. In fact, in the next sections, Kant explicitly rules out anything like a scientific or even probing analysis of what might exist in the sky. As soon as we think of the ocean as a body of water containing fish and whales, rather than as a canvas for our psyche; as soon as we think of the sky as the real Universe of stars and black holes, we aren't experiencing the sublime (§29):

Therefore, when we call the sight of the starry sky *sublime*, we must not base our judgment upon any concepts of worlds that are inhabited by rational beings, and then [conceive of] the bright dots that we see occupying the space above us as being these worlds' suns, moved in orbits prescribed for them with great purposiveness; but we must base our judgment regarding merely on how we see it, as a vast vault encompassing everything, and merely under this presentation may we posit the sublimity that a pure aesthetic judgment attributes to this object. In the same way, when we judge the sight of the ocean we must not do so on the basis of how we *think*, it, enriched with all sorts of knowledge which we possess (but which is not contained in

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<sup>29</sup> Kant, *Critique*, 106.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>31</sup> Iain Hamilton Grant, *Philosophies of Nature after Schelling* (London: Continuum, 2006) and Ben Woodard, *Slime Dynamics* (forthcoming with Zero books).

## Tim Morton – *Sublime Objects*

the direct intuition), e.g., as a vast realm of aquatic creatures, or as the great reservoir supplying the water for the vapors that impregnate the air with clouds for the benefit of the land, or again as an element that, while separating continents from one another, yet makes possible the greatest communication among them; for all such judgments will be teleological. Instead we must be able to view the ocean as poets do, merely in terms of what manifests itself to the eye—e.g., if we observe it while it is calm, as a clear mirror of water bounded only by the sky; or, if it turbulent, as being like an abyss threatening to engulf everything—and yet find it sublime.<sup>32</sup>

While we may share Kant's anxiety about teleology, his main point is less than satisfactory from a speculative realist point of view. We positively shouldn't speculate when we experience the sublime. The sublime is precisely the *lack of speculation*. Should we then just throw in the towel and drop the sublime altogether, choosing only to go with horror—the limit experience of sentient lifeforms—rather than the sublime, as several speculative realists have done? Can we only speculate from and into a position of feeling our own skin about to shred, or vomit about to exit from our lungs?

Yet horror presupposes the proximity of at least one other entity: a lethal virus, an exploding hydrogen bomb, an approaching tsunami. Intimacy is thus a precondition of horror. From this standpoint, even horror is too much of a reaction shot, too much about how entities correlate with an observer. What we require is an aesthetic experience of coexisting with  $1+n$  other entities, living or nonliving. What speculative realism needs would be a sublime that grants a kind of *intimacy* with real entities. This is precisely the kind of intimacy prohibited by Kant, for whom the sublime requires a Goldilocks aesthetic distance, not too close and not too far away (§25):

in order to get the full emotional effect from the magnitude of the pyramids one must neither get too close to them nor stay too far away. For if one stays too far away, then the apprehended parts (the stones

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<sup>32</sup> Kant, *Critique*, 130.

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on top of one another) are presented only obscurely, and hence their presentation has no effect on the subject's aesthetic judgment; and if one gets too close, then the eye needs some time to complete the apprehension from the base to the peak, but during that time some of the earlier parts are invariably extinguished in the imagination before it has apprehended the later ones, and hence the comprehension is never complete.<sup>33</sup>

The Kantian aesthetic dimension is an experiential condom that shrink wraps objects in a protective film. Safe from the threat of radical intimacy, the inner space of Kantian freedom develops unhindered. Good taste is knowing precisely when to vomit—when to expel any foreign substance perceived to be disgusting and therefore toxic.<sup>34</sup> This won't do in an ecological era in which 'away'—the precondition for vomiting—no longer exists. Our vomit just floats around somewhere near us, since there is now no 'away' to which we can flush it in good faith.

Against the correlationist sublime I'm going to argue for a speculative sublime, an object-oriented sublime to be more precise. There is a model for just such a sublime on the market—the oldest extant text on the sublime, *Peri Hypsous* by Longinus. The Longinian sublime is about the physical intrusion of an alien presence. The Longinian sublime can thus easily extend to include non-human entities—and, I shall argue, non-sentient ones. Rather than making ontic distinctions between what is and what isn't sublime, Longinus describes how to achieve sublimity. Because he is more interested in how to achieve the effect of sublimity rhetorically than what the sublime is as a human experience, Longinus leaves us free to extrapolate all kinds of sublime events between all kinds of entities.

Longinus' sublime is already concerned with an object-like alien presence—he might call it God but we could easily call it a Styrofoam peanut or the Great Red Spot of Jupiter. The

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<sup>33</sup> Kant, *Critique*, 108.

<sup>34</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Economimesis," *Diacritics* 11:2 (1981): 2–25.



way objects appear to one another is sublime: it's a matter of contact with alien presence, and a subsequent work of radical translation. Longinus thinks this as contact with another: "Sublimity is the echo of a noble mind."<sup>35</sup> Echo, mind—it's as if the mind were not an ethereal ghost but a solid substance that ricochets off walls. We could extend this to include the sensuality of objects. Why not? So many supposedly mental phenomena manifest in an automatic way, as if they were objects: dreams, hallucinations, strong emotions. Coleridge says about his opium dream that inspired *Kubla Khan* that the images arose as distinct things in his mind. This isn't surprising if cognition is an assemblage of kluge-like unit operations that just sort of do their thing. It's not that this pen is alive. It's that everything that is meaningful about my mind resting on the pen can also be said of the pen resting on the desk. Consciousness may be sought after in the wrong place by neuroscientists and AI (and anti-AI) theorists: it may be incredibly default.

Let's consider Longinus' terms. Luckily for OOO there are four of them: transport, phantasia, clarity and brilliance. Even more luckily, the four correspond to Harman's interpretation of the Heideggerian fourfold. The trick is to read the terms in reverse, as we did with rhetoric in general. The first two terms, clarity and brilliance, refer to the actuality of object-object encounters. The second two, transport and phantasia, refer to the appearance of these encounters. It sounds counter-intuitive that brilliance would equate to withdrawal, but when you read what Plato, Longinus and Heidegger have to say about this term (*ekphanestaton*) you will agree with me.

1. Brilliance: Earth. Objects as withdrawn 'something at all,' apart from access.
2. Clarity: Gods. Objects as specific, apart from access.
3. Transport: Mortals. Objects as something-at-all for another object.
4. Phantasia: Sky. Objects as specific appearance to another object.

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<sup>35</sup> Longinus, "On the Sublime" in *Classical Literary Criticism* trans. T.S. Dorsch (London: Penguin, 1984), 109.

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We'll see immediately that each one sets up relationships with an alien presence.

(1) Brilliance. In Greek, *to ekphanestaton*, luster, brilliance, shining-out (it's a superlative, so it really means 'superlative brilliance.' Longinus declares that "in much the same way as dim lights vanish in the radiance of the sun, so does the all-pervading effluence of grandeur utterly obscure[s] the artifice of rhetoric."<sup>36</sup> Brilliance is what *hides* objects. Brilliance is the withdrawnness of the object, its total inaccessibility. In the mode of the sublime, it's as if we are able to taste that, even though it's strictly impossible. Longinus compares it to the gushing magma of an exploding volcano—a description that's highly congruent with several places in Harman's work in which he refers to the molten core of an object. The light of this magma is blinding—that's why it's withdrawal, strangely. It's right there, it's an actual object. Longinus thus calls this brilliance an uncanny fact of the sublime.

For Plato *to ekphanestaton* was an index of the essential beyond. For the object-oriented ontologist, brilliance is the appearance of the object in all its stark unity. Something is coming through. Or better: we realize that something was already there. This is the realm of the uncanny, the strangely familiar and familiarly strange.

(2) Clarity (*enargeia*). 'Manifestation,' 'self-evidence.' This has to do with ekphrasis.<sup>37</sup> Ekphrasis in itself is interesting for OOO, because ekphrasis is precisely an object-like entity that looms out of descriptive prose. It's a hyper-descriptive part that jumps out at the reader, petrifying her or him (turning him to stone), causing a strange suspension of time like Bullet Time in *The Matrix*. It's a little bit like what Deleuze means when he talks about 'time crystals' in his study of cinema.<sup>38</sup> This is the jumping-out aspect of ekphrasis, a bristling vividness that interrupts the flow of the narrative, jerking the

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<sup>36</sup> Longinus, *On the Sublime*, 127.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.* 121.

<sup>38</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (London: Continuum, 2005), 66-97.

reader out of her or his complacency. Quintilian stresses the time-warping aspect of *enargeia* (the term is *metastasis* or *metathesis*), transporting us in time as if the object had its own gravitational field into which it sucks us. The object in its bristling specificity.

Longinus asserts that while sublime rhetoric must contain *enargeia*, sublime poetry must evoke *ekplexis*—astonishment.<sup>39</sup> This may also be seen as a kind of specific impact. In strictly OOO terms, ekphrasis is a translation that inevitably misses the withdrawn object, but which generates its own kind of object in the process. Ekphrasis speaks to how objects move and have agency, despite our awareness or lack of awareness of them; Harman's analogy of the drugged man in *Tool Being* provides a compelling example.<sup>40</sup> Now if somehow you get it wrong, you end up with bombast: the limit where objects become vague, undefined, just clutter (the word *bombast* literally means 'stuffing,' the kind you'd put in shoulder pads).

Ekphrasis accounts for a phenomenon that pertains to hyperobjects, something I'm calling viscosity. The hyperobject is so massively distributed, and so bizarre, that it melts you. And then you realize you're covered in it, or suffused in it like radiation.

(3) Transport. The narrator makes you feel something stirring inside you, some kind of divine or demonic energy, as if you were inhabited by an alien. 'Being moved,' 'being stirred.'<sup>41</sup> We can imagine the sublime as a kind of transporter, like in *Star Trek*, a device for beaming the alien object into another object's frame of reference. Transport consists of sensual contact with objects as an alien universe. Just as the transporter can only work by translating particles from one place to another, so Longinian transport only works by one object translating another via its specific frames of reference. In so doing, we become aware of what was lost in translation. Transport thus depends upon a kind of void, the withdrawn

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<sup>39</sup> Longinus, *On the Sublime*, 123–4.

<sup>40</sup> Harman, *Tool-Being*, 62–3.

<sup>41</sup> Longinus, *On the Sublime*, 100.

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reality of the universe of objects, the aspect that is forever sealed from access but nevertheless thinkable.

The machinery of transport, the transporter as such, is what Longinus calls amplification: not bigness but a feeling of (as Doctor Seuss puts it) biggering: “[a figure] employed when the matters under discussion or the points of an argument allow of many pauses and many fresh starts from section to section, and the grand phrases come rolling out one after another with increasing effect;” in this way Plato, for instance, “often swells into a mighty expanse of grandeur.”<sup>42</sup> By attuning our mind to the exploding notes of an object, amplification sets up a sort of subject-quake, a soul-quake.

(4) *Phantasia*. Often translated as ‘visualization.’<sup>43</sup> Visualization not imagery: producing an inner object. It’s imagery in *you* not in the text. Quintilian remarks that *phantasia* makes absent things appear to be present.<sup>44</sup> *Phantasia* conjures an object. If I say “New York” and you’re a New Yorker, you don’t have to tediously picture each separate building and street. You sort of evoke New Yorkness in your mind. That’s *phantasia*. What I’ve called the poetics of spice operates this way: the use of the word ‘spice’ (rather than say cinammon or pepper) in a poem acts as a blank allowing for the work of olfactory imagination akin to visualization.<sup>45</sup> It’s more like a hallucination than an intended thought.<sup>46</sup> In stories, for instance, *phantasia* generates an object-like entity that separates us from the narrative flow—puts us in touch with the alien as alien. Visualization should be slightly scary: you are summoning a real deity after all, you are asking to be overwhelmed, touched, moved, stirred.

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<sup>42</sup> Longinus, *On the Sublime*, 116, 117; Doctor Seuss, *The Lorax* (New York: Random House, 1971), 49.

<sup>43</sup> Longinus, *On the Sublime*, chapter 15.

<sup>44</sup> Quintilian, *Institutio Oratoria*, 6.2.29. [http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Quintilian/Institutio\\_Oratoria/6B\\*.html#2](http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Roman/Texts/Quintilian/Institutio_Oratoria/6B*.html#2)

<sup>45</sup> Timothy Morton, *The Poetics of Spice: Romantic Consumerism and the Exotic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 33–8, 129–31.

<sup>46</sup> On the seductiveness of phantasms, see Lingis, *Imperative* 107–116.

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In OOO terms, *phantasia* is the capacity of an object to imagine another object. Sensual contact with the alien as a specific object. How paper looks to stone. How scissors look to paper. Do objects dream? Do they contain virtual versions of other objects inside them? These would be examples of *phantasia*. How one object impinges upon another one. There is too much of it. It magnetizes us with a terrible compulsion.

Now for an example of the Longinian sublime, take Harman's first great use of the 'meanwhile' trope (which Meillassoux calls the *rich elsewhere*), in his paper "Object-Oriented Philosophy":

But beneath this ceaseless argument, reality is churning. Even as the philosophy of language and its supposedly reactionary opponents both declare victory, the arena of the world is packed with diverse objects, their forces unleashed and mostly unloved. Red billiard ball smacks green billiard ball. Snowflakes glitter in the light that cruelly annihilates them; damaged submarines rust along the ocean floor. As flour emerges from mills and blocks of limestone are compressed by earthquakes, gigantic mushrooms spread in the Michigan forest. While human philosophers bludgeon each other over the very possibility of 'access' to the world, sharks bludgeon tuna fish and icebergs smash into coastlines.

All of these entities roam across the cosmos, inflicting blessings and punishments on everything they touch, perishing without a trace or spreading their powers further—as if a million animals had broken free from a zoo in some Tibetan cosmology...<sup>47</sup>

This is nobody's world. This is sort of the opposite of stock in trade environmentalist rhetoric (which elsewhere I've called ecomimesis): "Here I am in this beautiful desert, and I can prove to you I'm here because I can write that I see a red snake disappearing into that creosote bush. Did I tell you I was in a desert? That's me, here, in a desert. I'm in a desert."<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Graham Harman, "Object-Oriented Philosophy," in *Towards Speculative Realism* (Winchester UK: Zero Books, 2010), 93–104, 94–5.

<sup>48</sup> Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthet-*

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This is no man's land. But it's not a bleak nothingness. Bleak nothingness, it turns out, is just the flip side of correlationism's world. No. This is a crowded Tibetan zoo, an Expressionist parade of uncanny, clownlike objects. We're not supposed to kowtow to these objects as Burke would wish. Yet we're not supposed to find our inner freedom either (Kant). It's like one of those maps with the little red arrow that says You Are Here, only this one says You Are Not Here.

### From the Sublime to the Ridiculous

This essay's title comes from Slavoj Žižek, whose *Sublime Object of Ideology* was the first book of his I ever read back in 1991. Žižek's sublime object is sublime for someone, not in itself (that is, among its constituent objects) or with other objects. The sublime object of ideology is a correlationist sublime that really only has one message to deliver: that objects are an ideological fantasy.<sup>49</sup> Yet the sublime gets at something that's essential to objects: their withdrawnness and the way in which at the same time they manifest, in all their scintillating particularity, the kind Longinus calls *ekphanestaton*. The sublime underpins other kinds of aesthetic interaction between objects—even ridiculous ones.

Are there non-sublime interactions between objects? Of course. One can easily imagine, for instance, a ridiculous interaction between objects. The trick would be to ascertain whether the objects found the interaction ridiculous. A shoe meeting a banana skin might be a tragedy for either party, not a farce.

Slinky Malinki's theft of household objects produces a marvelous Latour litany, a frequent figure of speech in OOO. It's frequent because Latour Litanies are collections of nonrepeating, unique objects, as diverse as possible—a sort of mini-revenge of unicities against global goo and global

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ics (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 29–78.

<sup>49</sup> Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London and New York: Verso, 1991), 201–7.

systems. Then the objects begin to malfunction, they unleash their forces on one another and the cat. Suddenly the family appears, but the objects via which they appear show up first: “On went the lights, / BANG went the door / and out came the family, / one, two three, four.”<sup>50</sup> We perceive this appearance in the framework of malfunctioning equipment (that’s the sublime); the lights go on in an unconscious parody of Heidegger’s *lichtung*. “On went the lights” is the climax, the energeia, that beams the family down—they are seen as aliens in their own house.

We need an object-oriented sublime in an ecological age. Google Earth wouldn’t qualify as Kantian sublimity—it’s too explicitly scientific—but it would count as Longinian, transporting us to real places. Ecological entities such as global warming need a Longinian sublime to evoke them. This requires sensitivity to hyperobjects, contact with alien entities that are here among us now. (We could apply the five parts of rhetoric to hyperobjects. Delivery as their sublime existence. Memory as their temporal foreshortening and the fact that they’re already here. Style as their viscosity and nonlocality. Ordering as their properties as derivatives, byproducts etc. that are more intense than the objects and relations in which they originate. Invention as the mysterious withdrawal common to all objects but obvious in their case.)

It would be a good start to look away from the supposed ‘content’ of rhetoric, and even away from styles such as metaphor or ekphrasis, and towards the most physical form, delivery. Then truly we can say that by generating more sublime objects of tone, pitch, bearing, rhythm, torque, spin, nonlocality, lineation, viscosity, tension, entanglement, syntax, climate, heft, density, nuclear fission, inertia, rhyme (the list goes on and on), rhetoric really does give us a glimpse of real sensual things, things even a cat and an eighteen month year old boy can steal, read about and get tangled up in.

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<sup>50</sup> Dodd, *Slinky Malinki*, 26.



# Unknowing Animals

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[Q]uestions ... do not simply occur like stones and water. Questions are not given like shoes, clothes, or books. Questions are as they are actually asked, and this is the only way in which they are. —Martin Heidegger

Not *how* the world is, is the mystical, but *that* it is. —Ludwig Wittgenstein

The concept of Life...has the structure of negative theology.

—Eugene Thacker, *After Life*

**A**MONG THE SENSES OF 'THE QUESTION of the animal' that philosophy constitutionally occludes is its most brutally literal sense: the sense in which animals really *are*, ontologically speaking, questions. The question that is the animal is the theoretical blind spot of the question of the animal.<sup>1</sup> This is precisely the sense of the question that

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida addresses this occlusion in relation to the principle of response: "The question of the response is...that of the question, of the response as response to a question that, at one and the same time, would remain unprogrammable and leave to the other alone the freedom to respond, presuming that were possible...The Cartesian animal, like its descendants...would remain incapable of responding to true questioning. For it lacks the power of real questions" in Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, ed. Marie-Louise Mallet, trans. David Wills (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 84. The crucial limitation of thinking the question as response is that it restricts questioning to being an act or mode of a being, to the question's being a form of capacity for open *relation* to something else. Accordingly, Matthew Calarco's parsing of the senses of 'the question of the animal'—a) the history of philosophical determination of 'the animal;' b) the ethics of being called to into question by the animal;

animal theory, as a discipline ordered toward the intellectual *seeing* of the animal, must engage if it is to overcome or undo its own correlationist or for-us-by-us structure, its decisional complicity with the history of putative human ownership of the question: for the power of this sense of the question is both to open animal-being to the hermeneutic engine of philosophy and to expose philosophy to its own animality. Unleashing the question's maieutic power within this intimately dark horizon of the question of the animal offers the prospect of a marvelous monstrous birth, a hermeneutic creature whose advent would mark at once an abortion of the human privilege of unknowing and a becoming-philosophy of the animal.<sup>2</sup> The creature would bear a special creative-destructive resonance with respect to the current status of the animal as a *deus absconditus* of theoretical discourse and the messianic expectancies it breeds, for instance, Derrida's "the animal that I am (following)" and Agamben's letting be of the animal as the "*outside of being...an existing, real thing that has gone beyond the difference between being and beings.*"<sup>3</sup> It would represent the coming-to-be of something that may be conceived as the hybrid offspring of Augustine's becoming-question—"deus meus...in cuius oculis mihi quaestio factus sum" [my God in whose eyes I became a question to myself]—and Deleuze & Guattari's becoming-animal, "a creative line of escape that says nothing other than what it is...[that] lets nothing remain of the duality of a subject of

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c) the questionability of thinking the animal at all; d) the animal as site of open questioning—both works to open its senses, to keep the meaning of the question of the animal ontologically flexible, and holds its significance within the orbit of its being a question for the human (See Matthew Calarco, *Zoographies: The Question of the Animal from Heidegger to Derrida* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), 4-6.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Jean-Luc Marion, "Mihi magna quaestio factus sum: The Privilege of Unknowing," *The Journal of Religion* 85 (2005): 1-24.

<sup>3</sup> Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, 32; Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Keven Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 91-2.

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enunciation and a subject of the statement.”<sup>4</sup>

This essay aims to mobilize this meaning of the question of the animal in the service of a speculative animal theory that is continuous with animal being. The sense of the animal-question it pursues is speculative, not only in the general sense of entertaining the difficult idea of an animal-being of the question, but in the more specific sense of following a logic of speculative solution as recommend by Meillassoux: “we must transform our perspective on unreason, stop construing it as the form of our deficient grasp of the world and turn it into the veridical content of the world as such – we must project unreason into things themselves.”<sup>5</sup> A speculative solution of the question of the animal is one that suspends questioning the animal in order to see it as question, one that delivers an image of real identity between animal and question. To envision this identity, I turn to and tangentially deploy apophatic mysticism as a tradition profoundly situated in being-the-question, or more broadly, in a vision of life itself as a substantial questionality modulating between an ur-question, a darkness that “never rests until it is filled with all being,” and an ur-answer, God.<sup>6</sup> “God *becomes* when all creatures say ‘God’—then God comes to be,” says Meister Eckhart.<sup>7</sup> Correlatively, I am positing the question of the animal as the being of unknowing, not to definitively determine it, but in order to maximize its becoming.

The term ‘unknowing animals’ is intended to name the product or intersection of its two-fold meaning, the potential identity of unknowing as a property of animal being and unknowing as an active epistemic relation to the animal. Does this *make* sense? Is there a real significance to the fusion of

<sup>4</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 2 vols. (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1950), x.33; Deleuze Guattari and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. Dana Polan (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 36.

<sup>5</sup> Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008), 82.

<sup>6</sup> Meister Eckhart, *The Complete Mystical Works*, trans. Maurice O’C Walshe (New York: Crossroad Publishing, 2009), Sermon 4.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* Sermon 56.

senses that this represents, namely, a space of non-difference between the adjectival and the gerundive meanings of *unknowing* as applied to animals? On the one hand, the meaning of this seems to require grasping the non-difference in the animal itself between being the subject and being the object of unknowing. On the other hand, just as the pun semantically requires a plural (unknowing animals); this meaning seems to be something namable only in plurality, a being-itself possible only in the mode of many, in the more-than-one.

We may begin to understand *unknowing animals* in this third or synthetic sense by tracing the ideas that traverse the node of its possibility, by thinking how unknowing animals (as being) pass into unknowing animals (as act) and vice-versa, how being and doing translate each other with respect to animal non-knowledge. The first movement is represented by animals who, having an unknowing nature, *engage* in unknowing animals. The second movement is represented by animals who, practicing the unknowing of animals, *become* unknowing animals. Encompassing the trajectories of instinct and habit, or first and second nature, respectively, these movements are both distinct and logically inseparable. Together they indicate the vague sense of an animal life for whom a form of apophasis is vital, a being who lives and moves and has its being in the elaboration of an essential epistemic negativity.

Of the various forms this idea may take, two interest me, one pertaining to life in general, the other to the particular form of life that this paper demonstrates: 1) The idea that all life takes place and becomes itself only on the basis of an essential questionability, a questionality or being-question that is latent within all being. The being for whom being is a question is not a singular kind, but every kind of being. Every entity is a *who?*, a something that *ex-ists* precisely on the grounds of not knowing itself. 2) The idea that animal theory is an essentially animal operation, an instinctive apophasis of life itself. Thinking and questioning the animal is not merely a hobby or only a science, but a behavior vital to the becoming of the human qua animal, an existential process

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continuous with animal becoming itself.

These ideas are less descriptions of easily visible facts than compelling possibilities, images in the mirror of thought whose reality must remain to be demonstrated.<sup>8</sup> I will entertain them by commenting on a conspicuous invocation of animal consciousness by the author of 14<sup>th</sup>-century mystical treatise *The Cloud of Unknowing*, in which the human capacity for divine contemplation is illustrated by animal self-awareness. But before turning to this text, I will elaborate a little on this twin thesis, in order to preemptively rescue it from the utopic abyss of anthropic intellectual consciousness, the critical-theoretic space where everything is said and nothing happens. For it is precisely the integrity and autonomy of this space, in short, language's putative princely relation to the universe, that these ideas unground.

### Being the Question of the Animal

A strong, identitarian ontology of the question is traditionally reserved for the human with regard to its rationality or spirituality (logos, soul), an essence that is paradoxically construed both as a form of belonging to something outside the human and as the natural, inherent property of human being-in-the-world. From Augustine's *quaestio mihi factus sum* to Heidegger's account of Dasein as an entity grounded in the question of its own being, human identity is granted the privilege, not only of possessing a superior essence, but

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<sup>8</sup> A more explicitly scientific exploration might seek the reality of the question at the level of biohermeneutics, and more specifically in relation to the evolutionary theory of Charles Sanders Peirce, at the interface between tychism and the tendency of "all things...to take habits." In Charles S. Peirce, *The Essential Peirce: Selected Philosophical Writings*, ed. Nathan Houser and Christian Klose (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 1.277. Here the question would mark the space of relation between spontaneity and repetition, such that the 'second nature' of habit, itself a production of new forms of spontaneity, would occupy the position of 'answer.' See also Nicola Masciandaro, "Exploding Plasticity," in Alexander R. Galloway et al., *French Theory Today: An Introduction to Possible Futures. On Catherine Malabou*, ed. Sarah Resnick. Vol. 2 (New York: The Public School New York, 2011) [forthcoming].

of being transcendently *about* itself. The human *matters*. It is the stuff that is fundamentally at stake, both for itself, and for the world at large. Of this mattering, of the human as the very transitivity of the world, there is no better monument than the doctrine of hell, which, recalling the repetition of Dante's inscription over its entrance—"Per me si va...Per me si va...Per me si va"—eternally testifies to the human as that *through which* everything takes place.<sup>9</sup> Only for the sake of human individuals is the all-loving, omnipotent absolute being willing to violate its own nature in the creation of a supplementary and inverted eternity, going so far, as Lactantius explains, to supply the rational animal with infinitely burnable flesh: "Because they contracted sin while in the body, they will again be endowed with flesh so that they can absolve their crime in the body. It will not be a flesh like the earthly one that God clothed man with, but it will be indestructible and eternal so that it can bear torments and perpetual fire."<sup>10</sup> At the same time, the doctrine of hell definitively figures the essential eccentricity of the human, the possibility that anthropocentrism is not only inevitably vestibular but infernal. By contrast, entering paradise requires, following Dante, a new intelligence (*intelligenza nova*), a new logos signaled in the first neologism of *Paradiso: trashumanar*, to pass beyond the human (*Paradiso* 1.70). This new word, which may be compared to Meister Eckhart's concept of the birth of the divine Word in the soul, participates in the Incarnation in reverse: flesh made Word. Experiencing the metamorphosis, Dante compares himself to the fisherman Glaucus: "Gazing upon her [*nel suo aspetto*] I became within me such as Glaucus became on tasting of the grass that made him sea-fellow [*consorto in mar*] of the other gods" (1.67-9). As Beatrice's first appearance in the *Vita Nuova* promised a perfection of the aesthetic or animal spirit (*lo spirito animale*), which speaks

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<sup>9</sup> "Through me one goes..." In Dante Alighieri, *The Divine Comedy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970), *Inferno* 3.1-3.

<sup>10</sup> Lactantius, "Divine Institutes, 7.21," in *Apocalyptic Spirituality*, trans. Bernard McGinn (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 68.

