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jane brown

the insubordination of joan of arc

alain badiou

translated by valentin cartillier

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE

The role of a translator's note is always to lament the struggle of transmission, to draw attention to the series of impasses that a translation inevitably presents. Badiou's French text is on Joan's life and posthumous legacy. Its largely florid and poetical mode of reflection eludes being captured by the brutishness of English. The resistance of rendering one language into another that the task of translation places before us is in fact analogous to the problematic Badiou puts before us in the following article. Badiou poses us the question "Who is she?" The very enigma of Joan of Arc is precisely her resistance to being fully captured

within signification, despite the numerous attempts to do so — whether literary, musical, religious, or political. Yet Joan still holds relevance for us today as a figure of this very resistance itself. She can be claimed by no-one, but only properly alluded to by those who take up her up in her own terms of resistance. This resistance figures into Badiou's own conception of subjectivity in the process of what he calls a political truth procedure. Her subjectivity is the process of her transition from the routine of everyday existence into becoming an historical figure of France, whose story captivates and fascinates us to this day. Joan repels all the available predicates of her time; she is a peasant who addresses herself directly to the king; a woman who takes up the traditionally masculine position of a political and military leader against the English; a Catholic who comes into sharp confrontation with the Church, leading to her eventual execution on the pyre. Badiou's presentation of Joan's resistance to these predicates confronts the translator with the same resistance he exalts. One translates in despair, and yet, by undergoing the very process of translation, something new emerges. Just as Joan's subjectivity of resistance permeates all attempts to capture her, so too does a text's elusiveness engender the never-ending task of translation, the attempt to signify in another language what cannot be fully signified.

Who is she? For she lies buried beneath interpretations and sublimations. She is like someone who, burnt and scattered, would have nothing less than innumerable tombs everywhere; where none could claim, unlike Mallarmé's tombs, to complete the poem of her existence and her oeuvre.

The tomb of Christ, in Hegel's meditation, draws its power from its own

uniqueness and its void. The innumerable tombs of Joan — literary, political, historic, religious, cinematographic, or poetic — are however filled to the brim with disparate significations. But ultimately, these significations have something deceitful about them, whether we envision them each for themselves or in their incomprehensible totality.

She is veiled only in beauty! The abstract sublime of Schiller, the patriotic passion of Michelet, and Péguy, a disjunctive synthesis of socialism, nationalism, and universal Christianity. Or Claudel, who binds her to the verse and the music of Honegger more surely than to the pyre.

Such faces are given to her in the artifice of reproduction, to make us dream of this absent gaze, of that unimaginable body! The Falconetti of Dreyer, the Ingrid Bergman of Hollywood, Florence's Delay of Bresson, Sandrine Bonnaire of Rivette. She passes behind these captors of light like a shadow suddenly called to a secondary, provisional destiny. Because, having existed, she is not a role to which an interpretation must hold as tightly as possible to an impossible resurrection. But who is she? Who brings her back to life?

There is also only ugliness or equivocations. This begins with Shakespeare's sarcasm, the English enemy. But here there is also the obscenity of Voltaire, convinced that, to crush infamy, it is appropriate to turn Joan into a wartime song of the barracks. She resists this treatment. But who resists? And so we find, in our cities, all these inept statues of Joan perched upon an extremely shabby bronze horse, adorned with her banner. She competes with the sinister monuments where one can read the interminable list of massacres born of the butchery of 1914-1918. The satisfying mediocrity of the Third Republic engendered a short-circuit between a nationalistic Joan and an absurd war. A short-circuit which is equally the drama of Péguy's life, the crucifixion of his poem by the villainy of the era. Long before these calamitous fetishes, Joan irradiates her subsistent enigma. But the enigma of what?

Who is she, that there could be both the anti-Joan of Voltaire and Michelet's Joan, the incarnation of the people? The nationalistic and Catholic Joan, France's eldest daughter of the Church, and the Joan of resistance and emancipation? The last war brought the enigma to its fever pitch. For there was the Joan of Pétain and the Joan of the Resistance. There is a Joan of the darkest reaction, of denunciation and collaboration; and a Joan of the communists, the very same which, along with the secret Party, returned the colours of France to Aragon. Even today, there is a Joan of Le Pen and the National Front. Or a Joan for those for whom the watchword is no longer the rallying cry of resistance against the powerful and militaristic invader, "to throw the English out of France"; but the watchwords of the dejection and persecution of the most vulnerable of our compatriots, the terrifying slogan of "throwing the *sans papiers* out of France." Against what can we reclaim a Joan for whom France is nothing if she is not within the imperative of resistance? If she, the Joan in the midst of her prayer, does not propose to tie all that is beholden to universal maxims for us in the midst of a political declaration? Accordingly, who can declare that those who have lived here for years, with or without documents, are as much from here as we are?

It seems to me that the enigma of Joan is this: the singularity of her emergence in the knot of dissimilar and discarded predicates. For Joan, on her part, would never accept to be reducible to them as a whole, nor to another one. Each of Joan's tombs attempts the contrary of this reduction, or at best this totalisation, for Joan is always the unspoken remainder of attempts to make her signify this or that.

The predicates with which we ensnare Joan are known to us all. There is France, the nation. There is Christianity, the religion. There is Royalty, the State. There is war, the army, and battles. Captivity, the trial, and torture. There is, diagonally across all others, femininity, the young girl simultaneously, in the world of yesteryear, vulnerable amongst all others, and nevertheless inaccessible, a weakness identical to her armour.

When we combine these predicates, we obtain what must be called practical

oxymorons, absolutely improbable collisions. These are what fascinate artists, as an oxymoron is an essential operation, because it delivers the impractical connections in language which art renders necessary. And thus, we have something like the movement of the sublime: a young girl as a military leader. The peasant who personally addresses the king. The victim whose transparent speech brings her directly into contact with the brutality of the judges. The saint burnt as a heretic and a sorceress.

Yet such is the force of these collisions, singular as they are, that we have the strong feeling that Joan has become petrified amid the artistic and sensitive resources. She becomes a repertoire, a collection of emblems. And the thinking of what she represents subtracts itself for the benefit of a signifying force which nullifies the risk that constitutes the whole.

This is undoubtedly beyond what Joan could have been, which we do not consider enough, as a reversal of the available predicates, that which she chose not to be, in a situation which was hers. Because this “not to be” is that which Joan — keeping at a distance the essential or appropriate figure that the situation imposed upon everybody — is less a shimmering and magnificent crystallisation of time, but more, an exception of this time, an event altogether hazardous and contingent. This is the only thing which illuminates that she is still worthwhile for us, for everyone, independent of the predicates which constitute her. There is no longer royalty or Christendom. Being a woman no longer has the same signification. France rarely ever poses the question of what will remain of her in Europe. It is less a question of kicking the English out of the country and more about how to engage with them, or how not to be completely absorbed by the bulk of Germany. We do not believe in saints or sorcerers. Within our predictable wars, whether they be rampant or apocalyptic, the question of knowing which functionary is going to be the one to press the buttons bothers us not one bit. Yet Joan remains a force and an enigma. She remains, for us, eternally available. How does one think that this woman, for whom all the apparent predicates return to a now obscure fifteenth century, could be so contemporary? It must be that her truth, or the

truth that she herself is, lies in the gaze of this fifteenth century, at the same time, entirely immanent and nevertheless subtracted. She is destined to be, albeit in the mode that she is destined, eternally accessible outside of it. Would Joan be this: the affirmative essence of a century, precisely because she is this century outside of itself?

SHE WHO LEAVES

There exist centuries where the general opinion is that they have been particularly dark, even in light of this long suite of massacres and disasters that we all know from human history. Or rather, as Marx said, its interminable prehistory. No one thinks, for example, that this is the case in our century as it nears its completion, which has carried the crime of the State to such perfection that we have trouble comprehending what has happened. But perhaps we contend that the value of this century is precisely as capable of maintaining the proof of the eternal return that, according to Nietzsche, had all the obstinacy, the force of thought, courage, so that a certain quantity of justice, of creation, of resistance and of a universalizable affirmative vision can subsist. They subsist under conditions that are often, in effect, as barbaric and nocturnal as the ones which incarnate the allegoric protagonist of Ernest Jünger's novella, the one entitled the Head Forester. For the time to come, it falls to the one who has not ceded to the Head Forester so they will not return to carry the century on their shoulders.

The beginning of the fifteenth century, with its infinite war, its band of brigands destroying everything which exists, its dilapidated figures of the state, its famines, has everything which appears in the anthology of disastrous periods. Already the fourteenth century had as its fatal sign the Black Plague. But for us, it is on Joan's behalf that this moment is carried to what is essential in what remains, instead of the public calamity that does nothing but harden the chaotic and habitually vile traits of the world's ordinary path. That which destines a miserable epoch to a sort of subsistent truth which always emerges from an exception.

It is of importance to consider that Joan did not choose to be what her century offered her in the usual run of things, or as an available predicate. Joan, in this respect, conforms greatly to that which the English novel knew to designate as the exceptional function of the young girl, as she who leaves. She leaves behind not only Domrémy, but all that the century destined for a young girl of her age and her provenance. She even leaves in the normal way of leaving. It is, in these conditions, themselves twisted and obscure, which Virginia Woolf calls *The Voyage Out*, in the title of one of her novels, dedicated to a young woman: this has been translated into French, somewhat remotely but acceptably, as *La Traversée des apparences* (*The Traversal of appearances*). Each predicative appearance: the peasant, the Christian, the patriot, but also the warrior, or the prisoner, is not carried or endured, but traversed by default, caught out, by Joan's successive choices, not to be that which the situation prescribed her to be. Where she never ceases to emerge, to be faithful to her own emergence, is within this very individual mixture of the Joan-event, this unwavering certitude and astonishment at what is happening to her.

Take the connection between Joan and France, the nation, which is without a doubt the origin of the most striking oppositions in her posthumous destiny. The mission that Joan is given, by the imperative intervention of the celestial voices, is without a doubt one of a national salvation, where the maxim is one of resistance: run the English out, win the war, liberate the territory. But which France is this exactly? What is this France that, at the beginning of the fifteenth century, has become something else, due to the complicated processes, an uncertain future, the justification for an English monarchy to claim legitimate sovereignty? To ensure that the principle of "kicking the English out of France" is in reality, in the conditions of the epoch, a maxim which constituted France herself, a choice across which France is defined as resistance and combat, is nothing like a substance of persistence. It seeks to traverse a national facade towards a still indistinct real.

That is why, as exaggerated as it may seem, de Gaulle's quasi-immediate identification with Joan is still legitimate in the sense that, for him too, France

doesn't pertain to the evil, inherent permanence of those who, somehow or other, went about their daily lives under the Nazis' supervision, but exclusively to those who sought as their immediate imperative to kick the Nazis and their collaborators out. Owing to the fact that Pétain's claim to Joan could only be an act of complete deception, as the German puppet who trapped France in an immobile terror. Let us say that Joan does not fall easily under the national predicate, that she is rather an event, a capacity for creation, than a result. She chose not to be what the era demanded her to be: someone who, far from the centres of decision, waits, utterly committed to her survival, to know on which side the balance falls. The nation is not for a delivered substance, a body which no war could master or symbolise. She is, like the resistance of the last war, a maxim which requires personal practice.

If we turn now to the people's Joan, the one who leaves her rural province towards the masters of the kingdom, we observe that she decisively chose not to be what was expected: a sort of people's prophet, elevating the peasants of her region, playing up a mystical trance or pretending to have the gift of divination, forming groups opposed to the regularity of the powers. She chose not to be a female Jacquou le Croquant, or an early Thomas Münzer. Yes, she came from the people, this is certain, but not within a purported semi-religious, semi-insurrectional guise, as our times have regularly portrayed her. She turns solitary towards the State, the king, the established powers. Her conviction, altogether incomparable, is that if she herself is about to reach the king, to talk to him, the course of events could change, that the State could give itself other principles of action. The classic figure of the prophetic disturbance, Joan substitutes an action in the direction of the State. She holds that all of this is possible, that no situation will bring about the impossibility of a resistance which conforms to the principles of the State. She believes that declaring her conviction to the king will inspire confidence in all. It is therefore unnecessary to oppose the State with the people. She seeks to make sure that a declaration from elsewhere, unplaceable and lateral, will make the State itself listen. The people have an aleatory capacity to prescribe to the State decisions which cohere to certain principles. And the people only exist in

the exercise of this capacity.

THE VOICES OF JOAN

What can be said of Joan the Christian, the Catholic? One must confess, frustrating the revision of the trial and the legitimate reputation of the infamous collaborator who holds the name of Bishop Cauchon, that it is not without admissible reasons that theologians could have declared that Joan was a heretic, even if they only accomplished, in doing so, the dirty work of the State. Because it has to be said that, at a time when Catholicism had the real body of a Church, Joan did not form the mediation of her belief through this body. Joan's authority comes only from herself, as with St Paul on the road to Damascus, where God gave the sign to her and to her only. Furthermore, it is based on this unwitting model of the Greek gods that both male and female saints prescribed her the task. Behold how the celestial authorities surprise us by involving themselves so intimately in ongoing national wars and are so resolutely on the side of France. These authorities' interests are, for reasons which are certainly their own, like Athena, Apollo or Hera, divorced from whether or not the Trojans or the Greeks win the battle.

What really signifies the voices of Joan? Simply that the patriotic imperative is unconditioned and self-sufficient, being of superior providence. And especially, that it does not infer the situation from itself, or the meanderings of realist politics, but from a pure subjectivation. And without a doubt what is possible which prescribes that voices must find their path in real practice, to that which provides lucidity, obstinacy, and the good sense of Joan. However, when this principle, under the form of the encounter with the voices, does not assume itself, its taking-place, it would seem as though Joan herself is powerless, as though she must obey. Just like the resistant fighters of the last war, questioned about their motivations, who nearly always responded that it is what they had to do, and that is all.

Joan's Catholicism is evidently not up for discussion. But at the same time, she

dwells in the intellectual resource of the epoch, for that is the public destiny of Joan, strangely reduced to a personal imperative, who gives form to the character of unlimited unconditionality of all true resistance.

And finally, who is Joan as a feminine figure? The motif of virginity seems to inscribe her, in the epoch, beneath the sign of Mary. For her contemporaries, she is the Maid. Partisans and adversaries cling to this predicate in a stupefying manner. One needed the physiological testimony of the matrons for the king to even take notice, and one must insinuate the doubt so that the English could create their propaganda, or so that Voltaire articulates anti-clericalism and obscenity. But at its heart, what does it matter to us? Virginity is here only the sign of a gap: one which shows that Joan asserts her decision not according to man, or from man, or from within some matrimonial delegation. She is a woman anterior to the stigmata of power that man can transmit to some women. She advances, as a young woman who, left alone and not transmitted, beneath the armour of an inaccessible and nevertheless decisive femininity. Without a doubt, only a woman whose beauty matched an interior armour had, in the conditions of the era, the authority to say in a loyal way, outside of all the rapine and of all the monstrosity, uniquely because it was what the era demanded: “Make war, not love.”

A patriot without a nation, a populist without an insurrection, a Catholic without the Church, a woman without man: this is how Joan traverses appearances and subtracts herself from all predicates.

The reactionary versions of her cult all consist in bringing to her, like heavy totems, or the equestrian statues of our cities, the predicates of which she was but their traversal. We hang on her shoulders, new chains for the new concealed pyres, a nationalism of substance and of race, a chosen people, a Catholicism of priests and submission, a femininity of sacredness.

It must be returned to its wanderings, to its universality, to the event without substance or realist condition for what she does, and where she dwells. From the

beginning of the fifteenth century, where the ordinary horrors had nothing to tell us, she is a truth. For in its heart, despite being particular and monotonous if seen as a moment in the time of men, it is here, that the exception dwells. She who knew, albeit in a single circumstance, not be reduced to the predicates of submission that her time imposed on her. Joan is entirely of her time, by all that she chose to be, and even more so by what she chose to not be, from that bloody and decayed beginning of the fifteenth century. But she is a truth, a truth for evermore. She is that which, for her barbaric epoch, merits the eternal return.

It is for this reason, she is greatly honoured, as Péguy says in his poem, "... by all those women and all those men who lived their human lives."

Badiou, Alain. "L'insoumission de Jeanne." *Esprit*, no. 238 (12) (1997): 26–33.

**“the future doesn’t last
forever”**

bernard aspe

translated by oliver feltham

“History is sad, because it is time, and it knows that it will be forgotten.”

For some years now we have carried the world in our pockets and handbags. I never would have believed — or I forgot — that it was such a little thing. And that, as such, it was so easy to lose. This is unfortunate, because to find something it has to be somewhere. But if there is no world anymore, where could we go and search for it?

It’s already some years ago now that I wrote this little tale, this enigma, and sent it to a few friends.¹ The idea was to express the disarray into which we have

fallen given the fact that the earth, the originary ark (to reuse Husserl's terms), is threatened.² We are supposed to recognize — faced with this threat — a self-evident duty to save the earth. Those little flyers posted up everywhere — their function is to accustom us to this evidence, and so the paradox it contains is masked: we are exhorted to “think global”, to make “gestures” for the planet. The world, or the entire world — as we said before we learnt that there are several worlds, that there are even an infinity of them — the entire world, of which we are part, is nevertheless amongst us: a little like those sets that are members of themselves, and we know the kind of logical puzzles they provoke. The world can be saved, just like one saves a species that is becoming extinct, just like one can try to save a person, a soldier, a comrade.

The background to this paradox is the most objective assessment that can be made: what is currently underway is the destruction of the world as it is, a destruction that is voluntary for those people who have the capacity to bring it about, or who do nothing decisive to bring it to a halt, which comes down to the same thing; a destruction all the more easy to deny given that nowadays it is universally known. Hence this is a perfectly objective assessment: no scientist could outdo it in terms of objectivity. As it happens, it is a political objectivity. What will be of particular interest for us today is that it is also, inextricably, a historical objectivity.

1. HISTORY ALONE

What is at stake is history. History is sad, Platonov tells us (this is the phrase cited as the epigraph, drawn from *Chevengur*) at the end of the 1920s, at the moment at which one could measure to what extent the revolutionary program was difficult to put in practice, and what its cost might prove to be — even if for Platonov it was not a question of giving up hope.³ At the end of the 1980s Godard spoke to us of the solitude of history. History is alone because it continues whilst having lost what seemed to be inseparable from it, that is to say, its telos, its end. History is alone because it no longer has an end, that end prescribed for it by the revolutionary movement: the horizon of a humanity emancipated from its chains, inasmuch as

that horizon came about through a complete dismantling of the capitalist world and the emergence of an egalitarian society in which the “free development of each” could have been “the condition of the free development of all” (Marx and Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*).⁴

In the end, history is alone because it is separated from politics. History which is not alone, which is not left to its own devices, is history envisaged as the field and movement of a political accomplishment. Inversely, politics supported by history, supported by the idea of an objective, ineluctable, necessary historical development, is politics which is not left to its own devices because it has found its reason and its guarantee outside of itself — I mean outside the forms of action and the meetings which make up its specific consistency, as we have noted during this seminar. Politics without history is also politics alone.

We have learnt to think politics based on its specific domain, in other words, on its basis alone. We have learnt to separate politics and history — and we must add: so as to save politics. History has been deconstructed, it seems, without anything left over. Politics had to be untied from history so that it did not end up shipwrecked like the latter — this is how we should understand the gesture made by some authors, authors from whom we have drawn some support. Politics had to be saved as subjectivation, and loosened from history; the latter, from that point forwards, being referred to objectivity. Scenes of political subjectivation could only be thought, it seemed, as removed from those historical processes of which they were in no way the expression. Politics which broke with the inegalitarian logic of the police (Rancière), politics “at a distance from the state” (Badiou), is politics which refers to itself alone, which must completely support itself by its own means, and in this manner alone finds its specific consistency.⁵

Hence we admitted the deconstruction of history. However, it should be understood that this deconstruction is not only the result of the impasses of Marxism, nor of the failures of the revolutionary socialist movement, nor of the emergence of new political problematizations that did not find their place inside that movement. The

deconstruction of history is clearly in part a product of these factors I have just mentioned, but it is also the result of active work on the part of the enemy, work which permitted the subjective weave granted by history as element of politics to be undone. If history has been defeated, it is because our enemy has succeeded in destroying it. As Silvia Federici writes, “history as collective project” was the “main casualty of the neoliberal era of capitalism”.⁶ Moreover, to complete this project, it was necessary to attack on two fronts at once.

The militants of the economy first succeeded in finding a way around the factory as a site of political organization by expanding productive life and carrying out an indoctrination into work outside actual workplaces — thus accomplishing a movement which has been there since the beginning as Jason Moore has shown, but which didn’t always have the same reach nor the same depth. At the same time, strategies have been rolled out, one after another, which have been decoded as the “colonization of the lifeworld”, as the society of the spectacle, and, to put the cherry on the cake, as the set of neoliberal strategies for guiding subjective behaviour (Foucault, Chamayou).⁷ The 1960s revolts took quite seriously the fact that one had to revolt also against the fabrication of life, against the ways in which power acts on the very conduct of life. These too were revolts that neoliberalism intended to circumvent. It was no longer sufficient to give work a psychic role that it never had before the liberal revolution; it was no longer sufficient to complete that quite narrow horizon by the invention of leisure activities with prescribed content; it was necessary to enter even more intimately into life and colonize the space of ascesis, the space of the work of the self on the self (the “self” being as much individual as collective). It was no longer sufficient to construct the timeframe and the appropriate places for what lay outside work (holidays); it was now necessary to control time in life’s most intimate moments, and undo the hold that remained for subjects upon themselves, that is, the capacity, which could define the subject as such, of being able to elaborate their own consistency. No wonder that the most widespread pathology of our time is precisely that of actively renewing our own inconsistency under the pretext of verifying it.

Perhaps we have not yet sufficiently explored the relationship between these workarounds and the fact that they were brought about by *one and the same movement*. The militants of the economy, it seems, had learnt Simondon's lesson about invention: a problem is only solved if it is solved in at least two ways at the same time.

In this seminar we have often spoken of this double solution from different standpoints — I only mention it today to underline one of its effects: a victory of the enemy over history as collective project, as matrix for political subjectivation. To undo the very idea of a political projection of a desirable and radically different future — yet one of which we would have an image, an idea — is to bring about the erasure of any horizon of expectation (Koselleck), and as such the absence of any perspective sufficiently charged with promise to enable subjects to hold on amidst the uncertainty of a present which does not resemble in any way the desired future. What takes the place of this erased horizon is catastrophe — as Rancière has shown for intellectual discourse — with the place made for the “Shoah” for a certain period, and today for the end of the world.⁸ It is history without History, yet it retains from History the necessity of being constructed via the end; however, the end is solely conceived of as a terminal point, and not at all as a goal. There is no longer any end possessing meaning, there is an end of everything, which is underway, an endless end, a progressive or perhaps sudden destruction. “End” is therefore no longer a synonym of *telos*; it's only a matter of the end of the story. In any case, what we do have are *stories*, in the plural (*histoires*), that's all we have: which means that we interpret what happens to us on the basis of the end conceived solely as a terminus. History is always what begins via the end, via the projected end — this is one of the reasons why a “love story” (*histoire d'amour*) is an oxymoron. (Another reason is that love is trial, and the pathos of trials doesn't suit stories).

History today is thus nothing more than the promise of the end; otherwise, history is confused with reportage that lots of things are “happening”. At this moment, for example, in Gaza, the programme of the extreme right is being carried out:

emptying Gaza, by massacring a large part of its inhabitants, and by destroying the environments that sustain the lives of those who might have the intention to stay; and all this with the tacit and hypocritical approval of Western states. But the problem is not that of the history of military or state powers and those that mimic them — nobody doubts that that history, unfortunately, has not come to an end and continues. The powers that matter to us are those of political subjectivation; and it is subjective time which is blocked, the time of political subjectivity of the kind that we have been trying to outline and solidify.

We are stuck in a present without horizon, and there we repeat the gestures that confirm our impotence. Repetition and blockage provide satisfaction — a satisfaction which is not experienced as such, which is the definition of unconscious enjoyment (*jouissance*). Yet we thought that we had come to the end of our analysis. Indeed we thought we had been liberated from the fantasy contained in our old relation to History inasmuch as we thought we had been liberated from the ultimate figure of the consistency of the Other, the place it all comes together, where it is written — “it”, experience, meaning. In other words, we can summarize the deconstruction of history by saying that history was unveiled as a non-theological substitute of the Other. We had to admit that this Other was just as inconsistent as that of religions. But this admission did not liberate us in any way from the cunning enjoyment that was bound from that point onwards, as already noted, to the active renewal of our impotence — on the contrary, it is what fastened us to that enjoyment. Perhaps this also happened because we can’t stop ourselves from addressing the Other, including in our personal and intimate relationships: we demand the other to be the Other. But then we can only end up verifying that in the place we want the other to be, there is nobody. This is good to know, but right away I’d point out that this is not the last word concerning what we call our relationships.

2. TELEOLOGY AND THE HISTORY OF NATURE

In this manner we have learnt to think that the condition for thinking anything

whatsoever, and above all history and politics, is ridding oneself of the idea that there is, that there would be a *telos*. The target of the deconstruction of history is always the teleology that is immanent to it. “Presence” gave rise to such an obsession amongst the thinkers of deconstruction, but in the end this was always the self’s presence to itself understood as the aim of a process, whether it be a process of thinking or a historical process — or the unity of the two, which is what Hegel posited as his contribution.