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to the aesthetic faculty of sight “*Apparuit iam beatitudo vestra*” (2:5) [now has appeared your beatitude], so Glaucus’s apotheosis or becoming-divine, which tellingly takes place on an unpeopled and uncultivated island, occurs by eating grass and becoming animal:<sup>11</sup>

I know the tale I tell will seem untrue / (but what have I to gain by fooling you?) / no sooner had I spread my catch along / the grass, than all that crowd of fish began / to stir, to flop from side to side, and then / to move on land as if at sea. Amazed, / stopped cold, I stared as all those fished made / straight for the water; they deserted me— / they left their new lord, leaped into the sea. / I’m stunned and stilled; it takes me long before / I probe the cause of this [*dubitoque diu causamque requiro*]. Was it the work / of some god, or the juice within the grass? / ‘But is there any herb that has such force?’ / I asked; and then plucked a tuft of grass, / and clutching it, I let my teeth sink in. / No sooner had my throat felt that strange sap, / then—suddenly—I felt my innards shake; / within my heart I felt a fierce desire / to live another life.<sup>12</sup>

What if the most magical and important causal element in this resurrective transformation, which is as much a resurrection of the animal *from* the human, is not the hyperpotent herb but the profoundly hermeneutic situation in which it is eaten? What if the secret of life is not this grassy substance but the even more actual and factual historical present of Glaucus’s being-question?—*dubitoque diu causamque requiro*.

A question is not only an intellectual act but a corporeal event born from the negativity of experience, “more a passion than an action,” flesh-becoming-word.<sup>13</sup> The substantial capacity of the question as medium of a Glaucian, evolutionary expansion of life may be surmised in comparison to John Cowper Powys’s concept of de-carnation, a kind of psychic

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<sup>11</sup> Dante Alighieri, *Vita Nuova*, ed. and trans. Dino Cervigni and Edward Vasta (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995).

<sup>12</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans. Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Harcourt, 1993), 13.935-46.

<sup>13</sup> Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (New York: Continuum, 1975), 360.



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event illustrated, surprisingly, with the image of a fish exiting and re-entering the water:

What I mean by the ‘Ichthian act’ is a swift lumping together of all the evils of your life—as if you turned them into one element that completely surrounds you—followed by a fierce leap up of your inmost identity, a leap that takes you, if only for a second, into the freer air...In no circumstance does [the] act of de-carnation help you more completely than when, confronted by some other person who is being a trial to you, you are tempted to pit your egoism, your desire for happiness at his or her expense, against the similar desire in this trying person. But when, hovering in the free air apart from both the self-asserting ones, you...are aloof from both, and, as it were, watching both from your airy vantage-ground [your] soul is still *the centre of your awareness*, but not longer the centre of your touchy animal identity.<sup>14</sup>

I imagine that similar forms of intelligent evasion of direct contest may be instrumental in the evolutionary becoming of *homo sapiens*. Elsewhere Powys likens this saltatory capacity for superior enjoyment to becoming “like a flock of birds, so that if *some of them* are killed the rest have a good chance of survival,”<sup>15</sup> and identifies it with the spontaneity, the self-willing, of life itself: “the living, vital impulse and leap forward of the self towards what it is absorbing with all its senses, at any particular moment in the recession of time and any particular spot in the gulfs of space, represents the essential life-stream of the world, at once creative and destructive.”<sup>16</sup> The deeper implication, then, is that the foundational medium of the stream of life, the place in which it flows—and I make no claim as to the location or nature of the difference between life and being—is a co-habited space of self-multiplying and self-suspending possibilities, that life takes place in the space of, or *as* the question, above all, the question of itself, of its being itself. Question is the essential

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<sup>14</sup> John Cowper Powys, *Art of Happiness* (London: Village Press, 1975), 24-6.

<sup>15</sup> John Cowper Powys, *In Spite Of* (London: Macdonald, 1953), 29.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 19-20.

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domain of what Powys describes as

*the moment of enjoyment itself, when all these selves are embracing and absorbing and tasting and devouring and ravishing the myriad objects of their hunger, thirst, lust, desire, interest, attraction, fascination, and inexhaustible wonder, such as is offered to all living sentiences by the spectacle of the world into which they are born.*<sup>17</sup>

As Glaucus's eating of the question-saturated grass liberates him from the unbearable self-enclosure of an innate speciesism, endlessly relieving his being from the ridiculous burden of having to be the shepherd of being, so might a really strong ontology of questioning thus lead, theoretically and practically, into the less terrestrial and more marine place where existence is an unfolding question. Where philosophy arrives at the threshold of this place, it generally does so by claiming what it finds there *for* the human, or more properly, for philosophy. Heidegger, the philosopher who gives more thought than any other to the existential ground of questioning, understood how our existence is structured as the question of being: "This entity which each of us is himself and which includes inquiring as one of the possibilities of its Being, we shall denote by the term '*Dasein*'...*Dasein* is ontically distinctive in that it is ontological."<sup>18</sup> There seems to be no question of other kinds of entities experiencing or participating in this question. Yet what if this sort of shoring up of the power of the question around the human is preformed, not only out of sensible recognition of the conspicuous human power of questioning, but out of a more perverse and a-scientific desire to preserve human identity *against* the self-swallowing power of the question, to keep Glaucus, as it were, on the shore, to turn the fisherman into philosopher, one who thinks and talks about, but never *eats* the grass? This power of the question, specifically, the power

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<sup>17</sup> John Cowper Powys, *In Spite Of*, 33.

<sup>18</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (San Francisco: Harper, 1962) §§8-12.

of the question of being to intellectually and experientially suspend being, to really call into question how and what an entity is, is after all something Heidegger exposes again and again, the sense in which the question of being, precisely by virtue of being the most basic, concrete, and factual of questions, is also the most bottomless. Accordingly, Heidegger identified the experience of the truth of being with a form of positive confusion, calling “the fundamental experience of *Being and Time*,” “an ever-increasing but perhaps also—in a few places—self-clarifying bewilderment in the face of” the fact that “the truth of Being as Being remains unthought.”<sup>19</sup>

Examining the fundamental structure of questioning leads more and more into in- and transhuman zones where the question of what question is has already flown the cage of autonomous reflective consciousness. This is evident above all in the phenomenological institution of the ‘always already,’ the being-there-before-it-is structure exemplified by questioning, according to which the question, in seeming violation of natural causality, is a procession of its answer, something mysteriously always already underway toward what it seeks—a fact Augustine volitionally traces to God. Heidegger identifies this elementality of the question by recognizing its *latency*, its pre-position in a primordially *unknowing* subject:

Inquiry, as a kind of seeking, must be guided beforehand by what is sought. So the meaning of Being must already be available to us in some way....we always conduct our activities in an understanding of Being. Out of this understanding arise both the explicit question of the meaning of Being and the tendency that leads us towards its conception. We do not *know* what ‘Being’ means....We do not even know the horizon in terms of which that meaning is to be grasped and fixed. *But this vague average understanding of Being is still a Fact.*<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Martin Heidegger, *Nietzsche*, ed. David Farrell Krell, 4 vols. (New York: Harper, 1987), 3.189-90

<sup>20</sup> *Being and Time* §5. Cf.: “For in all action what is principally intended by the agent, whether he acts by natural necessity or voluntarily, is the disclosure or manifestation of his own image. Whence it happens that every agent, insofar as he is such, takes delight. For, because everything that is desires

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Yet we can also reverse the subject/predicate order and observe that the question itself, as an operative force, is in a real sense a Dasein, a self-interpreting being whose being is an issue for it. This would be the *other* side of (and necessary precondition for) the human ability to become a great question for oneself: “*Factus eram ipse mihi magna quaestio*” [I had become to myself a huge question].<sup>21</sup> Thinking the question in this way, as ontically prior to, rather than a behavior of, Dasein, yields possibilities for understanding Dasein beyond the human, for perceiving the universality of hermeneutical being. And it is precisely this kind of possibility that is currently being investigated, from both theoretical and experimental perspectives in the nascent fields of object oriented ontology and biohermeneutics. In his Heideggerian study of the metaphysics of objects, Graham Harman observes regarding Dasein’s putative priority over other entities that “the important point is not that *humans* pose the question of being. The crucial factor is not that ‘questioning’ is a people-centered lens that conditions Heidegger’s subject matter. The key is not the being of the *question*, but rather the *being* of the question.”<sup>22</sup> Rendering the availability of the question to different forms of being more explicit, Tuomo Jäämsä, in his work on evolutionary semiotics, traces Heidegger’s *existentialia* to “the principle of dissymmetry in semiosis,” “a stable semiosic tension” across “the dividing line between object and representamen” that can be seen at

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its own being and in acting the being of an agent is in a certain way amplified, delight necessarily follows, since delight always attaches to something desired. Nothing acts, therefore, without *being* such as what is acted upon is supposed to become.” [Nam in omni actione principaliter intenditur ab agente, sive necessitate nature sive voluntarie agat, propriam similitudinem explicare. Unde fit quod omne agens, in quantum huiusmodi, delectatur; quia, cum omne quod est appetat suum esse, ac in agendo agentis esse quodammodo amplietur, sequitur de necessitate delectatio, quia delectatio rei desiderate semper annexa est. Nichil igitur agit nisi tale existens quale patiens fieri debet] in Dante Alighieri, *De monarchia*, ed. Pier Giorgio Ricci (Verona: Mondadori, 1965), 1.13.2-3, my emphasis.

<sup>21</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, 4.4.

<sup>22</sup> Graham Harman, *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Chicago: Open Court, 2002), 40.

every level, for example: the dissymmetry of animal forms, the chirality (or left- or right-handedness) of amino acids, the energy-matter dialectic. “Semiosis started with the Big Bang and bears since the primary specifications tied up with the circumstances of the cosmological dawn. Cardinal epistemic cuts originate from the very beginning.”<sup>23</sup> The principle of semiotic dissymmetry, according to which a pure dormancy of things is impossible, where everything is the site of, or is encoded with, an essential questionality, a tensioning or dissonance that calls for resolution, correlates as well with John Bruin’s intentional phenomenology of questioning, in which questioning arises within a possibilistic, “interesting ‘field of noise.’”<sup>24</sup> The grassy field, we might say, from which the question one becomes is plucked.

### Animal Mysticism

How might medieval mystical discourse illuminate animal theory? What does the ‘question of the animal’ look like in this luminous darkness? Two principles of mystical thought here seem particularly relevant: 1) theophanic logocentrism, according to which all creatures *speak* God; 2) the contemplative mysticism of the question, according to which union with God is achieved in the perfection of unknowing. The first is exemplified by Meister Eckhart’s observation, “All things speak God. What my mouth does in speaking and declaring God, is likewise done by the essence of a stone, and this is understood more by works than by words” (Sermon 22).<sup>25</sup> The second by Eckhart’s account of the way to God as an

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<sup>23</sup> Tuomo Jämsä, “Semiosis in Evolution,” in *Introduction to Biosemiotics: The New Biological Synthesis*, ed. Marcello Barbieri (Dordrecht: Springer, 2007), 96.

<sup>24</sup> John Bruin, *Homo Interrogans: Questioning and the Intentional Structure of Cognition* (Ottawa: University of Ottawa Press, 2001), 23.

<sup>25</sup> To this may be compared Ibn Arabi’s more explicitly panpsychist observation that the “whole world is intelligent, living, and speaking—in respect of the unveiling that breaks the customary views of people....They stop with what their eyesight gives to them, while we consider the situation differently” in Ibn Arabi, *Meccan Revelations* (New York: Pir Press, 2005), 1.36. As these

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invisible intensification of the pure *fact* of God: “There must be a withdrawal from all things. God scorns to work through images....This *not-knowing* makes her [the soul] wonder and leads her to eager pursuit, for she perceives clearly *that* it is, but does not know *how* or *what* it is” (Sermon 1).

Both of these principles come into play in a passage from the *Book of Privy Counselling* in which the question of animal awareness is brought into question in order to demonstrate the radical availability of contemplation and the divine union produces, over and against the cultured stupidity of most persons who are “so bleendid in here coryous kunnyng of clergie and kynde” that they are no more able to understand “the trewe conceite of this light werk” than “a yong childe at his A.B.C.” can understand “the kunnyng of the grettest clerk.” The existentially aware animal is thus introduced as a kind of *inoperative paradigm*, a figure of what the human is, if only it were not so human, so waywardly rational:

For I holde him to lewyd and to boistous that kan not thenk and fele that himself is, not what himself is bot that hymself is. For this is pleynli proprid to the lewdist kow or to the moste unresonable beest (yif it might be seide, as it may not, that one were lewder or more unresonable then another) for to fele the owne propre beyng. Moche more than it is proprid to man, the whiche is singularly endowid whith reson aboven alle other beestes, for to thenk and for to fele his owne propre being. And thefore come down into the lowest poynte of thi witte, the whiche

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examples show, the conceptual tendency of the recognition of an essential link between animals and God is to elide the animal itself within its being a divine name for the human. Thus Pseudo-Dionysius writes in the *Divine Names*: “The transcendently originating Life is the cause of all life, produces it, brings it to completion, gives it specific form. When we speak in praise of it our words must be drawn from all of life, for we have to remember that it teems with every kind of life. It may be contemplated and praised amid every manifestation of life, for it lacks nothing, or, rather, it is overflowing with life” in Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Complete Works*, trans. Colm Luibheid (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 104-5. So Augustine decisively separates the source and the agency of the theophanic animal word: “No part of your creation ever ceases to resound in praise of you. Man turns his lips to you in prayer and his spirit praises you. Animals too and lifeless things as well praise you through the lips of all who give them thought” (*Confessions* 5.1).

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sum man holdeth by verrey preof that it is the highest, and thenk on the lewedest maner, bot bi sum man the wisest, not what thiself is, bot that thiself is....for to thenk that thou arte, mayst thou have of thi lewydnes and thi boistouste<sup>26</sup> withoutyn any grete kunning of clergie or of kynde....It chargeth not now [nothing matters now] in thee bot that thi blynde beholding of thi naked being be gladli born up in listines of love, to be knitted and onid in grace and in spirit to the precious beynge of God in himself only as he is, withouten more.<sup>27</sup>

Contrary to the general elision of the animal itself within mystical discourse, an elision marked by the animal's being a word of God *for the human*, the *Cloud*-author gives animal consciousness the surprising task of exemplifying what he considers to be the essential faculty of contemplative work, the ability to experience, not only what, but *that* one is. The passage is all the more striking given the *Cloud*-author's explicit understanding of this contemplative capacity as definitive of the very process, the ontic task of specifically human being: "For this is the werk...in the whiche man schuld have contynowed yif he never had synned, and to the whiche worching man was maad, and alle thing for man, to help him and forther him therto, and by the whiche a man schal be reparailed agein."<sup>28</sup> Does this mean that animals are mystics? No. But more importantly, it means that they are not *not* mystics.

While maintaining the official distinction between human and animal, terminologically registered in the non-repetition of *think (think and fele...fele)*, the illustration performatively

<sup>26</sup> *Boistous*, meaning crude, unlearned, simple, humble, unpretentious, strong, and crafty is applied to both animals and humans, and, strongly associated with voice and sound, carries the human within the aura of labor and positions its nature across the boundary between self and body. The word names the human, in all of its individuated, embodied, irreparable contingency, and at the same time recognizes its marvelous power to work, speak, and laugh within the absurd actuality of its existence.

<sup>27</sup> *English Mystics of the Middle Ages*, ed. Barry Windeatt (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 80.

<sup>28</sup> *The Cloud of Unknowing*, ed. Patrick J. Gallacher (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1997), 4.340-43.



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throws the animal/human boundary into a significant and profound confusion. It simultaneously definitively states and obfuscates the difference between human and animal, rendering it the object of an artificial apophasis, a true representation whose truth lies in its not being true. That which even the stupidest animal can feel is ironically unavailable to the 'lewd' humans who are implicitly ranked at once below and within a category of the animal that excludes them by not admitting of difference. Even if there is no real question of some humans being actually unable to feel *that* they are, the counter-reality substantially contradicts this potentiality, a contradiction which hangs on the denaturing power of intellectual learning to render the human fatally stupider than it actually is. As it says in the *Upanishads*, "Those who worship ignorance enter into gloomy darkness, into still greater darkness go those who are devoted to knowledge."<sup>29</sup> This problematizing of the animal/human boundary is registered at the rhetorical level, wherein speaking of the animal necessitates a conspicuously literal instance of what Michael Sells, in characterizing apophatic discourse, calls the *language of unsaying*: "yif It might be seide, as it may not." Precisely by not saying so, this qualification has the wonderful effect of figuring the animal/human boundary as passing, not only within the human, but within this animal as the real existence of its own and the human's proper question, a being wondrously feeling what (the *that*) the human is made to contemplate and experience. From this perfectly confounded scenario I draw the following basic conclusions:

1. That an animal instinctively feels what a human must think, its own *that*.
2. That thinking the *that* means being the animal that the human already is.
3. That the human becomes itself by sinking into the gravity of thinking (*the lowest poynte of thi witte*).
4. That this gravity paradoxically elevates reason into a

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<sup>29</sup> *Bibliotheca Indica*, Vol. 15 (Calcutta: Bishop's College Press, 1858), 73.

new intelligence of its own instinct, namely, intuition, the mode of spontaneous (as opposed to calculative) knowing that, resolving the difference between impulse and habit, creatively restores knowledge to an originary unknowing, knowing without knowledge.

5. That the negativity of *that one is* is the primordial and universal question, the pre-rational ground of logos, according to which it makes sense to say, as Ibn Arabi does, that “the whole world is living, intelligent, and speaking.” This is the *dubito* that the *cogito* forgets.
6. That the latency of essential unknowing in every entity means that each is, not metaphysical, but a *metaphysics* in the Aristotelian sense: an inquiry in which the subject and the object of study are identical.
7. That mysticism is a pure science of the question, not irrational experience, but the superrational experience of experience, the conscious being of question itself, the question that one is.<sup>30</sup>

For Heidegger, the what/that distinction constitutes the very openness of human being, the light whereby anything appears as being: “beings—wherever and however we approach them—*already stand in the light of being*. In the metaphysical sense, therefore, the distinction stands at the commencement of Dasein itself....Man...always has the possibility of asking: What is that? And, Is it at all or is it not?”<sup>31</sup> I prefer to think of this distinction as a cardinal epistemic cut originating from the very beginning, a cut that has its own ending in mind. “In the Original Unity of the First Thing lies the Secondary Cause

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<sup>30</sup> “There is nothing irrational in true mysticism when it is, as it should be, a vision of Reality. It is a form of perception which is absolutely unclouded, and so practical that it can be lived every moment of life and expressed in everyday duties. Its connection with experience is so deep that, in one sense, it is the final understanding of all experience” in Meher Baba, *Discourses*, revised 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (North Myrtle Beach, SC: Sheriar Foundation, 2007), 1.7.

<sup>31</sup> Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, trans. William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 357.

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of All Things, with the Germ of their Inevitable Annihilation.”<sup>32</sup> Toward this end, the unknowing animal points the way by embodying this distinction in extreme form. More precisely, the animal as animal, the animal split across the *as* structure appropriated by the human as its own domain, appears to be the very crisis of the what/that cut, a living fissure or wound in the fact of being. As Agamben explains:

The animal is at once open and not open-or, better, it is neither one nor the other...Heidegger seems here to oscillate between two opposite poles, which in some ways recall the paradoxes of mystical knowledge—or, rather, nonknowledge....Animal captivation and the openness of the world thus seem related to one another as are negative and positive theology, and their relationship is as ambiguous as the one which simultaneously opposes and binds in a secret complicity the dark night of the mystic and the clarity of rational knowledge.<sup>33</sup>

The weird, taskless task that animal theory may inherit from the *Cloud*-author is to see the human into being what Heidegger unknowingly thought animals are.

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<sup>32</sup> Edgar Allen Poe, “Eureka,” in *The Works of Edgar Allan Poe* (New York: Widdleton, 1863), II.119.

<sup>33</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Open*, 59.

## Networkologies: A Manifesto, Section II

*Christopher Vitale*

### *Note to the Reader*

[The following essay is an excerpt from the soon to be completed work in progress entitled *Networkologies - A Manifesto: Towards A New Philosophy of Networks*. The first half of this excerpt, entitled *Section I*, appears in the first volume of *Speculations*.]

**[*diagram*]**

***Elements.*** The networkological project is an attempt to develop the potentials implicit in network diagrams, and in relation to networks in the wider world. Network diagrams are iconic signs whose relational form resonates, in varying degrees, with relational forms in networks in the world. The philosophical concept abstracted from the multiplicity of networks and network diagrams in the world is known as *the* network diagram. The three primary ***components, or elements,*** of the network diagram are the ***node,*** or individual, the ***link,*** or relation, and the ***ground,*** or context, from which these emerge. In addition, when a group of network elements are contained by other network elements, we see the manner in which what is considered an element of a

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network can also be a network as a whole in its own right. When network elements contain each other in this manner, we say that there is a difference in *level of scale* between the elements and whole network(s) in question. As far as we know about the structure of our universe, all networks are elements and all elements networks, depending on the level of scale, all the way up and down, up to and potentially including the open, at both the smallest and largest, most concrete and most abstract levels of scale. In this sense, we can say that the network diagram has three primary elements, namely, the node, link, and ground, as well as a supplementary element, which can be called the network, as a whole, or the level of scale, depending on one's perspective. The network diagram thus takes the form of what will later be described in depth as a triadic structure, one inherent to the manner in which the one and manifests in the three and, as described by the concepts of the node, link, ground, and network/level. Networks elements arise in many forms in the world. When a node emerges from a ground, we say that it has *individuated*, and when a link emerges between nodes, it has *connected* them. Levels emerge within networks by means of the process of *leveling*, and grounds may give rise to or absorb any and/or all of these elements. Networks/levels, nodes, links, and grounds may be static or dynamic, heterogeneous or homogeneous. Nodes may encompass all of an element, or only an aspect thereof. Links may be uni-, bi-, or multi-directional, precise or fuzzy (indicative of what Ludwig Wittgenstein would call a 'family resemblance'), single or multi-threaded, etc. Grounds may also be homo or hetero-geneous, flowing or static, and levels may take in groups of network elements or whole networks, may fold in various ways, etc. Networks include any and all of these permutations. From the diagrammatic germ described in this section—the three andic formation of the *node*, *link*, *ground (and level)*—the entire networkological project springs.

**Diagram.** The concept of the network diagram, and its associated concepts of network elements, are abstractions from networks in the world, and represent the networkological endeavor in its most abstract form. The concepts in question are clearly abstractions, and they collapse under the weight of this abstraction when taken to their extremes. However, as the source of generalization, abstraction has its uses, in that it can help us clarify in extreme form aspects of more concrete formations in the world. The first and foundational concept of networkological diagrammatology is that of the network diagram itself. The network diagram is both a concept and a diagram, for it is a concept of a sign, and the sign of a concept. A diagram is a sign which represents a concept, but the network diagram is a diagram which represents a concept which is also a sign. For unlike signs such as alphabetic or ideographic signs, network diagrams both say and show, they represent and perform relation. It is for this reason that the network diagram is both sign and concept, and while it cannot be easily drawn, for it is the concept of the network in its most abstract sense, and thus, abstracted from any particular form thereof, it can be described by means of the articulation of the relations between its component concepts.

**Node.** The concept of the node in the network diagram represents the principle of unity. At a given level of scale within the network diagram, a node is without parts, completely identical to other nodes in the network, for in fact, each node is simply an instantiation, an ingression, of the node which is itself a concept within the concept known as the network diagram. It must be kept in mind, however, that no node can be a true unity, for true unity is an abstraction, for it would be without relation, and hence, we could have no experience of it. For this reason, we can say that the concept of the node is a form of unity-within-difference, or the one(and).

**Link.** The concept of the link in the network diagram represents the principle of difference. Links hold apart that which they connect, and this is what is meant by difference, namely, disjunct-unity, or the two(and). When the concept of the link intersects that of the node, the result is the plurification of the node into nodes, for once there is a link, there are necessarily nodes rather than a node, and hence, a network rather than simply an element.

**Ground.** The concept of the ground in the network diagram represents the principle of indistinction. Grounds are neither/nor, for they are neither fully inside a network nor outside of it, and in this sense, we can say that they are extimate to networks. This is not the only manner in which grounds are neither/nor, however, for they are also neither unified nor dispersed, neither nodes nor links, and while they may be the background of a network, depending on how that network is deployed in the world, they may also be the foreground. In the capacity of foreground, a ground functions as a node, just as when it functions as a background, the ground functions as a link, in that it links the network to the wider world. When the concept of the ground intersects with that of the node and the link, the result is the potential for change within the network articulated by the node and the link. Change always involves production or consumption, which are forms of transformation. For when nodes and links change, they do so by drawing upon the ground, or releasing into the ground, that which is produced or consumed in order to make this change occur. Some change may even lead to the emergence or dissolution of individual nodes or links. The concept of the ground deepens the difference presented by the concept of the link, developing disjunct-unity into self-differing, or the three(and), for it is by means of the interplay between nodes and links with the ground that networks can become different from themselves. Furthermore, grounds exist both inside and



outside a given network, and in this sense, they allow the network to relate to the wider world. In this sense, we say that grounds are extimate (exterior yet intimate) to the networks of which they are a part. While links and nodes may exist in many networks at once, only grounds may be shared by networks, and in this sense, exist neither solely in one network nor another. And in this manner, we see how the neither/nor of the ground has the potential to deepen into the both/and of the level.

***Network/Level.*** The concept of the network in the network diagram represents the principle of emergence, and for that reason this concept is doubled, for it is both the network as a whole, and the level as a part of another network as another whole. In this sense, we see the manner in which the notion of the network/level deepens the disjunct-unity of the link and the self-differing of the neither/nor of the ground into the emergence, or threeand, characteristic of the both/and of the network/level. The concept of the network/level is both whole and part, it contains itself, and does so infinitely, and with infinite intensity. When the concept of the network/level intersects with that of the node, level, and ground, it causes them to enter into a state of emergence. Such a state is doubly split, for emergence at any level implies a relation to a macro level which contains the level in question, and a micro level which is contained therein, thereby giving rise, in their intersection, to the meso level which unites them. Hence we see the split between meso-macro and meso-micro, as well as that between meso and macro-micro, which itself splits amongst itself, taking on thereby the form of a threeand. This self-containing threeand (split macro-micro, split between meso and macro-micro, split between meso-macro and meso-micro) has a form which mirrors the manner in which the network diagram can be considered as itself split between a threeand in which diversity contains unity (the level which contains the ground, link, node, and network), and

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one in which unity contains diversity (the network which contains the node, level, ground, and level). When the concept of the network/level intersects with the concept of the node, it transforms the pure unity of the node within itself, the lack of distinction between that which it unifies, into a disjunct-unity in which distinctions of various sorts may occur. When the concept of the network/level intersects with that of the link, the disjunct unity between nodes is transformed such that the relation between any network elements and/or networks can be seen as a form of link, thereby expanding the disjunct-unity of the link between self-differing and emergence. And when the concept of the network/level intersects with that of the ground, it transforms the self-differing of the ground into an emergence, in that any individuation, decomposition, and/or transformation of a network element in relation to a ground becomes the potential for an emergence of a network/level as well. However, the self-differing of the ground is also that which transforms the concept of the network into that of an emergence, or that of a level, for it is the self-differing of the concept of the ground which, as self-exceeding, pushes the concept of the network into the emergence of the level. The ground represents that which, as both inside and outside the network, exceeds it, and it is for this reason that the self-exceeding aspects of the network diagram, the -andic side which it brings to the three, is split between the concept of the ground and that of the network/level, while also finding itself in germ in the notion of the disjunct-unity within the concept of the link. The result is that disjunct-unity, self-differing, emergence and unity are necessarily various sides of the same, in that unity-in-difference, disjunct-unity, and self-differing, are all ultimately aspects of the manner in which the world emerges from within itself. While each emphasizes different aspects thereof, they are nevertheless all abstractions from the self-differing emergence of what is. And while emergence emphasizes levels, self-differing emphasizes grounds, and disjunct-

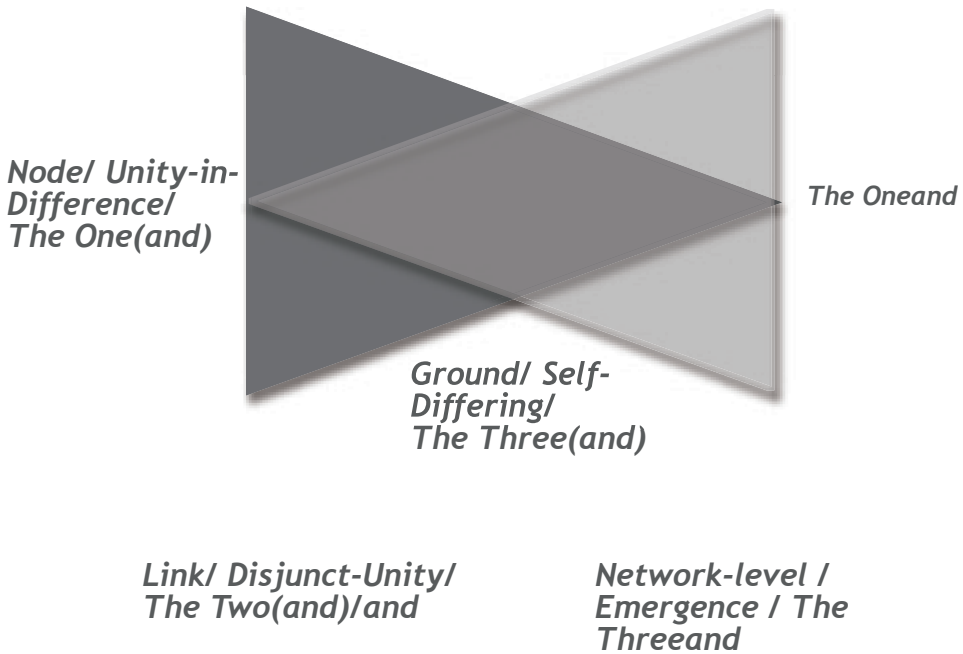
union emphasizes links, and unity-in-difference emphasizes nodes, ultimately, these are all but sides of the oneand as it brings itself forth. Levels link networks, and are networks, for they allow for each network element to function as each other, depending on how they are related to other networks. That is, levels may link nodes and nodes, links and links, grounds and grounds, networks and networks, as well as any combination thereof. These structures, as described above, continue all the way down in networks in the world, at all levels of scale, and do so fractally. That is, the concept of the level describes the manner in which the oneandic nature of emergence manifests itself *triandically*, that is, as a fractal and holographic oneandic proliferation of threeands within threeands, at all levels of scale. The concept of the network/level show us the manner in which the concept of the network diagram describes the concept of relation, for it intertwines that of unity, disjunct-unity, self-differing, and emergence, thereby producing intertwined series of triands which give rise to the fractal, holographic, relational complexity of all that is.