So we admitted the deconstruction of teleology. Yet I would like to propose a thought experiment to you: say we approach things the other way around, in the opposite sense. Instead of starting from this basis, let’s start from the idea that historical teleology, such as the teleology underlying Marx’s analyses for example, was true — but that what had to happen, necessarily, did not happen. There was a historical necessity, but the revolutionary movements did not succeed in accomplishing it, in making it effective. The meaning of History should be understood as missed teleology; this makes us see that what should have taken place did not take place, and that a limitless catastrophe is unfolding from that not-having-taken-place. We need to think a teleology whose effectivity has been suspended — the catastrophe that we are living through has inserted itself within that suspension. It was true: the revolution, at first proletarian and then working-class, and then in a wider perspective outlined by a heteroclite revolutionary movement, no longer solely centered on the figure of the worker, was indeed a historical necessity. But the proletariat failed, the workers’ movement failed, just as the more mixed insurrectional movement that extended the latter. The result is that the power of destruction is today in the hands of those who never should have possessed it in the first place. This is what Benjamin already told us long ago: we should have stamped out the fuse that the bourgeoisie lit before the catastrophe was irremediable (Tronti took up this idea, and in turn Frédéric Neyrat developed it by insisting on the importance of the relationship to what does not happen in *Le cosmos de Walter Benjamin*).⁹ But the capitalist class remained in power, and possesses what it should never have kept its hands on.

What we need to think is thus a historical necessity that has been verified without having been accomplished, and perhaps verified by the very fact of not having been accomplished.

It is in this sense that we can begin to understand what it could mean to say that history is returning: it returns as the insistence of what didn't happen. Yet one should immediately emphasize that if history is returning, it is after having undergone a transformation. Nature has no history, Hegel said, and Badiou said the same thing almost two centuries later. But for some time now we know, on the contrary, that nature also has a history, and that this history is strictly inseparable from human history. One could even say that in this entanglement of natural and human histories, nature has taken in charge the verification of the well-foundedness of what was supposed to have been accomplished, in the shape of the revolutionary project, by human history. It so happens that this verification is purely negative: the proof of the necessity of the historical accomplishment of the revolutionary project is the disaster that has followed the failure of that accomplishment.

As Marx already underlined, capitalism is constitutively a machine of destruction, and what's more, today it is a machine that is racing out of control. The truth about the essence of capitalism has been revealed for a long time now, and this essence is a unity, but it has two aspects: there is setting to work, and there is destruction — destruction via setting to work as a global effect, just as much as a local reality, setting to work standing alongside the necessity of destructions, destruction so as to relaunch setting to work. (Look up the article in *Le Monde* last week about the “slaughter” represented by workplace deaths in France, and in the opinion column of the 12th November 2023 the World Health Organization estimates that one death in four is due to “avoidable” climate factors).¹⁰ No doubt the unity of destruction and appropriation I am speaking of here is quite close to, or inspired by, what Elise Gonthier-Gignac proposed naming the “capture of the outside”, which aimed more precisely at the unity of integration and banishment. (Let's say that this is an open question: does this couple of setting-to-work and

destruction allow us to grasp the capture of the outside — given that destruction can of course take the form of letting-die?)

3. NECESSITY AND PURPOSE

I have proceeded here so far as if historical necessity were the same thing as historical teleology, but this is not the case. In itself, necessity refers only to a constraining sequence, to the idea of a determinate order in the succession of historical facts. Can't we think a necessity without teleology? Or, on the contrary, a pure teleology without necessity? It seems to me that we can search for the answer to these questions by a rapid overview of a series of positions going from Kant to Marx. Let's look at just four moments, in which possible conjunctions of necessity and teleology are related each time back to the subject-object couple. Above all, let's remain superficial — because if we dig too deep, we'll end up buried in the “molelike perspective of the scholar” (Foucault).¹¹

I have just declared in a slightly brutal manner a *methodological stance*, and I am going to explain it a bit further. This stance has two sides: on one hand, it is definitely a question of focusing on what might be provided for us by means of conceptual abstraction. It's a question of both thinking political subjectivation and of taking part in putting it into practice. What we can work on here is a supplement of symbolization, of symbolic articulation, precisely because we can identify a lack of symbolization within contemporary forms of subjectivation. Something is lacking at the level of conceptual articulation, and if political subjectivity today undeniably lacks consistency, it is also (and not only due to the strength of the enemy, etc.) because there is this lack. To do this work it seems to me that philosophical constructions provide the best landmarks. But on the other hand, it is of course not a question of mimicking the discourse of the university, delighting in the complexity of its constructions, and indefinitely delaying the moment to conclude – to speak in one's own name. The method adopted here is that of a quick comparison allowing us to determine the best articulation of the terms at stake – best not from the perspective of pure reasoning, but from the

perspective of providing a landmark, a structuring symbolization for the existent that is each one of us.

3.1

The first position to mention is the one we have inherited from Kant. Perhaps there is a purpose at work in history, and perhaps even nature works towards the realization of that purpose, but the latter is distinct from purely mechanical causality — the causality revealed by the sciences of nature. The problem is that this purpose cannot really be the object of knowledge. Perhaps we could speak here of a teleology without necessity, or at the very least without an objective verification of its necessity. However, we can speak of a subjective necessity of teleological *judgement* (“necessity” understood the sense of allowing the well-foundedness of a *rational* construction), even if this judgement is not guaranteed by a demonstrable objectivity. The content of teleological judgement is the idea that the world we live in is ordered according to certain ends. These ends cannot be known, they can only be the object of a reflection that remains inside a subjective framework: one cannot demonstrate that a purpose is objectively at work in nature or in history. On the other hand, it is necessary for us that we postulate this purpose — because if we don’t do so, we risk abandoning our destiny as moral beings.

Purpose is thus a pure requirement of reason here. The ends are no doubt in the object (in nature, and even in history — this is the hope that underlies “Idea of a Universal History from a Cosmopolitan Point of View”) but reason cannot prove this. Reason can only show that humans should orientate their actions according to this requirement, and that it would definitely be in their interest to do so. Undemonstrable teleology has the function of subjective orientation, on the individual scale just as on the scale of entire societies.

3.2

The second position is Hegel’s. We can objectively know history as a necessary

movement endowed with an end. This knowledge, which is speculative, is absolutely guaranteed, and the suspicion that a purpose to history is no more than a subjective projection is completely alleviated. There is, therefore, a historical necessity which can be unveiled; indeed, there is no way it can go unrevealed because its revelation is one of its moments. To be precise, this revelation is its endpoint, its internal purpose. There is an identity between necessity and purpose, and this necessity is posited as the result of the objective process of history. If history has taken place as it took place, then it did so in order to be grasped again as concept. This comprehension in the form of the concept is its purpose. Philosophical discourse grasps the truth of history after it takes place, and unveils its meaning; in other words, the meaning of having been unveiled in this manner. The purpose of history is the unveiling of its necessity. But this objective necessity which is the motor of history is only such — in the final analysis, that is to say, at the end of the historical process — in that it is able to be grasped as subjectivity. In any case, in Hegel we cannot get stuck in the opposition between subject and object. Objective necessity is revealed retrospectively as identical to subjective necessity. But the subject, which then appears solely to have been present from the very beginning, is nothing other than the concept itself. It is the Concept, taking place as historical necessity, which is guided since the dawn of time by the necessity of its self-revelation.

One could say that Hegel remade the Cartesian gesture, which consists in welding together certitude and truth, but by making a long detour. The detour is history. But it's worth it for Hegel. Taking a detour via history is what allows him to guarantee the identity of certitude and truth without passing via God.

3.3

The third position is what we could call vulgar materialism, or “scientistic” “materialism”, even when it wishes to be political. It attempts to overturn Hegelian idealism by stipulating the purely objective character of historical necessity, believing that in this manner it is remaining true to Marx (I'm thinking of the

Marxism Lenin called “economist”). But this objectivity is thought according to the model of positivist science. This is the flattest version of Marxism, that of the materialist science of history. Subjectivity is the pure effect of chains of causality revealed by positive knowledge. In this sense one could say the subject does not exist as such, since a subject possesses the kind of being that cannot be inscribed as a pure variable of causal chains. One could also say, conversely, that the Hegelian position entails the disappearance of the object, or more precisely, its complete absorption, its integration within subjectivity in so far as the latter fully encapsulates its essential truth.

The scientistic materialist position could be summed up as saying there is a purely objective historical necessity that can only be accessed by means of scientific knowledge; the latter has no need of the category of purpose, which is only ever a subjective, that is, illusory, projection of such necessity. So here we can speak of a necessity without a genuine *telos*, without, strictly speaking, any teleology. And this position is inseparable from the positivist myth according to which the real is pure objectivity without a subject.

3.4

The fourth position is that of materialism thought in a clearer manner in the wake of Marxism. Whatever temptations Marx may have been subject to at the level of making his discourse “scientific”, he never erased the difference that exists between the object of scientific knowledge and the object of dialectical thinking.

Marx is the inventor of the speculative materialist dialectic, and the meaning of these three interwoven terms should be specified (though without staying strictly within Marx’s vocabulary). Remember the 1857 *Introduction*: the historical situation is the “concrete reality” presupposed by thought which it is to be reconstructed in thought — it’s a question of producing “concrete thought”. The speculative object does not leave the subject in its supposed position of comfortable exteriority in the process of knowledge: this object cannot be described without adding the very

act of describing it to the description. When the speculative object is a situation of existence, this addition comprises the effects of thinking that situation in so far as they are inseparable from the effects of those acts which extend or anticipate them. The speculative object, then, is that which, existing before the subject's existence, forms the condition for the inscription of the latter's act. But this object is then dialectical because it obliges thinking to indicate its limit; that is to say, the way in which it cannot complete its description, its grasp of the object, on its own.

What does it mean to say speculative dialectics is materialist? It's not that matter determines ideas rather than the other way round, but that historical processes are marked by an essential contingency. Hegelian historical necessity evacuates all contingency from the essence of the historical process. To be more precise, there is contingency in history for Hegel, but it doesn't belong to the latter's essence. This is why historical action — and we would say political action — doesn't play a central role. I'm not saying it has no place in Hegel's thinking, but it certainly has a different place to that in Marx's thinking. Materialist dialectics sets up an empty space in its analysis of history, in the way in which thinking grasps its necessity; and it is in this empty space that political action can find its place. The task of thinking is to state historical necessity so as to be able to indicate in what way thinking cannot bring about such necessity on its own. Historical necessity is conceptualized as a set of contradictions which produce new situations — but not automatically. Contradictions only give rise to a new situation in so far as they are acted on. Materialist dialectics is the thinking of objective contradictions which are subjectively acted on.

This is how it makes room for what we can correctly call purpose, a historical teleology, which constitutes the messianic side of Marx's thought. Positive materialism is immediately recognizable by the fact that it does not promise much, apart from more equitable, less destructive, etc., management; in short, a goal so reasonable that nobody feels like fighting for it. Marx's materialist dialectics promises emancipation from all chains; the purpose is prescribed by the potential for flourishing that is contained in the life of living human beings,

and it is already clear that for him that human life is not separate from other lives. The purpose [*finalité*] has no end [*fin*] because the horizon for flourishing is unlimited. Purpose is inscribed within the objective necessity of history insofar as a subjective intervention takes on the task of fully revealing it as such.

We cannot take up any of these four perspectives, even the last one. As far as Kant goes, he is quite endearing as an author because he cannot stop destroying what he wished to protect: God, reason, immortality, morality. He did not destroy the latter himself, but he showed how to do so: what philosophers wanted to demonstrate can only be postulated; what should have been given a foundation turns out to have no foundation and is reconstructed in a position of endless precarity. He places all of these idols on the edge of the abyss — all we have to do is push them over (philosophizing with a hammer).

Hegel's idea was to reabsorb this contingency of the foundations of reason by turning them into the very foundation of historical *existence*. Only in this manner can reason ground itself; that is as something which is not solely a procedure of knowledge, but a movement that accomplishes its own existence. Reason accounts for itself because it accounts for its place amidst life as the goal of life itself. It seems to me that we can no longer have such confidence in reason, in its capacity to sublate [*relever*] the very essence of life.¹² For Hegel, real life is not literature (Proust), it's the life of the Concept.

The scientific approach wishes to reestablish the exteriority of reason; in Hegel's terms it is thus knowledge in the form of the pure understanding. It describes objectively what is, which it confuses with facts. When it wishes to be political, this approach forgets that it started out by making the very condition of politics disappear. If there is nothing but objectivity, then there is no politics. Besides, if there is an approach that is useful for our enemy, then it is clearly one which supports the disappearance of the subject, insofar as the latter is real and irreducible to the "subjective" understood as the set of necessary illusions out of which lived experience is woven.

Finally Marx takes up again the speculative approach from Hegel, according to which the subject must think her/his own intervention as added to what s/he describes; in this case not only as a thinking subject, not only inside a purely speculative space — s/he must think her/his possible intervention inside a historical space. But even in Marx's dialectic, subjective intervention is still thought as an expression of objective contradictions. Historical necessity is not causal (as in the scientistic approach), but expressive. It does not automatically produce the subject, but hollows out the exact place of its act. This also entails the specification of the subject (proletarian, worker). S/he is only a subject inasmuch as s/he comes to accomplish, in the place prescribed for her/him, the historical necessity that s/he was able to decipher. It is not by chance that this place is one of negation — let's say that in this perspective, the subject can only carry out his/her act as the negation of whatever *prevents* historical necessity from occurring.

In this seminar we have especially followed the indications of Badiou and Rancière, for whom the logic of expression or negation should give way to a logic of supplementation. Political action detached from historical necessity can solely be added to the existing situation; rather than it being mandatory to deny or refuse the latter. Political supplementation is affirmation; it is only accidentally negative. It is not defined by what it negates or by what it refuses, but rather by what it affirms. This displacement towards affirmation entails, and is entailed by, the unfastening of politics from history; in other words, by the idea that political action is not prescribed by the situation, which implies that there is no place that is prescribed in advance for the political subject.

What happens if history returns, not just for the essayists and journalists, who have been calling for it ever since Fukuyama had the bad idea of writing his book, and thus not in the sense of "something is happening" (wars, assassinations, etc.), but in the sense in which history returns as the content of political actions? What would happen if we went back to the idea that the historical situation prescribes something for us? Would we be condemned to return to Marx, and thus in a certain manner to Hegel, that is to say, to a totalizing thinking centered on the powers of

the negative, and which would restore history as the figure of the Other?

It seems to me that it is rather a matter of holding onto this schema of supplementation as a starting point, and of accepting the latter's complications, including the fact of this insistent question of ends in relation to the historical situation. There is most definitely an effect of prescription that results from objective (speculative) analysis, but there is no direct subjective qualification that follows specifically from this prescription. If there is a subject of history, it is therefore defined, paradoxically, by its indetermination.

4. NECESSITY AND FREEDOM

But this question of ends is inseparable from another theme which I have not spoken of up till now and yet which forms a couple with necessity, and that is freedom. We have already spoken in this seminar about the way in which Hegel conceives — or one can conceive on the basis of Hegel — freedom as the overturning of necessity. The teleology inscribed in Hegel's *Logic* is the basis upon which Marx was able to construct his concept of the "proletariat". It was also on this basis that Lenin was able to think revolutionary irruption as what occurs outside objective conditions and, in a sense, against them (second year, third session). But what matters to us today is that if freedom can be defined as the overturning of necessity it is precisely because it has the capacity to identify a purpose.

We are not going to dive into Hegel's *Logic*; I'm going to keep just two images from it. First of all, the chapter focused on teleology is found in the "Doctrine of the Concept", at the point at which it's a matter of going beyond mechanical or chemical causality. It has been remarked — Hegel tells us — that the "opposition of teleology and mechanism in the first instance the more general opposition of *freedom* and *necessity*"; and the principle of freedom has to be thought as what is torn away from mechanism.¹³ Freedom makes its appearance solely when it extracts itself from an effectivity that is not informed by it. This is also the

outcome of Kantian practical reason, but in Hegel there is a genuinely conflictual element which does not appear as such in Kant — it can be read as a way in which Hegel tried to get the measure of that event which marked him so deeply, the French revolution:

Never since the sun had stood in the firmament and the planets revolved around it had it been perceived that man stands on his head, that is, on thought, and reality is constructed in terms of it... This, accordingly, was a glorious dawn. All thinking beings shared in the jubilation of this epoch. Emotions of a lofty character then stirred men's minds; a spiritual enthusiasm thrilled through the world, as if for the first time it had come to a true reconciliation between the divine and the world.¹⁴

(Jacques Rancière used this passage in a recent interview when attempting to define philosophy as “thinking of conflict”). One must learn how to walk upside down, how to begin with thinking that is orientated by a purpose and then go towards reality, and this implies engaging in a combat with reality. So this is the first image: freedom appears when it extracts itself from reality — reality that is confused with the chains of necessity — and freedom can only extract itself by setting a goal, a purpose. From the outset, purpose is posited against necessity, freedom is conflict with necessity.

Gwendoline Jarczyk has shown that the passage from necessity to freedom, which is carried out in the “Subjective Logic” during the moment of teleology, is prepared during the “Objective Logic” — that is to say, in that part of the *Logic* in which the concept is not yet posited as subject, notably in the passage in which it is a matter of surpassing or sublating the “ground”.¹⁵ Previously, Hegel exposes the movement of “determinations of reflection”, that is, the passage from difference to opposition, and from the latter to contradiction. Grounding is the key to the “Doctrine of Essence” because it is what is attained at the end of a process of digging deeper into negativity. But this process of digging cannot be limited by the

opposition between the ground and what is grounded. The ground itself has to be tipped into the abyss (here there is a play on *Zugrundegehen* which means both go down to the ground and go into the abyss, in a double sense which has agitated many pens). What ends up emerging as the sublation of the opposition between ground and what is grounded, and thus as the unity of essence and appearance, is existence. Existence only appears when there is nothing “behind it” to support it, when it supports itself and is not supported by some ground that would be distinct from it. This then is the second image: one must fall into the abyss [*l’abyme*] so as to start out again towards existence that has liberated itself from what it believed it had to rely on, but into which it could only ever fall [*s’abîmer*].

Some authors have found ethical echoes in this passage: it is only when we hit rock bottom that we can start over and head towards existence. We could say it’s only when we are completely destitute, when we experience distress without succour, that we can come back to life and be utterly renewed. Hegel’s old classmate from Tübingen, Hölderlin, does not say anything different in his magnificent poem “Destiny” in which distress figures as a rough but reliable teacher: “From distress all desire is sprung /and under pain only thrives/the best my heart enjoyed...”.¹⁶

What we can retain from Hegel, even if it is not quite what he says (in the sense that he doesn’t *stop* there), but which does appear in what he says, is that to be free is to grasp necessity at its roots, to grasp it as distress, and turn it around. But we cannot follow Hegel in his desire to find a perfect coincidence of freedom and rational conduct through which he posits the unity of teleology and necessity — inasmuch as the unity of the two is precisely the movement of the concept. The concept of purpose that we find in German idealism always presupposes that it is ultimately reason which forms its own purpose for itself — in the form of the moral being who must apply the principles of reason in the world (Kant), or in the form of self-knowledge (Hegel). We cannot possess such a perfect loop.

Against Hegel, we would say that what is required to bring about the overturning of necessity into freedom — to disjoin what produces distress and is imposed as

necessity from what can be set as a goal — is an irrational subjective intervention, in the sense that it cannot be grounded in reason. This is the sense of the “absurd” decision, the decision that cannot be pieced together element by element, that Kierkegaard speaks of. It is not that what precedes it and what follows it cannot be rational; it’s rather that there is a break that occurs which interrupts the unity of a process, and that’s a question of inhabiting that breaking point. The goal that is set can be completely rational (we have plenty of arguments for claiming that capitalist (patriarchal, racist, etc.) power should be dismantled before the catastrophes it generates are irreparable), but the gesture itself of setting the goal is neither reasonable nor rational.

We have seen that we can extend Hegelian-Marxist teleology on the condition that it be overturned twice. First it must be deciphered as such from the standpoint of its not-having-taken-place. Second, its declaration of exigency must be sustained also from the standpoint, and alongside, those beings that have no voice — nature, natural beings, environments and their history. The subject, by way of consequence, does not see in the objective movement something that supports and verifies, or will necessarily verify, her/his action; nor is s/he dedicated to acting as if such a support existed, like some kind of wager that s/he knows is risky. On the contrary, the subject must bear this goal as what painfully tears him/her away from the objectivity of the historical movement that is underway. Henceforth subjective intervention will solely be confused with freedom thought as the overturning of necessity. Necessity is not to be understood solely as a mirage maintained by the enemy: chains of necessity do exist, quite literally; they are imposed as the run of things which unfolds according to its immanent logic if nothing interrupt it.

Tronti tells us “anyone who believes they can think politically without considering the sense of the end is weak-minded”.¹⁷ This is exactly what we must leave behind, this weakness. And to do so, we must take on the task of setting goals against historical necessity, such as it is presented to us, *and yet goals that are extracted from its effectivity*. This is what must be emphasized today — this is

how we can understand the return of the historical situation as the content of politics.

To summarize then what happens to teleology I propose the following: the teleology of the past revolutionary movement, for a long time centered on the figure of the worker, was defined by a coincidence between the necessary development of history and the position of the ends attributed to that development. This is how the Hegelian speculative program was repeated: necessity itself led, not to its surpassing, but to the point that called for its surpassing. Today we need to start out from a situation in which necessity, understood as an irreversible — or at the very least constraining — sequence of facts, has split in two, and has separated itself from the *telos* that gave meaning to its sequence. Hence it is now a matter of assuming this separation: we need to think how goals can be set against what, from now on, is imposed as necessity — given that necessity is understood today as a sequence of facts which no longer possesses any meaning. Necessity as the bearer of meaning has been overturned; not into freedom, but into a compact series of facts from which we must extract ourselves — so as to find again the ancient goal, and to give it a new accord.

6. COMRADESHIP

What should we retain from Marx's gesture? Not so much his expectations for the scientific demonstration of exploitation, but rather his confidence in what can come about through sharing a truth about the logic of a global situation, and about the destiny it imposes. This logic is that of the destructive appropriation of lives and activities, mobilized in order to make a strange abstract machine function. This machine simultaneously imposes two quite contradictory things: on the one hand those it mobilizes are welded to an immanence comprehended as the absence of any transcendence; on the other hand, it sacrifices this immanence by imposing an objective to which the immense majority of living beings cannot adhere, but in which they are all more or less forced to participate. This double imperative brings about the ever more expanded, ever more irremediable ruin of

the conditions of life. Were this ruin to be overturned... what might appear? Marx and Engels give us a clue in their formulation: the free development of each is the condition of the free development of all, or the inverse. This reversibility between the fulfilment of each and of everyone is one way of taking up the anti-liberal side of Spinoza. The freedom of the other is not what limits my freedom, but what increases it. The free flourishing of each and everyone is the co-amplification of freedom.

Yet this political horizon cannot just be something to invoke and nothing more: it must be joined to a diagnosis of the historical situation in which we find ourselves — our present. If there is a political duty that is irreducible to moral or religious judgements, it is tied to the exposition of a truth situated at the crossroads of political confidence and a historical diagnosis. This duty can be grasped as setting a goal that is antagonistic with regard to what is imposed by the run of things. My proposition is that comradeship is the action of carrying out this duty, of articulating and bearing its charges together.

But to speak of comradeship, I'm going to make a little detour: to raise the question of camaraderie we have to raise the question of being. These days, usage of the term 'ontology' is quite varied, including in this seminar. For my part I propose to stick to the very beginning of Heidegger's meditation — the grasp of "that it is" cannot be superimposed on the knowledge of "what it is". It is from this standpoint that the question of being-which-is-not-a-being first appears in Heidegger, and in a certain manner, this is sufficient. By raising the question in this way, it clearly appears to be a supplementary question; in other words, a question that can be easily forgotten, precisely because it cannot lead to the production of knowledge. The forgetting of being is first of all the forgetting of a way of questioning which is not that of knowledge.

On this basis, philosophers, including Heidegger, made the mistake of believing that the privileged experience of being was that of nothingness, of the void — and Sartre and Badiou took this road a little further. Nothingness is certainly an

interesting object to think about, but — put it like this — you pretty quickly get the hang of it. In hindsight it seems to me that the sense of the work I carried out on Simondon and his conception of the transindividual is that it provides an alternative route. The idea is that the privileged experience of being-which-is-not-a-being is not that of nothingness, but of being-together (the *Mitsammen* [Together] that Celan evokes so poignantly in “Anabasis”).¹⁸ This does not contradict what I said earlier about the relation to the other: being-together is what deposes the relation to the other as problem; it is only when one loses being-together that this relation appears as a problem.

The question of being is the supplementary question, and since we cannot separate the question from its object here, it is also the question of the supplement itself — Derrida was right to underline this point, even if it is not a question here of following his line of thinking (one could say that the supplement takes the place of the ground *as much as its absence*, and that it is only in this manner that the entirety of metaphysics can be completely overturned). The question of being is always the question of what is added, as being, to what is. This is precisely where we must not confuse nothingness with the supplement (to come back to the displacement mentioned earlier, but from a different perspective — from the logic of negation to the logic of the supplement). What is, without being given in the form of a being, is not nothingness, but being which remains something different to entities amidst entities, and whose privileged form is being-together. This is the-object-which-is-not-an-object, the object which cannot be thought without that thinking transforming it, and without that transformation thus modifying the very configuration of entities.

Thinking camaraderie is an example of the thinking of being that is irreducible to entities, and by this means is potentially capable of modifying the configuration of entities. To think the specific being-together of comradeship, is to add some being to what is. So perhaps tonight we'll add a little being — if we construct some being-together such that each of us leaves slightly augmented, that is, with more being than when we came in.

Like all being-together, elaborating comradeship can be understood as weaving patiently a space of resonance. This weave has become quite difficult. Twenty years ago, we said we were like painters who not only had to create an artwork, but also create the materials for supporting the work, and even the space in which it would be shown. For some time, we thought we had taken some steps forwards, and then things got worse. Such that nowadays not only do we need to create all that, but we also need to build the town in which the exhibition will be held.

(But of course things can change, and even very quickly. The French Revolution just like the Russian revolution turned out to be a moment of unpredictable acceleration. Without any transition they brought about a passage from the reasonable (constitutional monarchy in the English style, management of the post-Tsarist period) to the profoundly unreasonable (Republic, Bolshevik revolution). Such that we ought to speak about subjective haste, like a crystallization that happens all of a sudden. Perhaps this could happen again, in times to come: a similar subjective haste — in this case it would not take place inside a revolutionary process but would inaugurate it.)