***The Oneand.*** By means of the relative degrees of reification of the oneand, as manifested in unity-in-difference, disjunct-unity, self-differing, and emergence, the oneand comes to emerge from within itself. It thereby produces relation, for it is relation in the process of its coming to be. And to the extent to which we can say that the degree of reification manifested by unity-in-difference is the most extreme present within the network diagram, we can say that the oneand in this guise cloaks itself, and does so in a manner which can be described as that of the one(and). The movement from oneand to one(and), then, describes the motion of the concept of the network diagram within itself. In addition, we can also say then that the concept of the link represents the notion of the two(and) (as well as the intermediate form of the self-exceeding binary of the twoand, as utilized by figures such

as Bergson, Derrida, Luhman, Deleuze, etc.). And beyond this, the concept of the ground represents the notion of the three(and), and the level that of the threeand which opens onto the oneand itself. For it is by means of the plurivocity of the level, of the production of differences in kind from differences in degree, the movement from the indistinction of the ground to the multiplicitous distinction of the level, that we see the emergence of the new within emergence itself, the production of the actual from within the potential. This process, which continually produces itself from itself, describes the manner in which the threeand manifests the oneand. For while the threeand is a concept extracted from a diagram, that is, a representation of aspects of the world, the oneand is the world, it is the world and the concept thereof, it is the process of the world in its self-exceeding, and the threeand is merely the means whereby it comes to know itself as relation, fractally, holographically, and immanently, at all levels of scale. All of what follows is simply a wager on the potential resonance between the concepts presented here and the wider world, such that the articulation of what follows is simply an unfolding into actuality of the potentials abstracted by the threeand of the diagram from its relation to the world, a process which must now effectively be reversed.

***[extension, self-differing,  
and worlding]***

## *The oneand in the threand of the network diagram*



**Matrix.** Matrixology is the study of how networks manifest in the world of experience. As a philosophy of relation, the networkological approach does not firmly separate ontology from epistemology, matter from mind. Following Baruch Spinoza, the networkological perspective grounds all that is in a single fundament, of which matter and mind are simply aspects. This fundament is called the *oneand*, or *matrix*, for it is within all, as well as that which gives rise to all, it is the emergent self-differing which gives rise to all existents. All forms of matter and mind are so many various incarnations of matrix, and matrix is within all of these and beyond them all. Matrix is the potential to be of all that is, as well as what potential becomes as it unfolds into the actual. When matrix has not come to be it is called potential, when it comes to actualize itself in a location it is called matter, and when matrix comes to experience itself, it is called mind. Mind and matter co-permeate, if at differing degrees of intensity and in different forms, at all levels of scale. For the networkological approach, and unlike the inheritors of René Descartes and Immanuel Kant, mind is not the exclusive province of humans or even animals, but something which ‘goes all the way down’ to the quantum level and potentially beyond. Unlike those who rigidly bifurcate the world into mind and matter, or subject and object, the networkological approach does not need to bridge a mind/body gap, for it sees none. Rather, its task is to explain the diversity of combinations of matter and mind that give rise to the varied phenomena in the world. Within matrix, there are several aspects of the oneand which manifest as *the open*, that is, as that which prevents matrix from ever being fully at one with itself, and whose avatars structure its modes of appearance, or matrixology, thereby giving rise to variety in the world. From an epistemological perspective, the open manifests itself as the undecideability of the fundamental obstacle in its varied forms. From an ontological perspective, the

open takes the form of originary potential. And from the ethical point of view, the open takes the form of the call to maximum robustness. While these sides all present themselves, and will be explained in turn, they are all refractions of the same fundament, namely, the oneand of matrix in its process of emergent self-differing. The networkological approach, which frames itself relationally at the intersection difference and relation at the site of emergence, is thus ultimately neither a philosophy of ‘the One’ or ‘the Two’ but the one which exceeds itself, the one-and. Thus, it finds common ground with any approach to entities which finds them in the process of emergent self-differing, or becoming-other, for this is the necessary fundament for any truly relational philosophy. In the what that follows, the manner in which matter and mind intertwine within matrix as experience will be examined, first in its most general and abstract sense, and from there, in the varying ways in which forms of matrix emerge from one another, from the simplest to most complex. This examination of the ways in which matrix exceeds itself is what is what the networkological project calls matrixology.

***Extension.*** As matrix comes to be, it differentiates. While such differentiations may be stacked on top of each other in superposition, when matrix comes to be, it does so in ways that allows for differences which exclude each other. The result is an exclusive relation of a particular difference to matrix, segmenting it and extending it within itself, producing spacing or distance within matrix, resulting in the genesis of separations, disjunctions, actualization, and change. Such a process describes the manner in which matrix gives rise to the distribution of perspectives on what exists. Each perspective entails a view of the whole, one which emphasizes certain aspects over others, and this is what is meant by ***location***. Each location is a node which links together the varied changing inputs of all that is, and ***perspective*** is the name given to the manner in which the location of an entity within an



extended network determines, in relation to the nature of the entities in question, the strength of the impact of each on the other based influence based on the relative degree of separation between them. The emergent self-differing of matrix into localized perspectives is the result of the process whereby matrix comes to actualization, for it is only by means of this separation and self-distinction that matrix is able to localize, differentiate, experience itself, and appear to itself, and ultimately, these are various sides of the same. Most theorists today believe that our **common universal matrix, or universe**, originated within a singular formation often simply called ‘the big bang’ or ‘the singularity’. This **originary matrix**, from which all in our universe came to be, began at some point to self-differ, to shift from potentiality to increasingly complex forms of actualization. This process allowed for the growth within itself of what, following Whitehead, is called **extension**, namely, the opening within originary matrix that produces localization, perspective, and the relative mappings of changes therein, known as spacetime. Extension, spacetime, localization, and perspective are simply so many different ways of saying that the potentiality of the originary matrix began at some point to actualize, that is, to exclusively differentiate, and unfold into what we experience. Because our language is itself the product of an extended universe, it is ill equipped to describe the process of the coming to be of coming to be, of the genesis spacetime, unfolding, extension, actualization, etc., and it is for this reason that any attempt to do so must always use language against itself, fold back upon itself, etc. We can, however, describe this state at least negatively, and in relation to certain phenomena that exceed standard extended formations in our current context. At its furthest extent, we call all that we can experience, to the limits of our current spacetime horizon, the universe. However, the universe may also be part of a set of universes, or **multiverse**, which exist within a larger overall context, known as a **megaverse**. All of these are developments

of the originary matrix which formed all of the current context within which we exist.

**Spacetime.** Since the structure of spacetime networks differ according to the perspective of varied locations within the universe, there is a difference between what, following relativity theory, is called the *proper time* of an entity, that is, the experience of change as measured from the perspective of any given entity, while the change in time for a given entity as measured from the outside will be called a *temporal mapping*. Both of these are different, however, from the change of the universe as a whole, the ordering of which may be widely spatio-temporally different according to differing perspectives on the universe, and that from which all proper times, even if impossible, emerge. Following Whitehead, we call this overall change, that from which proper times emerge, the *creative advance* of the universe. Building upon the distinction between proper time and creative advance, it is also worth conceptualizing the distinction between space as it is apprehended from a given location (called an inertial frame in relativity theory), and that as mapped from an outside location. We will call the first an entity's *proper space*, and the apprehension of a space from an exterior location a *spatial mapping*. Space and time are ultimately abstractions, for it always takes time to move in space, and the changes which we use to apprehend movement can only be apprehended by motion in space. Even in everyday language, we say a voyage by car to another city is 'an hour away,' and we use the movement of a hand on an analog clock to describe changes in time. For this reason, the networkological project will generally speak of spacetime locations, rather than moments in time or locations in space. According to the theory of relativity, when one moves through spacetime, no matter how curved that spacetime may be, one's own spacetime always seems flat, it is only that around one which seems curved. For in fact, only if one moves within flat, non-

warped spacetime will one perceive the spacetime of its world not warp around it as it moves. We will speak of an entity's *proper spacetime* as the apprehension of time and space from within spacetime of that entity, while the apprehension of spacetime from an exterior location will be called a *spacetime mapping*. Distortions in spacetime are never experienced directly, but only indirectly as one changes location in spacetime (which includes remaining in one location while the world around you changes, or moving in space while the world around you changes). This is because change is always relative (that is, any inertial frame of reference is equivalent to all others in relation to the laws of physics), and hence any entity can only experience changes in its own spacetime curvature indirectly by apprehending changes in the world beyond it.

***Potential.*** All matrix has within it the potential for self-differing. Potential is emergence under the aspect of the future in the past (emergence that will have occurred), while the actual is emergence under the form of the past in the future (emergence which is always already different from what it was). From ordinary matrix to any bit of matter within the world, it is fundamentally unknowable whether the potential to be different present in any actualization is the result of mind or matter, or due to internal or external causes at a given localization in spacetime or level of scale. Some of the reasons for this are simply practical ramifications of the manner in which extension intertwines matrix within itself. It is logistically impossible to observe an entity from all spacetime locations, and at all levels of scale, and hence to know all the influences upon a matter, as well as all the hidden potentials therein in the future. What's more, it is impossible to observe a matter from within, and thereby know the degree to which its decisions come from its form of filtering its influences, those influences itself, or some other, more fundamental source of differing such

as originary potential. But to know another matter from within in this manner would be possible only by means of being that matter, which violates the very notion of matter itself. Beyond this, however, there is the issue of quantum fluctuations which, under the correct circumstances, could cascade up the series of networks in a given matter and tip the scales of a decision towards a given outcome. Researchers are relatively convinced of the fact that is impossible to know if, on a quantum level or below, there is some aspect of what is which renders matter itself fundamentally indeterminate. Within quantum mechanics, researchers still debate whether or not the fundamental indeterminacy of quantum fluctuations is due to the influence of minute shifts within the context of the quantum event in question, conveyed in a manner which is too delicate for our instruments to detect, or whether these fluctuations are the result of something present within the particles and sub-matters in question. Beyond this, there is no way to know, at least within contemporary science, whether or not there might not be influences which we simply cannot sense, which come from beyond the confines of our universe, simply because the universe is the horizon of our current experience. For all of these reasons, it makes sense to acknowledge the fact that all matrix has the power to surprise us, for in fact it has never ceased to do so. While it may behave in regular ways for the most part, it seems as if there is almost an inverse ratio between the level of precision with which we need to know it, and the degree to which we can know it. Let it suffice to say that we can understand matrix, particularly in general, but that in particular, it is nearly impossible to know, and we can call this impediment to knowledge, and the difficulties it gives rise to, the *quandary of potential*. And in the right conditions, all that we know can be given rise to by matrix no different than what we see before us in our everyday lives. All that is, or could be, exists as potential within any and all. The capacity for self-differing, in all its forms, is what is known by potential, and all matrix has this within it.

***Self-Differing.*** For the networkological endeavor, matter is that within matrix which is able to actualize a difference, and mind is that within matrix which is able to experience difference as potential which it can then bring to actuality via action. When matrix is delocalized, however, it is pure potential. But as matrix comes to actualize itself, it comes to differ with itself, not merely potentially, but concretely, exclusively in relation to a location, and hence, actually, giving rise to both difference within matter, which is then experienced by mind, as well as difference experienced by mind and then actualized within matter. Mind and matter are the two aspects of matrix which allow this transition, this emergence, to occur. As a philosophy of relation-in-process, the networkological perspective does not fundamentally distinguish epistemology and ontology, subject and object, mind and matter, nor does it distinguish whether difference originates in the matter or mind sides of matrix. Matrix differentiates into matter and mind simultaneously as potential comes to actuality. Mind is the capacity within matrix to be affected by difference, just as matter is the capacity to be difference, and subjectivity and objectivity are, within conscious minds, simply higher-level echoes thereof. To ask which precedes or grounds the other is a false question, for matrix gives rise to these very distinctions in its coming to be (and later in this work, we will describe this false question by means of the notion of the obstacle of experience). All matrix has potential for self-differing, just as all matter has potential to be differently, and mind to experience differently. Self-differing, extension, and experience are three sides of the same manner in which matrix emerges from itself, grasping itself as experience, and giving rise to appearance from within itself.

***Distinction.*** Within the self-differing emergent extension of what is, stasis interpenetrates with change, and continuity with discontinuity. Extension gives rise to

both differences in degree, or intension, and differences in kind, or emergence. Emergence, occurs when intensive differentiation differs with itself or the world around it. The result is that discontinuities arise in terms of space, time, matter, and mind, giving rise to analog/continuous differences of degree, and digital/distinct/discrete/discontinuous differences of kind. Were there no discontinuities, change would be limited in the extent that it could develop, and likewise, were there no continuities, there would be no opportunity for entities to interact and change thereby.

***Mind.*** At a given level, any material entity or system has a series of inputs which affect it, from both micro-/interior (sub-matters) and macro-/exterior levels of scale, and these then must be converted by the matter in question into actions. Mind is that which feels the influences upon it a given matter, experiences them, and then decides upon these influences, in light of its relevant potentials, by executing an action within its own matter. It must not be thought that mind is a magical substance that somehow inhabits matter in a ghostly manner. Rather, it is simply the manner in which matter relates to itself within experience. Mind can be thought of as the giant distributed thinking present within the brain of the universe of matter. Put differently, mind is that which processes the micro- and macro-level inputs within a matter, in light of the potentials relevant to that matter at its level of scale. That is, mind is the manner in which the micro folds into the macro, and the macro into the micro, at the level of the meso, and in relation to the potentials within that meso itself. This folding, beyond the three-dimensions of space and one of time, occurs in what can be thought of as a sort of fifth dimension material, that of mind. In this sense we can think of the intertwining of mind and matter, experience and action, macro and micro, as similar to a non-orientable twist within topological figures such as a cross-cap or Klein bottle. For there is no way that micro

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and macro levels of spacetime could intertwine within a meso-level of matter without in fact turning space inside out at the level of the meso, and mind is precisely this turning inside out of matter within itself, a doubling of matter which is yet still nothing but the same. Where is mind located? Perhaps this is a false question, for we live not in a world of matter, but of matrix, of which matter is simply one side, and one we only know indirectly through the experience provided by mind. However, in relation to that material side of what is, we can say that mind is both as if it were on the same level as matter, but also as if it were in a sense dimensionally orthogonal to it. Matrix is both mind and matter, and these can be thought of as two levels of matrix, but levels which do not relate to each other as macro and micro, but as meso to meso in different yet intertwined domains. That is, like the manner in which electrical and magnetic waves in the physical world are two sides of the same electromagnetic wave, but on different yet intertwined dimensional planes, so mind and matter are like two side of the same, on diferent yet intertwined planes. One is the plane of experience, or mind, the other the plane of action, or matter. However, while electromagnetic waves are one step out of phase with each other, changes within mind and matter remain in phase with each other. This is the sense in which mind is an interiority to matter, and yet, nothing but another aspect of that matter itself, for in fact, mind and matter are simply two sides of matrix, two sides of the same. Mind is what casts matter outside of itself, into the world of influence and experience, just as matter is that which localizes mind in the here and now of action. If energy is the potential within matter to configure itself differently, then mind is the potential within matter to understand itself, to split itself up and re-relate to itself based on differences in location within extension. While matter and energy are strictly convertible within physics, as two different forms of the same thing, mind can be thought of as matter to a higher power, an intensification of matter



which is a difference in both degree and kind, even as it is simply nothing more than that matter itself under another aspect, a twist of matter within itself, in a sense. Likewise, the reverse can be thought of mind to a higher power, a concretization and actualization within localized extension, wrenching the plenum of influences into the here and now of action. This snake eating its own tail is matrix, and matter and mind are two sides of the snake, each turning themselves inside out within each other, two sides of the same.

***Worlds.*** Matrix, mind, and matter divide and link up to locations within extension according to networks of symmetry within the manner in which potential actualizes within what is. The result is that matrix differentiates, giving rise, along with spacetime, location, and perspective, to particular matrixal entities. Each of these entities has a matter side, known as 'a' matter, and a mind side, known as 'a' mind. Each side, in its way, is the condensation and/or expansion of the other, each in its way, even as each is also the condensation and/or expansion of the whole, each in its way. That is, location, spacetime, matter, mind, extension, differentiation, and experience, actualization, and potential are all so many sides of the same process whereby matrix comes to emerge from itself. When mind is localized as 'a' mind by means of 'a' given matter, it takes up a particular position within spacetime, producing a unified perspective on what exists, and what this unified perspective presents to that mind is that mind's ***world***. Each world is a recasting and reworking of all that is into the graded series of appearances, the strength and positions of which is determined by the structure of spacetime and the nature of the matters of both the mind in question the matrixal entities which form its contexts. Any given world indicates the manner in which the world appears to a matrixal entity composed of the matter, mind, and location in question. For self-conscious and conscious

organisms, the world appears consciously via perception, but for simpler entities, the world is still experienced, but not in a manner which is conscious. Thus, while simple entities certainly have a world which appears to them, they cannot be said to know this, but only experience it. At all levels, a mind's world is continually recreated as the context around that mind shifts.

***Worldaspects.*** The myriad of worlds or graspings of the world form aggregates and subaspects in a variety of ways. The combinations or sections of these give rise to aspects of the appearance of the world, known as *worldaspects*. There are varying types of *worldaspects*, such as a static/0-dimensional worldpoint, a 1-dimensional worldline, a 2-dimensional worldsheets, a 3-dimensional worldsolid, and a 4-dimensional worldhypersolid. A world is an intertwining of any or all of these into a complex and shifting whole. All worlds are the result of the manner in which matrix experiences or grasps itself, giving rise to experience as appearance by means of the process of self-grasping in self-differing known as ***worlding***. If extension indicates the manner in which matrix differentiates, *worlding* is the manner in which matrix reconnects with itself in difference at higher and more abstract levels of emergence. Ultimately, we cannot know whether or not the manner in which a mind experiences its world corresponds to 'what really is,' for the world is never experienced in this manner, but only by given minds from given perspectives. In this sense, there is no 'what really is.' What's more, it is impossible for any given mind to determine the degree to which what they experience is due to its own nature and location, or that of its contexts. This will later be described as the *obstacle of experience*. What there is, however, is intertwined series of worlds, and varying degrees in which these resonate with each other.

**Worldevents.** Each time a given mind or matter changes, this is known as an event. Any event always occurs in a given world, and as such, is a type of dynamic worldaspect which is also known as a worldevent. There are three varieties of worldevents which can be experienced by a given mind in relation to its world, namely, interior material events, exterior material events, and interior mental events. When a mind experiences an interior material event in its world, such an event is experienced as a shift within the sub-matters of the matter relevant to the mind in question. For example, when I say, "I'm hungry," I say this because one of my sub-matters, namely, my stomach, has communicated to my consciousness the sensations associated with lack of food. An exterior material event occurs, however, when matters outside the matrixal entity in question change. For example, when I say "The kettle is boiling," *"there are as many worlds as there are events, and as many realities as there are networks of worlds"* I am recognizing a shift in the matters outside of me. An interior mental event, however, cannot be known by any mind directly, but only indirectly, through a loop through other matters which are then experienced by the mind in question. For example, when I move my arm, the aspect of my mind that moves my arm does not experience this as an influence coming from outside it, simply because it *is* this. It can experience the movement of this arm afterwards, however, indirectly, by experiencing the sub-matters in question moving. Minds cannot experience themselves changing except by means of a loop through either interior or exterior matters. It is in this way that some complex organisms have developed special loops within their control systems, or brains, such that some aspect of the brains in question are there specifically to experience others, thereby giving rise to what is called 'self-consciousness.' Since the mind of any given matrixal

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entity is merely a processor of influences and actions at a higher level of scale, it cannot experience itself but indirectly, after a delay and by means of its effects. And while I have used examples above to describe this mechanism by means of conscious entities, the same can be said, in much simpler fashion, for simple entities which do not perceive the world, but are only affected by it. Thus, when a stone breaks, we see a cascade of internal material events that give rise to a set of influences on the matter of the stone. These are processed by the mind of the stone, which gives rise to an internal mental event, which manifests itself in the matter of the stone as a particular type of break. This break is experienced by the mind of the stone indirectly, by means of a shift in the influences of its sub-matters and exterior matters, for the matter of the stone is in many senses nothing more than the intertwining of these two levels within a given spacetime location. After the stone breaks, however, can we speak of the stone as a single matrixal entity, or rather, one which is now split or dispersed? These sorts of questions depend upon the networks of reference which are applied to the matrix in question, and this depends upon the manner in which the entity in question is apprehended a given entity. While it may be possible to say the stone now becomes a dispersed entity, or rather, multiple smaller entities, this all depends upon the manner in which the matrix involved is divided up into networks within the world of a matrixal entity which does the apprehending of such a split. There are, however, many dispersed matters in the world, with dispersed mental aspects, and they simply function differently than unified matters and minds. Since ultimately all matters and minds are divisions of matter and mind, just as all matrixal entities are divisions of matrix, the question is not whether or not a given division of the world into aspects and events is correct, but rather, what networks of reference and perspective is implied by a given division. For the networkological project, all divisions of matrix are possible, and no division

is truer than any other, for any given division of matter, mind, and matrix into aspects is symptomatic and provisional, rather than ultimate. Aspects and events are simply aspects of all that is.

**Worlding.** Worldaspects and worldevents may conjoin to create the larger entities of which a world are composed. When events line up in a series, generally, though not necessarily, due to the unifying aspects of a single spacetime location or a given entity, the world aspect this gives rise to is known as a worldline. Worldlines, like all worldaspects, can be disjunct or unified. For example, the series of American presidential elections gives rise to a disjunct worldline. A unified worldline is one which describes the appearance of continuity between the events in question. When such a continuity is seen from inside, this is known as an interior continuous worldline, and when seen from without, an exterior continuous worldline. A continuous interior worldline is known as a *duration*. Any interior worldline has a shifting dynamic context which corresponds to it, the inverse of that worldline, the aggregate of the worldsllices which correspond to the interior events of which that interior worldline is composed. This inverted line is known as that worldline's interior worldstructure. Each interior worldline may be complemented by a variety of exterior worldlines, which may not correspond in all degrees with that of the interior worldline. The same disjunct unity described here in regard to events and worldlines, can be seen at higher levels of scale in regard to worldsolids, worldhypersolids, etc. Each worldaspect may be unified or disjunct, has interior and exterior sides, has inverses, and is composed of sub-worldaspects and is part of aggregate worldaspects at higher levels of scale. Appearance occurs to minds via the intertwined worlds which matters give rise to. Worldaspects are fundamentally related to spacetime networks, for spacetime is itself simply an abstraction of the aspects of worldaspects which have to do with location within the shifting dynamics of the world.

**Realities.** Each matrixal entity has its own world, and each event shifts worldaspects in relation thereto. No world exists in isolation, however. When minds share a given context, physical or otherwise, they are likely to have strong similarities between the form of their worlds. Whenever there are multiple worlds layered on top of each other in this manner, the resulting network of worlds is known as a **pluriverse**. When a pluriverse is constructed by matters which share the same general spacetime context, we say that this pluriverse is a physically localized material pluriverse. Within any set of minds within a spacetime context, the zones of symmetry between their worlds give rise to what is known as a **shared world, or reality**. Any reality is dependent upon the minds which exist in it, and its parameters are set by the interaction between them and their contexts. Realities can be physical or mental, for the same structural parameters apply, namely, the establishment of shared points of reference within conditions of flux. Worlds come in nested networks, while realities also come in nested networks, but also in varying degrees of fuzziness, and in varying forms of complexity, as determined by the worlds of which they are composed. The degree of fuzziness of a reality is indicated by the degree of asymmetry it contains. The higher the degree of asymmetry, the less the entities which compose this reality will be affected similarly by events which appear to them in their worlds, and therefore, it will be difficult for any sort of order or complexity to form. Some degree of symmetry within the basic reality shared by a group of entities is needed if order and complexity of any sort can emerge. For conscious organisms, the reality they share with other entities in their world must have relatively high degrees of symmetry for them to operate within that world in a manner which can support cause and effect in regard to their action, support learning, etc. Thus, there must not only be a relatively high degree of symmetry in regard to space, but also a very particular sort of asymmetry, known as **directionality or the arrow of time**, in which time

moves in only one direction within its spacetime contexts. Such a condition is also necessary for the development of complexity, life, and other preconditions of consciousness. For self-conscious minds, the same requirements hold, if at higher levels of complexity.

***Realityaspects.*** Realities describe the the intertwining of worlds via matter and minds, such that realities are composites of the worlds they contain, in which the impossible aspects of these worlds are recast as excesses which are fuzzily and extimately included within this reality. Realities, like worlds, can be divided into events, lines, sheets, solids, and contexts/structures of various sorts and degrees of complexity. The difference between them, however, is that worlds are inherently divided between interior and exterior sides, while a reality is always shared between entities, and emerges from the intertwining of interior and exterior world aspects. As such, there are internal and external sides of every entity and event, but no direct experience of mind enters into realities, where this does occur within worlds. This disjunction between world and reality is manifested as what will later be described as the obstacle of privacy, namely, the inability of one mind to experience what it is like inside another.

***Realityforming.*** How many worlds and realities are there? Ultimately, there are as many worlds as there are entities and events (which in their way are two sides of the same), and as many realities as there are networks of worlds. Just as worlds are networks, so are realities networks composed thereof, if differently. And in fact, all worlds are composed of realities, and all realities composed of worlds, down to and potentially including the quantum scale (where such distinctions become fuzzy), and it is the mind of a given matter which knits them together, each into the other, as it processes its relation to its context, or world. For ultimately, what a mind does



is produce a world from a series of realities, just as matter shatters worlds back into semi-compossible realities, only to be recomposed by intertwined networks of minds at further stages in this cycle. In this sense, worlds and realities are differing aspects of the same. Both worlds and realities, however, are always exceeded by the world of which they represent graspings.

***The World.*** All entities in a given universe ultimately share the same basic reality, known as ***the world***. The world is a reality and world as well as universe, for it is both between and beyond these very categories. As the universe, the world is no different therefrom, for the universe is the manner in which it experiences itself, and hence, there is a difference in name and emphasis only. As a world, the world is the manner in which the universe experiences itself. As a reality, the world is extremely fuzzy, due to the extreme degree of difference between the realities of which it is composed.