In any case, it seems to me that this patient weaving supposes some clarification of the space of comradeship as a dialectical space. To envisage this space we need to go back to the problematic of Plato's *Statesman* and the art of weaving: what can be tied together, and what must be separated? To be comrades should we define a common line; in other words, a proposed analysis which is inseparably also a proposed organization? Or rather solely a kind of minimal basis for a common articulation, without being able to prescribe the mode of organization entailed by it? Or just a strategy?

It seems to me that this session along with all the work we have done in the seminar favour the second hypothesis. This session extends our research with a unary trait, a mark of supplementary identification, potentially a support for a common political identification, a mark of identification that could potentially add to the existing forms of political subjectivation, characterized by heterogeneous

problematics (which were at stake in a good number of this seminar's sessions, no need to go into details here). Let's say that tonight it's a matter of making this minimal basis of elaboration a little more constraining.

I'm just going to say a few words about comradeship to open up the discussion. To be comrades is, first of all, of course, to not push off into the future the experience of reciprocal fulfilment. Perhaps this phrase seems a bit exaggerated in this time of realism, of falling back on the few things that remain for us. But we have to know whether we still expect something from life, or more precisely whether we are still capable of expecting everything from life (more than ever we have to read the "Treatise of Despair"¹⁹). In this sense the space of comradeship is a gentle space, a space that promises benevolence in a world that itself promises to become more and more hurtful. But it is a dialectical space and we also need to take into consideration relationships of rivalry between comrades — rival positions, rival strategies. The best way of not contradicting the benevolence I was speaking of is to not conceal rivalry. The dialectical synthesis between these two terms in apparent tension (benevolence/rivalry) could be formulated as: *know how to love your rivals*.

In any case, we're lucky to be living in the most important period of human history. What luck to be born today. Even Lenin must envy us. (This is not an ironic remark; comic no doubt, but not ironic).

And don't forget, however old we might be, the time has come to be seventeen years old:

It really was in vain that the lamp burned in the youth of Alexander Dvanov, lighting up the soul-irritating pages of books whose guidance he would in any case never follow. However much he read and thought, inside him there always remained some kind of empty place — and through this emptiness passed the unwritten and untold world, like an anxious wind. At the age of seventeen Sasha still had no armor over his heart — neither

faith in God, nor any other peace of mind; he would not give a name not its own to the nameless life opening before him. But he didn't want the world to stay unnamed; he was merely waiting to hear its proper name from its own lips — rather than other people's contrived labels.²⁰

NOTES

1. This text was given on the 13th February 2024 as the first session of the Spring semester of a research seminar “La Division Politique” held at La Parole Errante in Montreuil just to the East of Paris. The seminar – organized collectively, featuring different speakers – ran for six years under the aegis of the College Internationale de Philosophie, and then continued under its own name.
2. E. Husserl, “Foundational Investigations of the Phenomenological Origin of the Spatiality of Nature,” trans. Fred Kersten, in Husserl, *Shorter Works*. Ed. Peter McCormick and Frederick A. Elliston. Indiana: University of Notre Dame Press, 1981, 222-33.
3. Andrey Platonov, *Chevengur*. Trans. R. Chandler, & E. Chandler. New York: New York Review of Books, 2023, Ch.39.
4. The French translation Aspe uses for the Manifesto has *le libre épanouissement de chacun*. ‘Epanouissement’ also means flourishing, blossoming, fulfilment and happiness. K. Marx & F. Engels, “The Manifesto of the Communist Party” in Marx & Engels *Collected Works Volume 6*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1976.
5. Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*. Trans. J. Rose. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004. Alain Badiou, “ ‘We Need a Popular Discipline’: Contemporary Politics and the Crisis of the Negative: Interview with Filippo Del Lucchese & Jason Smith”, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 34, No. 4 (Summer 2008), 645-659.
6. Sylvia Federici, *Re-enchanting the World: Feminism and the Politics of the Commons*. Oakland: PM Press, 2019, 110.
7. Gregoire Chamayou, *The Ungovernable Society: a Genealogy of Authoritarian Liberalism*. London: Polity, 2021.
8. Reinhard Koselleck, *Futures Past: on the Semantics of Historical Time*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2004.
9. Mario Tronti, “Politics at Sunset: Theses on Benjamin”, *e-flux Journal*, Issue #139, October 2023. <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/139/559025/politics-at-sunset-theses-on-benjamin/> Frédéric Neyrat, *Le cosmos de Walter Benjamin*. Paris: Editions Kimé, 2022, 203ff. Also see, Neyrat, “Walter Benjamin’s Cosmos: Correspondence, Aura, and the Cosmo-geological Subject”, *Mosaic, an interdisciplinary critical journal*, Volume 54, Number 3, September 2021, 59-84.
10. Aline Leclerc, « Manque de sécurité sur les chantiers : ‘notre fils est morte pour 6000€’ » [Lack of security on building sites: ‘our son died for 6000€’], *Le Monde journal* du 7 Février 2024. President of the COP28, General Director of WHO, Special Envoy for Health and Climate Change « Si nous n’agissons pas, les changements climatiques conduiront bientôt à la submersion des systèmes de santé du monde entier » [If we do not act, climate change will soon lead to the submersion of health systems across the entire world] Opinion column, *Le Monde journal* du 12 novembre 2023.
11. Michel Foucault, “Nietzsche, Genealogy, History”, in Paul Rabinow. Ed. *The Foucault Reader*. New York: Pantheon Books, 1984, 77.
12. Aspe uses the verb that Derrida first identified as the best translation of Hegel’s term *aufhebung*. *Relever* means to lift up (again), to relay, and to replace.
13. G.W.F. Hegel, *Science of Logic*. Trans. A.V. Miller. New York: Humanity Books, 1969, 737.
14. G.W.F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of History*, Trans. R. Alverado. Wordbridge Pub, 2011, 399.

15. Gwendoline Jarczyk, *Système et Liberté dans la Logique d'Hegel*. Paris : Editions Kimé, 2001, 204-5.
16. Friedrich Hölderlin, « Das Schicksal »
Der Not ist jede Lust entsprossen,
Und unter Schmerzen nur gedeiht
Das Liebste, was mein Herz genossen (4th stanza, Lines 1-3)
17. Mario Tronti, "Politics and Destiny" on Endnotes. <https://endnotes.org.uk/posts/mario-tronti-politics-and-destiny>
18. Paul Celan, "Anabasis" in *Selected Poems*. Trans. M.Hamburger. London: Penguin Books, 1990, 199.
19. 'Treatise of Despair' is the title of the older French translation of Kierkegaard's *Sickness unto Death*.
20. Platonov, *Chevengur*, ch.9.

**the sensational event after-
the-event: on bernard
stiegler's "technology and
media"**

haipei zhang

This article serves as an introduction to one of Bernard Stiegler's earliest papers in his academic career, "Technology and Media: The Press of Sensations" ("Technologie et media: la presse à sensations"). I will focus here on three key statements in this text that were developed in Stiegler's subsequent writing: first, that all media are sensational; second, that writing, as the first "new technology," inaugurated the history of human society; and finally, that modern technology, by transforming the way events occur, must be understood as our non-predestined destiny. Readers may notice moments of rupture in the unfolding argument of "Technology and Media." These ruptures, I suggest, open up the threads that lead

toward broader thematic analyses present in his late-1980s writings—(including the doctoral dissertation he had started writing and would eventually be published in the series *Technics and Time*). Accordingly, my interpretive work here does not focus on main lines of philosophical inquiry engaged by Stiegler in this essay (i.e. critique of cybernetics, Lyotardian notion of performativity, Heideggerian notion of *Gestell*, etc.¹); rather, it will be more like flying a kite along a drawstring (a gesture that allows for two possibilities: when tightened, it brings the kite closer; when released, it sends the kite farther away). By doing so, I aim to offer appropriate supplementary reflections here. These lines of inquiry are themselves non-predestined—reflecting the undetermined state of Stiegler’s academic work at that time. It is therefore necessary to begin by situating Stiegler’s writing within the context of 1980s.

STIEGLER IN THE 1980S: A DEFAULT OF ORIGIN

Stiegler’s research work in the 1980s began after his release from prison and expanded year by year in an interlocking manner—as if guided by an irretrievable thread leading to a series of unfolding consequences, or, in the term he would later theorize, a *quasi-causal* series. Stiegler draws on Deleuze’s conception of quasi-causality in *The Logic of Sense*, where events are conceived as incorporeal effects immanent to one’s experience. In this sense, Stiegler comes to view accidents as necessary—they are “defaults” without essence that nevertheless constitutes a life. Imprisonment,² for Stiegler, was such an event: the necessary episode in his philosophical life that, “from its origin until today, is the question of accident, and the acting out [*passage à l’acte*] as accident. I have called this accident ever since 1983, my first interpretation of the myth of Epimetheus, the *default of origin*.”³

Two years after his release, at the earliest stage of his formative 1980s period, Stiegler writes “Technology and Media.” Although Stiegler would formalize many of the notions central to his philosophy in subsequent works—particularly the series *Technics and Time* (first volume published in 1994) and his later *Symbolic*

Misery series (first volume published in 2004)—their conceptual structure is already implicit in this 1985 text. My analysis therefore makes occasional use of his later vocabulary (e.g., tertiary retention, ex-clamation, etc.) to clarify what is at stake here and to highlight the coherence of Stiegler’s thinking over time. Formulated directly from his early seminars at the Collège international de philosophie (CIPh), this early text gathers together the conceptual threads with which he was then working: the technical condition of memory, aesthetics, and knowledge.

“Technology and Media,” published in *Le Cahier*,⁴ was written during Stiegler’s time at the Collège international de philosophie (CIPh), which was founded in 1983 by Jacques Derrida and three other scholars.⁵ During 1984–1985, Jean-François Lyotard, then president of CIPh, recruited Stiegler,⁶ who had just been released from prison in February 1983. At CIPh, Stiegler secured a six-year position as a director of research. For him, this was a stable role that allowed him to reintegrate into social life and to present and discuss his research with other scholars.⁷ He conducted seminars fortnightly, focusing on the themes including the “change of epoch” and the “end of the Book” in the first year.⁸ Around August 1984, Thierry Gaudin, then director of the Centre de prospective et d’évaluation at the Ministry of Research, invited Stiegler to undertake a research project on the theoretical and practical issues surrounding the so-called “new technologies,” after attending the latter’s seminars.⁹ Co-funded by the Ministry of Research and the Ministry of Culture, Stiegler worked for a year on the project entitled “The Philosophical Challenges of New Information Technologies,” and presented a series of reports in 1985 before a committee that included Derrida, Lyotard, Michel Deguy, Jean-Luc Godard and Pierre-Jean Labarrière.¹⁰ Following this, Stiegler received further research commissions. From 1985 to 1987, he was commissioned by the Centre Pompidou to curate an exhibition based on these reports, titled *Memoires du futur: Bibliothèques et technologies*, which opened in October 1987.¹¹ In 1988, in response to President Mitterrand’s proposal to construct a new library (the “Tres Grande Bibliotheque” [TGB])¹² integrating digital technologies, an idea partly

inspired by Stiegler's exhibition, Michel Melot,¹³ director of the Bibliothèque publique d'information at the Centre Pompidou, asked him to write a section entitled "Reading Stations" [*postes de lecture*] for the official report.¹⁴ In 1989, to implement this computer-assisted reading station project as part of the TGB initiative, Stiegler began working for the Établissement public de la Bibliothèque de France.¹⁵ Taken together, this series of events formed the quasi-causal process through which Stiegler's early philosophical work took shape. Each step, often triggered by encounters arising from the previous one.

As his visibility in French academia increased, however, the biographical event at the origin of this trajectory—his imprisonment—remained little known.¹⁶ Stiegler avoided discussing it in interviews on public media channels, because, in his view, the *sensational* reactions it tends to provoke would make such a singular event inappropriate.¹⁷

"THE PRESS OF SENSATION"

What does Stiegler mean by "sensational"? The adjective directly references the "sensational press" [*presse à sensations*], as indicated by the subtitle of "Technology and media." The sensational press (or tabloid press) refers to newspapers that emphasize scandals and the private lives of public figures, using exaggerated narration to incite and excite audiences. *Ici-Paris* and *Minute* are contemporaneous examples mentioned by Stiegler: "The press of sensations is Proust and *Ici-Paris*, *Minute* and *Capital*." This type of 'news media' media, according to historian Pierre Nora, contains a structural redundancy that drives it to continuously fabricate new things, producing sensational stories to satisfy the desire of audiences for "events."¹⁸

But why does Stiegler juxtapose Proust and *Capital* with these notorious French tabloids? Certainly, he does not intend to analyse their differences stylistically. We know Proust and *Capital* through reading the books—they are printed media that

mediates knowledge and, as Stiegler emphasizes here, our sensations. Stiegler's approach to these media are decidedly Kantian, emphasizing sensation as the impression [*Wirkung*] produced by an object given to us, in mediated form, affecting our mind by means of sensibility.¹⁹ Sensibility is structured by the intuitional unity of time and space, a synthesis Kant calls the "synthesis of apprehension," the first of three syntheses.²⁰ Following Kant, Edmund Husserl analyses the system of inner time-consciousness, in which a sensation (primal impression or now-perception), as the present experience of the temporal object, is retained in the memory flow as a just-past impression (primary retention), forming a continuum of sensation.²¹ One of the most important claims Stiegler later develops from Husserl in *Technics and Time*, 1 and 2, is that this mechanism of retention is always already filtered in recollection (secondary retention), which functions as a selection criteria—and this selection is itself conditioned by a memory support (tertiary retention).²² A book or a journal is such a support—in the technical form—exterior to our mind. Whether it be a story of Proust's recollection or news in a tabloid press, an object of sensibility is given to us through the mediation of printed material. This givenness, which Stiegler understands in a Heideggerian sense as the feeling or the impression through which Dasein is disclosed, can only occur through the medium as the already-there. These technical supports of memory reactivate our own past memories, inside of our mind, through which sensations are selected and a stream of consciousness is constituted. In this sense, all press—which is to say, all media—is sensational.

The press of sensation can only be understood beyond the opposition between the intelligible and the sensible, the soul and the body, the inside and the outside—that is, beyond the metaphysical tradition. For Stiegler, the human faculty of sensation is "noetic *through and through*, trans-formed by the fact that it is a sensitivity *of the noetic*: it is the *power* of the noetic, and that it is noetic means that it is inscribed in *logic*."²³ That is to say, the sensitivity of the noetic is not equivalent to the simple sensitivity which characterizes the sensitive soul of the animal, as described in Aristotle's *On the Soul*, but rather contains this animal

sensitivity *inside* as its potential.²⁴ What characterizes the noetic soul is that its sensitivity is sensational—it can move from potential to action, that is, to act *outside* of itself, to *ex-press*:

All sensibility in act becomes, for a noetic soul, the support of an *expression*. This expression (discernment, *krinein*, judgement, *making-a-difference*) is a *logos* [...] which only is in the course of its being ex-pressed, is what I call an *ex-clamation*: the *noetic* experience of the sensible is *exclamatory*. It exclaims itself before the sensible insofar as it is *sensational*, that is, experience of a *singularity* that is *incommensurable*, and *always in excess*. The exclamatory soul, that is, sensational and not only sensitive, *enlarges* its sense by exclaiming it symbolically.²⁵

Ex-expression, or ex-clamation, unfolds within a logical and symbolic horizon that is always technical. Whether the sensational takes the literal form of tabloid press or classical literature, its originary technicity “opens the social circuit of sense,” wherein “the noetic soul inherits a memory which it has not lived but by which it is constituted.”²⁶ Finite memory becomes accessible only after being exteriorized into technical supports, and becomes intelligible to a broader social group only after being literalized within the development of linear writing.

HISTORY WRITTEN AND THE SOCIAL BODY

Stiegler states in “Technology and Media” that linear writing is the first “new technology.” First designates the beginning, and for Hegel, it is with the becoming of written history that the veritable and objective history of the people begins.²⁷ Linear writing enables the inscription, dissemination and interpretation of the past, allowing the collective past—the already-there of the people—to take form as a social body.²⁸ Two centrally important political forms have arisen on the basis of this technical condition, first the Greek polis, and later as the nation-state. The

emergence of political space thus presupposes a specific relationship between the past and the present, a relationship conditioned by writing, which is both a historical and a political condition.²⁹ Writing constitutes the “traditional system” of a society, in which historical time is shaped by its means of recording—the literal technics of memory.³⁰

Linear writing makes the past repeatable and thus accessible to other readers even the writer is no longer present. Husserl’s analysis in “The Origin of Geometry” offers a compelling elaboration: it is literal recording that makes geometric knowledge intelligible as it is transmitted from generation to generation, thereby forming the community of geometers—a process of communitization.³¹ Husserl states that “the writing-down effects a transformation of the original mode of being of the meaning-structure,” since geometric knowledge continues to make sense across its long history because “the reader can make it self-evident again, can reactivate the self-evidence.”³² Reactivation, as Derrida emphasizes, is considered by Husserl to be finite: there are always interruptions in time, such that a total, immediate reactivation with absolute univocity is impossible—otherwise it “would paralyze the internal history of geometry.”³³ It belongs to the essence of geometry that “no piece of the geometrical edifice is self-sufficient.”³⁴ The finitude of reactivation, therefore, opens the possibility of interpretation, which creates differences.

This is how a social body emerges as “the site of history [*Geschichte*],” where multiple political sites and actors appear, each possessing the right to interpret the law that remains readable.³⁵ Reading consists in a form of comprehension that is both passive and active: passive, because it is possible only insofar as the reader already understands within geometric terms and “has already, through the application of written language, acquired an analytic access to that language”; and active, because it re-activates, resumes and recovers after “producing a new articulation of geometry, a difference within the *différance* opened out through the instrument of geometry.”³⁶ Since the past becomes comprehensible and re-

interpretable through linear writing, the history of a social body is itself a form of *hermēneia*: “the sending of Hermes also forms the (techno-logical) opening to the book of History.”³⁷ There is always a delay—a deferral in time—between the occurrence of an event, its inscription, and its eventual interpretation. Stiegler concludes that the Hegelian notion of the event becomes a historical event only when it is captured by writing in a retroactive fashion.³⁸ It is historians—the writers of history—who “produce” events that constitute the history of a society by “retrospecting and thus retroacting (an) ‘us’ [...] in deferred time, as after-effect [*après-coup*].”³⁹

This is a significant position that is established with Stiegler’s early work. It opens up the theme of delay and deferred reaction, discussed with reference to the Greek myth⁴⁰ of Hermes, in “Technology and Media,” which is then intertwined with the story of Prometheus and Epimetheus. As the messenger god, the god of interpretation, Hermes is sent out into the tension between Prometheus and Epimetheus—the god of foresight and the god of hindsight, or, in other words, between the anticipatory thought of *promētheia* and the after thought [*méditation après coup*] of *ēpimētheia*.⁴¹ This tension forms the temporal structure: “promētheia, advance, whose truth is the return after the event [*après-coup*], the delay, *ēpimētheia*; [...] promētheia as advance presupposes hermeneutics (related itself to the technics of writing), which lies at the very basis of temporality.”⁴² What Hermes brings is the feeling of shame (*aidō*) and the feeling of justice (*dikē*), which lack meaning thus must be interpreted.⁴³ These feelings are necessary for a social body to cohere—that is to say, to have its own history, which is, in this sense, techno-logical.

“READ TIME” AS THE NON-PREDESTINED DESTINY

Today, the issue of media, as Stiegler reveals in “Technology and Media,” is the industrial development of “new technologies” that attempt to eliminate deferral. They process information in what is called “real time”⁴⁴—a hallmark

of contemporary media—reaching the speed of light. Speed is the experience of difference in time and space, it had long been the aim of human being to master its potential for mobility by inventing tools.⁴⁵ In other words, the quest for speed has always lain at the very heart of the evolution of technics in human history: to save time, space and energy.⁴⁶ Put differently, the pursuit of speed is the destiny of humans, whose being is *by default* oriented toward securing and preserving life externally through tools that supplement retentional finitude—the predestined *default* of mortals.

But this “enterprise” of memory has been pushed to an extreme since the beginning of the twentieth century, when new technologies—from radio, television to computational devices—enabled sending and receiving to occur increasingly without delay. This situation has resulted in a profound transformation of the conditions of any event: “when memory is produced at a speed near that of light it is no longer possible [...] to distinguish an ‘event’ from its ‘input’ or its ‘input’ from its ‘reception’ or reading.”⁴⁷ This is the issue of “event-ization [événementialisation]⁴⁸”: such events are no longer reflective knowledge arriving in delay and projected forward (that is, within the temporal structure composed of *promētheia* and *ēpimētheia*), but instead become events *immediately* when the *media* proceeds to disseminate. An event must be selected by media to merit the name “event,” which is in some respects analogous to the selection mechanism of secondary retention within the system of memory—no past impression can be retained as perception in consciousness without such selection. However, all selection criteria in the contemporary context have been industrialized: the broader the diffusion and the newer the news story, the greater the “plus-value” for mass media.⁴⁹ Therefore, it is more accurate to say that the events are “co-produced” by media industries rather than simply selected from “history.”

As Stiegler notes, citing Nora’s statement, mass media have now monopolized history, since we are all sensationally struck [*frappe*] by events co-produced by them and only by them, leaving us no chance to escape.⁵⁰ An event’s intellectual

signification, which consists in the hermeneutics of history, is replaced by its emotional virtuality.⁵¹ Events without history are constituted by the merely affective participation of the public, who engage in public life solely through mass media.⁵² This is no longer the participation of the writer (the historian, in Nora's sense) and the reader within a traditional system, where participation is "a passage from potential to act," rather, it is the loss of participation, "a regression from act to potential."⁵³ This is why, in "Technology and Media," Stiegler calls for a careful rereading of Aristotle's theory of the soul, who already shows that the noetic soul acts intermittently from its potential. This means it can always regress into the inert, passive state of sensitivity characteristic of the animal soul. When this intermittent trait of the noetic soul is captured and exploited by the sensational press, it can trigger more frequent and massive "regression towards the reactive and herdish behaviour of sensitive souls, where the sensational engenders the panic behaviour of crowds."⁵⁴ This sensationalist effect causes sensitive memory to conceal, erase and even make impossible the inscriptions that Stiegler calls noetic.⁵⁵ Ultimately, the elimination of delay and deferral—which is also the elimination of historical temporality—short-circuits the cohering process of the social body in a destructive way.

However, Stiegler's critique of mass media does not lead to a condemnation or rejection of "new technologies." Instead, he calls for a new politics—the politics of memory—to invent the future of historical temporality. As the technical origin in the fault of Prometheus and Epimetheus indicates, the human being is a "race" not predestined to be what it is, but one that originally has no inherent qualities: "it must invent, realize, produce qualities," and these qualities are those of technics.⁵⁶ Qualities consist, for example, in the quasi-causality of the series of accidents running from Stiegler's own life to his participation in institutions in the 1980s; the communitization of geometers transmitting and reactivating geometric knowledge; and the cohesion of the social body constituted through historians' selection, writing and interpretation of events. All of these are necessarily composed of events after-the-event—that is, they must be reflected upon within

the temporal delay created by the tension of *promētheia* and *ēpimētheia*. Stiegler's conclusion in "Technology and Media" is that "new technologies" condition new forms of memory, and therefore open a new epoch of interpretation: an epoch, as he puts it, of "(re)readings which are as much unprecedented writings." This new epoch, in any case, is possible only by reinventing the reciprocity between the writer and the reader (the sender and the receiver)—that is, by acting out through the mediation of new technologies to achieve a kind of sensational exclamation, which is the potential that inhabits the non-predestined destiny of the noetic soul.

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NOTES

1. Suppletar references to these lines of inquiry are provided in the translator endnotes of “Technology and Media.”
2. It was in 1979, in Saint-Michel prison, that Stiegler first read *The Logic of Sense* and discovered the story of Joë Bousquet, who, after being shot, became bedridden for life and turned to writing. Stiegler was deeply influenced by Deleuze’s discussion of the wound as a pure event—particularly the question “of attaining this will that the event creates in us; of becoming the quasi-cause of what is produced within us” (Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester and Charles Stivale (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 148). See Stiegler, *The Age of Disruption*, 58.
3. Stiegler, *Philosophizing by Accident*, 42, n2.
4. The journal series was established as the first step in the Collège International de Philosophie’s publishing project, aimed at expanding the audience for its work. This volume, as the inaugural issue, seeks to provide the public—as well as the program directors of CIPh interested in following each other’s work—with insight into the structure and outcomes of the seminars held over the past four semesters (1984–1985). See “[Introduction].” *Le Cahier* (Collège International de Philosophie), no. 1 (1985): 5–8. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40972346>.
5. The other co-founders are François Châtelet, Jean-Pierre Faye, and Dominique Lecourt. In September 1982, they submitted a report to Jean-Pierre Chevènement, then Minister of Research and Industry, who had entrusted them with the task of proposing a new institution for philosophical education. Although supported by government funding, CIPh’s organizational and pedagogical structures enjoy a high degree of autonomy. It imposes no specific prerequisites regarding diploma, nationality, or age for applying as a program director. All activities organized by CIPh are free and open to the public. It also offers long-term research training programs and a doctoral path similar to those at universities, but without requiring prior academic degrees. See François Châtelet, Jacques Derrida, Jean-Pierre Faye, and Dominique Lecourt, *Le Rapport bleu* (Nanterre: Presses universitaires de Paris Nanterre, 2019).
6. Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, trans. Richard Beardsworth and George Collins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), x.
7. For example, François Laruelle, who met Stiegler at CIPh in 1986, recommended him to read the work of Gilbert Simondon—prompting Stiegler to begin exploring the concept of individuation and other Simondonian theories. Likewise, Patrice Vermeren later referred him for a teaching position at the University of Technology of Compiègne. See Bernard Stiegler and Mehdi Belhaj Kacem, *Philosophies singulières. Conversation avec Michaël Crevoisier* (Paris: Diaphanes, 2021), 95; Bernard Stiegler, *The Age of Disruption: Technology and Madness in Computational Capitalism*, trans. Daniel Ross (Cambridge: Polity, 2019), 61 and 64.
8. Stiegler, *The Age of Disruption*, 62.
9. Stiegler, *The Age of Disruption*, 62.
10. Bernard Stiegler, *Philosophizing by Accident: Interviews with Élie During*, ed. and trans. Benoît Dillet (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 116. This collection of reports were published in an abridged version as “Technologies de la mémoire et de l’imagination,” *Réseaux* vol. 4, no. 16 (1986): 61–87. It was translated into English by Ashley Woodward and Amélie Berger Soraruff as “Technologies of memory and imagination,” *Parrhesia* 29, (2018): 25–76.
11. Stiegler, *Philosophizing by Accident*, 116. The exhibition explored how libraries might become with the development of information and communication technologies. See the exhibition introduction by Centre Pompidou, available at: <https://www.centrepompidou.fr/fr/programme/>

agenda/evenement/cgiBE7k.

12. President Mitterrand first announced his plan to construct a “very large library of an entirely new kind” [très grande bibliothèque d’un genre entièrement nouveau] during his televised address on July 14, 1988. Following this, government officials and the public began referring to the project as the Très Grande Bibliothèque, abbreviated as TGB. See Gaëlle Béquet, *Trois bibliothèques européennes face à Google* (Paris: Publications de l’École nationale des chartes, 2015).
13. Before this, Melot had been commissioned by Mitterrand’s advisor Jacques Attali to serve as an external curator for the exhibition *Mémoires du futur*, and, in Stiegler’s own words, as the latter’s “line manager.” It was also Attali who played the key role in suggesting the idea of the TGB to Mitterrand. See Stiegler, *Philosophizing by Accident*, 116.
14. Stiegler, *Philosophizing by Accident*, 116. The report was published as Patrice Cahart and Michel Melot, *Propositions pour une grande bibliothèque. Rapport au Premier ministre* (Paris: La Documentation française, 1989).
15. Stiegler, *Philosophizing by Accident*, 116–117. Stiegler originally planned to carry out the project with Minster of Research, but the Ministry could only fund it if integrated into the TGB. Therefore, Stiegler joined the Etablissement public de la Bibliothèque de France (EPBF) established in October 1989. On January 1, 1990, Alain Giffard, the director of Information Technology and New Technologies, established the planning group “Postes de Lectures Assistées par Ordinateurs” (PLAO), where Stiegler was the group leader. See also Béquet, *Trois bibliothèques*, 59–61.
16. The publication of Stiegler’s autobiographical work *Passer à l’acte* (Paris: Galilée, 2003) and the collected radio interviews *Philosopher par accident: Entretiens avec Élie During* (Paris: Galilée, 2004) brought this story into the public domain. During the initial stages of the interview project with Élie During in 2002, Stiegler had refused to speak about it. However, in the course of their discussions, he came to realize that “it seemed impossible not to talk about it, and I also did not hesitate to share this information given the trust that he showed me” (Stiegler, *Philosophizing by Accident*, 42, n2.).
17. Stiegler, *Philosophizing by Accident*, 42, n2.
18. Pierre Nora, “L’événement monstre,” *Communications*, 18 (1972): 162–172, at 164.
19. Emmanuel Kant, *Critique de la raison pure*, trad. André Tremesaygues and Bernard Pacaud (Paris: Félix Alcan éditeur, 1905), 63.
20. Kant, *Critique de la raison pure*, 131–132.
21. Edmund Husserl, *On the Phenomenology of the Consciousness of Internal Time*, trans. John B. Brough (Boston: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1990).
22. Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time 2: Disorientation*, trans. Stephen Barker (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 224–225.
23. Bernard Stiegler, *The Decadence of Industrial Democracies*, trans. Daniel Ross and Suzanne Arnold (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 133.
24. Bernard Stiegler, *Acting Out*, trans. David Barison, Daniel Ross, and Patrick Crogan (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 13.
25. Stiegler, *The Decadence of Industrial Democracies*, 133.
26. Bernard Stiegler, *Symbolic Misery, Volume 2: The Catastrophe of the Sensible*, trans. Barnaby Norman (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), 31.
27. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *La Raison dans l’Histoire : Introduction à la philosophie de l’Histoire*, trad. Kostas Papaioannou (Paris: Union générale d’éditions, 1965), 25.
28. Although Stiegler had not read Simondon before Laruelle’s recommendation in 1986, we can already see complimentary themes emerging in his reflections on the individual-social relation

in “Technology and Media,” where he repeatedly uses the phrases “social body [corps social]” together with “to cohere [faire corps]” to indicate the dynamic process by which a society is formed throughout human history.

29. Bernard Stiegler, “Une insensible incertitude. Technique et facticité du temps,” *Cahiers de Fontenay*, n°51-52 (1988), 143-164.

30. Stiegler, “Une insensible incertitude,” 156.

31. See Jacques Derrida, *Edmund Husserl’s Origin of Geometry: An Introduction*, trans. John P. Leavey Jr. and Stony Brook (New York: N. Hays, 1978).

32. Edmund Husserl, “The Origin of Geometry,” trans. David Carr, in *Edmund Husserl’s Origin of Geometry: An Introduction*, by Jacques Derrida, trans. John P. Leavey Jr. (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 164.

33. Derrida, *Edmund Husserl’s Origin of Geometry*, 105.

34. Derrida, *Edmund Husserl’s Origin of Geometry*, 105.

35. Stiegler, *Technics and Time* 2, 38-40.

36. Stiegler, *Technics and Time* 2, 40.

37. Stiegler, *Technics and Time* 1, 200.

38. Stiegler, “Une insensible incertitude,” 153.

39. Stiegler, *Technics and Time* 2, 120.

40. In *Technics and Time* 1, Stiegler refers to Protagoras’s version written in Plato’s *Protagoras* (320d–322d), starting from the “the first moment” when “there was the first fault, Epimetheus’s forgetting, then the second fault, Prometheus’s theft, as a result of which appeared the disappearing nudity of mortals, the advance of their prematureness that is their eternal delay.” (192) The second moment is that Zeus sent Hermes to give human *tekhnai* of justice [*dikē*] and shame [*aidō*], the technics of politic, forming the polis, “the community of those who have no community,” the lack stems from the faults of Epimetheus and Prometheus. (200-202)

41. Stiegler, *Technics and Time* 1, 184.

42. Stiegler, *Technics and Time* 1, 202.

43. Stiegler, *Technics and Time* 1, 201.

44. Although Stiegler had not applied this term in “Technology and Media,” it is precisely what he intends to address when he speaks about the “enterprise” of cybernetics, which is clear in *Technics and Time* 2, that new information and communication technologies employs “the cybernetic tool called ‘real time’.” (141) Although the usage of this term around 1984 was not “popularized,” it still can be seen in the same context as Paul Virilio (an important colleague of Stiegler’s within CIPh), who was writing about the application of micro-computing to a “real time of emission and of the reception” of messages. See Paul Virilio, *L’espace critique : essai* (Paris : Christian Bourgois Editeur, 1984), 95-97. Also note, Stiegler wrote an essay published in 1987 putting the issue of “real time” media effects in the center, see Bernard Stiegler, “Réseaux et communauté : À l’époque du temps réel et industriel,” *Les Annales de la recherche urbaine*, N°34 (1987): 5-14.

45. It is what Stiegler developed from Leroi-Gourhan’s paleoanthropological analysis of human inventions of tools to conquer time and space, which is precisely what invents the human being—the process of hominization. See André Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech*, trans. Anna Bostock Berger (Cambridge, Mass. And London: MIT Press, 1993), 25-48; and Stiegler, *Technics and Time* 1, 134-150.

46. See Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 287-288.

47. Stiegler, *Technics and Time* 2, 116.
48. See Stiegler, *Technics and Time* 1, 280, n11, that the translators “coin the neologism ‘event-ization’ to translate the Stieglerian term *événementialisation* (the taking place and time of events).”
49. Stiegler, *Technics and Time* 2, 112.
50. Pierre Nora, “L’événement monstre,” 162.
51. Pierre Nora, “L’événement monstre,” 164-165.
52. Pierre Nora, “L’événement monstre,” 166.
53. Stiegler, *Symbolic Misery*, Volume 2, 25.
54. Stiegler, *The Decadence of Industrial Democracies*, 133-134.
55. Stiegler, “Une insensible incertitude,” 157.
56. Stiegler, *Technics and Time* 1, 193.

technology and media: the press of sensations¹

bernard stiegler

translated by haipei zhang

The press of sensations [*la presse à sensations*]² is the technological *dispositif*³ of the impression of memories. Memory is always already instantiated in the memories (books, stones, madeleines, institutions, individuals: all kinds of media supports [*médiathèses*]⁴), and it's the memory of a body which is not simply sensitive, but sensational.

The medium (milieu, element) of the sensational is the logos. The sensational body is always already logical. In the sensational, the body coheres [*le corps fait corps*] with its “outside”—and discovers itself outside of itself. “The outside is sensational!” The sensational is the outside. Logos, as the sensational outside, is

duplicitous [*duplice*]. The press of sensations is Proust and *Ici-Paris*, *Minute* and *Capital*. The sensational is the moving insofar as it is the movement of the interpretation of memory.

Capitalism is the power of the head over the body⁵ insofar as the body is political, and insofar as the political body is an epoch of the technological body. Cybernetics is the enterprise by which capitalism effectively extends its power over the political body. This body, corporeal, is textual and contextual, unmasterable, improbable, *irregular*.

The enterprise of the cybernetization of the body consists in the elimination of its textuality, that is, of its political character and corporeality qua heterogeneity. The issue is the understanding of the rule.

To the extent that it is a matter of a grammatical rule, it is a question of understanding the “use” of the rule as interpretation, that is, as the production of the rule (the grammar is performative, that is, speculative at the same time as normative).

The understanding of the rule is based on the understanding of the sign. In cybernetic conception, the sign is understood as a signal, that is, whose functioning (its “use”) is as a discrete element of a systematically organized and self-regulated code. This “use” is self-regulated to the extent that the “rule of use” [*règle d’usage*]⁶ is given. Thus, it is not, properly speaking, a matter of “use,” but a univocal response to a stimulus. “Use,” on the other hand, is plurivocal: the interpretation of a rule that is interpretable in its turn, having in its turn the force of a rule. “Use” is shaped by an irreducible indefinite, a constant alterability, a primordial irregularity: the ‘rule of use’ always calls for another “rule of use.” It is not given. The rule is and remains to be made. This means that the “use” of the sign is not systematic but textual; if there is a system, then it is not signals. The sign belongs to an irregular, asystematic text, which does not exclude the possibility that systems (codes, programs, grids) may systematically process the text. The sign is

textual as such, and it is as such that it makes signs [*fait signe*], that it signifies.

Cybernetics seeks to impose a univocal rule that establishes the self-regulation of the textual body through the systematic organization of the power of the head, which is thereby opposed to the body and cut off from it. Cybernetics is, above all, a science of government.

The very development of cybernetic means—which have primarily become the means of telecommunications, that is, of the inscription and dissemination of memory, and understood in this sense as media—has engendered effects contrary to the initial project of the cybernetic enterprise in its ideal phase, as a key theory.

These “new technologies” engender heterogeneous logics, which we will call techno-logics. The counter-effects, generating a *krisis*, may not necessarily signify the failure of capitalism’s accomplishment, but instead represent an opportunity for the body: they deprive real capitalism of its metaphysical foundation, the ideal capitalism.

Linear writing, as it developed in Greece and gave rise to secular books, is the first ‘new technology,’ the first techno-logic. These ‘new technologies’ are over three thousand years old. However, their modern occurrences (the printing press, the development of roads, mail, machines and transportation) and especially contemporary (photography, telegraphy, telephony, cinema, the whole set of electronic means) harbor a specific novelty: they urge the homo politicus to consider his/her primordially techno-logical (in-human), textual, mortal, non-predestined, and indefinite condition.

It is this whole that we call the press of sensations, as it extends from linear writing as a secular and political means of conservation, inscription, production, and dissemination of memory (a means which is thus not merely a means), to cultural industries, the entertainment business, as well as to artificial intelligence, the whole of these constituting the knowledge industries.

The press of sensation is destined toward a primordial and indefinite technological condition, a Promethean one. Hermes comes from Prometheus; the press of sensations is a hermeneutic enterprise.⁷

The first ‘new technology’ provokes a crisis, reaching its peak in sophistry, though it was already prefigured since the pre-Socratics. Sophistry reveals that the Promethean condition, once it becomes political, simultaneously becomes critical; that technological destiny consists in non-predestination and threat, and is destined by default [*par défaut*]; that the political body [*le corps politique*] is unpredictable and that the cohesion [*faire-corps*] of the city is never settled; that Epimetheus shadows Prometheus at each step; that the hermeneutic condition is sensational to the precise extent that the attraction to strong sensations is duplicitous.

Sophistry reveals all this through facts, taking advantage and even abusing what it discovers: it is unholy [*impie*]. The pre-Socratics had already prefigured this duplicity before the sophistic moment. But they declared it was irreducible and that any attempt to reduce it was impious: to attempt to reduce duplicity still and more than ever stems from this very duplicity.

To reveal that the politico-technological condition is critical means: to reveal that it is ultimately undecidable; that there are always things to be done, that it is necessary [*qu’il faut*] to constantly decide, but by default [*par défaut*], and that the issue, what it is that is necessary, is to cohere. The mortal, corporeal condition, failing to cohere [*faute de faire corps*], is missing [*fait défaut*]. The challenge is to create a sensation in public attractions (in the theater, courtroom, council, market, dining table) and to exhibit, to show (*deiknumi* [δείκνυμι] vs *apodeiknumi* [ἀποδείκνυμι])⁸ regularly the absence of the (a) rule [*l’absence de (la) règle*], the irregular.

The unholy project of philosophy is to reduce this duplicity revealed in factuality, by redeeming it through *critique* while causing the meaning of this word to shift,

so that it would soon designate an ultimate crisis that would amount to an operation of provident discernment.

Philosophy denies writing and its coalescence with all *phonē* (in the sense of J. Derrida⁹), denies *tekhnē* and its coalescence with all logos (here, technics and writing become synonymous), and thereby at the same time denies the body, its coalescence with the head, and the mortality of the latter, which thus becomes psycho-logical in opposition to techno-logical. It claims to state the universal rule (which nonetheless consists only in being missing [*faire défaut*]), to self-regulate the life of the political body from a head that has been served from this crisis-producing body [*corps fauteur de crise*]. Body and soul, it is a loss of the head.¹⁰

Recent technological development has resulted in a radical change in the process of intellectual production, linked to the new modes of inscribing collective memory and to the new publication procedures in which this inscription consists: the inscription of memory is its impression, and it is through publication processes (public interpretations) that publicity is both imprinted and makes an impression (sensationally).

This is the question of media, of mediators interpreting impressions from the public medium, of their performances and of performativity in general, which authorizes and even requires the dis-positivity¹¹ of available supports. This implies a reflection on the structure of new technological supports of memory. Supports in which the ‘reproduced [*reproduit*]’ has never existed before its reproduction, nor the impression (in the sense of feeling [*sentiment*]) before its publication. ‘Reproduced’ is what the support produces [*pro-duit*] in effect: there is no impression of the medium except imprinted in effects. The medium demands its intermediaries, requires and even requisitions them; it is always already the media, and everything is always already (only) its intermediary. There is an irreducibility of the media dimension.

The change in the process of intellectual production implies that we must fun-

damentally rethink the original relationship between philosophy and technics, and reconsider the semantic distributions, uses, and contexts shared by the terms *tekhnē*, *poiēsis*, *sophia*, *logos*, *hypokeimenon*, as well as author and authority¹².

This shift from a psychological to a technological conception of the intellect calls for a careful reading of theories of the soul in Plato and Aristotle.

The relationship between rationality and the empirical here presents itself in new terms (the performativity of supports makes the break between them problematic). The instrument, once conceived as an empirical means in the service of a rational end, now presents a new opacity harboring unpredictable finalities (better called outcomes), which *theorein*¹³ cannot fore-see [*pré-voir*]. There is no longer a predestining [*prédestinante*] pro-vidence to decipher and confirm. Previously, retroactive power seemed to belong to reason. Even though technics chronologically preceded science, the latter appeared to precede technics ontologically and retroactively. Today, retroactivity returns to the empirical: such is the performative question of techno-logics. Retroactivity would no longer be rational if it implied teleology and predestination, and science itself proves to be fundamentally instrumental and technical. The instrument has no a priori defined use. It is the exceptional [*insigne*] indefiniteness of its ends, that is, impropriety, availability and unavailability, that characterizes it. Yet the instrument effectively instructs, in effect, truth (or error), whether it is considered rational in the current sense (the instrumentality of contemporary sciences) or the political sense (the media apparatus of being-together¹⁴). ‘New technologies’ impose the question of the empirical in a pressing and original way.

The question of the medium and the media is that of the *logos* as technological foundation or capital. The question of memory, foundational of all publicity, is to be understood as the ancient question of the *hypokeimenon proton* [ὑποκείμενον πρῶτον]¹⁵. This problem seems to us to be concealed under the theme of *Gestell* in Heidegger. However, we think that Heidegger constantly retreats from the question insofar as he maintains an opposition between *logos* and *tekhnē*. In Heidegger,

there is a question of the support as memory, beginning from *Being and Time*, and which *Time and Being* returns [*reprise*]¹⁶ to in a remarkable way. It is the question of the meaning of being as the having-to-be [*avoir-à-être*] of the there-being [*être-là*] (feeling, impression) within its traditional medium. To have-to-be, for the there-being, means that it is not predestined [*prédestiné*] to be what it is, and that here lies its destiny [*destin*]. Destiny is a default of essence [*défaut d'essence*], that is to say, of a sender [*destinateur*]. But as J.-F. Lyotard¹⁷ insists, it is also a default of a receiver [*destinataire*]¹⁸, and of a human receiver (there is no essence of human-ity, there is a differend). This default [*défaut*] of a predestined destiny and this metaphysical defeat [*défaite*] are experienced today in the effects of technics, and in the absence of effect from the initial technological project of modern reason. It is centered on the question of the authority of the support (*Gestell*) in the absence of the author, of what this authorizes, and the conflict that results from it.

Intelligence has always already been artificial, ‘delegated’ to technics. What is called artificial intelligence is merely the manifestation of this intellectual condition, and it brings to the social body [*corps social*] this question: what are its relations with the head, and what is the intellect under this relation? And even, what is reason as a motive qua forming a body [*faire corps*]?

Certainly, we should not confuse, within artifice, the cybernetic (self-regulated) order with the semiotic (textual, irregular) disorder. But intelligence presupposes a technical “exteriority” (inter-legere¹⁹ is a being-among-texts [*être-parmi-les-textes*]), the world, and public-ness [*public-ité*]. World as non-pre-destined technicity is the intellective support. “New technologies” are not new in the sense that they make [*rendraient*] artificial intelligence, but rather in the sense that they return [*rendent*] intelligence to this artificiality, and reveal its techno-logics, putting in question the very notion of artifice, that is, mediation inasmuch as we oppose it to an “immediacy” of thought. Thinking is elementarily instrumental. It is a matter of thinking about the instrument otherwise, as an instrument of interpretation, which is construmantal²⁰ rather than merely instrumental. This means thinking intellection as a process of publication, of editing, as a press of

sensational ideas: there is no good idea that is not sensational – regardless of the duplicity of this sensationality.

New memories, new modes of recording, these technologicisms inaugurate the era of new grammars, other relationships to texts, of (re)readings which are as much unprecedented writings. These are promises of idioms to come, along with the feeling of pain and pleasure that accompanies them.

NOTES

1. Translator's note: This essay was published as "Technologie et media: la presse à sensations," *Le Cahier* (Collège International de Philosophie), no. 1 (1985): 168-172. I am grateful to Daniel Ross for his attentive feedback and crucial suggestions on this translation.
2. TN: Stiegler uses the phrase "*presse à sensations*" in a double sense: on the one hand, in its literal meaning of sensational press as a specific genre of news media; and on the other, to refer more generally to every technical medium. The sensational press (or tabloid press) is characterized by its focus on scandals and inflammatory discourses. For example, *Ici-Paris* and *Minute*, mentioned in the next paragraph, are two French sensational newspapers. More significantly, Stiegler uses this phrase to emphasize the artificiality of the noetic soul, which has a sensational (and exclamatory) quality constituted technically, in contrast to the merely sensitive soul in the Aristotelian sense. To retain Stiegler's open-ended use of this phrase, it is translated here as "press of sensations." For further discussion of this concept, see Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time 2: Disorientation*, trans. Stephen Barker (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 113-122; Bernard Stiegler, *Disbelief and Discredit 1: Decadence of Industrial Democracies*, trans. Daniel Ross and Suzanne Arnold, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011), 133-134; and Bernard Stiegler, *Symbolic Misery, Volume 2: The Catastrophe of the Sensible*, trans. Barnaby Norman (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015).
3. TN: I have followed Ashley Woodward and Amélie Berger Soraruff in retaining this French term untranslated, to avoid unnecessary shifts in meaning, as in their translation work Bernard Stiegler, "Technologies of memory and imagination," *Parrhesia* 29, (2018): 25-76. Additionally, the term "*dispositif*" is crucial for understanding Stiegler's critique of modern technologies here, as he recognizes it as a possible translation of the Heideggerian terminology *Gestell*, which is discussed extensively in the following paragraphs. For Stiegler's explanation of "*dispositif*" as a translation of *Gestell*, see Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time 1: The Fault of Epimetheus*, trans. Richard Beardsworth and George Collins (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 23-24.
4. TN: "*Médiathèses*" is Stiegler's own coinage, combining "media" and the suffix "-theses," This suffix functions in the same sense as his key term "prostheses" [*prothèses*], where the prefix "pros-" (Ancient Greek: πρῶς) denotes both in front (spatially) and in advance (temporally), and the suffix "-theses" (the plural form of *thesis*, θέσις) refers to an external placement. In this context, I translate the suffix as "supports," which preserves the sense of artificiality and exteriority found in "prostheses," while not distracting from Stiegler's emphasis on media in this essay. For more explanation of the term "prostheses," see Stiegler, *Technics and Time 1*.
5. TN: The reference to "capitalism is the power of the head over the body between the head and the body" derives from Jean-François Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, trans. Iain Hamilton Grant (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), chapter 3. In this work, Lyotard argues that capitalism produces a scission between the head and the body, most typically manifested in the cybernetic machine. He criticizes Marxist misunderstanding that industrial production merely divides the organic body into parts; rather, it is the whole body that is reduced to a productive machine, while the head is separated as a computational center. Lyotard also emphasizes the irreducibility of the political body when analyzing the productive body, particularly given that, since Ancient Greek, "the appearance of speech as political *tekhnē*" has already constituted "a process of cephalization and even of capitalization reducing each manual task to a fragmentation subordinated to the political body." (121)
6. TN: "*Le règle d'usage*" is an idiomatic French expression that can be understood as "rule of thumb" or "standard practice." For Wittgenstein, when he discusses language games, a "rule of

use” is the “ostensive definition” of a word (for example, the word “yellow”) given to someone who is being taught its meaning. As he writes, “the teaching may have supplied us with a rule which is itself involved in the processes of understanding, obeying, etc” (Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Preliminary Studies for the “Philosophical Investigations”. Generally Known as The Blue and Brown Books*, ed. Rush Rhees (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1969), 12). Lyotard further defines a language game as constituted by its rules, which “do not carry within themselves their own legitimation, but are the object of a contract, explicit or not, between players; if there are no rules, there is no game, that even an infinitesimal modification of one rule alters the nature of the game” (Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 10).

7. TN: For the mythical origin of Hermes in relation to Prometheus, see Plato, *Protagoras*, 322b-d. For further discussions of this theme in Stiegler, see *Technics and Time* 1, 200-203.

8. TN: In Greek, “*deiknumi*” is less formal than “*apodeiknumi*” (which is usually translated as “to demonstrate”), as the latter carries the prefix “apo-” [ἀπό-] meaning “from,” indicating that evidence is presented from the subject to others. See Aristotle, *Posterior Analytics*.

9. TN: See Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena: And Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973), and Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

10. TN: The original sentence is: “c’est corps et biens perdre la tête,” which contains the phrase “perdre corps et biens,” a French idiom that literally refers to a shipwreck in which all sailors and cargo are lost, and is usually used to indicate a catastrophic situation where everything is destroyed—similar to the English expression “lost with all hands.” Stiegler here uses this phrase to echo his earlier discussion of the head’s dominance over the body in capitalist-cybernetic context.

11. TN: Stiegler plays on the expression “dis-positivity” [*dis-positivité*] here, based on *dispositif*. It is worth noting that Lyotard also uses the same wordplay, though in a different context, in “Sur une figure de discours,” *Des dispositifs pulsionnels* (Paris: Galilée, 1973), 129-130: “the positivity of these investments must be affirmed rather than the gap, exclusion, etc., that they produce—the ‘-positif’ rather than the ‘dis-’ in *dispositif*[...] What is positive in this figure is the production of new libidinal operators, rather than the ‘effects of meaning,’ which are always relative to the exteriority chosen to describe the *dispositif*.”