***Mapping.*** Realities and their aspects appear to minds, if in a different manner than worlds and their aspects. Non-conscious minds are affected by their worlds, by they do not know them. Likewise, they are affected by the realities within which they exist and which they give rise to, for entities may grasp their worlds in manners which have symmetry between them, and lead to symmetries in the realities which form between them. Only conscious minds, however, possess the ability to recognize distinct entities, and by means interactions with entities repeated over spacetime, construct maps of the symmetries at work within the reality shared by entities in a particular zone of the world and the conscious mind in question. Doing this intentionally by means of a series of controlled interactions with these entities is known as ***reality testing, or experiment***. Mapping is one key way in which conscious minds work to increase their sync with their worlds.

**Quandary.** All attempts to know matrix have limits. These derive from both the open, intertwined, and extended manner in which emergence manifests itself within the world, but also from the inherent difference between knowledge and understanding. When an attempt is made to capture aspects of the world within knowledge, its conceptual and representational form mesh better with some aspects of the world, but less with others. This is because aspects of the world may be relatively static, situated, and isolated for periods of time, even if they are ultimately necessarily relational in nature. When an attempt is made to fix these relatively reified aspects of the world in knowledge, entities which use these forms of knowledge to organize their relation to the world may do so without experiencing large difficulties coordinating their relation to the world, or within the systems of knowledge they produce. But as knowledge approaches more liminal, processural, emergent, extended, or otherwise unreifiable aspects of the world, the result is paradox, quandary, and infinite regress. This limit to knowledge is what is known as the **fundamental obstacle**. There are three sides to this obstacle. From an epistemological-diagrammatological perspective, the fundamental obstacle and its varied aspects are the result of what is known as the **network paradox**. Networks foreground aspects of the world, such that what is left out forms the network's ground. Any attempt to know the ground in question results in the formation of a new network, but the same problem is ultimately reproduced within this new network formation. Even when an attempt is made to know the world via a series of nested and interlinked dynamic networks, there will always be that which grounds this complex meta-network, and which therefore connects it to the open. In this sense, the structure of inside, boundary, outside is found, if differently, in each of the fundamental obstacle's manifestations, and these correspond in their way to node, link, and ground, respectively, with each node itself being

composed of networks nested within it in turn. The infinite regresses which occur within paradox and quandary are a function of the manner in which the network paradox plays itself out in a wide variety of forms. From an ontological perspective, the fundamental obstacle appears as the **quandary of emergence**. Emergence is the name given to the self-containing aspects of the world. Since all the world is emergent, if in differing degrees of intensity and in different forms, this means that different aspects of the world will evidence the paradoxical nature of networks in differing degrees and in different forms. The intersection of the network paradox and the quandary of emergence give rise to the fundamental obstacle in its many appearances. However, there is also an ethical aspect to the fundamental obstacle as well, namely, the appeal of the other. Since emergence is fundamentally unknowable, giving rise to paradox within systems of knowledge in its wake, this means that all systems of knowledge must be seen as provisional tools to increase understanding, rather than ends in themselves. The world as emergent is continually in relational and in-process. This means that its otherness from what we know is continually appearing. Only when we continually listen to this appeal can we use knowledge in a manner which is less reifying, more relational, and hence, less paranoid in structure.

**Obstacle.** When attempts are made to know aspects of the world in ways which violate the network paradox, the result is one three types of error, namely, those of experience, distinction, and completion. When these errors arise, we say that the knowing system has fallen into the representational trap, and we can tell this has occurred because the actions of the knowing system in question which are based upon these errors will often fail to sync with the world in which they find themselves. Each of the three types of error lines up with one aspect of the network paradox, such that errors of experience are forms of overnodding, errors of distinction are forms

of overlinking, and errors of completion are forms of overgrounding. When a knowing system acts as if a network it uses to know the world matches exactly the contents of a network in the world beyond it, we say that this is an error of experience. This manner of error is an attempt to reduce the oneand to the one(and). This error occurs due to three fundamental manifestations of the fundamental obstacle, namely, the obstacles of matter, privacy, and the context. That is, a knowing subject can never know whether or not its representation of the experience of a matter, other mind, or the context of any entity is the same as its representation thereof. When a knowing system acts as if the distinctions given rise to by means of the networks it uses to know the world matches exactly those in the world beyond it, we say that this is an error of distinction. This manner of error is an attempt to reduce the twoand to the two(and). This error occurs due to three fundamental manifestations of the fundamental obstacle, namely, the obstacles of decision, experience, and complexity. That is, a knowing subject can never know whether or not the distinctions it makes by employing representational networks to know the world are the same as those in the world itself. Thus, when a subject attempts to distinguish between the contribution of its own networks and the world in regard to a given experience, the subject cannot know the degree to which this distinction is itself the result of the networks it employs or the experience in question. This is known as the obstacle of experience. Likewise, when a subject attempts to distinguish between its own contribution and those of one of its subminds when that mind makes a decision, the subject cannot know the degree to which the distinction is itself the result of the networks it employs, or of its submatters. This is known as the obstacle of decision. And in complex systems in the world, whenever a subject attempts to know the degree to which the complexity of a system as a whole is due to the contribution of the submatters in question, the system as a whole, or the potentials relevant to the

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system in question, the subject cannot know the degree to which the networks formed by means of the perspective taken by the subject in question informs such a judgement. This is known as the obstacle of complexity. And when a knowing subject acts as if it is able to know by means of its representational networks all that is about a given entity, we say that this is an error of completion. Errors of completion are attempts to reduce the threeand of the ground to the three(and). Thus, when a subject acts as if its representations of a system are complete, without taking into account the manner in which all matrix can differ from itself, depending upon the context, we say that there is a manifestation of the obstacle of potential. When a subject acts as if it can know all that is about the world as a whole, thereby reifying the world from process, we say that there is a manifestation of the obstacle of the world. And when a subject acts as if it can know all that there is about a system, thereby denying the relational nature of all that is, we say that there is a manifestation of the obstacle of aspect. Beyond all of these forms of obstacle, whenever any of the errors in question are made in a manner that applies to levels, we say that there is an error of leveling, and that there is a manifestation of the obstacle of level. The obstacle of level may manifest in all the other forms of error and obstacle, for it describes a form of overleveling, an attempt to reduce the threeand to the three(and) of the level. Often these errors intertwine, layer, and interpenetrate, and there are wide varieties of intermediary formations. The reasons for the obstacles described here will be developed in later sections. However, it must not be thought that these obstacles occur due to magical or transcendent reasons. Rather, they spring from the basic relational form of what is. It must also not be thought that these obstacles are merely hindrances. Rather, they describe the manner in which the world remains open. That is, each obstacle is also an opening, and describes the manner in which relational wholes are not closed to change and the new. The ramifications of these issues will be described in full in sections later in this work.

# ‘Girls Welcome!!!’<sup>1</sup>

## Speculative Realism, Object Oriented Ontology and Queer Theory

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Word of new intellectual developments tends to travel indirectly, like gossip. Soon, more and more people feel the need to know what the real story is: they want manifestos, bibliographies, explanations. When a journal does a special issue or commissions an editorial comment, it is often responding to this need. We have been invited to pin the queer theory tail on the donkey. But here we cannot but stay and make a pause, and stand half amazed at this poor donkey’s present condition. Queer Theory has already incited a vast labor of metacommentary, a virtual industry: special issues, sections of journals, omnibus reviews, anthologies, and dictionary entries. Yet the term itself is less than five years old. Why do people feel the need to introduce, anatomize, and theorize something that can barely be said yet to exist.

—Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner,  
“What does Queer Theory Teach us about X?”<sup>2</sup>

Ecological criticism and queer theory seem incompatible, but if they met, there would be a fantastic explosion. How shall we accomplish this perverse, Frankensteinian meme splice? I’ll propose some methods and frameworks for a field that doesn’t quite exist—queer ecology

—Timothy Morton, “Queer Ecology”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The editors wish to note that Christopher Vitale has promised to write a response to this position paper in the near future on his blog which can be found at <http://networkologies.wordpress.com/>.

<sup>2</sup> Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner, “What Does Queer Theory Teach us about X?” *PMLA* 110.1/3 (1995): 343-349, at 343.

<sup>3</sup> Timothy Morton, “Queer Ecology,” *PMLA* 125.2 (March 2010): 273-282. If you are persuaded by my argument that SR and OOO theorists have *always* been interested in queer theories and committed to antiheteronormative

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### Frankensteinian Meme Splice (or how hot are queer theory and speculative realism?)

I BEGIN WITH TWO EPIGRAPHS, BOTH of which were Guest Columns written for, commissioned especially by, the *PMLA*. Although they are separated by fifteen years they both make some strikingly similar points which are relevant for someone attempting to chart the potential connections or intimacies between queer theory and speculative realism (and in this position piece I'm placing quite a strong emphasis on object oriented ontology which is just one offshoot of speculative realist thinking). The first thing we might emphasize is the need to pin things down, to say what exactly queer theory is and *does* and to be entirely clear about what speculative realism is and what precisely it is that speculative realists *do*. Yet, perhaps the power and virtue of both queer theory and speculative realism, what makes them so compatible, is that neither is a delimitable field. Part of the attraction of both is their very undefinability, their provisionality, and, most importantly, their openness.

Let's spend a little time with the guest column written by Berlant and Warner, a very rich essay which sadly isn't often read or cited nowadays. In 1995 Queer Theory was arguably at its peak (at least in the United States) and people were calling for definitions, even though, as Berlant and Warner point out, it was barely five years old as a term and a field of inquiry. Queer

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projects then one could look to Morton's *earlier* piece "Thinking Ecology: The Mesh, the Strange Stranger and the Beautiful Soul" in *Collapse VI* (Falmouth, U.K.: Urbanomic, 2010), 195-223, where he says that "Desire is inescapable in ecological existence. Yet environmentalism as currently formulated tries to transcend the contingency of desire, claiming that its desires if any are natural. Organicism partakes of environmentalist chastity. 'Nature loving' is supposedly chaste... and is thus slave to masculine heteronormativity, a performance that erases the trace of performance," *ibid.*, 214. It is important to note that both of these articles appeared *before* Morton's now famous conversion to Object Oriented Ontology. See "All you need is love" on his *Ecology without Nature* blog: <http://ecologywithoutnature.blogspot.com/2010/08/all-you-need-is-love.html>



then was, as they say, “hot.”<sup>4</sup> Right now speculative realism is ‘hot’ and the sheer pace (largely thanks to the blogosphere) with which it has evolved, developed, and extended its pincers into and across disciplines, is nothing short of astonishing. If the ‘birth’ of queer theory can be dated to 1990 at a conference at the University of California, Santa Cruz where the term was first introduced by Teresa de Lauretis,<sup>5</sup> then we can locate the ‘origin’ of the term speculative realism to a workshop which took place at Goldsmith’s College, the university of London in April 2007.<sup>6</sup> The perception that queer was ‘hot’ for Berlant and Warner arises from “the distortions of the star system, which allows a small number of names to stand in for an evolving culture.”<sup>7</sup> This has also happened with speculative realism and its splinter faction object oriented ontology where, in both cases, four ‘star’ names stand in for a rapidly evolving field. The “four horsemen of the philosophicus”<sup>8</sup> who are associated with the founding of speculative realism (despite their many differences and divergent interests) are Quentin Meillassoux, Graham Harman, Ray Brassier and Iain Hamilton Grant. And the quartet of object oriented ontologists are Harman, Ian Bogost, Timothy Morton, and Levi Bryant. But, as with early queer theory, “most practitioners of the new queer commentary [speculative commentary] are not faculty members but graduate students.”<sup>9</sup> The accelerated pace with which speculative thinking has grown and impacted

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<sup>4</sup> Berlant and Warner, “Queer Theory,” 343.

<sup>5</sup> Teresa de Lauretis, “Queer Theory: Lesbian and Gay Sexualities. An Introduction,” *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies* 3.2 (1991): iii-xviii.

<sup>6</sup> The proceedings of that event can be found in *Collapse III* (Falmouth, U.K.: Urbanomic, 2007) which includes the texts from Ray Brassier, Iain Hamilton Grant, Graham Harman, Quentin Meillassoux and questions and answers from the audience. Alberto Toscano spoke at the second event (in place of Meillassoux) but is not generally associated with SR.

<sup>7</sup> Berlant and Warner, “Queer Theory,” 343.

<sup>8</sup> Archive Fire, “Diversifying Speculative Realisms,” <http://www.archivefire.net/2010/06/speculative-realisms-and.html>

<sup>9</sup> Berlant and Warner, “Queer Theory,” 343.

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upon other fields (both inside and outside the academy and institutionalized disciplines) has largely been because of the blogosphere and the work of graduate students such as Ben Woodard (who blogs at *Naught Thought*), Paul Ennis (who blogs at *Another Heidegger Blog*), Taylor Adkins (who blogs at *Speculative Heresy*), Nick Srnicek (who blogs at *The Accursed Share*), and others. Again, as with queer theory, this “association with the star system and with graduate students makes this work the object of envy, resentment and suspicion. As often happens, what makes some people queasy others call sexy.”<sup>10</sup> As we shall see, it is largely the association of speculative realism (and object oriented ontology) with four *male* philosophers which has made those calling for a queering of speculative thought and a diversification of its interests to become queasy. In a recent Facebook thread on the lack of women in speculative realism, one commenter referred to SR and OOO as a “sausage fest.” One could argue, in paranoid fashion, somewhat queasily, that speculative realism is unfriendly to those working in gender studies, critical sexuality studies, neovitalist and neomaterialist feminisms, and queer theory. But, in this paper, in a more reparative frame of mind, I want to suggest that speculative realism and triple O theory (as Timothy Morton has recently dubbed object oriented ontology) have always already been interested in and attuned to issues pertaining to gender, sexuality, feminism, and queerness. One could go even further and say that the “perverse, Frankensteinian meme splice” Timothy Morton dreams of has already been accomplished (but that doesn’t mean that the work is done, far from it).

### Undefining Speculative Realism

Berlant and Warner write that, in their view, “it is not useful to consider queer theory a thing, especially one dignified by capital letters. We wonder whether *queer commentary* might not more accurately describe the things linked by the rubric,

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<sup>10</sup> Berlant and Warner, “Queer Theory,” 343.

most of which are not theory.”<sup>11</sup> Even though SR and OOO are almost always dignified by capital letters (I prefer not to capitalize them in this essay), they too “cannot be assimilated to a single discourse, let alone a propositional program”<sup>12</sup> and I share Berlant and Warner’s desire “not to define, purify, puncture, sanitize, or otherwise entail the emerging queer [speculative realist] commentary”<sup>13</sup> or to fix a “seal of approval or disapproval”<sup>14</sup> on anyone’s claims to queerness or to speculative realism. Furthermore, I agree with them that we ought to “prevent the reduction” of speculative realism or object oriented ontology to a “speciality” or a “metatheory” and that we ought to fight vigorously to “frustrate the already audible assertions that queer theory [speculative realism] has only academic—which is to say, dead—politics.”<sup>15</sup> For me, much of speculative thinking’s allure is its openness, its promissory nature, and that much of what goes under its name has been “radically anticipatory, trying to bring a [non-correlationist, non-anthropocentric, even queer] world into being.”<sup>16</sup> Because of this very provisionality, and an attendant welcomeness to its own revisability, any attempt to “summarize it now will be violently partial.”<sup>17</sup> But we might see some value in the violently partial accounts, the meme splicings, the shortlived promiscuous encounters, I’ll be trying to stage here in this ‘position’ paper.

So, what follows is “a kind of anti-encyclopedia entry.”<sup>18</sup> If, for Berlant and Warner, “Queer Theory is not the theory of anything in particular, and has no precise bibliographic shape”<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 343.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 343.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 344.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 344.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 344.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 344.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 343.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 344.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 344.

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then I would like to suggest—with a wilfull disingenuousness since after all SR does have a working bibliographical shape which one can easily constitute<sup>20</sup>—that speculative realism and its tentacled offshoots is not the theory of anything in particular either. We might, to paraphrase Morton, say that speculative realism is the theory of *everything*.<sup>21</sup> If we turn speculative realism into a capital t Theory we risk forgetting the differences between the various figures associated with it and the variegated contexts in which they work. As Berlant and Warner caution, “Queer commentary [and speculative realist commentary] takes on varied shapes, risks, ambitions, and ambivalences in various contexts”<sup>22</sup> and if we try to pin the tail on the donkey by imagining a context (theory) in which queer or speculative realism has “a stable referential content and pragmatic force”<sup>23</sup> then we are in danger of forgetting the “multiple localities”<sup>24</sup> of speculative realist theory and practice. No one corpus of work (Harman’s for example) or no one particular project should be made to stand in for the whole movement, or what Paul Ennis has recently called the “culture” of speculative realism.<sup>25</sup>

If speculative commentary were simply reduced to being the province of one particular thinker then its multiple localities would be worryingly narrowed and its localities would

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<sup>20</sup> The Speculative Realism pathfinder maintained by Eric Phetteplace is a wonderful resource: <http://courseweb.lis.illinois.edu/~phettep1/SRPathfinder.html>. But it itself is permanently under revision, a construction site, as he add new names, terms, blogs, books.

<sup>21</sup> Timothy Morton, “Here Comes Everything: The Promise of Object-Oriented Ontology” in *Qui Parle* (forthcoming). Tellingly, he refers there to “the effervescent philosophical movement known as ‘speculative realism’ [note the inverted commas]” as ‘cool’ by which we might understand him to mean ‘hot’ in Berlant and Warner’s sense.

<sup>22</sup> Berlant and Warner, “Queer Theory,” 344.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 344.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 345.

<sup>25</sup> See Paul J. Ennis, “The Speculative Terrain” here: [http://ucd-ie.academia.edu/PaulJohnEnnis/Papers/380565/The\\_Speculative\\_Terrain](http://ucd-ie.academia.edu/PaulJohnEnnis/Papers/380565/The_Speculative_Terrain). Ennis shares my conviction that speculative realism is alive and well and exists but that it is irreducible to one single definition.

become merely 'parochial' like "little ornaments appliquéd over real politics or real intellectual work. They [would] carry the odor of the luxuriant."<sup>26</sup> If the work of Harman, or Bryant, or Meillassoux is made into a metonym for speculative theory or speculative culture itself, and if they are held to be exemplary cases (either for good or for bad) then what we lose is the original impetus behind speculative realism and queer theory in the first place: "the wrenching sense of recontextualization it gave."<sup>27</sup> And we would leave speculative realism open to charges of political uselessness and glacialization, "the infection of general culture by narrow interest."<sup>28</sup>

But let us, at least provisionally, disambiguate, to use a Wiki-ism that J. Hillis Miller is rather fond of. Speculative realism describes the work of a very disparate group of scholars (Quentin Meillassoux, Ray Brassier, Iain Hamilton Grant, Graham Harman) reanimating some of "the most radical philosophical problematics" through a "fresh reappropriation of the philosophical tradition and through an openness to its outside."<sup>29</sup> The term was coined by Ray Brassier, organizer of the first symposium on speculative realism, the proceedings of which appear in *Collapse III*. However, Speculative Realism is generally considered "a useful umbrella term, chosen precisely because it was vague enough to encompass a variety of fundamentally heterogeneous philosophical research programmes" as Brassier admits in a recent interview.<sup>30</sup> These philosophies, while at once radically different from one another, could be said to find some coherence in their opposition to correlationist philosophies. To quote the Ray Brassier interview again,

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<sup>26</sup> Berlant and Warner, "Queer Theory," 345.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 345.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 349.

<sup>29</sup> Robin Mackay writes this on the jacket for volume II of *Collapse* which features essays from Brassier, Meillassoux and Harman.

<sup>30</sup> Ray Brassier and Bram Ieven, "Against an Aesthetics of Noise," *Transitzone* (5 October 2009), <http://www.ny-web.be/transitzone/against-aesthetics-noise.html>

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the only thing that unites us is antipathy to what Quentin Meillassoux calls ‘correlationism’—the doctrine, especially prevalent among ‘Continental’ philosophers, that humans and world cannot be conceived in isolation from one another—a ‘correlationist’ is any philosopher who insists that the human-world correlate is philosophy’s sole legitimate concern.

The *Wikipedia* entry for speculative realism offers some further shared ground:

While often in disagreement over basic philosophical issues, the speculative realist thinkers have a shared resistance to philosophies of human finitude inspired by the tradition of Immanuel Kant. What unites the four core members of the movement is an attempt to overcome both ‘correlationism’ as well as ‘philosophies of access.’ In *After Finitude*, Meillassoux defines correlationism as “the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other.” Philosophies of access are any of those philosophies which privilege the human being over other entities. Both ideas represent forms of anthropocentrism. All four of the core thinkers within Speculative Realism work to overturn these forms of philosophy which privilege the human being, favouring distinct forms of realism against the dominant forms of idealism in much of contemporary philosophy.<sup>31</sup>

A ‘foundational text’ for speculative realism, then, is Quentin Meillassoux’s *After Finitude*, a text which boldly insists on the “necessity of contingency”<sup>32</sup> and critiques the post-Kantian primacy of, as Robin Mackay puts it, the “relation of consciousness to the world—however that may be construed—over any supposed objectivity of ‘things themselves.’”<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Speculative\\_realism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Speculative_realism). Again we should say that the *Wikipedia* entry is constantly being revised. According to the Speculative Realism pathfinder Michael Austin (who blogs at *Complete Lies*) frequently updates this page.

<sup>32</sup> Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* trans. Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008).

<sup>33</sup> Robin Mackay, “Editorial Introduction,” *Collapse II* (Falmouth, U.K.: Ur-

Meillassoux calls his own non-correlationist philosophy a speculative materialism. One strong critic of Meillassoux, Ray Brassier, in his *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* yolks revisionary naturalism in Anglo/American analytic philosophy to speculative realism in the continental French tradition.<sup>34</sup> He terms his own approach as 'transcendental realism' or 'transcendental nihilism'<sup>35</sup> (a position he at least *partially* shares with critical realist Roy Bhaskar) while the British philosopher Iain Hamilton Grant works with a post-Schellingian materialism to produce a speculative nature philosophy that some call 'neo-vitalism.'<sup>36</sup> Graham Harman, heavily influenced by the Actor Network Theory of Bruno Latour has long been advancing an object-oriented philosophy, emphasizing 'vicarious causation' which turns toward objects and demands a humanitarian politics attuned to the objects themselves.<sup>37</sup> So, despite their many differences these four thinkers have been most closely associated with the development of what has come to be called 'speculative realism,' a term Brassier thinks is now "singularly unhelpful."<sup>38</sup> And

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banomic, 2007), 4.

<sup>34</sup> Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

<sup>35</sup> See Bram Ieven's "Transcendental Realism, Speculative Materialism and Radical Aesthetics," paper presented at Duke University's Speculative Aesthetics working group, which interestingly is presided over by the feminist scholars Priscilla Wald and N. Katherine Hayles and the queer theorist Zach Blas. See the programme and texts here: <http://fhi.duke.edu/projects/interdisciplinary-working-groups/speculative-aesthetics>

<sup>36</sup> See especially Iain Hamilton Grant's *Philosophies of Nature after Schelling* (London: Continuum, 2006).

<sup>37</sup> See Graham Harman *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects* (Chicago: Open Court, 2002), *Guerrilla Metaphysics: Phenomenology and the Carpentry of Things* (Chicago: Open Court, 2005), *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* (Melbourne: Re. Press, 2009), *Towards Speculative Realism: Essays and Lectures* (Winchester, UK: Zero books, 2010) and *Circus Philosophicus* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2010). For the best way into Latourian Actor Network Theory see Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

<sup>38</sup> Brassier and Ieven, "Aesthetics of Noise."

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this should remind us that Teresa de Lauretis, who coined the term queer theory in 1990 dismissed it four years later as a “vacuous creature of the publishing industry.”<sup>39</sup> Perhaps the most ‘cool’ offshoot of speculative realism has been object oriented philosophy (the term is Harman’s and dates quite some way back to 1999) and its twin object oriented ontology (the term was coined by Levi Bryant). Again the four main thinkers associated with this splinter group (Harman, Bryant, Morton and Bogost) are very different: Bryant has a uniquely Lacanian take on the democracy of objects, Morton works on ecology, and Bogost writes about video game theory and what he calls ‘alien phenomenology.’ Ben Woodard has wondered about the ‘regnant’ status of OOO/OOP compared to the many other variants of speculative realism. He asks:

OOO/OOP will no doubt continue to grow and I often wonder why (besides having multiple prolific internet presences) it is the strangest/strongest of the SR factions. I think the best explanation is that the approach and even name of OOP reeks (justifiably) of novelty and this is only supported by the fact that Harman and others take what they need from philosophers and move on. This is not an attack but a high form of praise. For instance, it would be hard to call any user of OOO/OOP Heideggerian, Whiteheadian or even Latourian (though the latter would be the most probable) whereas Grant could easily be labeled Schellingian, Brassier Laruelleian (though less and less so over time) and Meillassoux Cartesian, Badiouian or, against his will but accurate I think, Hegelian<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Teresa de Lauretis, “Habit Changes,” in Elizabeth Weed and Naomi Schor (eds) *Feminism Meets Queer Theory* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 316.

<sup>40</sup> See Ben Woodard, “Speculative 2010,” <http://naughtthought.wordpress.com/2010/01/08/speculative-2010/>. Levi Bryant, who blogs at Larval Subjects, disagrees and says: “I have a somewhat different theory. While the strong internet presence of OOO/OOP certainly doesn’t hurt, this is an *effect* rather than a *cause*. In my view a successful philosophy has to create *work* for others and for other disciplines outside of the philosophy. This work is not simply of the *commentary* variety, but of the variety that allows others to engage in genuine research projects according to- I hate the word, but have to use it -a *paradigm*.” See “New Intellectual Trends,” <http://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/>.



For the remainder of this position paper, however, I want to focus on OOO because those associated with it, particularly Bryant, Morton and Bogost, have been at the forefront of the (often virulent) debates about queer theory, object oriented feminism and speculative realism.<sup>41</sup> I want to turn now to that brouhaha about queer theory and the putative non-politics of speculative realism which raged across the blogosphere in 2010.

### Queering Speculative Realism

*Everything populating the desolate wastes of the unconscious is lesbian; difference sprawled upon zero, multiplicity strewn across positive vulvic space. Masculinity is nothing but a shoddy bunkhole from death. Socio-historically phallus and castration might be serious enough, but cosmologically they merely distract from zero; staking*

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[com/2010/01/12/new-intellectual-trends/](http://com/2010/01/12/new-intellectual-trends/)

<sup>41</sup> Another figure associated with OOO (but from a critical Whiteheadian angle) is Steven Shaviro who has written a great deal about both sexuality and queer theory. He is also one of the leading lights in the nascent field of Gaga Studies where unexpected interventions have been made into OOO debates. To take just a couple of examples: Firstly, Judith Jack Halberstam has described Lady Gaga's *Telephone* video with its "phones, headsets, hearing, receivers and objects that become subjects, glasses that smoke, food that bites" as "an episode in Object Oriented Philosophy...whether the philosophy in question is drawn from Žižek on speed, Ronell on crack or Meillassoux on ecstasy, this video obviously chains a good few ideas to a few very good bodies and puts thought into motion." See "You Cannot Gaga Gaga," <http://bullybloggers.wordpress.com/2010/03/17/you-cannot-gaga-gaga-by-jack-halberstam/>. Secondly, Kristopher Cannon has described the bulge in Gaga's crotch at the AMA awards from the point of view of the cloth itself: "I think that this example is one which could also bridge several discussions—ranging from gender (and feminism) to sex/ed behavior and objects to art and fashion and avant-garde aesthetics. The object we would see here is the ever-so-subtle (penis-shaped) bulge, appearing when she bends—a bulge afforded by the way her belts, strap(-on?)s, and/or stitched seams align—a bulge she gets because of the clothing she wears. Not only might this be a moment (a la OOO) where the clothing becomes hard because of the way Gaga wears it, but it is also a moment where Gaga gets a hard-on because of the fashions she fetishizes." See "Telephoning the Cloth that Wounds," <http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/imr/2010/08/04/lady-gagas-phallicity#comment-2120>.