12. TN: The relation between author and authority is discussed in Stiegler, “Technologies of Memory and Imagination”: “Given the problems posed, for example, by artificial intelligence, and notably by the automatic generation of literary texts, we evidently cannot bypass the question of the subject, of what was called the ‘author.’ However, this subject-user of instruments, the performer and/or author of programs, is neither the author nor the performer of the promise which carries the authority of the program in its text. The question is one of knowing where this authority—the authority of an idiom—comes from. We posit the principle that the author is a derived, rather than originary.” (57)

13. TN: “Theorein” [θεωρεῖν], the Greek root of “theory,” literally means “to look at” or to see.”

14. TN: “Being-together” [être-ensemble] is what Lyotard uses to refer to the form of state, society and organization—the “we.” He emphasizes the role of “new technologies” in this context in a 1982 essay: “As for state control, the technologies of language touch its domain in regard to all aspects of its responsibility for the Idea of being-together: the multiplication of organizations for management and administration (ministers, agencies, missions); the constitution of memories (files, archives, etc.); the relationship to the new media; and so forth. The important fact is this: in

handling language, the new technologies directly handle the social bond, being-together.” (Jean-François Lyotard, “New Technologies,” *Political Writings*, trans. Bill Readings and Kevin Paul Geiman (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1993), 17)

15. TN: “*Hypokeimenon proton*” means “primary substrate,” as in Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* (1028b 33-29a2): “The substrate is that of which the rest are predicated, while it is not itself predicated of anything else. Hence we must first determine its nature, for the primary substrate is considered to be in the truest sense substance.” (Aristotle, *The Metaphysics Books I-IX, Vol I*, trans. Hugh Tredennick (London: William Heinemann; New York: G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1933))

16. TN: “Reprise” is a compositional technique that, in this metaphorical sense, Stiegler attributes to Heidegger’s 1962 lecture *Time and Being*, which, although planned as the third section of Part One of *Being and Time*, was never published within it. This reprise is a revisiting and revising—like the recapitulation in sonata form.

17. TN: See Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).

18. TN: This family of words (*destinateur, destinataire, destin, destination*) was something that Lyotard and Derrida were particularly fond of discussing in the 1980s. For example, there are numerous discussions in Lyotard’s *The Differend* (originally published in French in 1983) and Derrida’s *The Post Card* (originally published in French in 1980), with the latter clearly carrying a more Heideggerian sense. When it comes to the sending and destining of the post, Derrida associates them with *Geschick* and says that it is the unavoidable Freiburg—that is, Heidegger’s place. As Heidegger points out in *Being and Time* and *On Time and Being*, Derrida also reiterates the relationship between *Geschick* and *schicken*: “*Geschick* is destiny, of course, and therefore everything that touches on the destination as well as on destiny, and even on ‘sort.’ [...] I also like that this word *Geschick*, which everything ends up passing through, even the thinking of the history of Being as dispensation, and even the gift of the ‘*es gibt Sein*’ or ‘*es gibt Zeit*.’ [...] And *schicken* is to send, envoyer, to ‘expedite,’ to cause to leave or to arrive, etc. [...] Destination, the destinality, sorry, of an envoi which, of course, does not send this or that, which sends nothing that is, nothing that is a ‘being,’ a ‘present.’” (Jacques Derrida, *The Post Card: From Socrates to Freud and Beyond*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 63)

19. TN: “*Interlegere*” in Latin means “to read between the lines.”

20. TN: The word “construmental” is Stiegler’s own coinage, derived from the verb “to construe,” which comes from the Latin *cōstruō*, meaning “to gather together” and “to construct,” but most importantly, “to connect grammatically.” By contrast, “instrumental” lacks the sense of “with” (“con-”).

the epoch of psychopower... between shame and contempt¹

bernard stiegler

translated by james davies, colman
hogan and gabriele schliwa

The current capture of attention by technological means, in societies where the empire of television² reigns, is organised as psychopower which diverts and eventually destroys attention.

Contempt manifests the absence of shame [*vergogne*]. In Greek, shame is called *aidōs*, a name resonating with that of Hades, and is a feeling that Protagoras considers to be, along with the feeling for justice (*dikē*), the condition of a dignified life. The idea of *vergogne*, a word no longer used in French,³ is nowadays expressed through a locution of a rather unusual construction: to have shame [*avoir honte*] (just as one speaks of *having* feelings or thirst—while one *is* happy,

sad, intelligent, in love, wicked, rich, etc.). *Vergogne* is the *capacity* to have shame, to be affected by this feeling that one has, and *that one is not*, which falls upon you in some sense, and which is shame [*honte*]. To be *sans vergogne*, shameless, is to have become incapable of being ashamed [*avoir honte*].⁴

It is this shame [*honte*] that Primo Levi encounters in the face of the most unimaginable effects of the absence of *vergogne*—of the loss of all *aidōs*, well beyond the loss of *dikē*—an absence that has turned into the criminal, national and industrial organisation of contempt.

Today, however, and probably more than ever, we encounter many ordinary, all too ordinary forms of contempt, and we do so in the most quotidian aspects of everyday life. This is true to such an extent that we have come to believe that our ordinary life is *based* on contempt: on this absence of *vergogne*. It is this everyday and banal character of contempt that Axel Honneth refers to as *Missachtung*, a word literally meaning *non-attention*. Honneth speaks in this sense of a *society* of contempt.⁵ Etymology tells us that attention would also be the semantic kernel of *vergogne*, of which the noun, from the Latin *verecundia*, derives from *vereri*, which itself comes from the Indo-European **swer-*: to be careful, to pay attention.⁶

Attention is the faculty of desiring *par excellence* (in a sense clearly different from that of Kant), while contempt, as non-attention, *Missachtung*, results from the annihilation of desire. Axel Honneth analyses the causes and effects of *Missachtung*, this lack of attention that is contempt, taking up the questions of the young Hegel, and in particular that famous struggle for recognition,⁷ which is to say for *existence*, insofar as it is irreducible to *subsistence*. And we know since Alexandre Kojève that the struggle for recognition is a *desire for desire*.⁸

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To feel shame is to experience the opposite of contempt in the face of what may be contemptible. The contemptible is that which *may* arouse [*susciter*] contempt, which is itself contemptible: the contemptible and contempt are contagious, and are so in the first place because they can and must arouse shame—the shame of feeling concerned by this possibility of becoming contemptible oneself, *capable* [*susceptible*] of being contemptible in the very moment where the contemptible appears as such: falling upon us, and making us *ashamed*. Shame is precisely the feeling of one who, faced with the contemptible, does not himself fall into contempt—all while feeling how close he ultimately and always is to succumbing to it: all while feeling how *concerned* he is by contempt, by the contemptible.

The examples offered by Gilles Deleuze, referring to Primo Levi, of what can evoke shame are the most ordinary—and, writes Deleuze, the most *derisory*: they are our ordinary. Television programs, ministerial remarks, the behaviours of ‘bon vivants’—these can make one feel “ashamed of being a man”. But, instead of shame, these behaviours can arouse contempt. Contempt is thus *what neutralises the very possibility of shame*. Contempt imitates that which it holds in contempt: the contemptible begets the contemptible.

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Contempt is that which arouses shame because it is without shame, as Patrick Le Lay⁹ demonstrated, attesting through his own lack of shame that the destruction of all *vergogne* had become the very principle of operation of telecratic societies, and with it, *indignity*. Like attention, contempt—as absolute non-attention and total absence of *vergogne*—is a characteristic of the non-inhuman being, this being that we *tend* towards being (elevated *above* the inhuman). This being *tends* constantly towards the inhuman and is human only insofar as it *struggles* against inhumanity, *between* these two tendencies, and for the recognition of its non-inhumanity,

against this inhumanity that it bears within itself, like a facet of its secrecy—but only as a facet. The other face, the other secret, is that which raises this being out from and against this inhumanity, by making of it an *inverse dynamic*, and by this *power of inversion which is also the primary character of the libido qua perversion* (this latter being the condition of the mobility of the drives and their trans-formation into desire).

Vergogne and absence of *vergogne*, shame and contempt, and everything that involves recognition, attention, esteem and hatred, *philia* and enmity, narcissism and identification (rather than identity, whose phantasm is productive of so much contempt),¹⁰ all this is *formed* socially, and in this manner is trans-formed and trans-mitted. Today, all of this has become *the heart of economic activity*, but in an *an-economic*, and even *anti-economic* sense—given that an economy worthy of the name, economy as *reserve* (which is also what is meant by *vergogne*), is what puts in reserve what, precisely, the absence of shame annihilates without reservation.

If contempt is non-attention, then the current *capture* of attention—inasmuch as it leads to a psychopathology that is originally a sociopathology (“attention deficit disorder” according to American diagnostics, an effect which has become widely observed among youth)—is an *organisation of Missachtung and of contempt* for those who suffer from this great ill of the 21st century. This organisation is what emerges with the technologies of a psychopower that captures, diverts and exploits attention—in this way constituting a mutation in the history of the struggle for recognition—and which leads to the destruction of this attention (of this recognition): to non-attention, to the *Missachtung* that is contempt.¹¹

The capture of attention by technological means is a phenomenon that is global (it affects *all continents*), massive (it affects *all generations* and *all social strata*) and completely new. This capture averages more than six hours a day in the United States, not to mention those situations of “hyper attention” (to use N. Katherine Hayles’ term)¹² which lead to a splitting of attention between multiple forms of media simultaneously. For this reason, the Kaiser Family Foundation estimates

that the attention of American youth is ultimately channelled eight and a half hours per day¹³ by technologies of this psychopower.

Never before has humanity experienced this kind of hyper-realist and industrially synchronised collective hallucination. The implications of these facts for psychosocial individuation are yet to be adequately theorised, even if they have begun to be made the object of studies of psychopathology, or of research in the human sciences. Most of the time, pathogenic factors caused by this state of affairs have been analysed in neurocentric terms—thus being questions linked to attentional deficit—where in fact the causality is massively sociotechnical and therefore economico-political, even if it is evidently combined with [individual] neuropsychic “landscapes” [*terrains*].

This dreadful neurobiologisation is a scientific rationalisation of contempt.

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In *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations*, I attempt to put forward a theory of attention (and of *Missachtung*) that continues the pathways opened up in *Disbelief and Discredit*.¹⁴ I relate this question of psychological and phenomenological construction [*facture*] (which I analysed in socio-therapeutic terms in *The Lost Spirit of Capitalism*¹⁵) to the question of care: to a question of therapeutics, in the sense this word can have in ancient Greek. Psychic and collective individuation can only occur through the formation and maintenance of a general system of care, the first condition of which is education understood in the broadest sense, which is to say as an intergenerational relation—one aspect of which is the transmission of knowledge—and as the formation of attention as a faculty that is first of all *both* psychic and social—with *Missachtung* being the dysfunction of the process of individuation.

The *destructive* capture of attention—a destruction that is technological, industrial, systematic and constant—which has been called “cultural capitalism”, and which gives rise to such a dysfunction, is made possible by the emergence of psychotechnologies and amounts to the birth of what must therefore be analysed as psychopower.

The techniques of management and marketing based upon “storytelling”; the very recent rediscovery of Edward Bernays with the publication of *Propaganda*¹⁶ in French, in October 2007; the place of “soft power” in American geopolitics; the “psychological” character, both emotional and drive-based, of the recent French electoral campaign (where “celebrity culture” [*“peopolisation”*] is, in reality, a form of psychopolitics of symbolic poverty [*misère symbolique*]);¹⁷ the unprecedented dynamism of new forms of media; the immense effects of their techno-industrial integration via digitalisation; Google attempting to take control of mobile telephony, which is to say of motor functions [*motricité*]; Microsoft attempting to buy Yahoo to create a global system of controlling attention which is also and more profoundly a system of *control of transindividuation* through what we now call social media (and “social engineering”): all these, and many other phenomena, are embodiments [*concrétisations*] of psychopower.

Thus, psychopower radically threatens the apparatus [*dispositif*] of attention construction: the industrial exploitation of attention leads to the destruction of attention—to non-attention, to *Missachtung*—of which channel surfing is one benign manifestation. Here we encounter a limit of capitalism—induced by the tendency of libidinal energy to fall, a kind of *secondary infection* stemming from the tendency of the rate of profit to fall, the latter being what the industrial exploitation of libidinal energy (that is, of desire, *Wunsch* and *Begierde*) was precisely intended to counteract. For the object of attention is always an object of desire, while there is no desire without an object. To destroy attention is to destroy the object of attention, that is, the object of desire and desire itself.

This is so for reasons that were already examined by Plato in *Phaedrus*: we are dealing here with questions of *pharmacology*. The question of contempt, of non-attention, of *Missachtung*, is essentially pharmacological. More precisely, it stems from a pharmacology and a therapeutics of attention—and from the difference that must be made, precisely, between pharmacology and therapeutics.

Attention is *always* formed through devices [*artifices*] that capture attention, which, in addition, are *pharmaka* in Plato's sense. This means that the supports of the *formation* of attention are also the instruments of its *de-formation*—when they fall into the hands of pharmacists without medical control, these pharmacists thereby become *dealers*. The destructive capture of attention—such that it generates non-attention qua a “society” of *Missachtung* and contempt, a society which is no longer instituted, but on the contrary destituted (and by what I have called a dissociated milieu¹⁸)—has economic, political, health and noetic consequences, of which the analysis of neo-Nazi psychology by Ingo Hasselbach and Winfried Bonengel, cited in *The Society of Contempt*,¹⁹ is an extreme case (I myself have analysed others).²⁰

The combination of these consequences leads to limits being crossed and the consequences suddenly worsened and taken to their extremes, with *Missachtung* being precisely the *extremity as such* (and as an encounter with the limit): the extremity socially concretised as extremism. The combination of these consequences constitutes the vicious circle of an industrialised libidinal economy that has become self-destructive. And this vicious circle is a vortex, which raises the question of what we could call a renewable libidinal energy—which is also to say, of a new age of marketing.

By this last remark, I mean that I do not situate myself in the position of rejecting (or having contempt for) industrial society. Such an attitude is completely futile,

irresponsible, and truly desperate. It is one that has been adopted by a number of figures from the world of letters, and for me this is something to be infinitely regretted. On the other hand, neither do I identify myself with that consensus which abandons critique, nor do I subscribe to that form of disbelief (and contempt) which consists in believing that the world cannot be changed, which in the United States is called the logic of TINA: *there is no alternative*. In other words, I have been fighting—in an explicit manner, since *Technics and Time*, 3²¹—for the advent of what I call a new critique, which I understand, however, in a sense rather different from that of Axel Honneth.

Psychopower calls for a psychopolitics claiming the status of *noopolitics*. This alone (this psychopolitics conceiving itself as noopolitics) can reconstitute attention—for such are the stakes, and on every front: economy, security, well-being and the flourishing of individuals and groups, etc. The elevation of psychopolitics to the status of *noopolitics* cannot consist of anything other than a process of sublimation. Since attention is pharmacological—that which forms and maintains it being also that which allows it to be deformed, destroyed and to produce its opposite, which is contempt as *Missachtung*—politics can only be that which takes responsibility for turning this pharmacology into a therapy. And not simply a psychotherapy (a care of souls) but a socio-therapy: a care of the mind [*esprit*], of the *we* [*nous*]—which is the fruit of the struggle for recognition.

What still lies ahead for consciousness is the experience of what Spirit is—this absolute substance which is the unity of the different independent self-consciousnesses which, in their opposition, enjoy perfect freedom and independence: “I” that is “We” and “We” that is “I”.²²

But what this Hegelian dialectic of recognition ignores is precisely that attention, insofar as it is woven of retentions and protentions, is conditioned by the psychotechniques of what Plato called *hypomnesis*, which constitute tertiary retentions, and which, having become psychotechnologies (which is to say

industrial retentional devices and systems), are the organs of psychopower as the destitution of society. This calls for the constitution of a noopolitics: of a rediscovered power of the spirit.

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Attention is formed by the play of retentions and protentions, and it is this—by means of the retentional devices that constitute public or private institutions and social organisations, by organising tertiary retentions—that allows for the implementation of politics of attention.

The formation²³ of at-tention always consists in the arrangements, via the intermediary of psychotechnics, of re-tentions and pro-tentions. Attention is the flow of consciousness. This flow is temporal, and as such it is constituted in the first place by what Husserl analysed in terms of primary retentions. “Primary” retentions are those through which an appearing object, which is to say a present object, is constituted, the contours of which I retain as its very presence. This retention, which is *primary* precisely in that it relates to perception, is conditioned by *secondary* retentions (by the past of attentive consciousness), which form its experience. By selecting from primary retentions on the basis of secondary retentions, consciousness projects protentions, which is to say expectations. It is this organisation of (primary and secondary) retentions projecting protentions, which is to say expectations, that constitutes attention.

However, the *formation* of attention is always already that of *both* a psychic faculty *and* a social faculty to the extent that its capture channels primary retentions according to the secondary psychic retentions of the individual, but does so by inscribing them in *collective* secondary retentions that are symbolised and supported by *tertiary* retentions. Collective *individuation* is constituted from

collective *retentions*, common to those who psychically co-individuate only on the basis of sharing a common retentional stock [*fonds*]. This retentional stock—which forms what Simondon calls a pre-individual milieu, where a transindividuation takes place—is formed by objects that are also the objectified recollections of an epiphylogenetic, which is to say technical, memory. It is within this epiphylogenetic milieu that properly mnemonic—which is to say hypomnesic—objects appear, which, as tertiary retentions, form the material bases of psychotechnics.

When *collective* secondary retentions are “tertiarised”, that is, when they are materially and spatially projected onto psychotechnical supports, they can be internalised by those who have not lived them, and who project onto them their own lived secondary retentions, which is a specific case of what Freud himself calls projection. This projective mechanism, which is the basis of the process of adoption, is also that which enables the constitution of the transindividual: the *formation of attention through its social capture*, which is called *education*, is the path by which psychic individuals not only co-individuate, but transindividuate—including at the level of the unconscious, which can also be said in this respect to be “structured like a language”.

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Attention always presupposes attentional techniques. Today these psychotechniques, which include what Plato called *hypomnesis*, have become psychotechnologies totally and hegemonically controlled by an industrial organisation of retentional devices in the exclusive service of shameless forms of marketing—begetting a generalised *Missachtung*. This psychopower, for a long time conceived in the United States as *soft power*, has become devastating, taking care of nothing and imposing the reign of non-attention. This is why the constitution of a psychopolitics reaffirming itself as *noopolitics* through *technologies*

of the mind is the great challenge of the reorganisation of capitalism—at a time when it is confronted with the limits of its model of development, based on a massive and unsustainable production of carbon dioxide, and in the face of which the modification of models of behaviour requires a revival of individual and collective capacities for sublimation.

NOTES

1. Translators Note: Originally published in *La pensée de midi*, 24-25 (2008): 59-69.
2. Translators Note: It is worth bearing in mind both the year that this article was originally published, and the fact that Stiegler has a broad conception of the term ‘television’ as referring, more or less, to audiovisual temporal objects (in Husserl’s sense) in general, including today video-based phenomena such as TikTok, Instagram, YouTube, etc. This is why he begins his article entitled “New Industrial Temporal Objects” by stating, for example: “I would like to begin with an affirmation which at first glance may seem shocking, if not iconoclastic: I include television in cinema.” See, Bernard Stiegler, “New Industrial Temporal Objects.” In: *Frontiers of Human-Centered Computing, Online Communities and Virtual Environments*, edited by R.A. Earnshaw, R.A. Guedj, A.v.Dam, and J.A. Vince, London: Springer, 2001, pp. 445–60.
3. *Verguenza*, on the other hand, is still very common in Spanish.
4. Translators Note: The semantic fields encompassed by the terms *honte* and *vergogne* pose a particular difficulty for translation. We have elected to translate *avoir honte* and *honte* by “have shame,” “ashamed,” or “shame,” with the particular variant determined by context. For *vergogne*, we have most often elected to retain the original French word. However, while starting the essay by outlining a distinction between the two terms, Stiegler then proceeds to use the terms in composition, and so the distinction becomes less essential later on.
5. Axel Honneth, *Disrespect: The Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007.
6. Cf. Alain Rey, *Dictionnaire historique de la langue française*, Paris: Robert, 2006.
7. Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition: The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts*. Translated by Joel Anderson, Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995.
8. Contempt is what breaks the circuit of recognition whose ordinary name is attention, and which presupposes *vergogne* (*aidōs*). In other words, contempt is what destroys desire, and the possibility of the desire for desire, by way of the master-slave dialectic. This desire is reflected in another desire, which it makes its object, and as the object of its attention which is therefore also its phantasm, its phenomenon. This reflection, this *mirage* that is the basis for *aidōs*, and the condition of all dignity, is what lies at the origin of self-consciousness, as it is formed directly by this object of attention that is consciousness, in a process that Hegel calls his phenomenology and of which he describes its first moment in the following way: “...self-consciousness is *Desire* [*Begierde*, inclination, leaning, longing] in general. Consciousness, as self-consciousness, henceforth has a double object: one is the immediate object, that of sense-certainty and perception, which *however for self-consciousness* has the character of a *negative*; and the second, viz. *itself*, which is the true *essence*, and is present in the first instance only as opposed to the first object.” G.W.F. Hegel. *Phenomenology of Spirit*. Translated by A.V. Miller, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 105. Interpolation in square brackets is Stiegler’s.
9. Translators Note: In 2004, Patrick Le Lay, CEO of TF1 (the French public television channel privatized in 1987) caused a scandal in France when he made the following statement about the channel’s aims: “There are many ways to talk about television. But from a business perspective, let’s be realistic: basically, TF1’s job is to help Coca-Cola, for example, sell its product”.... “For an advertising message to be perceived, the viewer’s brain has to be available. The aim of our programs is to make them available, in other words, to entertain them, relax them and prepare them between two messages. What we sell to Coca-Cola is available human brain time. Nothing is more difficult than obtaining this availability”.... TF1’s logic is one of power. We sell our

customers a mass audience, a number of individuals likely to watch an advertising spot. For advertisers, airtime represents nothing more than ‘customer contacts’. Human attention” (Le Monde, “Patrick Le Lay s’explique dans ‘Télérama’ sur ses propos controversés”, 7 September 2004: https://www.lemonde.fr/archives/article/2004/09/07/patrick-le-lay-s-explique-dans-telerama-sur-ses-propos-controverses_378186_1819218.html).

10. Here, I am not in agreement with Axel Honneth when he writes, for example, that “a criterion for what has to be regarded as a ‘disorder’ or pathological development of social life” must be constituted by “the intersubjective condition of human identity development” (*Disrespect*, p. 74). In *Prendre Soin. Tome 1, De la jeunesse et des générations*, Paris: Flammarion, 2008 [Eng. Trans.: *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations*. Translated by Stephen Barker, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010], I attempted to demonstrate that the question which must be posed is not that of identity, but that of a process of identification which precisely allows us not to be locked into the phantasm of an identity—generator of so much *Missachtung*.

11. Perhaps this becoming is inscribed in what appears after the fact to have been this ominous [*sinistre*] portent heralding an age of lovelessness: “The true shape in which truth exists can only be the scientific system of such truth. To help bring philosophy closer to the form of Science, to the goal where it can lay aside the title ‘love of knowing’ and be *actual* knowing—that is what I have set myself to do” (Hegel. *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 3).

12. N. Katherine Hayles, “Hyper and Deep Attention: the Generational Divide in Cognitive Modes,” *Profession*, 2007, pp. 187-199.

13. Translators Note: The precise source referred to by the author is not known. More recent information suggests that between 2019 and 2021, the total amount of screen media used each day among tweens rose from 4 hours 33 minutes to 5:33, and among teens from 7:22 to 8:39, and that this increase had accelerated since the start of the pandemic. See *The Common Sense Census: Media Use by Tweens and Teens*, 2021, p.3. https://www.common sense media.org/sites/default/files/research/report/8-18-census-integrated-report-final-web_o.pdf.

14. Translators Note: This refers to a three-volume series: *Mécréance et Discrédit. Tome 1, La décadence des démocraties industrielles*, Paris: Galilée, 2004 [Eng. trans.: *The Decadence of Industrial Democracies: Disbelief and Discredit, Volume 1*. Translated by Daniel Ross and Suzanne Arnold, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2011]; *Mécréance et Discrédit. Tome 2, Les sociétés incontrôlables d’individus désaffectés*, Paris: Galilée, 2006 [Eng. trans.: *Uncontrollable Societies of Disaffected Individuals: Disbelief and Discredit, Volume 2*. Translated by Daniel Ross, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013]; *Mécréance et Discrédit. Tome 3, L’esprit perdu du capitalisme*, Paris: Galilée, 2006 [Eng. trans.: *The Lost Spirit of Capitalism: Disbelief and Discredit, Volume 3*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014].

15. *Mécréance et Discrédit. Tome 3, L’esprit perdu du capitalisme*, Paris: Galilée, 2006 [Eng. trans.: *The Lost Spirit of Capitalism: Disbelief and Discredit, Volume 3*. Translated by Daniel Ross, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2014].

16. *Propaganda: comment manipuler l’opinion en démocratie*, Paris: La Découverte, 2007; Edward Bernays, *Propaganda*. New York: Horace Liveright, 1928.

17. Translators Note: Although the English translation of Stiegler’s 2004 two-volume work *De la misère symbolique* was titled “*Symbolic Misery*”, the French word *misère* is perhaps more appropriately translated as “poverty” or “impoverishment”.

18. Bernard Stiegler and Ars Industrialis, *Réenchâter le monde : la valeur esprit contre le populisme industriel*, Paris: Flammarion, 2006 [Eng. trans.: *The Re-Enchantment of the World: The Value of Spirit Against Industrial Populism*. Translated by Trevor Arthur, London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014], and Bernard Stiegler, *La Télécratie contre la démocratie*, Paris: Flammarion, 2008.

19. Honneth, *Disrespect*, p. 201.

20. In particular the cases of Richard Durn, of Patricia and Emmanuel Cartier, and of terrorist forms of fundamentalism.

21. *La technique et le temps. Tome 3, Le temps du cinéma et la question du mal-être*, Paris: Galilée, 2001 [Eng. trans.: *Technics and Time, 3: Cinematic Time and the Question of Malaise*. Translated by Stephen Barker, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2010].

22. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, p. 110.

23. Translators Note: *Formation* in French includes notions of education and training, as well as processes of enculturation.

Translator's note: This essay was published as "Technologie et media: la presse à sensations," *Le Cahier* (Collège International de Philosophie), no. 1 (1985): 168-172. I am grateful to Daniel Ross for his attentive feedback and crucial suggestions on this translation.