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*out a meticulously constructed poverty and organizing its logical displacement. If deconstruction spent less time playing with its willy maybe it could cross the line.*

—Nick Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation*<sup>42</sup>

During his live-blogging at *Object-Oriented Philosophy* of the “Metaphysics and Things” conference held in Claremont in December 2010, Graham Harman recounts a question and answer session between Isabelle Stengers, Donna Haraway and the audience.<sup>43</sup> He says approvingly that Haraway “agrees with Latour that nothing should be allowed to explain anything else away. And certain forms of correlationism make precisely this error [Haraway has clearly read Meillassoux].” She says that:

Speculative realism is a term I’m still learning to use in a sentence, as if in a school assignment. Speculative realism is the new kid on the block that has adopted a label for itself, which may sound mean, but all kinds of interesting things are going on under that label and so she may want to live on that block. Not enough girls in speculative realism which makes her mad, but she’s still curious and seduced by it [Note: Girls Welcome!!!].<sup>44</sup>

Harman concludes that “overall Haraway [is] a bit more condescending than necessary about speculative realism (most of us really like her stuff), but she does sound interested.” It is true that Haraway sees speculative realism as a new kid on the block but she is far from condescending. In his own

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<sup>42</sup> Nick Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism* (London: Routledge, 1990).

<sup>43</sup> Stengers is the only woman included in the landmark volume *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism* edited by Harman, Bryant and Nick Srnicek (Melbourne: Re.Press, 2010). Harman explains the reasons for this here: “The collection also has great national and generational diversity. Unfortunately, it admittedly has horrible gender diversity (Isabelle Stengers is the only woman in the collection). To that my only answer is: we tried to do better. The invitation list and the contributors list do not entirely overlap. Sometimes people are just too busy, which of course is as good a sign for them as it was unlucky for us.” See “Very Close to Publication,” <http://doctorzamalek2.wordpress.com/2010/12/21/very-close-to-publication/>.

<sup>44</sup> Graham Harman, “Question Period: Stengers and Haraway on Speculative Realism,” <http://doctorzamalek2.wordpress.com/2010/12/03/question-period/>.

live blog notes for her keynote paper at the same conference Harman himself quotes her as referring to “‘the openness or dare of what has been called speculative realism.’ Wow, SR is really in the lexicon now” shortly before asserting that “we now have technical-biological capabilities to generate new organisms without hetero-normativity, in ways that queer theory has never dreamed of.”<sup>45</sup> While Haraway is right to say that SR is a new kid on the block she is equally correct that its appearance on the scene is an invitation, or a dare even, to queer theory to go beyond itself. What she is disappointed by is the fact that so few girls seem to have been invited along for the ride.<sup>46</sup> Harman reassures her that girls are indeed welcome (his exclamation gives this paper its title) and we shall see that quite a few girls have (always) already accepted that invitation.

If this all sounds rather cosy in December 2010 then we need to go back to a furious argument which took place between Chris Vitale (who blogs at *Networkologies*), Levi Bryant, Michael (who blogs at *Arcade Fire*) and Ian Bogost in June and July of 2010 about the question of “Queering Speculative Realism.” While the arguments were often heated and personal in nature they did have the effect of putting gender, sexuality and queer theory very firmly on the speculative realist agenda (as well as forefronting the very politicality of speculative realism too).

The trouble started out with Vitale's highlighting the absence

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<sup>45</sup> Graham Harman, “Donna Haraway Responds to Stengers,” <http://doctorzamalek2.wordpress.com/2010/12/03/haraway-response-to-stengers/>.

<sup>46</sup> Paul Reid-Bowen has blogged about Haraway and object-oriented ontology and is pleasantly surprised by how many “parallels and resources there are between her work and OOP” especially the Latourian aspects of her writing on cyborgs. See “Haraway and Object Oriented Ontology,” <http://paganmetaphysics.blogspot.com/2010/01/haraway-and-object-oriented-ontology.html>. Perhaps the ideal location for staging an encounter between Haraway and SR/OOP would be to revisit her first book (not often read these days) from 1976, *Crystals, Fabrics and Fields: Metaphors That Shape Embryos* (Berkeley: North Atlantic Books, 2004).

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of gender and queerness in SR/OOO and how this blunts, in his opinion, the political edge of both. He wrote:

To what extent do we still need, or continually need, to queer philosophy? Let me be clear on what I mean by this. To what extent do we still need, or continually need, to work against the normative tendency of philosophy to be a predominantly white, male, heterosexual, middle-to-upper middle class discipline? Why is or has this been the case? What are the implications, and even philosophical implications, of this?

Let's even look at the Speculative Realist movement, or the bloggers associated with it. Am I the only one who is 'gay' or 'queer'? Is there anyone who doesn't get white privilege on a regular basis? Even though I'm Sicilian-American, I get white privilege on a continual basis. Are there any women who regularly blog on philosophy, speculative realism (I can only think of Nina Power, and yet she doesn't really deal with issues related to speculative realism that much...)? And let me be clear about this: I don't think it's a sin to be born a man, or to be hetero, or to have whitish skin. But I do think it's important that if you get a certain type of social privilege, you fight against it. And that means, I think, trying to dissect the way this produces epistemological privilege of various sorts. So, I do think that if the speculative realist movement is predominantly white, male, hetero, we need to not only ask ourselves why this might be, but how it impacts our thought, and what we can do about this.<sup>47</sup>

Bryant responds by saying that he finds Vitale's worries "admirable" but pointedly rejoinders that "Vitale knows next to nothing about the sexual preferences or backgrounds of the various figures in the SR movement (assuming it can be called a movement)."<sup>48</sup> While I sympathize with Vitale's concerns too, I would side with Bryant here because queer is as much of a portmanteau term as speculative realism and

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<sup>47</sup> Chris Vitale, "Queering Speculative Realism," <http://networkologies.wordpress.com/2010/06/08/queering-speculative-realism/>.

<sup>48</sup> Levi Bryant, "Vitale on SR and Politics," <http://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2010/06/29/vitale-on-sr-and-politics/>.

is a non-gender specific rubric which is pitched against normativity, what Michael Warner calls regimes of the normal,<sup>49</sup> rather than heterosexuality. Queerness is a positionality, a posture of opposition to identitarian regimes, rather than a statement about sexuality of the kind Vitale makes.<sup>50</sup> Bryant goes on to question Vitale's identity politics and claims that "the overwhelming desire to *label* or subsume ourselves under a particular identity, can be seen as a symptom of how contemporary capital functions. The problem is that this symptom, like all symptoms, obfuscates or veils the social relations that generate the symptom. The point here is that we shouldn't concern ourselves with questions of identity, but that we should raise questions about how this particular form of politics might very well function to perpetuate the very structure that generates these crises in the first place." Queerness, as Bryant quite cogently asserts, is about a disintri-cation from heteronormative and hegemonic regimes. If we insist on beginning queering speculative realism by labeling ourselves as 'gay' or 'queer' (or wanting to know about the sexual orientations of those who practice it) as Vitale does, then we are very much on the wrong track.

Bryant takes particular exception to a response post from Michael at the blog *Archive Fire* to the original Vitale entry. Michael writes:

I want to briefly address his specific question with regards to 'queering speculative realism.'

Overall, I believe we will begin to see a lot more diversity creep into the general thrust of Speculative Realism (SR) when it begins to get picked up by artists, radicals and other non-institutional intellectuals. That is to say, the issue of queering and engendering diversity is more a problem with institutionalized intellectuality as such than with SR

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<sup>49</sup> Michael Warner, "Introduction" to *Fear of a Queer Planet: Queer Politics and Social Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota press, 1993), xxvi.

<sup>50</sup> Vitale makes similar claims about privilege and identity in his long post "Queer Mediations: Thoughts on Queer Media Theory" although he is not addressing SR there. See <http://networkologies.wordpress.com/2009/12/07/queer-mediations-thoughts-on-queer-media-theory/>.

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specifically. Academia in general is still very much a white-boys club. The issues of privilege, access and univocality—and even aesthetic-ideological preference and distinctions—are deep class issues at the heart of Western society and deeply embedded within our institutional education systems. And I don't think we can expect SR to diversify and become overtly political if it remains entangled in the academic/bloggging/philosophy assemblage.

In less words, we can't expect SR to treat the symptom without its adherents (for lack of a better word) first, or also attacking the root causes of a much larger dis-ease at the core of their disciplines. SR will simply perpetuate the problems existent within the institutions that SR thinkers and bloggers are entangled with. Again, diversity will come when SR is 'contaminated' from outside the academy and taken up by non-philosophical modes of intellectuality.<sup>51</sup>

Bryant is insulted most by the insinuation that speculative realism is an ivory tower discourse practiced by those in powerful academic positions and that its ideas don't travel very far beyond the confines of the academy. He responds (and again I agree with him if not caring much for his tone) that OOO is an open discipline, a dare in Haraway's terms, and that he ardently hopes it will create "projects for other people:"

OOO is among the most open philosophical movements that's ever existed. On the one hand, OOO has generated a large inter-disciplinary interest from people both inside and outside the academy. Not only has OOO drawn interest from rhetoricians, anthropologists, media theorists, literary theorists, biologists, and even a handful of physicists, it has also drawn the interest of artists, activists, feminists, and so on. In the forthcoming collection edited by Ian Bogost and I, *Object-Oriented Ontology*, there will be an article by the performance artist and feminist Katherine Behar, as well as contributions from media theorists, literary theorists, technology theorists and others. On the other hand, through the medium of blogs, we have opened the doors to the participation

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<sup>51</sup> *Archive Fire*, "Diversifying Speculative Realisms," <http://www.archivefire.net/2010/06/speculative-realisms-and.html>.

## Michael O'Rourke – 'Girls Welcome!!!'

of anyone who comes along, regardless of whether they are in academia or not. On this blog alone there are regular interactions between computer programmers, office workers, poets, environmentalists, novelists, comedians, and a host of others outside the academy. Michael can go fuck himself with his suggestion that somehow we're trapped within the ivory tower walls of the academy, ignoring anyone who is outside the academy or from another discipline. I, at least, interact with such people every day.<sup>52</sup>

Bryant confesses earlier in the same post that he finds Vitale's question as to what OOO has "to say about race, class, and gender?" irritating. But, as Vitale points out in a further response to Bryant, he then himself goes on to produce a brilliant OOO reading of *American History X* which is responsive to questions of race.<sup>53</sup> Strangely, however, Vitale does not pick up on the very last part of Bryant's post where he utilizes Luhmannian systems theory to describe the way Spivak's notion of the subaltern flags blind spots in any hegemonic system (be that race, class, gender, or sexuality). "Resituated in terms of object-oriented ontology," Bryant says, "the subaltern is a system in the environment of another system that nonetheless belongs to the unmarked space of that system within which it is entangled." What Bryant is here calling the subaltern could just as easily refer to the queer, and is "something like the politics of the part-of-no-part described by Rancière."<sup>54</sup>

Before coming back to Bryant let us take a closer look at Vitale's "Queering Speculative Realism" post. He argues there that "Speculative Realism, for whatever we think of this name, is mostly a movement which works to bring speculation and science into a greater rapprochement. But what are the

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<sup>52</sup> Bryant, "Vitale on SR and Politics."

<sup>53</sup> Vitale, "SR and Politics: Response to Levi and Ian," <http://networkologies.wordpress.com/2010/06/30/sr-and-politics-response-to-levi-and-ian/>.

<sup>54</sup> For more on Rancière's politics of the miscount and queer theory see Michael O'Rourke and Sam Chambers, "Jacques Rancière on the Shores of Queer Theory," *borderlands* 8.2 (2009): [http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol8no2\\_2009/chambersorourke\\_intro.htm](http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol8no2_2009/chambersorourke_intro.htm).

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political implications of what we're doing?"<sup>55</sup> He goes on to state that speculative realism is far too concerned with the ontological (philosophical research) rather than the ontic (the messy stuff of actually existing arrangements in culture and politics), a charge that has often been levelled against Judith Butler we might add, and that:

Epistemology and ontology, the current focus of speculative realism, aren't enough. We need a politics and an ethics from this movement, yes? Does SR have something to say about race, gender, sexuality, or global capitalism? Something that comes from a particularly SR approach to the world? It's my sense that unless philosophy develops all these sides of itself, it isn't complete. Must philosophy be complete this way? My sense is that it should be. I'm not sure if my own work does this, but I think it is a challenge to myself that I need to make sure I at least work to fulfill.<sup>56</sup>

While he concedes that speculative realist thought comes "in many varieties" Vitale is concerned that (and he doesn't exculpate himself here) "we" underplay "the politico-social sides of philosophy in the speculative realist movement as it stands now." Ian Bogost replies in an equally irascible fashion to Vitale and *Archive Fire* by saying that

the argument generally goes like this: philosophies need to include political and ethical positions to be complete. Privileges (like race, gender, and class) make it easy to ignore certain assumptions, and the whiteness and maleness and heterosexism of philosophy writ large automatically infects speculative realism, for it is a product of institutions propped up on those privileges.

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<sup>55</sup> Harman writes, albeit in a different context, that "there's certainly a lot more potential in OOF [Object Oriented Feminism] than there is in the 'All-Things-Shall-Be-Destroyed-By-Science' wing of SR, which drags its juggernaut through cities, forests, museums, and zoos, crushing all entities and leaving in their wake only the powder of mathematical structure." See "Levi on Reid-Bowen on Feminism and OOO," <http://doctorzamalek2.wordpress.com/2010/01/22/levi-on-reid-bowen-on-feminism-and-ooo/>.

<sup>56</sup> Vitale, "Queering Speculative Realism."



But for Bogost OOO is always already political insofar as his approach, his turn to objects “is itself part of the path towards a solution, of paying attention to worldly things of all sorts, from ferns to floppy disks to frogs to Fiat 500s.” So, for Bogost, “political and ethical positions in philosophy and theory...are thus, I would argue, fucked (to use a term that is truly populist).”<sup>57</sup>

However, Bryant is far more sanguine about the political and ethical (and queer) potentialities of SR in posts written *before* and *after* the Vitale flare-up.

Let's start with the blog post written after the argument (in August 2010) over the masculinism of speculative realism before circling back to the earlier post (which might have obviated the whole debate in the first place).<sup>58</sup> Here Bryant talks about mess as something we abhor in our research practices, a term he takes from the social scientist John Law, who in his book *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research* makes a case for “quieter and more generous methods.”

Bryant writes:

What we abhor, to use John Law's apt term, is a mess. Everywhere we think in terms of relations between form and content, form and matter, where one key term functions as the ultimate form (which for Aristotle was the active principle and associated with masculinity) and where all else is treated as matter awaiting form (which for Aristotle was the passive term and was associated with femininity). In short, our theoretical framework tends to be one massive metaphor for fucking and the sexual relationship. Of course, it's always a fucking where the men are on top in the form of an active form inseminating a passive matter. And again, that active form can be the signifier, signs, economics, the social, form, categories, reason, etc. What's important for masculinist ontology is that form always be straight and one. I'll leave it to the

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<sup>57</sup> Ian Bogost, “I am not a Marxist,” [http://www.bogost.com/blog/i\\_am\\_not\\_a\\_marxist.shtml](http://www.bogost.com/blog/i_am_not_a_marxist.shtml).

<sup>58</sup> Levi Bryant, “Unit Operations,” <http://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2010/08/03/unit-operations/>.

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reader to make the appropriate phallic jokes here.<sup>59</sup>

What Bryant is arguing for is a spreading or diversification of approaches to method and similarly Law argues for “symmetry” as opposed to a phallic ontology/methodology and he calls for a wide range of metaphors for both imagining and responding to our worlds (he calls these ‘method assemblages’). The political stakes of this are that these methods call forth worlds, helping us to both imagine and take responsibility for them (this seems to me to be the very political underpinning of the work of *all* four main OOO theorists). Among Law’s metaphors for imagining and taking responsibility for our worlds are “localities, specificities, enactments, multiplicities, fractionalities, goods, resonances, gatherings, forms of crafting, processes of weaving, spirals, vortices, indefinitenesses, condensates, dances, imaginaries, passions, interferences.”<sup>60</sup>

Moving on from his discussion of our abhorrence for mess in favor of a phallic univocity, Bryant says this:

What the masculinist passion for ground abhors, however, is the idea of a multiplicity of heterogeneous actors acting in relation together. It is not economics that determines all else. It is not biology that determines all else. It is not neurology that determines all else. It is not signs and signifiers that determines all else. It is not cows and roads that determine all else. It is not history that determines all else. No, the world is populated by chairs, cows, neurons, signs, signifiers, narratives, discourses, neutrons, chemical reactions, weather patterns, roads, etc., all mutually perturbing one another in a mesh. In other words, we have all sorts of negative and positive feedback relations between these different spheres functioning as resonators for one another.<sup>61</sup>

We might take from this that speculative realism and queer theory are in a dance of relation with each other, are enmeshed

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> John Law, *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research* (London: Routledge, 2004), 156.

<sup>61</sup> Levi Bryant, “Unit Operations.”

and mutually perturb each other. As Bryant goes on to write: "What we have here is a mesh of non-linearities without ground. What we have here are all sorts of agencies and objects feeding back on one another, modifying one another, perturbing one another, translating one another." And this choreography involves castrating a certain Lacanianism:

What I've tried to formulate is an ontology without phallus in the Lacanian sense of the term; or rather an ontology where phallus is recognized properly as the masquerade that it is (here an analysis of projective identification in the portrayal of woman as masquerade is an appropriate critique of psychoanalysis). The point is not that the signifier and fantasy do not play a role, but rather that we must see the role that these things play as a role among other actors in a complex network of feedback relations. An ontology without phallus is an ontology where there is no fundamental interpretant, no ground of all else, no final explanatory term.<sup>62</sup>

Bryant then shifts from discussing the phallus to a 'review' of Ian Bogost's book *Unit Operations* and his alien phenomenology of objects. He explains that

in *Unit Operations*, Ian [Bogost] contrasts unit and system. As Ian writes, 'Unit operations are modes of meaning-making that privilege discrete, disconnected actions over deterministic, progressive systems...I contend that unit operations represent a shift away from system operations, although neither strategy is permanently detached from the other' (3). This asemiotic understanding of unit operations hinges on the fact that 'the unit can always explode the constraints of system, or that systems are always occasional, local stabilities from which units can escape to create a new surprise.'<sup>63</sup>

The last sentence could just as well describe Bryant's own understanding of subalternity and second order systems discussed earlier.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

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Bryant wants to focus in on the operation part of unit operations and how this leads to messy creativeness and amongstness rather than phallic univocity. He explains that

In his early work (I suspect we'll find that he's of a different view once *Alien Phenomenology* comes out), Bogost is deeply influenced by Badiou's concept of the count-as-one (which has been a longtime fascination of mine as well). The count-as-one is, in Badiou, an operation that transforms an inconsistent multiplicity into a consistent multiplicity, literally counting it as one, or transforming it into a unit. The count-as-one is an operation, something that takes place, not something that is already there.<sup>64</sup>

Bryant goes on shortly after to say that

In short, unit operations produce, they generate a new entity, whereas system operations re-produce, they iterate an already existing pattern or object. This, really, is what is to be thought in the mesh of exo-relations among the heterogeneous actors populating the heteroverse of flat ontology: What are those exo-relations that reproduce existing units and relations and what are the operations that produce entirely new entities or agents? And if we are to think this, we must think a complex interplay of a variety of different types of entities, how they contribute to the production of new entities, and must avoid our phallogocentric inclinations that would erect only a single ground of being...we must think processes of unitizing without abandoning objects.<sup>65</sup>

What we might glean from this is that queer theory's unit operations produce rather than reproduce, that there is not one 'single ground' of queer theory, OOO or SR, not one single interpretation of what they are or what they do. Instead they are caught in a mesh, are always in relation to each other and in a gravitational mobility toward each other, and that this mess or mesh of 'exo-relations' produces a new kind of theoretical creativity where the concrete concepts of OOO

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<sup>64</sup> Levi Bryant, "Unit Operations."

<sup>65</sup> Ibid.

and SR can be put to work *with* and *amongst* queer theories and concepts.

Now, let us return to an earlier post by Bryant from January 2010 where he anticipates many of Vitale's charges against SR and OOO and rehearses some of these later arguments.<sup>66</sup> On this occasion he is responding to a post from Paul Reid-Bowen, who blogs at *Pagan Metaphysics*, who was arguing for a realist ontology and a feminist metaphysics in the work of Christine Battersby, Donna Haraway and Luce Irigaray.<sup>67</sup> Bryant forthrightly states that he is unconvinced by a feminist metaphysics (since for him there is *just* metaphysics) but he does admit that Reid-Bowen is "on to something here." And what Bryant suggests he is on to is precisely what preempts some of Vitale's later criticisms of SR/OOP. It is worth reproducing in full:

In the world of cultural studies and the humanities, I think there have been a number of privileged sites that have been directed towards bucking the primacy of anti-realist or correlationist thought than other disciplines by virtue of the nature of the objects that constitute their object of investigation. These theorists have not, of course, in most cases baldly stated their work as a debate between realism and anti-realism, but their work has nonetheless inevitably led them to thinking being in such a way that it is not simply a discourse, language, or a correlation with the human.

Paradoxically, these privileged sites have largely been *marginalized* in the world of academia and the humanities; no doubt because of the hegemony of anti-realist thought or the status of correlationism as the establishment position. Among these privileged sites I would include environmental philosophy and thought, science and technology studies, critical animal theory, geographical studies, writing technology studies, media studies, **queer theory**, and, of course, feminist philosophy and thought. I am sure that there are many others that don't immediately

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<sup>66</sup> Levi Bryant, "Feminist Metaphysics as Object-Oriented Ontology—OOO/OOP Round-Up," <http://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2010/01/22/feminist-metaphysics-as-object-oriented-ontology-ooooop-round-up/>.

<sup>67</sup> Paul Reid-Bowen, "Foreshadowing Dundee," <http://paganmetaphysics.blogspot.com/2010/01/foreshadowing-dundee.html>.

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come to mind for me. If these have been privileged sites for the development of significant conceptual innovations in the field of realist ontology, then this is because all of these sites of investigation force encounters with real and nonhuman objects and actors that cannot be reduced to correlates of human thought, language, perception, or use but that have to be approached in their own autonomous being to properly be thought.<sup>68</sup>

After perhaps somewhat unfairly setting Judith Butler's work to one side because, for him, she places far too much emphasis on discursivity,<sup>69</sup> he argues that

feminist thought (and here I am not even beginning to do justice to the richness and sophistication of this thought and what has arisen out of those inquiries) forces an encounter with the *real* of the *biological* body and the difference it introduces into the world, the real of the *sexed* body, that exceeds the being of the *phenomenological* lived body and the discursive body, while somehow still being intertwined with these other two bodies... the forgetting of the real is always a masculine gesture.<sup>70</sup>

The most crucial point Bryant makes here, however, is that queer theory, among the other "privileged sites" he mentions above, is, although being a marginalized site of realist thought, "in so many respects, *ground-zero* for object-oriented ontology." This is a remarkable assertion: no OOO without queer theory, no SR without queer theory.

### OOO: Object Oriented Feminism

One of the newest kids on the OOO block is object oriented feminism, another of Bryant's privileged if marginalized

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<sup>68</sup> Bryant, "Feminist Metaphysics as Object-Oriented Ontology," my bolding.

<sup>69</sup> There is a fascinating moment in *Undoing Gender* where Butler promises to write in the future about "the place of sharp machines" and "the technology of the knife in debates about intersexuality and transsexuality alike," *Undoing Gender* (London: Routledge, 2004), 64. But she never has, at least to my knowledge, written about this.

<sup>70</sup> Bryant, "Feminist Metaphysics as Object-Oriented Ontology."

sites for realist thought where the “‘really real’ is placed on neither the side of the natural, nor the human.” Graham Harman humbly admits that he “wouldn’t know how to go about constructing”<sup>71</sup> an Object-Oriented Feminism but Ian Bogost has blogged the proceedings of a conference as well as his response to all six papers on this very topic held in Indianapolis in October 2010. The two panels, organized by Katherine Behar, who Bryant mentioned in his response to Vitale above, took up the question “what would a program for object-oriented feminism (OOF) entail?”<sup>72</sup> Drawing on Bill Brown’s ‘Thing Theory’<sup>73</sup> Wendy Hui Kyong Chun used ‘softwarification’ as a way into reconfiguring the relationship between subjects and objects, linking software’s “historical emergence as invisibly visible (or visibly invisible) object” to gendered “hierarchies embedded in its vapory structure.” Patricia Ticineto Clough, whose earlier work on Deleuze and affect was already making these object-oriented moves, tried to rethink “the relationship of language and a subject” which also bringing to the fore “questions about bodies, desires, phantasms.” In the brilliantly titled “Facing Necrophilia, or ‘Botox Ethics,’” Katherine Behar picked up Catherine Malabou’s notion of plasticity, the ways in which it is able to receive or create form and is situated between the extreme points

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<sup>71</sup> Graham Harman, “Object-Oriented Feminism,” <http://doctozamalek2.wordpress.com/2010/10/30/object-oriented-feminism/>.

<sup>72</sup> The panels was held at the 2010 Society for Literature and the Arts Conference. The first panel dealt with general responses to the organizer’s question and the second panel focused in on the theme of the body. There were two responses from Katherine Hayles and Bogost. You can read all six abstracts and Bogost’s response here: [http://www.bogost.com/blog/object-oriented\\_feminism\\_1.shtml](http://www.bogost.com/blog/object-oriented_feminism_1.shtml).

<sup>73</sup> Bill Brown has somewhat apologetically developed ‘thing theory’ in such a way that its necessity becomes visible and we could add it to Bryant’s list of privileged if marginalized sites for realist thinking which falls outwith the correlationalist circle: “Is there something perverse, if not archly insistent, about complicating things with theory? Do we really need anything like thing theory the way we need narrative theory or cultural theory, queer theory or discourse theory? Why not let things alone?” In Bill Brown (ed) *Things* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 1.

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of taking and annihilating form, to queer the relationship between living and dead objects:<sup>74</sup>

Just as Object-Oriented Feminism incorporates human and nonhuman objects, it must extend between living objects and dead ones. This paper explores how self-objectifying practitioners of body art and plastic surgery incorporate inertness and deadness within the living self. First we discuss body art and plastic surgery through Catherine Malabou's concept of brain plasticity, the constitution of oneself through passive reception and active annihilation of form. Malabou associates plasticity's destructive aspect with plastic explosives and its malleable aspect with sculpture and plastic surgery. Yet seen from under the knife, plastic surgery and body art seem to make plastic objects in Malabou's full sense of the term. The plastic art object of surgery kills off its old self to sculpt a new one. This brings us to Botox, the snicker-worthy subject at the heart of this paper. In Botox use, optional injections of Botulinum toxin temporarily deaden the face, Emmanuel Levinas' primary site of living encounter. With Botox, living objects elect to become a little less lively. Botox represents an important ethical gesture: a face-first plunge for living objects to meet dead objects halfway, to locate and enhance what is inert in the living, and extend toward inaccessible deadness with necrophiliac love and compassion. 'Botox ethics' hints at how Object-Oriented Feminism might subtly shift object-oriented terms. Resistance to being known twists into resistance to alienation. Concern with qualities of things reconstitutes as concern for qualities of relations. And, speculation on the real becomes performance of the real. Botox ethics experientially transforms empathy for dead counterparts into comingled sympathy. Setting aside aesthetic allure, Botox ethics shoots up.<sup>75</sup>

This powerful argument (or parts of it) were already implicit in an early attempt (from October 2008) by Ben Woodard to

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<sup>74</sup> Malabou's name is rarely invoked in speculative realist (or indeed in queer theoretical) circles but her idea of plasticity is attractive precisely because it is an agent of disobedience, a refusal to submit to a model. See *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, trans. Sebastian Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

<sup>75</sup> [http://www.bogost.com/blog/object-oriented\\_feminism\\_1.shtml](http://www.bogost.com/blog/object-oriented_feminism_1.shtml).



think speculative realism in relation to the object and ethics.<sup>76</sup> Woodard's assertion, and this should bring to mind Bryant's argument about feminist thought and the biological body, is that "the philosophical paradigm of speculative realism can serve to elucidate an ethics of the Real object." For Woodard, Levinas "sweeps the phallus under the rug of the face" and he suggests that "the object, as a form of immanence" must be "brought into psychoanalysis and opposed to the formal object, the object as concept." In a typically Schellingian account of slime dynamics, Woodard turns to Iain Hamilton's Grant's nature philosophy to argue that "post-Kantian philosophies predominantly ignore the inorganic focusing instead on the opposition of number and animal, epitomized in the contrast between Deleuze and Badiou." As Woodard understands it, "inorganicity as the self construction of matter, as an ontological protoplasm—the slime of being—provides the very possibility of all philosophy." Behar's face-first plunge for "living objects to meet dead objects halfway" obliquely references Karen Barad's work on 'agential realism,' the way bodies intra-act, dynamically and causally.<sup>77</sup> It also calls to mind

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<sup>76</sup> Ben Woodard, "The Phallicized Face: Towards an Objectifying Ethics or the (Real) Object of Science," <http://naughtthought.wordpress.com/2008/10/27/the-phallicized-face-towards-an-objectifying-ethics-or-the-real-object-of-science/>. In his abstract on feminist metaphysics mentioned above Paul Reid-Bowen confesses that "the irony and/or perversity of proposing this alliance [between objects and objectification], given the history and weight of feminist analyses of sexual objectification, is not lost on me. However, I contend that an Object Oriented Ontology does not run afoul of ethical, political and social feminist critiques of objectification." Graham Harman comments on this by reminding us that the objects of OOP have "nothing to do with objectification. In fact, they are what resist all objectification. To objectify someone or something is to limit it, to reduce it...by contrast, object-oriented philosophy is by definition an anti-reductionist philosophy. It holds that all things must be taken on their own terms. The reason for complaints about 'objectification' is that a false split is made between people and maybe animals who cannot be objectified, and inanimate objects which can. My thesis, by contrast, is that even inanimate objects should not and cannot be objectified." See <http://doctorzamalek2.wordpress.com/2010/01/22/levi-on-reid-bowen-on-feminism-and-ooo/>.