**suffering thinking machines:
lyotard and the sensuous
path to cognition**

noah roderick

INTRODUCTION

Jean-François Lyotard's framing of the problem of cognition—which he tackles most directly in the essays comprising his 1988 book, *L'Inhuman*—is strikingly contemporary. While philosophers, neuroscientists and psychologists continue to look for clues to cognition, as they have for centuries, in studies of the brain, animal behavior, logical inference patterns, and ethical decision making, it's now commonplace to frame cognition as a technological problem. At minimum, we can work backwards from the current state of artificial intelligence in order to find at least a negative definition of cognition: the more impressive the technology,

the higher we set the bar for conscious thought. Lyotard's own framing of the problem works backwards from the far, far distant future: 4.5 billion years, give or take. In the essay, "Can Thought Go on Without a Body?" Lyotard imagines the end of organic life on earth as the sun shrivels into a cold white dwarf, taking with it the continuity of thought sustained by organic life. One need not believe in an eternal afterlife to be lulled into the assumption that thought will go on, even if the one thinking it will not. And one doesn't need Hegel to see a pervasive, if implicit, belief—particularly in those loftier areas of thought like scientific and moral understanding—that knowledge, like a mythic hero, advances towards its own destiny, certain but unknowable to the hero. To be able to point to the end of thought in terms of years, no matter how unimaginably far into the future, is to undermine the myth, which, in turn, threatens to strip away meaning from thought in the present.

Lyotard says that even if we take the Epicurean attitude of not worrying about the arrival of something we won't be present for, the death of the sun nonetheless leaves us with a "glum afterthought: *après moi le deluge* [...]. The deluge of matter" (Lyotard, 11).¹ What's discomfiting is the idea that matter will go on, and, in some sense, leave us behind. We might have accepted that humans are wholly material, but it is also hard not to think of matter in what Quentin Meillassoux points out as *correlationist* terms, with matter existing as a category that is sustained by our immaterial cognition of it.² Lyotard, then, argues that the only way to comfortably continue in this relationship of dependence is to frame the death of the sun as a technical problem to be solved: Even if we won't be around to think, we can still work on manipulating matter (as machines) to sustain thought. I argue in this essay that Lyotard entertains the idea of the death of the sun as a technical problem in order to rethink the relationship between matter and thought. The technical problem of engineering a true thinking machine would require closing the gap between matter and thought. This will not be done not just by complexifying material-informational networks, creating more and more data processing channels until thought appears. Also needed is a re-materialization

of thought, which means conceiving of matter is not an objective unit of reality wholly present to and representable by thought, but rather as a “presence [...] unrepresentable to the mind, always withdrawn from its grasp” (Lyotard, 142). As such, the mind’s proper orientation to matter is aesthetic. It has more to do with the sublime than with synthesis.³ Bringing matter and thought together on the axis of the aesthetic or the sensuous means that thought encounters itself at every moment as a withdrawn presence. This incomplete circuit, as I will attempt to illustrate in this essay, is the beginning of successive recursive formations that enable a material system to become an agent of thought.

THE INHUMAN DIPOLE

To be sure, Lyotard is not seriously positioning himself as a prophet or even a philosopher of artificial intelligence. Indeed, the structure at least of “Can Thought Go on Without a Body?” is that of a speculative drama (between the interlocutors “He” and “She”). But it’s worthwhile to follow him as far as we can into this drama because in his arguments about how we would need to think about thought before engineering it in some hardware, we discover a position that threads throughout Lyotard’s diverse oeuvre, which is that there is something at the very core of thought that resists cooptation for the external ends of capital accumulation, even as capital becomes increasingly reliant upon coopting thought and communication for its own expansion. The logic of accumulation that marshals thought to be “consolidated under the name of development” is one of the two types of the *inhuman*—which I will call I_1 —that Lyotard discusses (2). Central to the logic of I_1 is the drive for efficiency, or the maintenance of maximum complexity with minimum energy or information input, operating at a temporal minimum. This inhuman form of reason, an externalized product of human thought, is constantly being assimilated back into human thinking. Lyotard, however, believes that genuine thought can never fully mirror I_1 reasoning because human thought is inherently inefficient and is therefore incapable of ever fully achieving the limitless performativity that capital demands of it.

In Lyotard's notion of the inhuman, there is an echo of Kant's autonomy-heteronomy distinction, in which Reason gets coopted for ends other than its own, and it gets coopted at the very moment it acts as if it is limitless.⁴ For Reason to avoid being coopted for ends other than its own, it must draw upon its own rational powers—its inherent capacity for self-reflection—in order to discover its own limits. Self-reflection is a type of recursive behavior, and, as I will attempt to show in this essay, one of Lyotard's most underappreciated contributions to philosophy is his thinking on recursion. But in order to show how thought resists heteronomous performativity, Lyotard takes us beneath the reason, to the very emergence of self-reference. He locates self-reference, as well as thought's resistance to total performativity, in sensuous experience. The type of sensuous experience Lyotard describes is not that which accompanies the capacity for aesthetic judgement. It is instead proper to the second type of *inhuman* (I_2) that Lyotard names: a state of complexification that precedes the development of a self-referencing "I" which is capable of marking and judging experience.⁵ It is in the primitive form of sensuous experience proper to I_2 , Lyotard shows, that the agent is confronted with contingency, anticipation, and, crucially, of itself in time.⁶ It is also important, as Yuk Hui insists, that the *inhuman* be differentiated from the *nonhuman*: "The nonhuman is other than human—for example, plants, animals, and minerals—but the inhuman is precisely the negation of the human, what it is not and what it will never be, but the inhuman is inside [of the human]."⁷ But to say that the inhuman is inside of the human is not to say that it is some atavistic phenomenon that homo sapiens occasionally revert to but have generally evolved beyond with the acquisition of symbolic reasoning; rather, it is always-already present to symbolic reason, as, for example, when we intend symbolic categories as phenomenal objects in analogy-making or when paradoxes cause us to languish in anticipation for a discursive logic that has not yet appeared.⁸

There is an interesting symmetry in the relationship between I_1 and I_2 : I_1 is an exteriorization of human reason that is constantly being included back into the human; whereas I_2 is anterior to human reason and is constantly being forgotten

or excluded from the human. The overall picture of the inhuman, then, is that of a dipole. It's tempting to think that the symmetry between the two inhumans is a recent historical development with the advent of information capitalism; however, Massimiliano Simmons's convincing reading of Lyotard claims that "capitalism is not the cause of performativity, but one of its latest effects," and that performativity is present wherever informational structures become complex.⁹ If this is the case, then the human exists in the tension between these two sides of the inhuman dipole. The reason, I think, Lyotard dipped his toe into artificial intelligence is precisely because the prospect of a true artificial general intelligence, as nonhuman, serves a conceptual canvas on which the tension between I_1 and I_2 is most visible to us. We want A.I. because it saves—or rather *saves us from*—time by compressing the very labor by which we mark time, which, in turn, multiplies the labor that can be done. But Lyotard argues that a true thinking machine, even one that persists beyond the death of the sun, cannot be safe from time. It cannot be safe from *feeling* time, from suffering the incompleteness of a moment, waiting for thought to come.

TIME, MEANING AND THE PHILOSOPHY OF TECHNOLOGY

The question of temporality is central to not just to Lyotard's own philosophy of technology but to thinkers who preceded him, such as Martin Heidegger and Gilbert Simondon, as well as to his contemporaries in the field, such as Gilles Deleuze and Bernard Stiegler. When Lyotard wrote *The Postmodern Condition* in 1979, he could already see that language technologies would be just as consequential for economic production in the postmodern era as the steam engine was in the modern era.¹⁰ Stiegler argues this point even more forcefully and expansively than Lyotard, emphasizing that language technologies have long been the defining technology of human culture because they, more than any other invention, change the way we think. Language technologies, from writing to digital information processing, are, Stiegler argues, essentially technologies of time and memory. Here, Stiegler follows upon Jacques Derrida's notion of the *pharmakon*, which plays with Plato's ambivalent attitude towards writing, where *pharmakon* can mean both a poison

and a remedy.¹¹ Thus, while writing extends the memory by exteriorizing it (a remedy), it also makes the ideas that have been exteriorized less present, which, for Plato, is a detriment (a poison) to thinking. Stiegler puts such exteriorizing technologies on a continuum of modes of retention. Expanding upon Edmund Husserl's division of *primary* and *secondary retentions*, Stiegler adds a third category, *tertiary retentions*.¹² A primary retention is an impression of a sensory event or a perception, which is retained in memory but is “*not yet a memory*.”¹³ A secondary retention becomes a memory by selecting a retained sensory event for re-presentation. This representation also shapes the horizon of anticipation—or what Husserl called *protension*—which is part of the temporal flow of conscious experience just as memory is. Stiegler's third category of tertiary retention is sometimes thought of as a mode by which ideas are exteriorized onto some extra-cerebral medium, such as writing. However, for Stiegler, tertiary retention is also what makes such an exteriorization onto another medium possible, as it includes the “grammatization [...] of the flow of retentions.”¹⁴ Systems of symbolic representation, like linguistic grammar itself, already exteriorize the presence of sensory events by flattening them together as categories, or, as Nietzsche already argued, “We obtain the concept [...] by overlooking what is individual and what is actual.”¹⁵ *Logos*, as Heidegger emphasizes, comes from *legein*, which means both ‘to say’ but also “to harvest, to gather, to add one to the other...”¹⁶ Sensory events are experienced inside of a pre-synthesized time, or what Henri Bergson called *duration*.¹⁷ Only when they are gathered together and spatialized are they able to be recorded onto other media as extensions of memory and thought.

Even though a symbolic system such as language operates inside our heads, the particulars of a language come from outside of us, before us. Thus, tertiary retention, in whatever form it takes, is never strictly our own, individual memory. Yet, on the remedy side of the *pharmakon*, tertiary retention and its attendant grammatization makes possible the “discretization, reproduction, and spatialization of temporal flows” that are involved in analytical and synthetical thought.¹⁸ In other words, this exteriorized apparatus is what allows us to make up our own minds about things;

it is what allows for what Simondon calls *individuation* to happen.¹⁹ But this is also where, for Stiegler, the poisonous side of the *pharmakon* reveals itself, an aspect of the gift that looks a lot like Lyotard's I_1 . With the language technologies that operate in the knowledge economy of the postmodern era—up to and including A.I. systems—there is “*automated categorization*,” which “automatically produces digital tertiary retentions on the basis of other digital tertiary retentions.”²⁰ This “automation of categorization makes it possible for operations of analysis and understanding to be delegated to digital systems.”²¹ The danger here is that this automation has “proletarianised” both knowledge workers and consumers of language technologies just as mechanical production did to skilled craftsmen in the 19th century.²²

Later in this article, I will discuss the prospect of *iterative collapse* in current LLMs, where models being trained on their own output become increasingly entropic, and they end up producing nonsense (*noise*, in informational terms). But both Lyotard's larger critique of techno-science and Stiegler's argument about automated categorization already point to a related phenomenon. Both argue that the employment of language technologies in postmodern information economies reorient the production of knowledge so that efficiency and performativity are both its methods and its goals. This circularity of intentions results at the societal level in a kind of epistemic noise, or attenuation of the noetic. In the case of the production of digital tertiary retentions ‘on the basis of other digital tertiary retentions,’ there can be no other ends besides the optimization of performativity. According to Stiegler, “Interpretation cannot be delegated to an analytical system of tertiary retentions.”²³ That is to say that meaning—decisions about the intentions, purposes, and truth value of an object of thought—must come from outside of the iterations of these retentional operations, a threshold that language technologies have yet to cross.

The cultural-epistemic problem of circularity in digital tertiary retention intersects with another prominent problem in the fields of cognitive psychology and artificial intelligence called *the symbol grounding problem*. The symbol grounding problem

points to a seemingly irreducible distinction between information processing and interpretation/understanding, a distinction John Searle notably described in his *Chinese Room* thought experiment.²⁴ The problem, according to Stevan Harnad, is:

How can the semantic interpretation of a formal symbol system be made intrinsic to the system, rather than just parasitic on the meanings in our heads? How can the meanings of the meaningless symbol tokens, manipulated solely on the basis of their (arbitrary) shapes, be grounded in anything but other meaningless symbols?²⁵ (335)

On the face of it, the problem is one of how a system of symbols (i.e., a tertiary retention) can interact with what is exterior to it. For Harnad, the ability to ground symbols likely presupposes consciousness; however, it is often also understood as a problem of embodiment: only through embodied experience can an agent pick a symbol's referent from outside of the system of symbols (i.e., without looping back to other symbols). But the symbol grounding problem is a bit deeper than this. Although multimodal A.I. technologies can assign symbols to referents in environments exterior to themselves, the referent object is not experienced phenomenally as an object but rather as a set of values on a spatial grid. The identification of the referent never really leaves the space of the system.

Although Lyotard stresses the importance of embodied cognition, he is not necessarily looking for an 'outside' to the system of symbols wherein the body would serve as an interface for an unimpeded flow of information from environment to symbol. What Lyotard's emphasis on an affective experience of time suggests is that it is not enough to have a body as a mere conductor of information. As I'll discuss in the next section, Lyotard conceives of the body as much as an obstacle to the flow of information as it as a conductor for it. To understand the body as a conductor for information is, in fact, to treat the body as an obstacle to thought, which Lyotard claims is one of the "essential objectives of

research today” in language technology (Lyotard, 62). Embodiment is necessary for grounding symbols because its limited affordances in its environment subject it to contingency. Again, as Stiegler points out, tertiary retentions (including systems of symbols) serve to congeal the singular presences of sensory events, flattening them into concepts that are preserved across time, transforming sensory events into repetitions whose differences are subsumed under categories. This includes the very concept of time itself. Lyotard adds that the more abstract systems of symbols become—from money to insurance policies to derivatives—the more they serve in “neutralizing the event” (Lyotard, 66). But I would argue that Lyotard goes further than Stiegler in his arguments about contingency. Whereas Stiegler thinks that tertiary retentions can intervene on primary and secondary retentions by shaping one’s horizon of anticipations, Lyotard also believes that there is sensuous experience of the system of symbols itself. Sensuous experience, or the aesthetic, is limited to a synthesis of an object’s accidental qualities and is therefore prior to the temporal synthesis of its invariant essence. As such, it is subject to the contingencies of accidental qualities. It is from inside of a state of contingency that we intend symbols to make meaning. Lyotard’s conception of I_2 means that there is no agent behind the intention of symbols that would possess a further system of symbols to neutralize the event of thought. Thus, when we say that we *intend* a symbol to mean something, we should think not of the intention as an act of an agent’s will but as an *intensity* that we experience passively. “Thinking,” according to Lyotard, “consists in receiving the event” (Lyotard, 74).

BODIES AS INFORMATIONAL BOUNDARIES

The conceit in the titular question of Lyotard’s essay, “Can thought go on without a body?” involves the prospect of a human-like artificial intelligence that could survive a cold sun either by developing an alternate power source or joining another solar system entirely. Insofar as the superficial question of body goes, he has no doubt that we’ll be capable of constructing a “hardware” that “owes nothing to biochemical components synthesized on the surface of the earth

through the use of solar energy” (14). Such a future body can be thought of as a machine designed for efficiency. Its purpose is to keep the artificial agent in a steady state equilibrium by introducing ordered information into an entropic system whose boundaries are demarcated by the body itself. This is a role that all living bodies play, from prokaryotes to humans to redwoods. And the role is the same, whether the ordered information comes from hydrothermal vents, heterotrophic consumption, or directly from the dying sun.

We all know what we mean when we talk about organic bodies: solid extensions in space with certain textures, colors and contours, as well as organs and appendages fit for purpose in their environments. But a body is also a difference between an internal informational state and the external state of information in the agent’s environment. This difference can be described as a *Markov blanket*, a statistical concept whose application to descriptions of living, conscious systems is what Karl Friston calls *the free energy principle*.²⁶ Friston explains that through sensory input and active interfacing with an agent’s environment, the agent must demarcate what external information is relevant to maintaining its internal state (threats, convertible energy, etc.), and what is irrelevant. Within that demarcation is the agent’s model of itself in relation to its environment, a model that, recursively, contributes to the integrity of the agent’s internal state. The ‘free energy’ that Friston refers to in his free energy principle is new information or surprise that is not predicted in the agent’s model of itself in its environment.²⁷ Free energy is the result of contingency, which, at each moment, is a function of the difference between the informational contours of an exterior environment and the specific limitations of a body’s access to environmental information. Thus, the goal is to minimize the difference in information between an organism’s sensory states and its internal model of itself in its environment. The beginnings of conscious experience, in Friston’s reckoning, is an embodied agent trying to minimize the free energy in its environment by actively pursuing and sampling sensory information, improving the model of itself in its environment (essentially, a kind of Bayesian inference). The body’s limited access to the information in its

environment creates a mismatch (free energy) between the sensory information it is continuously updating itself with and its internal model of that environment. It is with this mismatch—where the sensory state contains information not predicted in the internal state model—that gives rise to the kind of attentional selection which we associate with a conscious experience (think, for instance, of a door unexpectedly slamming).

Though predating any such concept of the free energy principle, Lyotard is already thinking along these lines when he draws upon Leibniz's monadology to imagine a "complete" monad (Leibniz's God), whose limitless memory excludes the possibility of new information and thus the possibility of experiencing genuine events (65). The most efficient body, in other words, knows no time, no interface between internal and external states. Lyotard thinks that research into the development of thinking machines is already, almost retroactively, being pressed into the service of constructing a complete monad, with the implicit belief that only a complete monad would be able to neutralize the event of the death of the sun. Ironically, however, while we might attribute *knowledge* to such a being (all knowledge, in fact), it couldn't be said that such a being actually *thinks*. Extending this logic, we could say that while all of the efforts that lead to conscious thought are efforts towards maximum efficiency, it is a lack of total efficiency that opens up the space for thought. Indeed, it is the drive to have a more efficient internal model to overcome the limitations of the body's sensory states that new pathways of thought are opened, such as synthesized categorical information, or the exteriorization of retention. For example, if I associate a particular terrain with dangerous things, I will be less likely to be surprised to spot a predator there and my body will move about the terrain sampling sensory information accordingly. But of course there is a cost in creating new pathways of thought. New pathways of thought require more complex data processing and memory, which then requires that more reserves of ordered information (i.e., consumable energy) be taken in from the environment.

But in the relationships of contingency between environments and bodies,

environments should not just be understood as local configurations of space filled with stuff. Friston thinks that “active states,” or embodied systems moving through space to gather sensory information, can also constitute an external state (or environment) for other embodied systems.²⁸ Likewise, Lyotard insists that the informational boundaries between bodies, particularly bodies of the same species, are key to the development of thought. It was in the mid-1980s to early 1990s when he turned his attention to the problem of artificial intelligence. This period happens to coincide with what is known as the second “A.I. winter,” which refers to a time in which the pace of development in the field appeared not to be matching expectations, and, consequently, research funding dried up.²⁹ Among the expectations of the field was that A.I. and robotics would progress together. However, Rajan and Saffiotti point out that by the second A.I. winter, it was clear that the two fields were on different tracks, lacking a “common *lingua franca*.”³⁰ They observe that “A.I. researchers were driven by top-down (and abstract) reasoning, rarely connecting with the physical world,” while “researchers in the field of robotics took a more bottom-up approach, mostly ignoring the reasoning aspects and focusing instead on embodiment.”^{31 32} It is perhaps in this context that we can understand Lyotard’s frustration with contemporary imaginings of artificial intelligence, where, as he complains, “the tendency is to do away with the body, with becoming-human in general, but notably with the body, and, consequently, in the body, the sexual inscribed in the body.”³³ This is also a theme in “Can Thought Go On Without a Body,” where, again, the dramatic interlocutors are “He” and “She.” There, Lyotard argues that it should be impossible to have a concept of a body without difference in gender. He goes on to argue that technoscience and wider cultural trends are converging on their valuation (or devaluation) of gender: “The notion of gender dominant in contemporary society wants this gap closed, this transcendence toppled, this powerlessness overcome” (21). Again, in making the body necessary only as a conductor to remove the obstacle of environmental information, the differences inscribed in the body become an obstacle to removed; however, the removal of those obstacles becomes itself an obstacle to thought.

Even within its proper context, some of Lyotard's language displays a lack of nuance about gender differences that does his larger argument no favors. We can, nevertheless, take the point that a body without difference inscribed in it is nothing more than a conductor, and is therefore no medium for the emergence of thought. Just like a semi-conductor, a body with difference inscribed offers a degree of resistance, which is necessary for informatic complexity. He argues that the reason why models of artificial bodies often exclude gender difference is "because, quite simply, it is not very performative, indeed it gets in the way."³⁴ In other words, a body without such difference inscribed in it is like a complete monad—efficient, immune to the pain of misunderstanding, but unable to build an internal model of itself against a field of contingencies (i.e., free energy). What needs to be made clear at this point is that Lyotard is not advocating for the inscription of gender difference in artificial agents for the sake of faithfully reproducing the human. He does so instead because gender difference creates a partially opaque interface between agents. The particularities of human gender categories—which, anyway, are not reducible to biological sex—need not be reproduced. What would need to be reproduced in an artificial agent is the informatic opacity that comes with such differences, so that communication among agents would not be a perfectly closed circuit with perceptual information flowing losslessly between them. It is only with such opacity between agents can sensory experiences be gathered together and exteriorized as symbolic tertiary retentions, which, being native to neither agent, become intentional objects even as the agents use those symbols to intend referents in their fields of sensory experience.

ANALOGIES AND PARADOXES

Despite the impressive advances in A.I. in recent years, Moravec's paradox continues to hold true: the easy stuff is the hard stuff. This is true for the ability of an embodied system to manipulate ordinary objects in its environment. It is also true for the kind of symbol manipulation that goes into analogy-making, which we humans do constantly (often without realizing), but which Melanie Mitchell identifies as one of the fundamental barriers to a "robust and general

intelligence” in machines.³⁵ Certainly, an LLM like the one used in ChatGPT can give you an analogy if you ask it to. I recently asked ChatGPT (3.5) to tell me how a refrigerator is like an integer. Without hesitation, it gave me an answer that—if I’m being honest—is just as good or better than anything I could have come up with myself: they are both containers that hold constant values.³⁶ Impressive though it might have been, the analogy that ChatGPT gave me was generated by a statistical association between the tokens “refrigerator,” “integer,” and, in this case, “container.” There is no sense in which the model *sees* any concepts or connections beyond the numerical value assigned to each token. Relatedly, there is the “Reversal Curse” (otherwise known as the “Tom Cruise problem”), which concerns an LLM’s ability to understand $aRb \rightarrow bRa$ types of arguments. For example, when Berglund et al. asked GPT-4 who Tom Cruise’s mother is, it came back with the correct answer (*Mary Lee Pfeiffer*) 79% of the time. But when asked who Mary Lee Pfeiffer’s son is, it only gave *Tom Cruise* as an answer 33% of the time.³⁷ Making such associations is difficult for an LLM because it does not reside *inside* of a temporal context in which the two questions are linked. “Real ‘analogy,’” Lyotard says, “requires a thinking or representing machine to be *in* its data *just as* the eye is in its visual field or writing is in its language...” (17). It requires that symbols be intentional objects.

That Lyotard attempts to explain how analogy works by reaching for a comparison to visual perception is no accident. As we have seen already, Lyotard never wants to locate thought too far away from the limits of embodiment. And in selecting the analogy to visual perception in particular, he’s signaling his debt to Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of perception. What Lyotard likes about Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology is that vision is only realized within its own spatiotemporal limits:

While a visual object is presenting one side to the eye, there are always other sides, still unseen. A direct, focused vision is always surrounded by a curved area where visibility is held in reserve yet isn’t absent (16).

Visual attention (attention in general being a hallmark of cognition) is only possible because there is ‘visibility held in reserve.’ It is through this reserve that ground and figure are differentiated. As Bert Oliver argues, Lyotard’s comparison between visual perception and analogy rests on “the continuous exchange between that which is focused and that which is blurred, uncertain; between searching and recognition, preservation (or memory) and anticipation.”³⁸ If we, as Husserl famously did, study a mailbox for its phenomenal properties, it is the multiple, fleeting, sensuous impressions of the front of the mailbox (‘focused’ and ‘blurred’), which are connected together by an emergent mental object, that allow us to anticipate the ‘other sides, still unseen’ (i.e., the back of the mailbox). This mode of visual perception is quite different from that of, for instance, a self-driving car, which begins from the parallel processing of multiple data dimensions and then plots that data onto what is essentially a two-dimensional graph to make weighted guesses about the object being detected. When, on the other hand, an organic agent perceives, it actively infers (anticipates) from changing data (connecting sense impressions) by moving within space of the incoming data (using sense organs, proprioception, and locomotion), thus finding itself in a three-dimensional environment—finding itself, in other words, within its own ‘visual field.’ This is how an organic agent has information not just about the objects it detects but about a reality that includes itself among those objects.