<sup>77</sup> See Karen Barad, "Queer Causation and the Ethics of Mattering," in *Queering the Non/Human*, eds. Noreen Giffney and Myra Hird (Aldershot: Ashgate,

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Reza Negarestani's opening up of "the moment of *nucleation with nigredo*" and the mathesis of decay and putrefaction.<sup>78</sup> The meeting between queer theory and speculative realism involves a mutual blackening, a 'necrophilic intimacy,' a meeting of necrotizing forces: "if the intelligibility of the world must thus imply a 'face to face' coupling of the soul with the body qua dead, then intelligibility is the epiphenomenon of a necrophilic intimacy, a problematic collusion with the rotting double which brings about the possibility of intelligibility within an inert cosmos."<sup>79</sup> Queer theory and speculative realism/object oriented ontology are not so much open to, as opened by each other, in what Bogost calls "carpentry, doing

2008), 311-338; and "Quantum Entanglements and Hauntological Relations of Inheritance: Dis/continuities, SpaceTime Enfoldings, and Justice-to-Come," *Derrida Today* 3.2 (2010): 240-268. In my preface, "The Open," to Giffney and Hird's *Queering the Non/Human* (xix-xx), I made a fairly early reference to the potential enmeshments of speculative realism and queer theory:

"If for Haraway and many of the authors collected here the question has been 'if we have never been human, then where do we begin?' then answers have been forthcoming in other fields: Bruno Latour's Actor Network Theory has been at the forefront of technoscientific attention to (if not queering as such) the non-human, Bill Brown's and Sherry Turkle's probing of things and 'evocative objects' has foregrounded our intimacy with the objects we live with in generative ways, Graham Harman's speculative realism has inaugurated a philosophy turned toward objects and consistently urged us towards a humanitarian politics attuned to the objects themselves, while Quentin Meillassoux's non-correlationism argues that there can be no necessary relations between things in a vision of the world after finitude, a world without humans."

<sup>78</sup> Reza Negarestani, "The Corpse Bride: Thinking with *Nigredo*," *Collapse IV* (Falmouth, U.K.: Urbanomic, 2008), 129-161.

<sup>79</sup> Negarestani, "The Corpse Bride," 134-135. See also his "Death as a Perversion: Openness and Germinal Death," <http://www.cttheory.net/articles.aspx?id=396>. For more on Negarestanian necrophilia see my "Cyclonoclasm: Negarestani's Queer Polytics of the Twist" (forthcoming). In my preface "TwO (Theory without Organs)" to David V. Ruffolo's *Post-Queer Politics* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), x, I make a connection between post-queer politics and Negarestani's polytics: "We might, borrowing from Reza Negarestani in *Cyclonopedia: Complicity with Anonymous Materials* [Melbourne: Re.Press, 2008], call this a 'polytics' of anomalous or unnatural participation with the outside, a set of 'schizotragedies' for openness and insurgency."

philosophy by making things.”<sup>80</sup>

The rest of the papers on the OOF panel turned their attention to the body. Anne Pollock's "Heart Feminism" asks what "starting from the heart might offer for feminism,"<sup>81</sup> Adam Zaretsky began to formulate an Object-Oriented Bioethics (OOB) and Frenchy Lunning, in a paper on the corset, reflected on the "anamorphic entangled fields of the feminine and the fetish." Ian Bogost's extemporized response is interesting since it takes us back to where we began: "I had the expectation that today's speakers would define 'object-oriented feminism.' That they would pin it down, that they would domesticate it, if you want." But OOF is as undomesticatable as queer theory or speculative realism. It refuses to be pinned down, anatomized, given a precise shape. Instead, Bogost tells us "we saw a fascinating exploration around a theme. A tour of sorts, a kind of Heideggerian pastoral stroll on which aspects of object-oriented ontology were introduced to aspects of feminist theory." We might supplement Bogost's observation by saying that aspects of feminist theory were also introduced to aspects of object-oriented ontology in a mutual illumination. As he himself writes in response to Pollock, "going into the

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<sup>80</sup> [http://www.bogost.com/blog/object-oriented\\_feminism\\_1.shtml](http://www.bogost.com/blog/object-oriented_feminism_1.shtml). This kind of mutual blackening is what has motivated much of the recent Black Metal Theory which shares some important overlaps with speculative realist thought.

<sup>81</sup> With the exception of Peter Gratton (see his course syllabus here: [http://web.me.com/grattonpeter/2010\\_Speculative\\_Realism/Speculative\\_Realism.html](http://web.me.com/grattonpeter/2010_Speculative_Realism/Speculative_Realism.html)) the philosophy of Jean-Luc Nancy has been largely absent from speculative realist discourse which is strange given his attention to the sense of *all* beings-in-the-world, from the human to the animal to the inorganic. The best place to start on Nancy and 'heart feminism' however would be his essay "The Heart of Things" in *The Birth to Presence*, trans. Brian Holmes and others (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 167-188. Jacques Derrida has been equally neglected (frequently ugly debates about Derrida have flared up from time to time in the SR blogosphere in the past year) in both SR and OOO thinking despite some claims that his philosophy anticipates some central OOO concepts. Again, if one simply wanted to start with 'heart feminism' you could look to Derrida's book *On Touching: Jean-Luc Nancy*, trans. Christine Irizarry (Stanford: California University Press, 2005) where he ruminates on Nancy's heart transplant, technicity and sexual difference.

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body also means going outside of it, like a Möbius strip or a klein bottle.” And this idea extends beyond the biological body because, for Bogost, we have been shown “the value of looking for” Meillassoux’s “great outdoors” inside as well as outside. Object-oriented feminism is, and again this should remind us of Bryant and Barad, “a perturbation of human and world.” Like Butler’s iterability, this agential realism or materialism, which brackets things-in-phenomena allows for new articulations, new configurations, for what Luciana Parisi calls ‘affective relations,’ a community consituted through Barad’s posthuman performativity.<sup>82</sup> Such an ethico-

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<sup>82</sup> Luciana Parisi, “The Nanoengineering of Desire” in Giffney and Hird, *Queering the Non/Human*, 283-310. Parisi’s work is heavily influenced by the blackened Deleuzoguattarianism of Nick Land and her book *Abstract Sex: Philosophy, Bio-Technology and the Mutations of Desire* maps a complex web of intricate relations between humans and non/humans. In an interview with Matthew Fuller she explains that:

“*Abstract Sex* addresses human stratification on three levels. The biophysical, the biocultural and the biodigital amalgamation of layers composing a constellation of bodies within bodies, each grappled within the previous and the next formation—a sort of positive feedback upon each other cutting across specific time scales. In other words, these levels of stratification constitute for *Abstract Sex* the endosymbiotic dynamics of organization of matter—a sort of antigenealogical process of becoming that suspends the teleology of evolution and the anthropocentrism of life. From this standpoint, the modalities of human optimism, rooted in the net substantial distinction between the good and the evil and the distinct belief in negative forces, fail to explain the continual collision and coexistence of the distinct layers. Following the law of morality, human optimism would never come to terms with its own paradoxes of construction and destruction. And if it does it is soon turned into an existential crisis giving in to the full force of negating power and thus all becomes intolerable. Once we are forced to engage with the way layers collide in the human species—the way some biophysical and biocultural sedimentations rub against each other under certain pressures and in their turn the way they are rubbed against by the biodigital mutations of sensory perception for example—then the moral stances of optimism and pessimism make no longer sense. Indeed we need to leap towards a plane debunked of ultimate moral judgement. A plane full of practice and contingent activities, where we find ourselves plunged in a field of relation—interdependent ecologies of forces (attractors, pressures, thresholds), which trigger in us modifications that resonate across all scales of organization.”

See <http://www.nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-0410/msg0054.html>.

politics (and the queering of the normativities of both queer theory and speculative realism themselves) depends on what Agamben calls 'the open,' a process which does not follow some preconceived teleological programme. There can be no program for what queer theory or speculative realism or object oriented approaches do. They are not means to an end but rather means 'without end.'<sup>83</sup>

### Naught Thought: On Ben Woodard's Queer Speculative Realism

If for Bogost one of the promising aspects of OOF is that it looks for the great outdoors inside as well as outside then we might not see Ben Woodard's nihilist speculative realism as an ally for object oriented feminisms or queer theories. Indeed in his most recent work Woodard has cautioned that philosophy can only ever return to the 'great outdoors' if it "leaves behind the dead loop of the human skull."<sup>84</sup> That said, Woodard's essays on his *Naught Thought* blog have consistently led the way when it comes to queering speculative realism and to advancing the politics of a queered speculative realism. We have already seen his discussion of the "phallicization of ethics" but we might also consider his various writings on gender, sexuality, psychoanalysis, anorexia, trauma as clearing a ground for queer speculations.<sup>85</sup> I will isolate just a few

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<sup>83</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004) and *Means Without End: Notes on Politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti and Cesare Casarino (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000).

<sup>84</sup> Ben Woodard, "Mad Speculation and Absolute Inhumanism: Lovecraft, Ligotti and the Weirding of Philosophy," *Continent* 1.1 (2011): 3-13.

<sup>85</sup> Woodard has engaged with the queer theories of Lauren Berlant on fetal citizenship, Ann Cvetkovich on affect and Lee Edelman on reproductive futurism in a number of posts. For example see "Migrations of Trauma," <http://naughtthought.wordpress.com/2008/01/19/migrations-of-trauma/> and "Trauma's Transmogrifications," <http://naughtthought.wordpress.com/2007/10/27/traumas-transmogrifications/>. Three other names one associates with speculative realism, Dominic Fox (who blogs at *Poetix*), Mark Fisher (who blogs at *K-Punk*) and Nina Power (who blogs at *Infinite Thought*),

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exemplary posts. As Bryant has reminded us it is masculinism which forgets the real of the biological body and it is feminist thought which remembers it. One figure who has been largely forgotten by the speculative realists is Katerina Kolozova and Woodard returns her to her proper place in his post “Meshing the Real and the Transcendental or Katerina Kolozova.”<sup>86</sup> He tells us that “jumping from Judith Butler, to Rosi Braidotti, to Drucilla Cornell, to Derrida, to Lacan (with thinkers such as Badiou, Derrida and Deleuze sprinkled throughout) Kolozova formulates a breathtakingly lucid and powerfully political, theoretical and social system.” One of the reasons why Kolozova has not been prominent in SR discussions is that speculative realism “has been more than slightly ambiguous as to its relation to psychoanalysis.” Bryant and Negarestani are two very obvious counter-examples but Woodard cites Brassier’s limp deployments of the term ‘unconscious’ and its near absence in the texts of other speculative realists as evidence. But Kolozova’s psychoanalytically-inflected, Laruelian non-philosophical system, is clearly a prime, if again shunted to the margins, site for realist and non-correlationist thinking about the body, sexual difference and identity:

If, as Kolozova suggests, the body is the nearest bearer of the Real of our being, how do we articulate a politics which is different from the tired attempts of identity politics? If we carry the real with us, and our experiences can touch upon the real, what is to separate a politics of the embodied Real versus an identity politics? The difference that Kolozova ends on is that since identity is always a failure to grasp the Real and sense the World, as experiential, is what forces and faces the Real of such materialism, we can only remind ourselves that such a world is not-All, that the World can never grasp identity as such let alone any singular human in their automatic solitude. The strength here is that Kolozova seems bolder than Badiou in dismissing the pre-Evental

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have also critiqued Edelman’s book *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*.

<sup>86</sup> Ben Woodard, “Meshing the Real and the Transcendental or Katerina Kolozova,” <http://naughtthought.wordpress.com/2008/06/24/meshing-the-real-and-the-transcendental-or-katerina-kolozova/>.

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non-subject and more optimistic than Transcendental Materialism in that not only can the subject think the gap that it is but that the gap does the thinking, that the Real itself desires to be transcendental to, in a sense, be political.<sup>87</sup>

Shortly before this post on Kolozova's politics, Woodard had worked though a provisional speculative realist politics (in June 2008, two years exactly before Vitale's post on the lack of political engagement of SR), wisely rejecting Lee Edelman's *No Future* and its misleading politics of the Real along the way.<sup>88</sup> Woodard gently argues that the "End of Time" section of Brassier's *Nihil Unbound* "leans towards what might be a politics, in that, jumping from Freud's theory of the drive as repetition, there is an inherent will-to-know in humans that is, contrary to most of the universe, negentropic." The question he proceeds to ask is: "how does one account for the genesis of the multitude in a non-vitalist way, in a philosophically realist way, that does not occlude the possibility of politics?" He partially answers that speculative realism "provides a step in the right direction in that it illustrates the radicality of thought by 'immanentizing' the transcendental by binding it to the object." But the full answer he moves towards is that

the implicit politics in Speculative Realism is found in its return to slime as the trace of life, that the smudge of materiality cannot be idealized away, not even in the most basic form of relation itself, in the notion of currency and exchange. This zero point of being is, in a sense, a paradoxically deanthropomorphized bio-politics—that matter matters in that it can think itself as such without recourse to the reflective structures of ethics or democracy. Speculative Realism exposes that the zombic hunger of Hardt and Negri's multitude is a form of thinking and not a form of being. The psychoanalytic contribution here is that

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<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Ben Woodard, "Heaps of Slime or Towards a Speculative Realist Politics," <http://naughtthought.wordpress.com/2008/06/20/heaps-of-slime-or-towards-a-speculative-realist-politics/>. In their interviews with Woodard in *The Speculative Turn* both Žižek and Badiou argue that speculative realism lacks political purchase.



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capital, while inhabiting the drive's mode of iteration, is still subject to alteration. In thinking capital as object we highlight the objects around it as possibly dissociable from it such as democracy and the social.

### Conclusion: Some Sightings and Speculations

In *Circus Philosophicus*, Graham Harman asks us to imagine a “giant ferris wheel” with thousands “of separate cars, each of them loaded with various objects.”<sup>89</sup> This final section paints a picture of several ferris wheels, each one containing glimpses of encounters between queer theory and speculative thought, which readers can then pause and fix in their minds as they continue to wheel around.

#### *Ferris Wheel #1: NEOMATERIALIST FEMINISM*

This wheel would contain texts by various thinkers associated with (a mostly Deleuzian) neomaterialist or neovitalist feminism which has been sensitive to the nonhuman, the inorganic and the vibrancy of matter. This would include theorists such as Stengers,<sup>90</sup> Elizabeth Grosz,<sup>91</sup> Rosi Braidotti,<sup>92</sup> Manuel de Landa,<sup>93</sup> Myra Hird<sup>94</sup> and Claire Colebrook.<sup>95</sup> It

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<sup>89</sup> Harman, *Circus Philosophicus*, 1.

<sup>90</sup> Isabelle Stengers, *Cosmopolitics 1*, trans. Robert Bononno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

<sup>91</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

<sup>92</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics* (Cambridge: Polity, 2006).

<sup>93</sup> Manuel DeLanda, *Philosophy and Simulation: The Emergence of Synthetic Reason* (London: Continuum, 2011). For a queering of DeLanda's work see Jeff Lord's review of *A Thousand Years of Non-Linear History* here: [http://www.situation.ru/app/j\\_art\\_1036.htm](http://www.situation.ru/app/j_art_1036.htm)

<sup>94</sup> Myra Hird, *Sex, Gender and Science* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2004). Hird is heavily influenced by Harman's work. Her recent issue of *Parallax* (16.1, 2010) on the life of the gift contains Harman's essay “Asymmetrical Causation: Influence without Recompense.”

<sup>95</sup> Claire Colebrook, “How Queer Can You Go? Theory, Normality and Normativity” in Giffney and Hird, *Queering the Non/Human*, 17-34. Colebrook's



would also hold Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* which rethinks the partition of the sensible (in Rancière's terms) where matter is seen as inert and human beings are understood as vibrant. She turns the "figures of 'life' and 'matter' around and around, worrying them until they start to seem strange... [and] in the space created by this estrangement, a *vital materiality* [of thunder storms, stem cells, fish oils, metal, trash, electricity] can start to take shape."<sup>96</sup>

*Ferris Wheel #2: THE SEX APPEAL OF THE INORGANIC*

This wheel takes its name from Mario Perniola's book *Sex Appeal of the Inorganic* which strangely hasn't exerted much of an influence on speculative realism.<sup>97</sup> In it we would discover figures and texts desiring a re-cycling of the world, a world re-encountered in which each singular being is exposed to an existence they share with other beings (from shells, to hammers, to clouds, to crystals, to storms). The wonder involved in this encounter which shakes all our anthropocentric certainties, is we might say, after Sara Ahmed, a 'queer phenomenology.' In Ahmed's terms, a reorientation toward the world and its objects (tables and pebbles are among her gorgeous examples), such a making strange, is what "allows the familiar to dance with life again."<sup>98</sup> Among the other texts housed here would be those which return an agential dynamism to the non-living, the inanimate and the inert: Bernard Stiegler's *Technics and Time* which queers the distinction between man

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emerging work on extinction might be useful for those thinking about politics and nature after Brassier and Woodard.

<sup>96</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), vii. Jonathan Goldberg's recent thinking around Lucretian physics is pertinent here too. See, for one example, *The Seeds of Things: Theorizing Sexuality and Materiality in Renaissance Representations* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009).

<sup>97</sup> Mario Perniola, *Sex Appeal of the Inorganic* (London: Continuum, 2004).

<sup>98</sup> Sara Ahmed, *Queer Orientations: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), 164. Ahmed has been highly critical of the masculinism of OOO.

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and animal by mining the paradox between the human invention of the technical and the technical invention of the human;<sup>99</sup> Nikki Sullivan and Sam Murray's *Somatechnics* which plasticizes, intertwines and en-folds man and animal, human and object;<sup>100</sup> Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's "Stories of Stone," a geochoreographesis in which he explores the life of stone, allowing it to breathe and speak as it "confounds the boundary between organic and inorganic, art and nature, human and mineral."<sup>101</sup> It would also include Shannon Bell's *Fast Feminism*, a philo-porno-political machine in which she fucks Stelarc's six-legged walking robot and tissue-engineers a male phallus, a female phallus and a Bataillean big toe in a "bioreactor where they formed into a neo-organ."<sup>102</sup> Also here we would discover Dinesh Wadiwel's essay "Sex and the Lubricative Ethic" where in the fisting scene a whole range of "nonhuman material objects are also important entities within networks of erotic production. A sling, a piece of lingerie, a whip or a vibrator may all play significant if not indispensable roles in enabling an erotic scene to happen."<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time, 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, trans. Richard Beardsworth and George Collins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2008).

<sup>100</sup> Nikki Sullivan and Sam Murray (eds), *Somatechnics: Queering the Technologisation of Bodies* (Farnham: Ashgate Press, 2009). In my preface to the book, "Originary Somatechnicity," (xiii) I wrote that they "disclose that there is not just an originary technicity but also an originary somaticisation of the technical object. Their queer intervention, the space they open for us in a deft disorientating move, is to begin to think an *originary somatechnicity*."

<sup>101</sup> Jeffrey Jerome Cohen, "Stories of Stone," *postmedieval: a journal of medieval cultural studies* ½ (2010): 56-63. Medieval Studies has proved to be a particularly fertile site for speculative realist thinking. Two other essays in the inaugural issue of *postmedieval* by Michael Witmore ("We have Never not Been Inhuman") and Julian Yates ("It's (for) You; or, the Tele-t-r/opical Post-Human") engage with Meillassoux and Harman. In her response essay the feminist N. Katherine Hayles picks up on this and also references both Harman and Bogost when she writes that "alien phenomenologists gather information about tools to understand them not as accessories to human culture but as subjects that perceive and act in the world," Hayles, "Posthuman Ambivalence," 266.

<sup>102</sup> Shannon Bell, *Fast Feminism* (New York: Autonomedia, 2010), 183.

<sup>103</sup> Dinesh Wadiwel, "Sex and the Lubricative Ethic" in Noreen Giffney

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### *Ferris Wheel #3: PERSONS AND THINGS*

This wheel gets its name from Barbara Johnson's *Persons and Things* which isn't often remembered when speculative realists and object oriented ontologists are reconfiguring relations between subjects and objects.<sup>104</sup> Bracha Ettinger's post-Lacanian work on the matrixial belongs here too.<sup>105</sup> It shares much on the level of style with Negarestani's psychoanalytic territopic materialisms;<sup>106</sup> her matrixiality may have affinities with Iain Hamilton Grant's dark chemistry of *ur-slime*;<sup>107</sup> and she makes it clear how Meillassoux's hyperchaos also refers to the absolute contingency of gender.

### *Ferris Wheel #4: OBJECT ORIENTED MATERNITY*

Ettinger could also take her place in this wheel alongside Lisa Baraitser's *Maternal Encounters* where she theorizes maternal 'stuff,' the many objects which encumber the mother's body. These 'maternal objects' are variously figured by Baraitser as Latourian 'actants' or Harmanian 'tool-beings.' And these tool-beings include clothes, blankets, quilts, bottles, teats, milk powder, sterilizers, breast pumps, feeding spoons and bowls, juice bottles and bibs, pacifiers, mobiles, rattles, nappies, wipes, changing mats, creams, powders, cribs, cots, baskets, baby monitors, mobiles, prams, buggies, carry cots, slings, back packs, car seats and so ever infinitely on.<sup>108</sup>

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and Michael O'Rourke (eds) *The Ashgate Research Companion to Queer Theory* (Farnham: Ashgate Press, 2009), 492.

<sup>104</sup> Barbara Johnson, *Persons and Things* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008).

<sup>105</sup> Bracha Lichtenberg Ettinger, *The Matrixial Borderspace* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

<sup>106</sup> Reza Negarestani, "On the Revolutionary Earth: A Dialectic in Territopic Materialism," <http://fass.kingston.ac.uk/downloads/conference-dark-materialism-paper.pdf>.

<sup>107</sup> Iain Hamilton Grant, "Being and Slime: The Mathematics of Protoplasm in Lorenz Oken's 'Physio-Philosophy,'" *Collapse IV*, 287-321.

<sup>108</sup> Lisa Baraitser, *Maternal Encounters: The Ethics of Interruption* (London:

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*Ferris Wheel #5: HERE COMES EVERYTHING!*

The ferris wheels of speculative realism, object oriented ontology and queer theory have been shown to be interlocking or each perhaps as tiny wheels imagined inside each other. If Bryant hopes that speculative realism and OOO will create projects for others then what we need to ensure is that the wheels keep spinning and that we never try to pin things down. If we refuse to spell out a programmatic content for speculative thought then it will always retain the power to wrench frames and whenever and wherever queer theory (or better queer theories) and speculative realism (or better speculative realisms) meet that “fantastic explosion”<sup>109</sup> promises an irreducible openness to everything.

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Routledge, 2009), 126.

<sup>109</sup> Timothy Morton, “Queer Ecology,” 273.

# Science and Philosophy

## A conversation with Sean Carroll

*Fabio Gironi*

SEAN CARROLL IS A THEORETICAL physicist at the California Institute of Technology whose work is mainly focused on theoretical aspects of cosmology. He has authored numerous papers,<sup>1</sup> an introductory textbook on General Relativity<sup>2</sup> and more recently, a popular science book on cosmology and the arrow of time.<sup>3</sup> He is an active scientific communicator, both in the physical and the virtual world: in addition to talks, presentations and workshops at both the specialist and the popular<sup>4</sup> level he's a prolific blogger

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<sup>1</sup> For a comprehensive list see [http://arxiv.org/find/all/1/all:+EXACT+Sean\\_Carroll/0/1/0/all/0/1](http://arxiv.org/find/all/1/all:+EXACT+Sean_Carroll/0/1/0/all/0/1). See also his personal website at <http://preposterousuniverse.com>

<sup>2</sup> Sean Carroll, *Spacetime and Geometry: An Introduction to General Relativity* (New York: Addison Wesley, 2004).

<sup>3</sup> Sean Carroll, *From Eternity to Here: the Quest for the Ultimate Theory of Time* (New York: Dutton, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> For an example of talks dealing with his recent work see his “The Origin of the Universe and the Arrow of Time” presentation at the 2009 *Quantum*

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(on the *Cosmic Variance*<sup>5</sup> blog, one the most popular science-related websites in the blogosphere), he has participated in several *Bloggingheads* discussions<sup>6</sup> and he even held two public lectures in *Second Life*.<sup>7</sup> Prof. Carroll kindly agreed to find an opening in his busy schedule to answer some questions, broadly encompassing the delicate—and timely—relationship between science and philosophy.



Fabio Gironi: *Let us start with some biographical notes: when and why did you decide to pursue a career in physics? To what extent were you guided by concerns regarding the nature of reality and what drove you to the natural sciences rather than to philosophy?*

Sean Carroll: I became interested in physics at a very young age—about ten years old. I would read books in my local public library, and became fascinated by the books on particle physics, astronomy, and relativity.

I didn't know anything about philosophy at the time, so the thought of studying philosophy never occurred to me. My first exposure was in college at Villanova University, where every student was required to take three semesters of philosophy. I fell in love with it, and ended up getting a minor in philosophy as well as my major degree in astronomy.

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to *Cosmos Festival* organized by the Perimeter Institute ([http://www.q2cfestival.com/play.php?lecture\\_id=7731](http://www.q2cfestival.com/play.php?lecture_id=7731)) or his, slightly more technical, talk at the *Fermilab Colloquium* ([http://vmsstreamer1.fnal.gov/vms\\_Site\\_03/Lectures/Colloquium/090211Carroll/f.htm#](http://vmsstreamer1.fnal.gov/vms_Site_03/Lectures/Colloquium/090211Carroll/f.htm#)).

<sup>5</sup> <http://blogs.discovermagazine.com/cosmicvariance/>

<sup>6</sup> With fellow *Cosmic Variance* blogger Mark Trodden (on cosmology), with philosopher of science David Albert (on problems in quantum mechanics and the arrow of time), and with science writers John Horgan, Jennifer Ouellette and George Johnson. For a complete list see <http://bloggingheads.tv/search/?participant1=Carroll,%20Sean>.

<sup>7</sup> Organized by the Meta Institute for Computational Astrophysics (MICA): [http://www.mica-vw.org/wiki/index.php/Meta\\_Institute\\_for\\_Computational\\_Astrophysics](http://www.mica-vw.org/wiki/index.php/Meta_Institute_for_Computational_Astrophysics).

FG: Roughly since the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, philosophy has split in two: the analytic tradition, mostly arising in central-European countries and moving, in the post-wwii period, to the UK and the USA, and the continental tradition, mainly (but not only) situated in France and Germany. To this day, the two ‘movements’ operate on often radically different planes, with different vocabularies and incommensurable interests.<sup>8</sup> I wonder: as an American scientist what do you think of when you hear of ‘philosophers’? Is this difference in approaches between the two traditions familiar to scientists, and does it matter?

SC: I know enough about the current philosophical scene that my view is probably not representative of most physicists. Personally I find value in all the different approaches, depending on what question is being asked. What is labeled the ‘continental’ tradition provides interesting insights into how language works, but is probably less directly relevant to science than the analytic tradition.