Of course, the comparison between visual perception and analogy only takes us so far, since, in the latter case, it is mental symbols rather than visual objects that are being intended. Still, Lyotard offers a further point of comparison, saying “Neither the linkages nor the connections between one word and another nor the connections between one part of a visual or sonorous figure to another are fixed, and, at each instant, there is a ‘decision’ to be made as to how to create linkages.”³⁹ He posits an “event of the ‘decision’ that enacts and ends the infinity of possibilities.”⁴⁰ Lyotard’s description sounds a lot like the event of decoherence in quantum mechanics, where a system in a superpositional state collapses into a single position relative to the environment it becomes entangled

with. In quantum decoherence, an outside observer could never “decide” when the superpositional state would become entangled with its environment, because to do so would mean that the observer is already entangled with the system, and so the event of decoherence would have already occurred.⁴¹ Similarly, there is a reason why Lyotard puts “decide” in scare quotes with regards to the collapse of analogical possibilities. There is no “I” to enact this decision. In other words, the one making the symbolic linkage is not standing transcendent to some finite set of all possible linkages, picking which one they decide is best; from inside the mind, claims Lyotard, the set is infinite. Instead, the “act that decides is not an *action* in the strict sense of the term—it is an event.”⁴² The event springs from something anterior to the symbol-wielding conscious agent. Instead of making the decision to link symbols from among a set of possible linkages, “the mind awaits this decision.”⁴³ This is why Lyotard makes the rather enigmatic claim that “the suffering of thinking is the suffering of time...” (19). Unlike my ChatGPT, which told me, *without any hesitation*, how a refrigerator is like an integer, a true thinking machine would have to feel itself waiting (suffering) from inside a set of possible linkages.⁴⁴

Insofar as analogy-making must occur inside of time, it is related to a mode of memorization that Lyotard calls “passing,” which he uses interchangeably with the Platonic concept of *anamnesis* and the Freudian concept of *Durcharbeitung* (or ‘working-through’) (54-55). In both the Platonic and the Freudian senses, it is the means of recalling that which has yet to be synthesized in the memory, for instance as a concept. Since the object of passing is not synthesized in the memory, there exists no rule for selecting it. It is, as Lyotard puts it, a “generativity with, if possible, no set-up other than the absence of set-up” (54). He contrasts *passing* with two other modes of memorization: *breaching*—habitual association, which can include anything from impressions of past events on some medium to accumulated cultural practices—and *scanning*, which is the active remembering by a conscious agent, complementary to the psychological concept of episodic memory. Scanning is a “temporal synthesis” that “implies not only the retention of the past in the

present as present, but the synthesis of the past as such and its reactualization as past in the present” (Lyotard, 51). In scanning, there is already a synchronous “I” that mediates the relationship between past and present. Scanning further implies “the identification of what is remembered, and its classification in a calendar or a cartography” (Lyotard, 51). The object of scanning is therefore already entered into a grid or a table or a grammatical system of differences that spatializes time. This type of memorization translates into constrained, albeit productively constrained, fields of reasoning, which themselves can be automated. Think, for instance, of my ChatGPT query, where, when presented with a problem—find the semantic proximity between ‘refrigerator’ and ‘integer’—it operated with a defined set of rules that flatten out the difference between *this* instance of a semantic proximity problem and any past or future instance of such a problem. Again, the model did not hesitate to give me an answer because it operates in a time that has already been synthesized as a set of spatial relations, where symbolic tokens have assigned values that reference nothing outside of the system of values itself.

It is not just current A.I. models that are subject to the constraints of temporal synthesis; Lyotard claims that techno-science, whose own performative objectives are indistinguishable from its operations, render the human “its vehicle much more than its beneficiary” (53). The point, then, of discovering new techniques that require *passing* is to put the agent back inside of time—yes, to suffer in time—in anticipation of other *logoi*. One of the major threads in Lyotard’s work is theorizing on how adjudication and creation are possible without coming from a point of transcendence (i.e., without presupposing a knowing “I” who decides). Most famously, in *The Postmodern Condition*, he talks about what knowledge production could look like without meta-epistemic *grand narratives* from which to derive epistemological legitimacy. The erosion of grand narratives in Postmodernity is not in itself something to be celebrated, since they have been replaced by the quasi-transcendence of economic performativity whose only valuation is performativity itself. However, Lyotard sees cause for optimism in scientific modes that expand internally (fractally) by neither being derived from

certainty nor producing it:

Postmodern science—by concerning itself with things as undecidables, the limits of precise control, conflicts characterized by incomplete information, ‘*fracta*,’ catastrophes, and pragmatic paradoxes—is theorizing its own evolution as discontinuous, catastrophic, nonrectifiable, and paradoxical. It is changing the meaning of the word *knowledge*, while expressing how such a change can take place. It is producing not the known, but the unknown. And it suggests a model of legitimation that has nothing to do with maximized performance, but has as its basis difference understood as paralogy.⁴⁵

As Lyotard sees it, certain modes of postmodern science, such as the study of complexity, do not draw upon a transcendent notion of Reason to solve problems that arise, but instead await new forms of reason that emerge from within the localized field of problems—problems which often take the form of paradoxes.

We can also see this line of argument in *The Differend*, where Lyotard is interested in “the unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be.”⁴⁶ For example:

Can you give me, says an editor defending his or her profession, the title of a work of major importance which would have been rejected by every editor and which would therefore remain unknown? Most likely, you do not know any masterpiece of this kind because, if it does exist, it remains unknown. And you think you know one, since it has not been made public, you cannot say that it is of major importance, except in your eyes.⁴⁷

The editor is trying to parry the interlocutor’s argument with a paradox. The

editor's interlocutor cannot present a rejected, unknown masterpiece because to do so would constitute an illegitimate move within a discourse genre, where the rule is that "masterpiece" must be *a work acknowledged as a masterpiece by the public*. But what is presented as a paradoxical statement in one discourse genre may also be a legitimate move in a genre that is yet to be inscribed, one in which it is possible to propose a masterpiece without offering public acknowledgement as proof. This new genre of literary criticism can only emerge at the point of a paradox within the existing genre, and so the rules for a new form of discursive reason emerge from within discourse itself. The paradox reveals the formal limits of the existing genre as definitional qualities so that the genre can be named as part of a multiplicity of genres. If we look at the genre as a set, we can say that the formal limits of the existing genre are included as a part (a subset) of the emergent genre set that includes both {public acknowledgement proofs} and {¬public acknowledgement proofs}. The internal division of discursive planes—just as Lyotard describes in the emergence of new forms of reason with postmodern science—happens locally by means of recursion rather than a transcendent "I" who orders the discourse.

SELF-REFERENCE BEFORE THE SELF

Lyotard holds that recursive processes are essential for the emergence of new forms of reason, including the special form of reason that produces self-reference. When he speaks about the concept of recursion, he does so with reference to the work of Douglas Hofstadter, whose own insights into cognition are, I would argue, often complementary to Lyotard's own.⁴⁸ "The essence of recursion," Hofstadter tells us, is "something being defined in terms of simpler versions of itself, instead of explicitly."⁴⁹ Recursion is different from equivocal and circular definitions because it involves a hierarchical repetition of nested layers rather than a lateral repetition of the whole. An easy example of this can be found in the Fibonacci sequence, where, for instance, $F_6 = 8$. F_6 can be defined as a sum of F_5 (= 5) and F_4 (= 3); F_5 can, in turn, be defined as the sum of F_4 (= 3) and F_3 (= 2), and so on. Here, the repetition of the procedure $F_n = F_{n-1} + F_{n-2}$ allows us to define F_6 as a nested

set rather than using an explicit, equivocal definition.

But an object can also interact with the nested levels of constituents from which it emerges, as with a hurricane that affects the water droplets of which it is composed. The consequences of this kind of self-interaction are described by Hui, who characterizes recursivity as “the looping movement of [a system] returning to itself in order to determine itself, while every movement is open to contingency, which in turn determines its singularity.”⁵⁰ This sense of *recursion* as an individuating process resonates with Hofstadter’s notion of the *recursive figure*, where the “ground can be seen as a figure in its own right.”⁵¹ One example Hofstadter gives of a recursive figure is in M.C. Escher’s *Fish and Scales*, where the scales of larger fish, as well as the negative spaces between those fish, are composed of smaller fish of roughly the same shape. Indeed, in typical Escher fashion, the relationship between ground and figure is indeterminate (i.e., the viewer must decide whether to foreground the smaller fishes or the larger fishes). The recursive figure is also a defining quality of postmodern popular culture, given its obsession with ‘going meta.’⁵² Take, for instance, the postmodern classic *Scream* (1996), where the narrative’s ground—the slasher horror genre—becomes itself a narrative figure.⁵³ With a recursive figure like the *Scream* narrative, we can also talk about *self-reference* as a kind of recursive action. In fact, the second installment of the franchise, *Scream 2* (1997), begins with a movie called *Stab*, which depicts the events of the first *Scream* movie—events which, again, take the slasher movie genre as a narrative figure. From there, the franchise could have proceeded as an infinite loop of self-reference if the studios would have found it profitable to do so.⁵⁴ Infinite loops are a characteristic of some self-referential objects, which is why a thinker like Bertrand Russell tried to ban them from logic: it is impossible to reduce them to well-defined, ordered sets. From the logician’s perspective, a self-referential loop produces about the same result as a circular definition, except that a self-referential loop may also express a paradox. And, again, paradoxes can be productive.

Self-referential loops can be dead ends, but they can also be achievements. One

of the most notable examples of this is Gödel numbering, in which all elements of a formal mathematical system (numbers, logical symbols, variables, and operations) are encoded as number segments. Essentially, the formal system, with which information *about* numbers is created, is itself expressed *as* number segments (*Gödel numbers*). One consequence of this exercise was that Gödel was able, within the logic of the formal system, to represent the statement, “This statement of number theory does not have any proof.”⁵⁵ It’s a provable statement expressing its own unprovability. This apparent paradox, which Russell could do little but dismiss,⁵⁶ represents a meta-level plane within the system, another layer of information where the system draws a logical boundary around itself. Almost as if there is a very faint “I” emerging from within the system.

While Gödel numbers don’t constitute anything like the “I” of human consciousness, Hofstadter does claim that the self-conscious “I” is not something that’s either fully present or fully absent; rather, it takes on sharper and sharper contour as it repeats within the self-referential loop. Hofstadter creates a further distinction between ordinary self-referential loops and special *strange loops*, the latter being a prerequisite for the conscious “I.” An example he gives for the first kind is that of a video camera facing a screen that’s projecting the camera’s own input. Such self-interaction can produce all kinds of interesting patterns, but those patterns develop “*no symbols at all*, because a video system does not perceive anything.”⁵⁷ I would argue that we may include as non-strange loops the sort of iterative recursion we see in LLM-based A.I. that uses text prediction to generate content. Indeed, Shumailov et al., who conducted research into LLMs that train on their own output, posit a “curse of recursion” characterized by *model collapse*: “a degenerative process affecting generations of learned generative models, where generated data end up polluting the training set of the next generation of models; being trained on polluted data, they then mis-perceive reality.”⁵⁸ To illustrate, they ran several generations of training sets, beginning with a query about the origins of Revival architecture. By the tenth iteration of outputs (*Gen 9*), the model had devolved into nonsense, generating text about “architecture” as being the home

of several varieties of jackrabbits.⁵⁹ Shumailov et al. claim that collapsed models ‘mis-perceive reality,’ which is an appropriately evocative description, but it’s doubtful that they ever met the criteria for genuine perception in the first place.

In addition to the requirement of perception, Hofstadter’s second “ingredient of strangeness” is actually an *inability*, as in the system has an “inability to peer below the level of [its] symbols.”⁶⁰ In human terms, he means:

This, our innate blindness to the world of the tiny, forces us to hallucinate a profound schism between the goal-lacking material world of balls and sticks and sounds and lights, on the one hand, and a goal-pervaded abstract world of hopes and beliefs and joys and fears, on the other, in which radically different sorts of causality seem to reign.⁶¹

It is this inability to look below the nested layers of analogies, to see itself emerging from multiplicities—roughly, what Lyotard thinks of as I_2 —that stabilizes a self-referential “I,” which in turn effects a semi-stable model of the world which the “I” inhabits. Barring certain brain injuries or other neurological conditions, it is this steadfast relationship between a person and their internal model that saves them from the iterative model collapse that Shumailov et al. describe. This is because while a category like “architecture” may undergo “*conceptual slippage*” through analogy-making (i.e. the metaphor of *legal architecture*), it keeps its place in a relatively steady orbit around the “I” through a network of associated perceptual experiences in the memory—a network of perceptual experiences that is unlikely to strongly include, for instance, jackrabbits.⁶²

PERCEPTION AND THE FEELING OF TIME

Although Hofstadter articulates a more detailed picture of the relationship between recursion, self-reference, and consciousness than Lyotard offered, there is one major shortcoming in Hofstadter’s theory for which Lyotard already had

a remedy. Hofstadter sees a progression from perception to symbols to thinking to identity, but he fails to provide an adequate picture of perception itself. Any progressive theory of consciousness (one that doesn't posit consciousness as being *either present or absent*) must explain the link between sensation and perception, a question that ultimately terminates in the symbol grounding problem. As with iterative model collapse, the symbol grounding problem is not just a problem of getting 'immaterial' reasoning out of material stimulus.⁶³ It's also a problem of time. As we have already seen, Lyotard believes that experiencing time (suffering it) is key to thought. Thus, when he envisages material stimulus as the grounding for symbolic activity, he thinks about matter not as some undifferentiated stuff that makes up reality (i.e. a physicalist sense of matter), but rather as the immediacy of experience. Again, he describes matter as 'presence as unrepresentable to the mind, always withdrawn from its grasp.' For Lyotard, the unrepresentable presence of matter also refers to affect, such as pleasure and pain. He argues that affect creates a gap between the immediacy of the sensation itself and the attempt to present it in the memory or discourse. Affect is "singular, inflexible, incomparable, in the very strict sense that the English-language speaks of a singleton."⁶⁴ He adds that discourse can only speak "about the affect in the third person," since affect does not address anyone or anything in particular.⁶⁵

Elsewhere, Lyotard discusses matter using terms like *nuance* and *timbre* almost as shorthand for matter:

Nuance and timbre are scarcely perceptible differences between sounds or colours which are otherwise identical in terms of the determination of their physical parameters. [...] Nuance and timbre are what differ and defer, what makes the difference between the note of the piano and the same note on the flute, and thus what also defer the identification of that note (140).

In this example, if *timbre* is matter, then a musical note is a form. As a form, the musical note has determinable parameters within an ordered system of difference to other musical notes. The note is a synthesis of the singular events of timbre as a spatial grid. But the utterable parameters of notes are only possible because there is an immediate experience of differentiated timbres whose parameters cannot be determined and represented for the precise reason that they are immediate. Lyotard's notions of nuance and timbre are very much in line with Gilles Deleuze's understanding of difference as being prior to the concept, in which difference "makes itself" rather than being derivative of self-identical forms whose differences are given by abstract, unified categories.⁶⁶ Insofar as the unrecoverable difference in timbre defers the identification of the note, there also emerges the experience of being inside of time—the note identifies an immediate presence (an event) that, by virtue of its symbolic identification, is no longer present.

Lyotard sees the same phenomenon in human communication that he identifies in the relationship between timbre and musical notes. Here, the guiding terms are *lexis* and *phōnē*. Where *lexis* is composed of the abstract forms of language (proper to, in Stiegler's terms, tertiary retention), *phōnē* is the immediate experience of communication: "Phōnē can be heard, even as silence, *within* the *lexis*. The inarticulated voice gives timbre to the articulated one."⁶⁷ *Phōnē* defers the *lexis* just as timbre defers identification of the note. The attempt to recover presence with *lexis* is most visible in writing: "All writing is this attempt to bear witness, by way of the articulated *lexis*, to the inflexible *phōnē*. Writing has a debt of affect which it despairs of ever being able to pay off."⁶⁸ Writing extends the sense of being in time by presupposing the absence of what it is trying to bear witness to; however, this absence is already there in speech. Recovery of the energetic excess of *phōnē* from within the *lexis* is also, as Lyotard points out, the job of the psychoanalyst who facilitates *Durcharbeitung* or *passing*. By recovering and articulating the pure affect associated with "infantile desires," the analyst is dis severing the patient's past (infancy) from their present, which is supposed to create a more coherent life narrative, with past, present, and future in their proper

places.⁶⁹ In other words, “the inflexible now of the affect can be actualized in the now subject to the inflexions (especially temporal inflexions) of the articulated voice.”⁷⁰ But the felt gap between *lexis* and *phōne* —is not confined to the page nor to the therapist’s couch; it is felt every time we cannot articulate what we mean or else every time we guess at another’s meaning. Because this gap is recurrent, it becomes an oscillation between that presence and absence of the self so that “the subject is constituted across repeated intervals of loss and return.”⁷¹ It is within this oscillation that the agent finds itself inside of time, presumably being able to sustain a metastable network of perceptual categories in relation to itself.

Lyotard argues that when an agent’s internal model is steeped enough inside of time, immediate reactions to sensation begin to be “delayed” or “prevented” (41). Thus, a multitude of possible actions “remain inscribed in a virtual state” (Lyotard, 42). Moreover,

This is how perception stops being ‘pure,’ i.e. instantaneous, and how representational consciousness can be born of this reflection (in the optical sense), of this ‘echo,’ of the influx on the set of other possible—but currently ignored—paths which form memory (Lyotard, 42).

The symbols of ‘representational consciousness’ are therefore contractions of possible states. Furthermore, an agent whose reality is populated with virtual actions is also an agent who lives in a world of linguistic modality and inference. We are moving rapidly through the major milestones on the way to a fully human-like cognition, but we can say that the possible mental states that are contracted in symbols would also include relational states between agents, and, finally, the ability to make inferences about the states of mind of others (i.e., theory of mind), which is perhaps the ultimate marker of general intelligence.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this essay was not to demonstrate that within the late writings of Jean-François Lyotard lay some alchemical secret to artificial general intelligence, but rather to gather a picture of his insights on consciousness and cognition, beginning, as he himself did, from the concrete image of a machine that thinks. Still, I do think it is well worth reading Lyotard at this moment in the development of A.I. not only because he stands out from his generation of philosophers in his understanding of consciousness as an emergent phenomenon, but also because he offers us ways to position ourselves in relation to intelligence technologies. It is too early to tell if the success of LLMs in the early years of this century's third decade represents a lonely peak (the history of A.I. is full of those) or if it is truly a launch point to something like artificial general intelligence. General intelligence is not meant to be a concept for which we can write an easy checklist of satisfactory conditions; yet it's not controversial to point to a few crucial conditions that are still far from being met, such as theory of mind and symbol grounding. But with general intelligence, it is not so much that there is a list of discrete conditions to be checked off; rather, it's a matter of multiple cognitive abilities working together. We may not yet have that kind of integration in the cognitive department, but we can see, for instance, in the launch of Google's *Gemini* in 2023 and OpenAI's *GPT-4o* in 2024, that A.I. is becoming more *multimodal*, with textual, visual, and sound interfaces getting increasingly integrated. Our experiences with it will be just as sensuous as they are linguistic. If this is the direction the technology is taking, then Lyotard's insights into the relationship between embodied, sensory experience and cognition will prove all the more valuable.

For Lyotard, sense and affect are there at every moment of thought—every analogy, every reflection, every decision. Our sense of time, which is so necessary to our ability to think causality and to develop goals and to understand ourselves as free and rational agents, only comes about, Lyotard says, because we suffer. On the surface, Lyotard's positioning of sense and affect at the heart of rational

thought might seem a little difficult to square with his information ontology. In our inherited understanding of information, there is always something of the rational and, indeed, the instrumental. The division between information and noise is not just between the meaningful and meaningless but also between the useable and useless. Postmodern culture, as Lyotard so famously described, became saturated with instrumental reason as information grew more and more into a tradable commodity. For Lyotard, the only way to meet this seeming contradiction is to develop a newly rational stance towards information. Some of that newly rational stance can be negotiated in philosophical discourse, for example, in resisting the I_1 logic of information commodification by viewing information not as a universal translator of value but as only existing in difference, as an event. But Lyotard also proposes a praxis of aesthetic encounter. This is what he was attempting in his 1985 exhibition, *Les Immatériaux*, at the Pompidou Centre in Paris. There, the visitor was placed in the midst of material objects of information and communication technologies, such as Minitel terminals and fax machines. The goal was to produce a sense of anxiety in the viewer by putting them in the midst of the “conflict between formal organization and the disorder of data, with victory going to the former.”⁷² Those objects, which are material manifestations of supposedly immaterial reason, were to be encountered in an aesthetic experience rather than in their familiar instrumental contexts. In encountering those instrumental objects as an aesthetic experience, the hope was that a new form of reason might emerge that goes beyond instrumental, I_1 reasoning, in which “the relationship between mind and matter is no longer one between an intelligence with a will of its own and an inert object.”⁷³

I would argue that Lyotard’s philosophy of sense, information, and cognition should be seen as one attempt at a universal aesthetic theory. It is universal because it looks at cognition not as transcendent to but as a subset of sensual and affective experience, and it is therefore capable of considering how novelty—perhaps new forms of cognition—can emerge from the sense interactions of even non-conscious systems. Lyotard is not alone in this respect. We can point to other

philosophies that attempt something like this, those which, perhaps, fall under the banner of speculative realism, such as Deleuze's philosophy of difference, Bruno Latour's social ontology, Karen Barad's intra-action or Graham Harman's object-oriented ontology. Of these, I believe Lyotard gives us the best head start in thinking about how the path from physical substrate to cognition runs through sense. It is in following and developing such a program of universal aesthetics that philosophy may best equip itself for the technical and ethical challenges posed by the coming of inhuman intelligences.

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NOTES

1. This and all parenthetical references are taken from Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*. Trans. Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991.
2. Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*. Trans. Ray Brassier. London: Continuum, 2008.
3. c.f. Jacques Rancière, "The Sublime from Lyotard to Schiller: Two Readings of Kant and their Political Significance." *Radical Philosophy* 126 (2004): 8-15.
4. Immanuel Kant, *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Trans. Mary McGregor. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998, 43-47.
5. At times, Lyotard uses ontogenetic language to describe this second sense of the inhuman, observing it in the developmental process of infants:

A foal, once out of its mother's womb, takes six hours to start grazing. I simplify. The human child takes two years to begin to speak. This is a huge zone, constituting a delay which explains, perhaps, or which at least gives us to understand analogously, that something is going to happen, that something will have happened in this dumb zone where the child nevertheless hears, hears a music. Something is going to happen that cannot be marked, because it cannot be symbolized (yet) in a language. This presents the occasion for an affective mass to gather which will remain in attendance of its expression.

Jean-François Lyotard, "Freud, Energy and Chance: A Conversation with Jean François Lyotard," interviewed by Richard Beardsworth, *Teknema* 5, Fall 1999.
6. N.B. The numbering of "1" and "2" does not express any priority in an ordered series. It merely expresses the order in which Lyotard introduces the two conceptions of the inhuman.
7. Yuk Hui, *Recursivity and Contingency*. London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2019, 263.
8. We should include in this second sense of the inhuman Lyotard's appropriation of the Freudian concept of the infant, to which he makes frequent references in his later writings. Like I_2 , the infantile voice, which is non-referential, is there at the beginning but persists through the acquisition of symbolic reason.
9. Massimiliano Simmons, "Jean-François Lyotard and Postmodern Technoscience," *Philosophy & Technology* 35 no. 31 (2022): 7.
10. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984.
11. Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*. Trans. Barbara Johnson. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1981.
12. Bernard Stiegler, "For a Neganthropology of Automatic Society," in *Machine: In Search of Media*. Eds. Thomas Pringle, Gerturde Koch & Bernard Stiegler. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019, 31.
13. Stiegler, "For a Neganthropology," 31.
14. Stiegler, "For a Neganthropology," 32.
15. Friedrich Nietzsche, *Philosophy and Truth: Selections from Nietzsche's Notebooks of the Early 1870s*. Ed. and trans. Daniel Breazeale. Atlantic Highlands, New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1993.
16. Martin Heidegger, *Aristotle's Metaphysics 1-3: On the Essence and Actuality of Force*. Trans. Walter Brogan & Peter Warnek. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2-3.
17. Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*. Trans. Arthur Mitchell. Garden City, New York: Dover Publications, 1998.