FG: *Following up on the previous question: do you think that after the Science Wars during the 1990s the perception of ‘philosophy’ among scientists has changed?*

SC: Again, I’m probably not the person to ask. Most physicists don’t think very highly of philosophy, but on the other hand most physicists don’t think highly of any other fields—they’re fairly chauvinistic toward their own discipline. There is some lingering suspicion among physicists toward postmodernism and claims that reality is socially constructed; scientists tend to think that reality is real and independent of human understanding. (Personally I think it depends on what kind of ‘reality’ you are talking about).

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<sup>8</sup> For brevity’s sake I here of course overstate the case for the analytic/continental distinction. For a recent, thematic assessment of the divide see Jack Reynolds, James Chase, James Williams and Edwin Mares’ *Postanalytic and Metacontinental: Crossing Philosophical Divides* (London: Continuum, 2010). For an excellent analysis of the historical and conceptual origins of the analytic tradition, its present characteristics and the future of the analytic/continental divide see Hans-Johann Glock’s *What is Analytic Philosophy?* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

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FG: *Do you think that to show something as ‘socially constructed’ necessarily means to ‘debunk’ its epistemic validity? To what extent should human intervention be quarantined out of reconstructions of scientific progress?*

SC: I don’t think it means that at all. Scientists (including myself) generally believe in the existence of an objective reality. But our various ways of apprehending that reality are socially constructed, and that includes scientific theories. There are an infinite number of theories we could consider, and there are an infinite number of experiments we could do; but we only choose certain ones. Likewise, any set of data could be fit to any theory at all, given enough flexibility. So there’s no question that human judgment is involved in the practice of science. That idea isn’t inconsistent with the claim that there is an objective reality, and that successive scientific theories are better approximations to it.

FG: *Your work in cosmology probably makes you particularly ‘receptive’ to questions of a philosophical nature, even in your everyday job. In a Bloggingheads dialogue with philosopher of science David Albert<sup>9</sup> you claimed that “sometimes I write a paper and I stop, and I think: I cannot write this, it sounds too philosophical!” Can you define your criterion for defining what counts as philosophical? To what extent do you represent an ‘average sample’ of scientist, when it comes to your engagement with philosophical questions? Do you think that it is reasonable to claim that theoretical scientists are generally more prone to philosophy than observational scientists and experimenters?*

SC: It’s worth pointing out that a statement like that is at least in part a joke. But there are differences between what scientists care about and what philosophers care about—and that’s not a bad thing. The difference is hard to define, but roughly speaking philosophers are more interested in questions of principle, while physicists focus more on questions of practice. Philosophers are also much more likely to interrogate

<sup>9</sup> <http://bloggingheads.tv/diavlogs/12123>



foundational questions, while physicists are happy to work with unquestioned background assumptions (when it's possible). Theorists are probably more amenable to philosophy than experimentalists are, and I'm probably more amenable than the average theorist.

FG: *On your blog you once cited a quote from Paul Feyerabend, where he blamed the professionalization of philosophy for the philosophical ignorance of scientists. You wrote: "It's probably true that the post-wwii generations of leading physicists were less broadly educated than their pre-war counterparts" but you concluded that*

*philosophical presuppositions certainly play an important role in how scientists work, and it's possible that a slightly more sophisticated set of presuppositions could give the working physicist a helping hand here and there. But based on thinking about the actual history, I don't see how such sophistication could really have moved things forward.<sup>10</sup>*

*Other physicists have been less generous than you, notably Steven Weinberg, who famously wrote a whole chapter "Against Philosophy" (perhaps a poke at Feyerabend's Against Method?).<sup>11</sup> Could you expand a little on your position regarding the role of philosophy in the intellectual formation of young physicists? Do you think that young scientists would benefit of a more thorough education in the history of their discipline? And conversely, do you think that philosophers should study more science?*

SC: For scientists, I think that studying the history and philosophy of their field can sometimes be helpful, but I wouldn't say that it's necessary. Empirically, there are many successful scientists who aren't that interested in history or philosophy. And it depends on the questions being addressed; someone who works in early-universe cosmology or the foundations

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<sup>10</sup> <http://blogs.discovermagazine.com/cosmicvariance/2009/07/06/does-philosophy-make-you-a-better-scientist/>

<sup>11</sup> Chapter 7 of Weinberg's *Dreams of a Final Theory: the search for the fundamental laws of nature* (London: Vintage, 1993).

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of quantum mechanics is more likely to find philosophy useful than someone who does observational astronomy. For philosophers, I think that studying science could be very helpful—it's a similarly rigorous field of inquiry, but with the additional constraint of dealing with experimental data.

*FG: Turning specifically to cosmology: do you think that the heavy 'injection' of particle physics into cosmology from roughly the 1970s onwards contributed to making the discipline less open to metaphysical preferences and more grounded in observations, now possible through particle accelerators 'replicating' the physical conditions of the early universe?*

SC: I think there may have been a shift, but would attribute it much more to advances in observational astronomy than to particle physics. In cosmology, for example, philosophical arguments have sometimes been advanced in favor of this or that model of the universe, but being able to observationally distinguish between models has made all the difference. (Also, they were often not very good philosophical arguments). If anything, the combination of particle physics and cosmology has allowed cosmologists to extend their theorizing beyond the observable universe, which has in turn raised the need for a better philosophical understanding of how to handle that topic.

*FG: Today there is a great talk of the 'public understanding of science.' You have spent quite a lot of time and energy explaining science, through lectures delivered to audiences of non-scientists, a whole video lecture course in cosmology, your blog, and a 'popular science' book. You are not an isolated case: from—roughly—the 1970s to today the list of your colleagues who have written 'popular science' books features many highly regarded scientists, including several Nobel Prizes. How are these books perceived from within the scientific community? How do you understand this role of mediator? Are you aiming at introducing the public to scientific practice or to reality itself?*

SC: Communicating with the public is extremely important, especially when it comes to work in theoretical particle physics and cosmology. What we do is not motivated by the desire for economic or technological gain; it's purely for the thrill of discovery. It does no good to discover things and then not to tell anyone!

Most people in the field recognize this. Nevertheless, heavy emphasis is placed on research accomplishments, and spending too much time interacting with a wider audience can be seen as detracting from that. So there is some tension—everyone agrees that public outreach is important, but they view actual attempts at outreach with some suspicion.

My personal goal is to explain both the discoveries of science, and something about how science works. Science is a deeply human endeavor, and there's no reason why everyone shouldn't share in the excitement.

FG: *Commenting on the movie Žižek!* you wrote:

*as a philosopher and cultural critic, Žižek gets not only to bandy about bits of quantum cosmology, but is permitted (even encouraged) to connect them to questions of love and meaning and so on. As professional physicists, we're not allowed to talk about those questions—referees at the Physical Review would not approve.<sup>12</sup>*

*That is true, but it seems to paint a picture of scientists as powerless regarding their influence on society which seems inaccurate to me. Aren't you downplaying the epistemic prestige that scientists hold in society? Do you think Žižek's pronouncements have more resonance than, say, Steven Hawking's? Isn't it the case that it is precisely the channel of 'popular publications' that allows scientists a space of freedom where claims which would be unacceptable in a scientific publication can be—at least tentatively—made, and that allows them to somehow bypass or replace traditional 'intellectuals'?*

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<sup>12</sup> <http://blogs.discovermagazine.com/cosmicvariance/2006/05/22/the-universe-is-structured-like-a-language/>

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SC: I wasn't trying to comment on the relative influence of scientists and philosophers, only on the different realms about which they were normally expected to comment. But still, I don't think that scientists have much influence in our current climate when speaking outside their specialties. Of course they can write whatever they like in popular media, but that doesn't mean that anyone will pay attention.

Personally, I would be very happy if more philosophers as well as scientists had higher public profiles. But ultimately what matters is what a person says, not what their credentials are. I want to see more engagement in a wide variety of conversations by intellectuals of all backgrounds.

*FG: Did you mean your popular science book as a tool for forging links with non-scientists from other disciplines (this interview, for example, might be one such link)? Do you think that philosophers should embrace this practice and write more accessible books together with their more technical publications?*

SC: I would love to see more books of 'popular philosophy' by experts. My own book was an attempt to reach non-scientists as well as my professional colleagues. As a field, science has a much higher profile than philosophy, and there is a flourishing genre of popular science books that philosophy doesn't enjoy. (With shining counterexamples, of course). But there's no reason there couldn't be; philosophical questions, like scientific ones, are ultimately shared by all people.

*FG: I once attended a lecture delivered by you at Imperial College London. Your talk was addressed to a public of physicists, and therefore 'mathematically heavy.' I was probably the only person in the room without the mathematical competence to follow all of your equations. The topic was entropy and the arrow of time, and I had already read a popular article of yours on the same topic,<sup>13</sup> and read your discussions of it on your blog, so I managed to*

<sup>13</sup> "Does Time Run Backward in Other Universes?" *Scientific American*, May 21, 2008. Online at <http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=the-cosmic-origins-of-times-arrow>.

*follow your argument nonetheless. However, when I was walking out, I started to wonder in which ways my experience of your talk had been qualitatively different from those of my neighbors. The question therefore is: when it comes to ‘popularizing’ science, or even when it comes to discussing it in academic contexts with, for example, philosophers, what kind of conceptual obstacle does the incomprehension of mathematical formalism represent? What is it that the non-mathematically trained layperson just ‘cannot get,’ and to what extent might that undermine the possibility of a full comprehension of what the scientist is communicating?*

SC: There’s no question that there is a gap between the kind of scientific understanding one can attain through mathematics, and the kind one can attain through qualitative description alone. Both are valuable, but ultimately mathematics is the language of physics. Translations into words are like reading great poems in translation—some of the meaning can come through, but some of the precision is inevitably lost. Unfortunately, discussions are usually only available at a completely-specialized level or a completely-popular level, with very little in between. The market simply isn’t there.

FG: *Again regarding mathematics: in continental philosophy circles we are today witnessing a renewed interest in equating ontology with mathematics, mainly through the work of Alain Badiou and his employment of Cantorian Set Theory. The fact that mathematics underpins the structure of physical reality is a standard assumption since early modern science but the fact that it happens to map so precisely the patterns of the universe is still a source of puzzlement. What is your opinion regarding the ‘unreasonable effectiveness’ of mathematics to describe the natural world? A colleague of yours, Max Tegmark, goes as far as claiming that it is no surprise at all since reality itself is a mathematical structure. How do you react to this kind of—if you pardon the pun—radical matherialism? I’m sure you would agree that we discover rather than invent reality, but do we discover rather than invent mathematics? And if so, how can we discern ‘mathematics’ from ‘reality’?*

## Speculations II

SC: I'm not sure how puzzling it should be that mathematics is effective in describing reality. If not mathematics, then what? It is certainly a crucial fact that reality exhibits regularities of various sorts, but once we take that as given it is hard to imagine what other tools we would use to characterize those regularities other than mathematics. For the discovering/inventing debate, I don't really think there is an interesting question to be decided. On the one hand, mathematics derives theorems from axioms, and I believe that there is ultimately not much choice about which theorems are true; in that sense we are discovering mathematics. On the other hand, we're certainly not discovering mathematics in the same sense as we discover a new continent or a new planet or an unknown law of nature. Those are contingent parts of reality that could in principle have been different, which is not a feature I attribute to mathematics.

FG: *So branches of mathematics grounded upon necessarily true (proven) theorems can be employed to describe contingent physical realities? If so, how is it that certain mathematical branches do describe physical phenomena (say, for example, Einstein's innovative employment of differential geometry for his theory of General Relativity) while (many) others seem to remain completely 'abstract'? Is mathematics intrinsically 'larger' than physical reality or might it be that the abstract mathematics of today describes some hitherto unknown physical phenomenon?*

SC: Yes, I think mathematics is much larger than physical reality. At heart there is only one reality (although it may take different forms in different circumstances), but there are many kinds of mathematics. I'm not surprised that reality is well-described by a certain kind of mathematics, but I see no reason to think that every kind of mathematics should be relevant to describing reality.

FG: *Quoting again Steven Weinberg, the "working philosophy" of scientists is a "rough-and-ready realism, a belief in the objective reality of the ingredients of our scientific theories" and it is "learned*

*through the experience of scientific research and rarely from the teaching of philosophers.”<sup>14</sup> Can you define your commitments regarding realism? Usually philosophers tend to differentiate between epistemological realism (the belief that our access to reality allows us transparently to know things in themselves, not being limited to appearances) and ontological realism (the belief that there are things-in-themselves whose existence and—at least primary—properties are completely independent from our perception of them and from our existence). Do you believe that most scientists tacitly accept both these positions? I have the feeling that there often is a gap between the forms of realism which philosophers attribute to scientists and the actual realist stance scientists have: can you offer an educated guess regarding the ontological commitments of your less philosophically inclined colleagues?*

SC: I think that almost all scientists are ontological realists, whether they would admit it or not. Nobody really believes that the natural phenomena they are studying, or even the theoretical structures they use to understand them, aren't real. But the word 'transparently' in the definition of epistemological realism can be problematic. Our access to reality is often very mediated and incomplete (not to mention occasionally unreliable). Even though most scientists believe strongly in objective reality, they might not care to distinguish between different ways of thinking about that reality there aren't any experimentally testable consequences. Said another way, scientists are typically committed to reality, but don't care much about that commitment; they care about getting the predictions right.

FG: *You are a fairly outspoken atheist, but you have often claimed that your rejection of supernatural explanations is not an a priori matter, but simply the result of a scientific process of formulating hypothesis, making predictions and testing these predictions against empirical evidence. Religion invokes unnecessary entities and its predictions are disproved by evidence. On the other hand, you are hostile towards a strictly empiricist attitude: science cannot be*

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<sup>14</sup> Weinberg, *Dreams of a Final Theory*, 133.



## Speculations II

*forced to remain silent regarding that which escapes strict empirical testing but must be able to propose frameworks which explain the observables, even if this means reference to unobservables. In your book you write that “it’s wrong to think that of the goal of science as simply to fit the data. The goal of science goes much deeper than that: it’s to understand the behavior of the natural world.”<sup>15</sup> You think there are ‘metaphysical’ considerations which adjudicate the explanatory framework to be chosen, when empirical data are scarce? At the time of Newton and Leibniz, for example, the debate between relational and substantive space was largely a matter of metaphysical aesthetics. Come General Relativity, and Eddington’s testing of it, the issue has been empirically settled. Yet, not completely: given the absence of experimental data, do metaphysical preferences still play a role, for example, in the contrast between string theory and quantum loop gravity regarding a background-dependent or independent theory? Or even in your own proposed high-entropy multiverse solution to the riddle of the (local) low initial entropy of the universe?*

SC: There are certainly criteria that come into scientific theory choice over and above ‘fitting the data.’ Otherwise the best possible theory would simply be a list of all the data. In science we seek understanding in terms of patterns that help account for the data. A good theory is one that explains a lot with very little input. The search for the best possible understanding of nature happens in pieces, step by step. So when we are evaluating different theories, a necessary component is not simply how well they fit the data we have now, but how well they will fit future data and be compatible with future theories. That kind of judgment is necessarily subjective, and brings in factors that could be described as ‘metaphysical.’

FG: *Today, continental philosophy is moving away from postmodernism attempting to recuperate the possibility of talking about reality-in-itself. ‘Speculative realism’ is an umbrella terminology which groups several ways in which philosophy is trying to escape*

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<sup>15</sup> Carroll, *From Eternity to Here*, 371.



## Sean Carroll – Science and Philosophy

from the restrictions of post-Kantian ‘correlationism,’ where ‘correlation’ has been defined as “the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other.”<sup>16</sup> This new realism aims at getting out of the self-imposed limitation of philosophizing from within human language or consciousness, and has naturally led philosophers to a closer contact with the natural sciences, physics and astronomy in the first place. Speculative realism aims at embracing the violently counterintuitive (non-anthropocentric) reality which science describes and to employ scientific predictions (such as the ‘Big Freeze’ scenario—expected to take place extrapolating in the future the dark energy-driven acceleration of the universe’s expansion—and its unsettling ontological consequences) as matter of philosophical speculation. What speculative realists are doing is to strengthen the Copernican principle of mediocrity: there is nothing special about our location in the cosmos and our placement in the order of being—philosophy should therefore stop focusing uniquely on the phenomenological experience of humans (and stop building metaphysical systems centered upon such a ‘domesticated’ perspective) and reclaim the possibility of dealing with the world in itself. Some indeed argue in favour of an injection of ‘scientism’ into continental philosophy. Now, when Richard Rorty died, you wrote a blogpost in his memory,<sup>17</sup> and in it you observed that

*as physicists go, I’m more sympathetic to postmodernism than most....What I really think is that people who think carefully about science and people who think carefully about the social construction of truth would have a lot to learn from each other, if they would approach each other’s concerns and insights in good faith, which is hard to do.*

*Ultimately, you concluded,*

*postmodernists would appreciate how science differs from morality and ethics*

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<sup>16</sup> Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (London: Continuum, 2008), p. 5.

<sup>17</sup> <http://blogs.discovermagazine.com/cosmicvariance/2007/06/10/richard-rorty/>

## Speculations II

*and aesthetics by the ontological independence of its subject matter, while scientists would appreciate how there is a lot we have yet to quite understand about how we use language and evidence in an ultimately contingent way.*

*Reading your words, it seems that you allow (postmodern) philosophy a ‘magisterium’ over ethics, social constructions, aesthetics and language, but that’s about it. My question is: would you welcome a new form of philosophy less concerned with human phenomena and more interested in non-human entities as finally breaking free of ‘postmodern relativism’ and antirealism or do you see it as a transgression of boundaries, illegitimately entering ‘scientific turf’?*

SC: My intent was not to demarcate magisteria in which science or philosophy would hold sway. Philosophy has much to say about non-human entities as well as about human beings, as does science. Rather, I was trying to diagnose certain hidden assumptions that are common in the two fields. When (certain) philosophers and scientists start arguing over the status of objective realities (or metanarratives), they often have different things in mind—the philosophers are thinking of human contexts, while the scientists are thinking of electrons and planets. (Again, this is sometimes true, not always true). All I’m suggesting is that a mutually beneficial conversation could occur if either side were sympathetic to the primary concerns of the other. Philosophers sometimes make disparaging remarks about objective realities that don’t really make sense if we’re thinking about physics, but can be useful if we’re thinking about ethics. Conversely, physicists often underestimate how much mediation there is between our conceptions and reality, even if we grant that reality exists. I’m not worried about boundaries being transgressed, only about opportunities for understanding being squandered.

FG: *Allow me to insist on this, since one of the core points of litigation within contemporary philosophy is precisely how much should/must philosophy relinquish to science in terms of production of knowledge about the real (mind-independent) world and its causal connections. On the one hand, there are some philosophers*

that, while respecting scientific knowledge, question both the scientific monopoly over relations between non-human entities and the reductionist protocol, and consider it legitimate to conceive a metaphysics which recognizes as ‘real’ in a strong, irreducible sense even entities which are ‘eliminated’ or ‘explained away’ by those who privilege a scientific outlook. For these philosophers no layer can be singled out as the one where explanation must be grounded—not even the physical one—and science is therefore unable to offer full metaphysical explanations, but only to give an epistemologically refined form of know-how, hence reducing the real to what we can know of the real. On the other hand there are philosophers who deem useless any metaphysics which is not well informed by the best current theories in physics, and that explicitly vouch for a higher dose of ‘scientism’ in philosophy. As a recent example of this last position philosophers of science James Ladyman and Don Ross recently published an abrasive book<sup>18</sup> denouncing philosophical metaphysics and proposing, as a central plank in their argument, a ‘Principle of Naturalistic Closure,’ stating that:

*Any new metaphysical claim that is to be taken seriously at time t should be motivated by, and only by, the service it would perform, if true, in showing how two or more specific scientific hypotheses, at least one of which is drawn from fundamental physics, jointly explain more than the sum of what is explained by the two hypotheses taken separately.<sup>19</sup>*

*As a physicist yourself, is it trivial to ask you who your favoured philosophical discussant would be, and why?*

SC: The claim that any reasonable metaphysics should be ‘well informed’ by our best understanding of physics is a fairly weak one, and one that I’m happy to support. I would even go a bit further, and argue that any reasonable metaphysics should be compatible with physics. But that’s still a fairly weak claim, and I can’t imagine that many people

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<sup>18</sup> James Ladyman and Don Ross, *Everything Must Go: Metaphysics Naturalized*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press 2007).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 37.

## Speculations II

would dispute it. I am not, on the other hand, interested in ‘denouncing’ either a metaphysics-first or a physics-first approach as a general matter, or demanding that one discipline or another ‘relinquish’ its right to address certain questions. Turf battles are boring. I would rather look at specific proposals along those lines, and decide whether they are useful. I don’t think that metaphysics can be useful if it is incompatible with physics; nor do I think that we can decide between possible theories of nature on the basis of metaphysics alone. But if someone who thinks of themselves as ‘doing metaphysics’ proposes a helpful and interesting way of thinking about the world, I would be very happy to accept it.

*FG: The topic of the reality of the laws of nature has a robust tradition in analytic philosophy of science and it became also central in the work of Quentin Meillassoux, one of the principal figures in speculative realism. Within the scientific community, a philosophical discussion regarding the laws of nature came to the fore a few years ago, following a controversial op-ed that Paul Davies published on the New York Times.<sup>20</sup> Davies’ unfortunate comparison of science with religion—the scientists’ reliance on the reality and universality of the laws of nature is ultimately a form of ‘belief’, historically inherited, since no explanation for the laws is known—caused several outraged responses. You responded to that piece too, politely disagreeing with Davies, and claiming that*

*the reason why it’s hard to find an explanation for the laws of physics within the universe is that the concept makes no sense. If we were to understand the ultimate laws of nature, that particular ambitious intellectual project would be finished, and we could move on to other things. It might be amusing to contemplate how things would be different with another set of laws, but at the end of the day the laws are what they are.<sup>21</sup>*

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<sup>20</sup> Paul Davies “Taking Science on Faith,” *The New York Times*, 24th November 2007. Available online at <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/11/24/opinion/24davies.html>.

<sup>21</sup> [http://www.edge.org/discourse/science\\_faith.html#carroll](http://www.edge.org/discourse/science_faith.html#carroll)

*Meillassoux, in his After Finitude, rejects the principle of sufficient reason—arguing that the answer ‘for no reason whatsoever’ is a perfectly good, deflationary but rational, answer to the fundamental ‘why is there something rather than nothing’ question. He formulates his ‘principle of factuality’: the only necessity is the contingency of everything, and this is something that we can know as an absolute, and the necessity of contingency imposes the existence of some contingent entity or state of affairs. Now, this implies that the laws of nature not only are ‘just so’ but that their stability is contingent: no external principle warrants that they’ll be tomorrow as they are today. As a cosmologist, you rely on the stability of the laws of nature through time (as well as their time-reversibility) and space. Do you ‘reasonably expect’ the laws of nature to be invariant through time or do you believe that there is some reason for which they must be so? In other words, even if we answer ‘that’s just the way it is’ to the question ‘why these laws and not others?’ the question ‘why stable and not haphazard laws?’ can still be asked.*

SC: I would be extremely suspicious of any attempts to judge that the world must ‘necessarily’ be some way rather than any other. I can imagine different worlds—or at least I think I can—so I don’t believe that this is the only possible world. That would also go for any particular feature of the laws this world follows, including their stability. Maybe the laws are constant through time, maybe they are not. (Maybe time is a fundamental concept, maybe it isn’t). We don’t yet know, but it seems clear to me that these are empirical questions, not a priori ones. Because we want to understand the world in terms that are as simple as possible, the idea that the underlying laws are stable is an obvious first guess, but one that must then be tested against the data. Said in a slightly different language: any metaphysical considerations concerning what qualities the world should properly have can be taken seriously and incorporated into Bayesian priors for evaluating theories, but ultimately those theories are judged against experiment. We should listen to the world, not decide ahead of time what it must be.

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FG: *Would you then claim to be endorsing reductionism? Stephen Jay Gould, a fellow scientist—but admittedly not a fellow physicist—often argued that the contingency of ‘accidental’ and emergent properties of complex systems undermine any reductionist project. Where do you stand regarding both ontological and disciplinary reductionisms? What objects and which disciplines can be reduced to the objects of study of physicists—be they vibrating strings or mathematical structures?*

SC: I don’t know of any definitions of ‘reductionism’ according to which it is both sensible and plausibly wrong. If we define ‘reductionism’ as ‘the best way to understand complex systems is always to reduce them to their component parts,’ that is not sensible, but I don’t think anyone believes that. If it means ‘the behavior of complex systems can in principle be deduced from the behavior of their component parts,’ then I think it’s true, but not very useful—the ‘in principle’ is crucial, and practice is a completely different matter. If that were not true, it would be tantamount to claiming that component parts (atoms and particles) obeyed different laws when they were in the context of a complex system than when they were isolated. That would certainly be interesting, but very few people really believe it. Much more commonly, people who claim to be anti-reductionist are simply claiming that it is often useful to forget about component parts and look at emergent features of a system. That is indeed very useful, and fully compatible with the idea that any behavior could in principle be deduced from the component parts.

FG: *In a paper aimed at explaining the different worldviews of scientists and ‘religious’ people,<sup>22</sup> you described ‘the materialist thesis’ which scientists underwrite. You wrote:*

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*once we figure out the correct formal structure, patterns, boundary conditions,*

<sup>22</sup> Sean Carroll, “Why (Almost All) Cosmologists are Atheists.” *Faith and Philosophy* 22, 622 (2005). Available online at <http://preposterousuniverse.com/writings/nd-paper/>.

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*and interpretation, we have obtained a complete description of reality. (Of course we don't yet have the final answers as to what such a description is, but a materialist believes such a description does exist).*

*Is complete intelligibility a necessary feature of reality? How do you account for the (ontological) incomprehensible comprehensibility (to paraphrase a famous remark by Einstein) of the preposterous universe (to use your own phrase) in which we happen to live? Moreover, you recently claimed that “the laws underlying the physics of everyday life are completely understood” and observed that “getting the basic laws right is an extremely impressive accomplishment, especially for good old human beings who have only been doing science systematically for a few centuries. Way to go, human beings!”<sup>23</sup> So, on the epistemological level, how would you explain this ability of human beings to ‘get things right’? Would you also argue that all that is real is also knowable (by us)? I am not invoking a scientifically inaccessible ‘supernatural’ level, I am wondering how you would ground the expectation of absolute knowability of immanent reality. Some might refer to the fact that any epistemic enterprise is ultimately powered by our brains, which have originally evolved for particular tasks and to achieve particular evolutionary advantages (essentially, survival—far more basic than quantum field theory) or to the fact that we have reached a stage in scientific development where the experimental apparatus necessary to prove our theories is at a level of technical complexity inaccessible both to our brainpower and our technological capabilities. Are there limits to science?*

SC: I don't think there are any necessary features of reality, over and above logical consistency. But the universe does whatever it does, and a complete knowledge of what that is would represent a complete description of reality. One could imagine truly chaotic universes that possessed no forms of regularity whatsoever, but our universe doesn't seem to be like that. Less dramatically, it may be as a practical matter that a

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<sup>23</sup> <http://blogs.discovermagazine.com/cosmicvariance/2010/09/23/the-laws-underlying-the-physics-of-everyday-life-are-completely-understood/>



## Speculations II

complete description of the universe is beyond our abilities to construct. Again, that's an empirical question and we'll have to wait and see. But I'm not surprised that we have figured out the laws we have, including all of those relevant to our everyday lives. After all, we are part of the physical world; what's really happening is that the evolution of matter produces a compact image of its own regularities. Impressive and amazing, but maybe it shouldn't ultimately be a surprise. How far the project will ultimately progress, I don't think there's any way to know.

*FG: One last question: the 'speculative' part of speculative realism indexes a will amongst a new generation of philosophers to break the discipline free of several self-imposed (anthropocentric) constraints and reclaim an ambition to deal with the complexity of the real world at large. Is it good to 'speculate' in science? I recall a blogpost<sup>24</sup> you wrote commenting on the controversial Nielsen and Ninomiya's paper<sup>25</sup> involving causation from the future and advising that the fate of the Large Hadron Collider should have been decided by a card drawing experiment: contrary to many, your reaction was not of outraged dismissal. You wrote an interesting paragraph:*

At the end of the day: this theory is crazy.... But I'm happy to argue that it's the good kind of crazy. The authors start with a speculative but well-defined idea, and carry it through to its logical conclusions. That's what scientists are supposed to do.

*At a panel discussion which you participated in,<sup>26</sup> physicist Gino Segre advised young scientists to 'think crazy ideas!' Do you think young scientists should pursue so called 'high-risk research' or does science have some form of institutional constraints which tend to limit their speculative velleities and frown upon their (good kind*

<sup>24</sup> <http://blogs.discovermagazine.com/cosmicvariance/2009/10/14/spooky-signals-from-the-future-telling-us-to-cancel-the-lhc/>

<sup>25</sup> Holger B. Nielsen and Masao Ninomiya, "Card game restriction in LHC can only be successful!" (2009). Available online at <http://arxiv.org/abs/0910.0359>.

<sup>26</sup> The Quantum to Cosmos Science Festival at the Perimeter Institute, Waterloo, Ontario. 15th-25th October 2009.



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of) ‘crazy ideas’? *Have your own ideas become more or less ‘crazy’ now as compared to your grad school years?*

SC: I think it’s absolutely crucial that science as a whole nurture a strong speculative impulse. That’s a crucial step in the scientific method—formulating hypotheses. But I wouldn’t want to insist that any particular scientist or group of scientists focus on speculation, including young ones. For most young scientists who have not yet established that they can make solid contributions to the field, wandering off on a speculative path is more likely to lead to being kicked out of the field (by not obtaining a job) than any tangible reward. Rather than exhorting young scientists to think crazy ideas, we should imagine changing the systems of reward and encouragement such that smart people with speculative ideas are protected and promoted. Other than that, I think science has a good amount of speculation built in, and also a pretty good system for weeding out speculations that fail. Individual people may struggle, but good ideas eventually come to the top. My own ideas are getting crazier as time goes on; we’ll have to wait and see whether any of them turn out to be any good.

# Eugene Thacker, *After Life*

Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2010

268 pages

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**L**IFE HAS BECOME A PROBLEM. We can find this problem at the heart of our global political and social debates over abortion rights, right to die movements, questions related to environmental damage, the manipulation of the genetic structure of plants, non-human animals, and human beings, to say nothing of ethical issues related to war and economics. Addressing the problem of life is then of critical importance, but there is another reason to do so; one of simple curiosity. Life presents itself as weird, even in terms of its seeming cosmic rarity, and this weirdness attracts our attention. In the late-20th century and over the past decade the problem of life has become a defining problem, at once a site of political struggle and a captivating weirdness: “If the question of Being was the central issue for antiquity (resurrected in the twentieth century by Heidegger), and if the question of God, as alive or dead, was the central issue for modernity (Kierkegaard, Marx, Nietzsche), then perhaps the question of ‘life’ is the question that has come to define our contemporary era...”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Eugene Thacker, *After Life* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2010), xiii.

## Anthony Paul Smith – Review of *After Life*

Eugene Thacker's *After Life* is a masterly work that does not claim to provide a new conception of life, but to give some clarity to the problem, to provide a critique of life. According to Thacker the three dominant forms of philosophical engagement with life (affective-phenomenological, bio-political and politico-theological) remain 'under the spell' of the framework of an Aristotelian ontology of life passed through history by way of the Scholastics in the Middle Ages. Thacker does not organize the book around these three dominant modes, but he nonetheless argues convincingly for the dominance of this Aristotelian framework that requires we think "life in terms of something-other-than-life"<sup>2</sup> because it is in Aristotle that the problem of life is first split between "that-by-which-the-living-is-living" and "that-which-is-living."<sup>3</sup> That is, in all contemporary ontologies of life there is a separation between Life and the living and this split along with all contemporary responses to this separation are found in some form in post-Aristotelian Scholasticism.

Thacker traces this separation through four of the chapters of the book, leaving the final chapter to set up the planned sequel, *Darklife*, that will look at the fundamental shift in ontologies of life that occurs after Kant. Though the book begins with Aristotle and his *De Anima* and ends with Kant and his *Critique of Judgment* it is not primarily a work in the history of philosophy. Thacker's focus is primarily on those thinkers we would normally group under the category of 'scholasticism,' but it also includes contemporary philosophers like Badiou and Deleuze whose work, while clearly post-Kantian, remains under the spell of post-Aristotelian Scholasticism. It is, more than a work exploring the historical development of the idea of life in philosophy, a work of contemporary interest that dares to ask what naively lies behind our thinking when we claim to think of life.

The contemporaneous character of the book begins with the first chapter which reads Aristotle's *De Anima* through

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., x.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 17.

## Speculations II

characters and motifs found in the 'weird fiction' of authors like H.P. Lovecraft and Clark Ashton Smith. For it is Lovecraft's conception of the 'nameless thing' that is outside the logic of the monster (which requires a normal by which to judge the aberrant) that is the common paradigm for Aristotle's concept of life and our own, before which our categories of thought flounder. This is because in order to think of life as life we must not simply reduce it to its manifestations (biology) and yet we also can't simply remain in silence about what life is as we would have to if we proposed to think life as the totality of experience (theology). And so this third nameless thing is the call to think life as Aristotle attempted to; outside the limits of biology and theology.

Yet Aristotle's original attempt requires the split or separation between Life and the living already mentioned above. Reconciling this split becomes the focus of ontologies of life after Aristotle. Through the proceeding three chapters Thacker traces three responses: raising life to the level of a superlative by the means of negative theology, thinking the Creator-creature relationship as univocal, and a thinking of the divine nature, analogous to Life-in-itself, as a pantheism. Though each response is given its own chapter there is a circulation of common themes, like the question of immanence, that makes each chapter feel as if it has been enfolded into or unfolded from the others. This can lead to a feeling that Thacker is repeating himself, but this repetition is both necessary because of the relatedness of the material and appreciated because of the difficulty of the material. This is true of the last chapter, which focuses mostly on Kant, which suggests that, even if after Kant the attempts at an ontology of life are fundamentally changed, this is an *immanent* change that is really a mutation of the post-Aristotelian Scholastic framework. Whereas the other three chapters pursue thinking life-as-time, life-as-form, and life-as-spirit, the Kantian approach re-formulates the problem of life so that "the major challenge for any ontology of life lies in being able to think its very conditions of being thought at all."<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Thacker, *After Life*, 250.

It is in the final chapter's discussion of the limits of Kantian philosophy that Thacker connects the book directly to work collected under the moniker 'speculative realism,' though Thacker's interest in thinkers like Brassier, Laruelle, and others are present throughout. Before I speak about this connection I have to first discuss the place of theology in the book, for the originality of the book is Thacker's connecting this recent speculative work to that of scholastic theology.

The book begins with Aristotle, casting him as a philosopher whose thought can be read as a kind of biohorror. But the horror present in authors like Lovecraft, who is celebrated by a group of philosophers that take the question of 'decay' and 'the weird' as a particularly interesting challenge for philosophy to think, is linked directly to theology by Thacker. In a discussion of the creatural he writes, "Such examples [like the Wolf Man or psychic 'thought creatures'] are worth taking seriously, for they suggest that the creature, as that which is not-quite-animal, is also that which is not-quite-spiritual. The modern avatars of these 'spiritual creatures' demonstrate the ways in which horror and theology are always intimately connected with one another."<sup>5</sup> The question of thinking life as life, without reducing it to either biology or universalizing it through theology (mirror images of the other), requires that one think alongside both scientific and mystical thought but we must do so because in this instance thinking the weirdness of natural reality goes hand in hand with the weirdness exposed by theology.

While the deflationary elements of speculative realism pivot precisely around a response and often a rejection to the 'theological turn' in Continental philosophy, I read Thacker's book as a warning against the hubris of such deflationary tact. It isn't simply that one form of philosophical discourse is beholden to a quasi-theological framework, as a reductionist might accuse a vitalist, but that all three dominant ontologies of life are reliant on that quasi-theological framework. Even contemporary forms of naturalism appear to operate via a

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<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

## Speculations II

form of pantheism, in so far as the philosophical nihilism of naturalism repeats the theological nihilism of superlative or negative thought that religious mystics used to think God as such. None of this means that philosophy, namely contemporary speculative philosophy, need become theological in itself or acquiesce to religion (as, after Meillassoux's *After Finitude*, one is often accused of tarrying with the spectre of creationism if you engage with religion in any serious way at all), but it does require at least a careful consideration of theology lest we simply remain pious but do not know it.

Thacker's book goes beyond mere consideration, though, to an active mutation of theological thought that matches what I have elsewhere called 'non-theology.' Thus, in each chapter Thacker takes the theological material engaged with therein, derived equally from 'Doctors of the Church' like Augustine and Aquinas, quasi-heretics like Duns Scotus, Eriugena, and Nicholas of Cusa, and mystics outside the Christian tradition like Suhrawardi (Sufi Islam) and Dōgen (Zen Buddhism), and stretches that material to its limit. Thus theology, already for Thacker a "void at the heart of philosophical thinking itself,"<sup>6</sup> becomes both subject to the critique of correlationism and material that may be radicalized under that critique. So, the superlative method of negative theology becomes a thinking of life as luminous void; the relationship between Creator and creature moves from one of univocal immanence (everything in relation) to equivocal immanence (no relation); and pantheism becomes dark pantheism or the conjunction of life and immanence under the sign of the negative.

Thacker takes his readers effortlessly through a minefield of difficult material by systematizing the various forms of post-Aristotelian Scholasticism and providing new ways to conceive of that material through contemporary notions like horror. Because of the skill with which Thacker develops his argument in relation to close readings of a wide range of difficult texts, the book should stand as a model for how to do creative genealogical work. But more importantly, Thacker's

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<sup>6</sup> Thacker, *After Life*, 262.

Anthony Paul Smith – *Review of After Life*

*After Life* is a really remarkable work of philosophy. Not because it offers a convincing conception of life that finally gives us a true contemporary ontology of life, but because it clears up the question and poses it anew so that we might finally begin to answer it.

Jussi Parikka, *Insect Media: An Archeology of Animals and Technology*  
Minneapolis & London, University of Minnesota Press, 2010.  
281 pages

Beatrice Marovich

Drew University

THE PARTICULAR GENIUS OF INSECTS has long been a point of fascination and awe (perhaps, at times, even envy) for the human animal. In his early 20<sup>th</sup> century meditation on the life of bees, novelist Maurice Maeterlink found himself bedazzled by the calculating brilliance of these instinctually mathematical creatures. They act, he wrote, “as if acquainted with [the] principles of solid geometry” and, thus, “follow them most accurately.”<sup>1</sup> How could, he seems to ask, these little brutes have figured these mind tricks out? How could they so effectively actualize, and concretize (in the form, say, of a honeycomb), an abstract problematic over which our agile human brains might agonize?

If the latent humanism of this rumination offends the sensibilities of 21<sup>st</sup> century readers, Jussi Parikka’s *Insect Media*—an entomologically attuned bestialization of media theory—might be aimed, more directly, to please. Most recent in the University of Minnesota’s Posthumanities Series (which includes Donna Haraway’s *When Species Meet*, Robert Esposito’s *Bios*, and Isabelle Stengers *Cosmopolitics I & II* among

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<sup>1</sup> Maeterlink’s *The Life of the Bee* (1901) as quoted in Jussi Parikka, *Insect Media: An Archaeology of Animals and Technology* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 46.



## Beatrice Marovich – Review of *Insect Media*

a host of others) it is a text similarly undone by, and absorbed with, the capacious activity of insects. But it is not, to be sure, a romantic or anthropocentric account of insect life. It is, instead, a rather even-handed assessment of the ambivalent deployment of what Parikka (a Reader in Media Theory and History at Anglia Ruskin University in Cambridge) calls ‘insect affect’ in (and as) the digital technology that swarms within, and around, our corporeal life.

The capacity of insects to act in concert as packs, collectives, multiplicities, has made them appear paradigmatic of the distributed intelligence of our digital era. The ethological figure of the swarm is a ubiquitous analogue of the shape, and configuration, of the networked social. The American military has been keen to, for example, develop cyborg insects that might work like miniscule spies in swarm configuration—ideal agents for a world in which alleged enemies congeal into incomprehensible, shifting forms that escape the capture of traditional intelligence. Theorists like Eugene Thacker and Alexander Galloway have already explored the biodigitization of swarm structure in contemporary technoscience,<sup>2</sup> but Parikka is attempting to build on, and complicate, this work in order to develop a ‘media archaeology’ of insect life. Digging through intellectual and entomological relics dating back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Parikka charges that the coupling of insects and technology is not new. It is not, simply, a meeting of forms that dates back to post-1980s cybernetics. Instead, he argues, a kind of ‘insect logic’ has been configuring and dehumanizing our relations with technology for more than a century.

Parikka’s project seeks to establish this insect logic within a blended and entangled ecology where the boundaries between insect and media are difficult to discern. Here he builds on his earlier media ecological theory in *Digital Contagions: A Media Archaeology of Computer Viruses* (Peter Lang, 2007)—a similar entwining of the biological and technological. Me-

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<sup>2</sup> See, for example: Alexander R. Galloway and Eugene Thacker, *The Exploit: A Theory of Networks* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

## Speculations II

dia, Parikka argues now, is most basically “a contraction of forces of the world into specific resonating milieus.”<sup>3</sup> Media works, in his method, as a contraction and intensification of the environment. Both animals and more conventional media forms, he argues, can serve as such intensifications. Thus, animals can suggestively broaden our sense of what media actually *is*, and how it functions. A digital network is not, perhaps, a media form that mimics the natural world. Instead, a digital network and a collective of insects might be two forms of media that illuminate the work and function of technology. Insects—as contractions of an environment—are media. This is the crucial speculative wager on which Parikka’s insect logic rests.

His theoretical influences are numerous and varied but the project rests heavily on the intensities, assemblages, and diagrammatics of Deleuze and Guattari, and their readings of figures such as Bergson, Spinoza, Whitehead, and the early 20<sup>th</sup> century German ethologist Jakob von Uexküll. Feminist theorists Elizabeth Grosz and Rosi Braidotti make frequent appearances, especially toward the latter half of the book, as does the work of Gilbert Simondon. Parikka’s recovery of 19<sup>th</sup> century entomological sources (such as the theology-heavy work of pre-Darwinian naturalists like William Kirby and William Spence) give off, from time to time, a weird baroque aroma.

The chapters of the books amount to a series of case studies in which Parikka seeks to substantiate the effect and function of this insect logic. The first half of the book is dense in the historical, genealogical, archaeological work. Chapter One dwells in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with theologically inspired entomologists who liken insects to angels, and early ‘pioneers’ of insect media such as chronophotographer Etienne-Jules Marey whose *La Machine Animale* (1873) tracked his attempts to package insect movement into practical machines. Technology was making insects more visible, to human eyes, than

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<sup>3</sup> Jussi Parikka, *Insect Media: An Archeology of Animals and Technology*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), xiv.

ever before and their efficient bodies were, in turn, already serving as technological models and molds. Chapter Two looks at early discourses of insects as nature's non-Euclidean geometers—enviable builders, architects, engineers of form. The hive and swarm-like shape of media questions the assumption that the digital is fundamentally algorithmic, Parikka intimates that insect habit underscores the ways in which algorithms and sensual form are mutually immanent. Chapter Three, an extended meditation on Jakob von Uexküll's work in animal perception, is something of a departure—a bit of a deep theoretical distraction from the genealogical project. While this work on perception becomes crucial for the following chapter, the complex web of theory and history that Parikka weaves seems to strain a bit at this point under the pressure. In Chapter Four he's thinking alongside early 20th century surrealists who were using new film technology to visually amplify insect (and, more generally, animal) affect into human perceptual worlds. The work of Roger Callois is particularly influential, here, as it impacted the surrealists (and Lacan) as well as contemporary game theory. These early attempts to illuminate and expand the work of technology seem to suggestively set the ground for the late 20th century digitization of insect affect.

The second half of the book leaps forward into the post-wwII context, exploring the (perhaps) more historically familiar boom in cybernetic and digital discourses and the subsequent intensification of relations between biological and technological forms of life. This is where, it might be easy to assume, interest in the technological potential of swarms first began to develop. But in Chapter Five Parikka reminds us that pioneers of cybernetics, such as Norbert Wiener, were also initially quite interested in early entomological research and the cybernetic potential of insect life. Parikka also spends time looking at Karl von Frisch's research into bee dancing as a form of communication (in the early 1950s) as a discursive expansion of the embodied social lives of insects, and the initial attempts to deploy animal affect in robotic technologies (such as, especially, the work of W. Grey Walter and his

## Speculations II

‘robotic tortoise’). Chapter Six explores more recent and explicit couplings of biology and technology. Beginning with a discussion of neo-Darwinian discourses on insects in digital culture (such as Richard Dawkins’ biomorphs) Parikka ends with an expressed preference for the collective shape of Craig Reynolds’ “boids” and swarm algorithms. In Chapter Seven, the potentially frightening inhumanism of insect media is more explicitly inhabited and plugged transgressively into forms of desire and sexual selection. Parikka offers a reading of Lynn Hershman-Leeson’s film *Teknolust* (2002)—the fictional quest of a female scientist and her self-replicating automatons (all played by Tilda Swinton) for a little TLC. Pulling from the work of cyberfeminists and thinkers of corporeality beyond the human (such as Luciana Parisi and Rosi Braidotti) Parikka seems to want to derail the heavy militarization of insect media, suggestively pairing his bestialization of media with cyberfeminist propositions that “software also needs a bit of intimacy and cuddling.”<sup>4</sup> The figures and forms of an insect media are not always and already the front of a new and incomprehensible battle—perhaps they need love, too. The nonhuman nature of media does not, necessarily, present us with a terrifying anti-humanism.

While this last chapter might be the most seductive, I think it also exposes what I find the most crucial weakness of *Insect Media*. In spite of the sometimes awkward and challenging pairing of history and theory, the insect logic Parikka advances seems to hang together and present itself well—throughout the text—in the evocative abstract. Insects offer a useful method through which to bestialize media, to make its animal functions more apparent. But in Parikka’s reading of *Teknolust* the actual bodies of insects disappear from the text. The wings, the hives, the hairy legs, the actual sound of a swarm of mosquitoes out for a bit of blood disappear behind the more appealing form of Tilda Swinton and her fictional automatons. To charge, through the mediation of *her* form and figure, that software needs love too is easy.

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<sup>4</sup> Parikka, *Insect Media*, 191.

Beatrice Marovich – *Review of Insect Media*

But intimacy with insect life will, I think, always be a more difficult proposition. We might eat their sweet, sweet honey or recognize their awesome mathematical executions. But insects are more than figures, they work beyond logic too, and the undeniable revolt of mammal flesh against the incisive cut of an insect is—also—an important fact to take into consideration. Parikka, generally, shows a willingness to blend the affects of particular insects together, and the affective potency of insects into that of animals. He creates a brilliant set of figures through which to read media. But I would only hope that the figures don't threaten to overshadow the actual insects.

What Parikka ultimately does, however, is to pose an interpretive challenge. And I think he does this well. Additional, perhaps tantalizing, speculative questions—that he may not ask outright—emerge from his research. If insects are indeed media, for example, how much might the hive-live, swarm-like nature of our digital technology reflect their enterprising colonization of human actors?

Graham Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism*  
Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2010.  
219 pages

*Fintan Neylan*

University College, Dublin

SINCE ITS INCEPTION IN 2006, THE online community which speculative realism sparked has rapidly grown and established the internet as the movement's home. The beauty of this is that the content is readily and regularly debated online as its thinkers have embraced the free publishing format the internet offers. Though such freedom creates an open atmosphere, the various blogs, comments, and email attachments flying about also give it a somewhat sprawling nature. With each post, it becomes increasingly difficult for any newcomer to break into the trend let alone to keep track of new developments. Graham Harman's *Towards Speculative Realism* seems to answer this problem, as the author has published a collection of writings spanning his own career which are geared towards bringing the reader unfamiliar with speculative realism into the fold. The book not only represents a sustained attempt to widen the audience via print, but also a move towards systematizing the movement (or at least his 'object-oriented' section of it).

For the title is an endorsement not only of his thought, but of speculative realism's nature as a diverse school. As is well known by now, the four founders regularly contradict each other, but they are united by a common position: tak-

ing realism with the counter-intuitive speculative angle in mind—in some ways all four are vying to be the Nikola Tesla of philosophy. If this was to be determined by the prose, Harman would easily win: his writing delivers all concepts with a considerable degree of concision, clarity and lightness. The various essay and lectures fall over two categories of Harman's style, with some threading both waters: first as a reader of other philosophers and then as a thinker in his own right. To newcomers (the audience at which the author seems to be aiming), the readings chosen seem to ease one into Harman's own views, with his task to give objects back their autonomy and not have them dependent on being freed from their environment by some privileged feature of humans alone (be that Dasein, consciousness, etc.).

Philosophically, the first three chapters are more a mark of honesty than anything else: they each show Harman as a student working out and clarifying contrary ideas coming from Heidegger and Whitehead. It is in "A Fresh Look at *Zuhandenheit*" that we get a concise summary of his views on Heidegger and a sharp introduction to his thought, so it will serve us to dwell on it for a short while. For despite the fact that Harman's analysis of the Heideggerian tool gradually takes a back seat in his thought, it nevertheless forms a foundation upon which much of the book's ideas are based. At its core, 'tool-being' is a rejection of the world-view that entities are there just for our projects, and not subsisting as independent objects in their own right.<sup>1</sup> In approaching the 'tool analysis' found in *Being and Time*, Harman is quick to denounce the traditional view of privileging the practical as more primordial: instead, he holds that the practical is but another mere 'present-at-hand' (*vorhanden*) way of approaching the object.

In the famous 'breakdown' situation, Harman takes an entity to not become *vorhanden* upon losing its *functionality for us* (such as a hammer's handle breaking), because he holds that a tool's being does not lie solely in its practical use; rather,

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout, Harman uses 'objects' and 'entities' interchangeably.

## Speculations II

it is a mistake to apprehend the object as casually moving between a *zuhanden* or *vorhanden* state from time to time as Harman holds there to be an ‘unbridgeable gulf’ between them.<sup>2</sup> With this we reach his first big claim: contrary to the object traditionally being exclusively *zuhanden* or *vorhanden*, it occupies both states simultaneously at each moment of time, i.e., every entity is constantly in ‘a global dualism.’<sup>3</sup> Not being meshed to the practical, the *zuhandenheit* of the object refers rather to its inexhaustible inner reality—importantly, its independent reality. So where does that place *vorhandenheit*? To state an object as present-at-hand is to refer to a particular finite aspect which has been broken off its reality by our (or another object’s) encountering it. For example, when a car hits a gate, each colliding object comes into contact with certain aspects of the other: though the car perceives the hardness of the wrought iron and the gate perceives the flexibility of the aluminium as it crunches under the exerted pressure, neither encounters all the aspects of the other.

No matter how many attempts, on Harman’s view each object has a wealth of aspects which can never be entirely dug out. Instead, what is turned up in each instance is a particular *vorhanden* aspect. With each object laying claim to a *zuhanden* in its own right, Harman can thus reach his central claim that every object which is, is already a tool; to put it in his own words, “the tool isn’t ‘used,’ it is.”<sup>4</sup> By distinguishing the idea of tool from the finite aspect of ‘use,’ he maintains that we cannot bridge the gap between the aspects we come across in our pedestrian acquaintances with objects and the reality of their domestic interiors. Our perceiving the object ‘as a means,’ i.e., in terms of the ‘as-structure,’ is no longer even a privileged type of encountering but a garden variety type along with all the other encounters between autono-

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<sup>2</sup> Graham Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2010), 47.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* 47.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* 46 his italics.



mous objects.<sup>5</sup> For ‘use’ of them can only come about if the objects form an independent structure already—i.e., one not dependent on Dasein—as Harman later states that ‘they are real, *because they are capable [autonomously] of inflicting some sort of blow on reality.*’<sup>6</sup>

From this analysis, two consequent claims bear on the rest of Harman’s thought: the first leads one down a road of Heideggerian scholarship, and thus it is not followed up; in contrast the second frames each chapter of the rest of the book. They are, respectively, 1) all philosophical concerns of Heidegger can be reduced down to some form of the global duality found in entities; 2) despite Heidegger’s wishes, the ‘tool-being’ analysis places a metaphysics back into his system, one in which entities, through perception, objectify each other –regardless of whether Dasein is around or not. Harman thus takes his ‘object-orientated’ project to be a revival of metaphysics within the tradition of Continental philosophy. But before starting, he notes in his piece on Latour that Continental Philosophy is haunted by its own two dogmas which must be overcome: the first is anti-realism, an inaccessibility caused by a supposed (and somehow privileged) human finitude; holism comes second, particularly the type whose outlook relegates the independence of individual objects within a larger system (or context).<sup>7</sup>

Taking his cue from Latour, Harman holds that objects are comprised of relations between other objects. Crucially, all relations comprise an object. However what is put forth is not meant to resemble a type a hierarchy—instead it is stressed that all relations are equal in significance and on the same footing. The key point is that, when in a relation, both objects ‘objectify’ each other, though not in any conscious way. Relation becomes the means by which objects A and B encounter the finite properties of each other, but Harman still holds that object A never comes into contact with, i.e., never bridges the gap to, the withdrawn reality of B, or what

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 111 his emphasis.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 85-87.

## Speculations II

he now calls the ‘substance’ of object B. Harman is quite clear-cut that substance, a concept long-shied away from by Continental thinkers, is nothing but the unknown withdrawn reality of the object which is inexhaustible “by any perception of it or relations with it.”<sup>8</sup> The system which he is trying to put forward, particularly in “The Revival of Metaphysics in Continental Philosophy,” is that the key opposition of the universe is between substance and relation.<sup>9</sup>

Now, having substances with unbridgeable gaps may seem reminiscent of a dogmatic Leibnizian outlook complete with pre-established harmony but, with a bit of help from Husserl, Harman dodges this with his own novel conception of causation—an indirect type he calls ‘vicarious.’ If real objects are separated by a chasm, then how does one account for interaction between them, or, to put differently, how can causation happen in reality? Even causation cannot bridge the gap between objects, so Harman concedes that causal interaction must take place on the interior of an object. Yet when I grasp an intentional object I enter into a relation with it: the *intentional act* is a new object, as it is constituted by a relation. For Harman the real table ‘perceives’ me, by relating, as an intentional object to it. Thus the table and I find ourselves duelling in the withdrawn interior of another object and any interaction between us must happen *as parts* constituting that third object. So in order to hang on to substances, causation between two objects cannot be direct; instead, it must operate ‘vicariously’ through a third object which opens an interior space for action.<sup>10</sup>

Harman’s thoughts on objects and his revival of metaphysics drive him to a position which could be called a Husserlian reversal, as it is from the foregoing analysis that he concludes it is not horizons that form a major element of the world, but ‘objects and their interiors.’<sup>11</sup> But as well as giving an introduc-

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<sup>8</sup> Graham Harman, *Towards Speculative Realism*, 118.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* 114.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.* 132-133.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.

## Fintan Neylan – *Review of Towards Speculative Realism*

tion to the main ideas of object-oriented metaphysics, *Towards Speculative Realism* also provides the reader with writings that discuss other philosophers. Though some of the early ones do seem to be placed in order to buttress the thesis of ‘tool-being’ their inclusion also serves to point one in the direction of authors with whom the reader may be unfamiliar. Throughout, Harman is clear and concise in his exposition of whoever he takes as his focus. And as mentioned before, he makes no secret about the source of his inspiration: from Whitehead, interior reality of objects and from Lingis the autonomy of objects. It is with the more substantial “Bruno Latour, King of Networks,” however, that we see Harman come into his own. He does well to include it, as Latour’s influence presses itself upon the rest of the book and his witty exposition serves to ease one into the more complex essays.

Though brevity has now revealed itself as my enemy, I feel it important to note a certain change in Harman’s style in his more recent work. Post-2006 there is a clear vibrancy in his writing, as one can see the effect of dialogue with the other speculative realists cropping up in his work. Along with the Latour lecture, the essay on DeLanda proves to be one of the best: in the nine years between the Latour piece and “The Assemblage Theory of Society,” we see the author operating with a great deal more finesse in analysing his topic. In tackling DeLanda’s thought, Harman is no longer drawing on ideas of his target, but positions them in dialogue with his own: we see a critical appraisal through his own object-oriented system, something which marks the emergence of a ‘Harmanian’ line of thought against the others. Though there is a definite ‘work in progress’ feel throughout *Towards Speculative Realism*, it is heartening that one does feel there is a sense of progress. Although this review has been somewhat restrictive in its scope, we can summarise this collection as being one which shows the author, both as reader and as thinker, shifting into a mature stage of thought. The reader is thus invited to trace this shift towards the current edge of speculative realism.