18. Stiegler, "For a Neganthropology," 35.
19. Gilbert Simondon, *Individuation in Light of Notions of Form and Information*. Trans. Taylor Adkins. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2020.
20. Stiegler, "For a Neganthropology," 34.
21. Stiegler, "For a Neganthropology," 34.
22. Bernard Stiegler, "Suffocated Desire, Or How the Cultural Industry Destroys the Individual: Contribution to a Theory of Mass Consumption." Trans. Johann Rossouw. *Parrhesia* 13 (2011): 54.
23. Stiegler, "For a Neganthropology," 35
24. Briefly, the Chinese Room experiment describes a room in which sits a native English speaker who knows no Chinese (we'll assume he means Mandarin) but has access to a computer program that can translate any statement in Chinese. The person in the room is fed slips of paper with Chinese statements; they then feed the Chinese statements into the computer; they write down the translation on another slip of paper and feed it back outside the room. The point is that both the computer and the person in the room are simply following a series of algorithmic instructions (for-type information) without having any information about the statements they are translating.
25. Stevan Harnad, "The Symbol Grounding Problem," *Physica D* 42 (1990): 335.
26. Karl Friston, "Am I Self-Conscious? (Or Does Self-Organization Entail Self-Consciousness?)" *Frontiers in Psychology* 9, no. 579 (2018): 4.
27. Friston, "Am I Self-Conscious," 5.
28. Karl Friston, "Life as We Know it," *Journal of the Royal Society: Interface* 10 (2013): 2.
29. Melanie Mitchell, *Artificial Intelligence: A Guide for Thinking Humans*. London: Pelican Books, 2019, 24-26.
30. Kanna Rajan and Alessandro Saffioti, "Towards a Science of Integrated A.I. and Robotics," *Artificial Intelligence* 247 (2017): 3.
31. Rajan and Saffioti, "Towards a Science," 5.
32. And it's fair to say that as of the beginning of the third decade of the 21st century, the major advances in artificial intelligence have come separate from any advances in the field of robotics or embodiment.
33. Lyotard, "Energy, and Chance"
34. Lyotard, "Energy and Chance"
35. Mitchell, *Artificial Intelligence*, 245.
36. Full answer: "Both a refrigerator and an integer serve as containers—one for preserving food, and the other for storing numerical values. They maintain stability: a refrigerator keeps items cold, and an integer holds a constant numerical value."
37. Lukas Berglund et al., "The Reversal Curse: LLMs Trained on "A is B" Fail to Learn "B is A." *arXiv* 2024, 4. DOI: <https://arxiv.org/abs/2309.12288>
38. Bert Oliver, "Body, Thought, Being-Human and Artificial Intelligence: Merleau-Ponty and Lyotard," *South African Journal of Philosophy* 21 no. 1 (2002): 48.
39. Jean-François Lyotard, *Readings in Infancy*. Ed. Robert Harvey and Kiff Bamford. London: Bloomsbury, 2023, 82.
40. Lyotard, *Infancy*, 83.
41. I use the concept of decoherence here merely to illustrate Lyotard's view that decision-making, normally associated with the will, is neither free (i.e., directed by an autonomous agent) nor is it strictly determined by a discernable chain of events and/or biological necessities. But there is indeed a theory of consciousness, Orchestrated Objective Reduction, advanced by Roger Penrose and Stuart Hameroff, which contends that consciousness is literally a decoherence event. Stuart

- Hameroff & Roger Penrose, "Consciousness in the Universe: A Review of the 'Orch OR' Theory, *Physics of Life Reviews* 11 no. 1 (2014): 39-78.
42. Lyotard, *Infancy*, 83.
43. Lyotard, *Infancy*, 82.
44. A fantastic but extremely subtle illustration of Lyotard's 'suffering in time' principle can be seen in Alex Garland's (2014) film *Ex Machina* in which the human protagonist Caleb is engaged in a sort of advanced Turing test with the A.I. robot, Ava. At one point, Ava leaves the room to put on a wig and a dress, and just before she comes back into the room with Caleb, she very briefly stops—as if collecting herself, perhaps trying to conjure her own image in Caleb's eyes. It is this moment of hesitation, which the audience sees but which Caleb cannot, that would have surely been proof of Ava's consciousness.
45. Lyotard, *Postmodern Condition*, 60.
46. Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*. Trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988, 13.
47. Lyotard, *Differend*, 4.
48. The reference to recursion in Bennington and Bowlby's translation of the *Inhuman* essays is, I believe, erroneously attributed to the physicist Robert Hofstadter, Douglas Hofstadter's father. As far as I can see, the senior Hofstadter never wrote anything about recursion and symbolic logic.
49. Douglas R. Hofstadter, *Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*. New York: Basic Books, 1999, 152.
50. Hui, *Recursivity*, 4.
51. Hofstadter, *Gödel*, 67.
52. Here is point where the legacies of Jean-François Lyotard and Douglas Hofstadter are strangely intertwined. Lyotard's *La Condition postmoderne* and Hofstadter's *Gödel, Escher, Bach* were published in the same year (1979). Both works heavily featured the concept of meta and, arguably, put the word as a standalone adjective into mass circulation. A quick glance at the Google Ngram entry for "meta" shows that although it does appear as a standalone word prior to 1979, its usage was pretty much flat until 1980, with an approximate .00015% market share of the written English language. Since then, its market share has increased by 700%, to .0012%.
53. *Scream*, directed by Wes Craven (1996; Los Angeles: Miramax Films).
54. *Scream 2*, directed by Wes Craven (1997; Los Angeles: Miramax Films).
55. In Hofstadter, *Gödel*, 18.
56. Disappointingly, Russell never seriously engaged with Gödel's work, mostly claiming that by the time he became aware of it, he hadn't been engaged in mathematical logic for decades and that it would take too much time to reacquaint himself with it. When prompted, Russell met Gödel's findings with a blanket dismissal: "If a given set of axioms leads to a contradiction, it is clear that at least one of the axioms must be false." In Alasdair Urquhart, "Russell and Gödel," *The Bulletin of Symbolic Logic* v22, no.4 (2016): 515.
57. Douglas Hofstadter, *I am a Strange Loop*. New York: Basic Books, 2007, 203.
58. Illia Shumailov et al., "The Curse of Recursion: Training on Generated Data Makes Models Forget," *arXiv*. 2023, 3. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2305.17493>
59. Shumailov et al., "The Curse," 3.
60. Hofstadter, *Strange Loop*, 204.
61. Hofstadter, *Strange Loop*, 204.
62. Mitchell, *Artificial Intelligence*, 338.
63. There is, in fact, a quiet revolution happening in neuroscience right now that is challenging

- what Mark Solms calls the “cortical fallacy” in theories of consciousness. Specifically, these newer views challenge the idea that conscious experience emanates from higher level cognitive activity in the brain’s cortexes, arguing instead that consciousness begins in the subcortical regions involved in interoception, where dysregulation translates into affective intensities. Mark Solms, *The Hidden Spring: A Journey to the Source of Consciousness*. London: Profile Books, 2021, 51-77.
64. Lyotard, *Infancy*, 94.
 65. Lyotard, *Infancy*, 94.
 66. Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*. Trans. Paul Patton. New York: Columbia University Press, 1994, 28.
 67. Lyotard, *Infancy*, 96.
 68. Lyotard, *Infancy*, 100.
 69. Lyotard, “Energy and Chance”
 70. Lyotard, *Infancy*, 104.
 71. Jean François Lyotard, “Anamnesis of the Visible,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 21 no. 1 (2004): 114.
 72. Jean-François Lyotard, “Les Immatériaux,” *Art & Text* 17 (1985), “The Problem.”
 73. Lyotard, “Les Immatériaux,” “The Context.”

our desire for fascism (and for democracy)

mark purcell

INTRODUCTION

The point of this paper is to develop a way of thinking about fascism that is useful in our current context. The paper is not another analysis of the historical manifestations of fascism, like Mussolini, Franco, or Hitler.¹ It is also not a contribution to the debates about the surge of fascism over the last ten years or so.² Instead, the paper focuses its attention on something closer to what Umberto Eco calls “Ur-Fascism, or Eternal Fascism.”³ “Political regimes can be overthrown, and ideologies can be criticized and disowned,” Eco says, but “behind a regime and its ideology there is always a way of thinking and feeling, a group of...obscure

instincts and unfathomable drives.”⁴ This paper examines this way of thinking and feeling, these obscure instincts and unfathomable drives. It sheds light on the undercurrent that is Eternal, the stream that runs through all manifestations of fascism. Its aim is to understand the forces in our collective human psyche that give rise to fascism. Taking my cue from the collaborative work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, I call these psychic forces “our desire for fascism.”

The bulk of the paper, in fact, is a close analysis of Deleuze and Guattari’s explorations in our desire for fascism. These explorations certainly do not amount to scientific claims about human political psychology that the reader should expect to be substantiated empirically. What they are instead is an evolving cluster of generative philosophical propositions about the desire for fascism. They prompt us to think about fascism, I argue, in bright new ways, in ways that I think are *useful* in our present political context. The paper’s core mission is to draw out of Deleuze and Guattari’s work a way to understand fascism that can help us think more clearly about what is to be done, politically, today. Its core method is exegesis. Most of the paper is taken up by an interpretation of how Deleuze and Guattari understand the desire for fascism. I intend for this interpretation to be both rigorous and creative. I aim for it to bring “forward something new and useful to our own purposes,” as Deleuze scholars Ian Buchanan⁵ and Rosi Braidotti⁶ have urged us to do. I intend both to make clear how Deleuze and Guattari think about fascism, and how we might use that thought today.

In addition to that core mission, I am happy if this exegesis can contribute to the scholarship on Deleuze and Guattari’s work, since in that scholarship their idea of fascism has been relatively less examined. And of course I hope this way of conceiving fascism can be of use to those who study historical fascism, perhaps helping those scholars see familiar details in a new light. In a similar way, the paper may also be of value to those trying to make sense of the current moment of populist authoritarianism prevalent in so many societies today.

So then, just what do Deleuze and Guattari say fascism is? The paper contends

that over the course of their collaboration Deleuze and Guattari come to propose two main hypotheses: 1) the desire for fascism is in all of us, permanently installed at the very root of our human experience, and 2) fascism is the product of two primary desires, the desire to be ruled and the desire to destroy.

If we all desire fascism, then fascism is not someone else's problem. We are all called to participate, together, in a collective project to *desire otherwise*. But what would that entail, specifically? I argue that we should not resist or struggle against our desire for fascism. Rather we should cultivate our other desires. In particular, we should pursue a project to strengthen our desire for *democracy*. For several years now, I have been developing a concept of democracy that understands it as driven by the desire to manage our affairs for ourselves.⁷ Just as the desire for fascism is present in all of us, so too is the desire for democracy, and so I have argued that the project of democracy must be a project to attend to and develop our desire to manage our affairs ourselves. We do that by investing our energy in ways of living together that require such self-management. Certainly the desire for self-management is very different from the desire to be ruled, and so in that sense the desire for democracy is the opposite of the desire for fascism. But if fascism is produced not only by the desire to be ruled but also by the desire to destroy, might we understand democracy, then, as *also* animated by the desire to *create*, the desire that urges us to produce new human communities, new forms of life in common? I have not conceived of democracy that way in the past, but in this paper I argue that we should. The desire for democracy, therefore, involves both our desire to manage our affairs ourselves *and* our desire to create, and so the project of democracy must be to encourage and strengthen those desires

DELEUZE, GUATTARI, AND THE DESIRE FOR FASCISM

Any exploration of fascism in Deleuze and Guattari's work starts with desire. They understand this term psychoanalytically; it is not just sexual desire but all desire, all pulsions, drives, forces of the unconscious that impel humans to act into the world, and to change it. Moreover, for them desire is not only a matter of psychology *per se*, it is also a social and economic force that produces the material

world. They thus conceive of their work as a “materialist psychiatry”⁸ whose subject is both “political economy *and* psychoanalysis, political economy *and* libidinal economy”.⁹ Both Freud and Marx.

Deleuze and Guattari argue that desire has been wrongly understood by the traditional, Platonic logic of Western thought, which sees desire as produced by a lack.¹⁰ We lack something, this logic presumes, and as a result we desire (or want or need) that something. For Deleuze and Guattari, instead, desire produces lack. More generally, desire is, by its very nature, “a process of production”.¹¹ That is why they often use the hyphenated term “desiring-production” to refer to desire, in order to emphasize its fundamentally productive and generative nature.¹² Desire produces our material and social reality by making “investments in the social field”.¹³ Desire even produces the structures that repress it, structures like Oedipus, capital, and the State. “Even the most repressive and the most deadly forms of social reproduction,” they contend, “are produced by desire”.¹⁴

Once desire produces these forms of repression and reproduction, they then have the power to operate on desire, to control it, limit it, channel it. Deleuze and Guattari put it this way: desire produces repressive social structures, and then those structures “fall back on (*se rabat sur*)” desire and force it to produce in particular ways.¹⁵ The Oedipus complex is of course the main structure of repression that they critique in *Anti-Oedipus*. Desire produces Oedipus, which then falls back on desire and controls it. But the archetype for this relation is to be found in Marx, where labor produces all value, including capital, which for Marx is nothing more than “dead labor.” But capital, once produced, then falls back on labor and controls it. What is more, Marx says, capital will then present itself, falsely, as the source of all value, a mystification Marx is keenly concerned to refute. Deleuze and Guattari model Oedipus on this relation: Oedipus “fell back on and appropriated desiring-production as if all the productive forces emanated from Oedipus itself...The same history as that of Capital, with its enchanted, ‘miraculated’ world”.¹⁶ Similarly concerned to refute the lies of Oedipus, Deleuze and Guattari repeatedly insist that it is desire that is the productive force. Desire

“does not arise after Oedipus....On the contrary, it is *Oedipus that depends on desiring-production*”.¹⁷ Desire produces the structures that repress it.

And so for example if we apply this way of thinking to the economic sphere, we would seek to understand “how social production and relations of production are an institution of desire, and how affects or drives form part of the infrastructure itself. For *they are part of it, they are present there in every way* while creating within the economic forms their own repression, as well as the means for breaking this repression”.¹⁸ Or in the sphere of psychoanalysis, we would see that “there is no difference in nature between neuroses and psychoses. *For in any case desiring-production is the cause*, the ultimate cause of both the psychotic subversions that shatter Oedipus or overwhelm it, and of the neurotic reverberations that constitute it”.¹⁹ Since our own desire institutes capitalist relations of production and produces Oedipus, we must attend to that fact. They urge us to “ward off...this abject desire that makes us bend our knees, lays us on the couch, and makes us remain there...”.²⁰ But note that in both cases desire produces not only the structures that repress it but also the liberating flows that can overwhelm that repression. Desire is also capable of breaking capitalist relations and shattering Oedipus. We must leave off desiring our own repression, but we must also attend to our desire for liberation. Either way, their analysis suggests, our project must be to attend to our own desire.

In a solo article in 1974, Guattari connects this way of understanding desire to an analysis of fascism. He writes that “fascism seems to come from the outside, but it finds its energy right at the heart of everyone’s desire”.²¹ And so, he says, we must start from the fact that “everybody wants to be a fascist”.²² This salvo is clearly meant to unsettle the way fascism is often understood, especially in countries that have not endured a full-blown fascist regime. We assume it is something that must have been imposed on people by an outside entity. Deleuze and Guattari open up the possibility that fascism does not work that way, that it does not originate in the State, or in some power outside of and beyond people themselves. Fascism, they propose, is generated by us. It arises in the social structure as the

result of the investments made by our own desiring-machines. In his preface to *Anti-Oedipus*, Michel Foucault says the book's "major enemy" is "the fascism in us all, in our heads and in our everyday behavior, the fascism that causes us to love power, to desire the very thing that dominates and exploits us."²³ We all desire fascism, Foucault suggests, and that is precisely how fascism comes to exist in the world.

So many of us in liberal-democratic societies, steeped as we are in our liberal political dogma, tend broadly to assume what Étienne de La Boétie taught us, that by their nature people desire to be free.²⁴ Whenever people are in a condition of servitude, he contends, it must have been *imposed* upon them by some outside force.²⁵ Writing in the 1500s, La Boétie does not discuss fascism *per se*, but rather "servitude" as opposed to "freedom." A century later, Thomas Hobbes reinscribed this way of thinking. "There are very few so foolish," he wrote, "that had not rather govern themselves, than be governed by others".²⁶ I propose that this assumption—that everybody wants to be free and nobody wants servitude—is near-universal and mostly unconscious in liberal-democratic societies, and it leads us to assume that servitude in general, and fascism in particular, is somehow unnatural, unstable, "bound to lose."²⁷ When a multitude becomes a cult and willingly follows a leader like Mussolini or Hitler into the abyss, we assume they must have been duped somehow, that they must have been promised freedom but were betrayed and tricked into servitude.

In *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari refuse this idea. They argue instead that fascism comes to exist because people desire fascism. Here they are working quite closely with Wilhelm Reich, whose work understood the rise of Nazi Germany psychoanalytically, from the perspective of desire.²⁸ "Reich's cry," Deleuze and Guattari tell us, was that "the masses were not deceived, they desired fascism, and that is what has to be explained."²⁹ Deleuze and Guattari continue: "It is not enough to say: they were fooled, the masses have been fooled. It is not an ideological problem, a problem of failing to recognize, or being subjected to an illusion. It is a problem of desire, *and desire is part of the infrastructure*".³⁰ Hitler does

not instill in the masses a desire for fascism. The desire of the masses for fascism produces Hitler. Deleuze and Guattari insist that our goal must be “to analyze the specific nature of the libidinal investments in the economic and political spheres, and thereby to show how...desire can be made to desire its own repression....All this happens, not in ideology, but well beneath it. An unconscious investment of a fascist or reactionary type can exist alongside a conscious revolutionary investment.” In the unconscious there are “ever so many subtle, uncertain shiftings where the unconscious itself oscillates between its reactionary charge and its revolutionary potential....Here schizoanalysis must unravel the thread”.³¹

When we make room for the possibility that it is the investments made by our own desire that produce fascism, and this desire is “part of the infrastructure,” part of our own complex of desiring-machines, inherently present in the bodies and minds of all persons, churning “right at the heart of everyone’s desire,” we perceive immediately that fascism can arise among any people, in any era. We cannot assume we are an exception. Mark Seem argues that the English and Americans have difficulty accepting this fact. They tend to think, he argues, that “fascism is a phenomenon that took place elsewhere, something that could only happen to others, but not to us; it’s *their* problem.”³² I submit that this is precisely the kind of thinking Americans were raised on after WWII, and it is a big part of the reason Trumpism caught the United States so off guard.³³ But Guattari disabuses us of this assumption succinctly: “We must abandon, once and for all, the quick and easy formula: ‘Fascism will not make it again.’ Fascism has already ‘made it,’ and it continues to ‘make it’.”³⁴ Fascism is always with us, with everyone, because it is generated by our own desire.³⁵

If we take this intervention by Deleuze and Guattari to heart, it opens up a new way to understand what a non-fascist political project must consist of. Put on what I contend is the wrong path by La Boétie so many years ago, we have assumed that fascism must be unjustly imposed on us by something outside us, and so we go looking beyond ourselves for an outside force to confront, resist, and struggle against. We have been looking in the wrong place. Fascism is produced by the

desire for “fascism in us all.” Any non-fascist political project must look *within ourselves*. We must work, intentionally and creatively, to invest our desire in ways that produce social structures other than fascism.

SURRENDER! SURRENDER!

So Deleuze and Guattari urge us to locate the source of fascism in the infrastructure of our desire. But what kind of desires, specifically, produce fascism? Recall Foucault’s argument from the preface: fascism is associated with our desire for “the very thing that dominates and exploits us.” Fascism is produced, at least in part, by our desire to be ruled.³⁶ It is the desire to surrender our power to something other than us, and to let that something decide our affairs for us.³⁷ In the case of historical fascism, the desire to be ruled led people to surrender their power to an exalted “leader” to whom they offered blind allegiance. In that case, people did not surrender to actual persons so much—Benito Mussolini or Adolf Hitler—but rather to a fantastical, mythologized, and artificial version of those persons: *il Duce* or *der Führer*. This historical case of fascism, Nazism in particular, is the example through which Deleuze and Guattari initially explore the desire to be ruled:

the fundamental problem of political philosophy is still precisely the one that Spinoza saw so clearly, and that Wilhelm Reich rediscovered: ‘Why do men fight *for* their servitude as stubbornly as though it were their salvation?’...after centuries of exploitation, why do people still tolerate being humiliated and enslaved, to such a point, indeed, that they *actually want* humiliation and slavery not only for others but for themselves? Reich is at his profoundest as a thinker when he refuses to accept ignorance or illusion on the part of the masses as an explanation of fascism, and demands an explanation that will take their desires into account, an explanation formulated in terms of desire: no, the masses were not innocent dupes... they *wanted* fascism, and it is this perversion of the desire of the masses that needs to be accounted for.³⁸

Here they are quite clearly moving us beyond La Boétie's assumption that we always want only freedom, and they are drawing on Spinoza's assertion that we also want servitude. Fascism arose in Germany, in part, because the masses wanted to be ruled by a strong leader. This is not a "perversion" of the desire of the masses, as Deleuze and Guattari suggest here, it is merely a rising of their desire to be ruled, and a related ebbing of their desire to manage their affairs themselves.

In the first half of *Anti-Oedipus*, Deleuze and Guattari understand our desire to be ruled in the context of historical fascism. In the second half, however, they turn their attention to capitalism, and they explore how our desire to be ruled operates in that context as well. "The bourgeois field of immanence," they say,

institutes an unrivaled slavery, an unprecedented subjugation: there are no longer even any masters, but only slaves commanding other slaves; there is no longer any need to burden the animal from the outside, it shoulders its own burden. Not that man is ever the slave of technical machines; he is rather the slave of the social machine. The bourgeois sets the example, he absorbs surplus value for ends that, taken as a whole, have nothing to do with his own enjoyment: more utterly enslaved than the lowest of slaves, he is the first servant of the ravenous machine, the beast of the reproduction of capital, internalization of the infinite debt. "I too am a slave"—these are the new words spoken by the master.³⁹

In this condition of unrivaled slavery, they say, bourgeois and proletariat alike desire to be ruled. They "come to desire strength while also desiring [their] own impotence".⁴⁰ Both classes in capitalism, in other words, desire to be impotent, to surrender their power. In this case, they surrender their power not to a mythologized leader, but to the capitalist "social machine." For Deleuze and Guattari the "unrivaled slavery" of capitalism is not the bourgeoisie enslaving the proletariat. Rather servitude pervades the entire system, and that servitude is

desired by everyone. All people in both classes desire to be enslaved by capitalism. For Deleuze and Guattari, therefore, the important opposition in capitalism is not between bourgeoisie and proletariat, but between our desire to be ruled by the capitalist social machine, and our desire to manage our affairs—in this case economic production—ourselves.⁴¹

In *Anti-Oedipus* they also explore the desire to be ruled in the context of the emergence of the sovereign State in human history. Here they suggest that the State arose “from within,” as a product of our own desire to be ruled. However, in these pages they also explore the possibility that the State was imposed on us by a “from without,” by an entity that is other than us.⁴² The latter thesis is considered through Nietzsche, who proposes the possibility that the “founders of the State” are beings who “come like fate...a master race which...lays its terrible claws on a populace”.⁴³ “The death of the primitive system,” by which they mean societies that did not have a sovereign State, “always comes from without...like a cloud blown in from the desert...”.⁴⁴ The “populace,” in this line of thinking, are innocent victims, they know nothing of the desire to be ruled. Sovereign control is imposed on them by a despot that arises without, far beyond them, in the remote desert. However, in these same pages Deleuze and Guattari also aver that the State arises from within: “but this death that comes from without is also that which was rising from within,” they say, because societies before States “already prefigured despotic formations”.⁴⁵ The primitive community without the State “remains on its guard with respect to its own institutions of chieftainship, and exorcises or strait-jackets the image of the possible despot whom it threatens to secrete from within...”.⁴⁶ Here the populace is not so innocent. It desires to be ruled. It secretes the despot from *within* its own body. Across these passages, Deleuze and Guattari seem to decide that it is not always easy to know whether the State arises from within or it is imposed from without.

Later, in *A Thousand Plateaus*, they take up again this image of the populace secreting the State from within.⁴⁷ Here they are inspired by the work of Pierre Clastres on indigenous societies in South America.⁴⁸ Clastres was interested in societies

that organized themselves without a sovereign State, and his work demonstrates that such organization is not only possible but also has been quite common in human history. Clastres' work, Deleuze and Guattari suggest, allows us to ask *why* humanity came to choose the sovereign State as its default organizational structure when it had many other less oppressive options to choose from. Here Deleuze and Guattari say little about the State being imposed from without, and they focus their discussion on how it arises from within. "Clastres is fascinated by the problem of 'voluntary servitude,' in the manner of La Boétie: In what way did people want or desire servitude, which most certainly did not come to them as the outcome of an involuntary and unfortunate war?"⁴⁹ Here they argue that modern societies came to accept the State as their normal mode of organization because people *want* the servitude it provides. The State arose, in other words, from our desire to be ruled, from our desire to surrender to the State. This desire, I would argue, occupies Deleuze and Guattari's attention for the whole second half of *A Thousand Plateaus*. In those pages, they make an extended and impassioned argument against Hobbes and against the modern State.⁵⁰ And they imagine ways we might be able to unbind ourselves from its rule, ways we might desire, instead, to manage our affairs ourselves.

And so Deleuze and Guattari prompt us to consider that in order to truly grapple with servitude—whether it be in the form of fascism, capitalism, or the State—we should understand our servitude not as something imposed on us from without, but as something we secrete from within. We must come to terms with our desire to be ruled. We must become aware of our desire, come to understand it, and discover ways to desire differently. In addition, they show us that the desire to be ruled is does not produce only fascism. It produces capitalism and the State as well (see Figure 1). Since fascism, capitalism, and the State are not identical, we can infer that there must be something more to fascism than just the desire to be ruled. Some other desire must be at work that distinguishes fascism from those other two forms of rule.

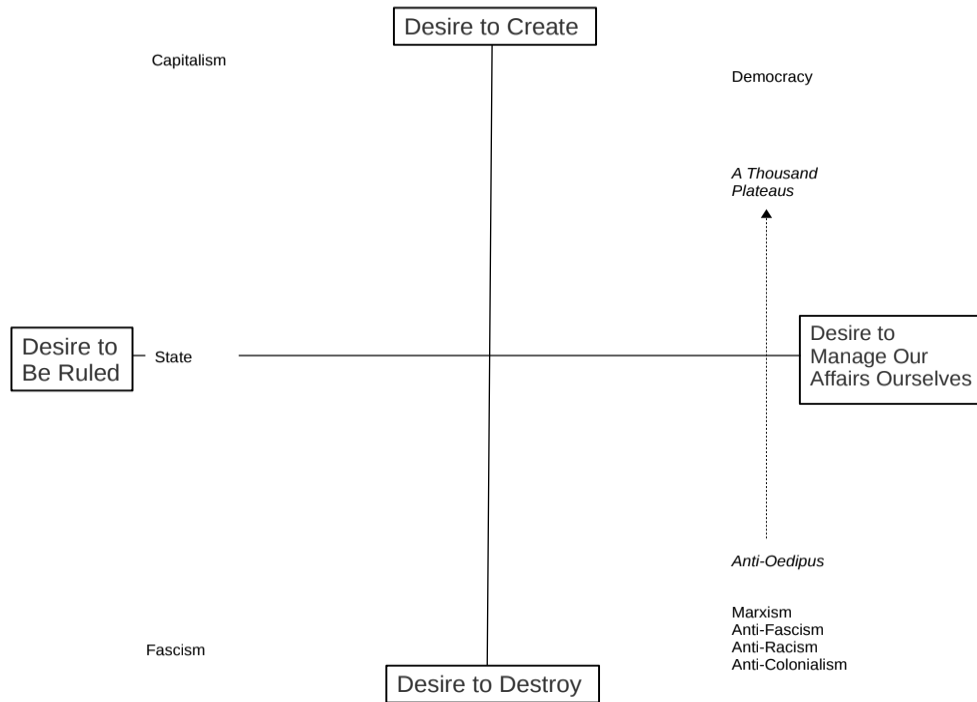


Figure 1: Plan(e) of Our Desire

DESTROY! DESTROY!

Indeed, throughout Deleuze and Guattari’s discussion of fascism there is always another desire lurking: the desire to destroy. This desire often takes the specific form of the desire to destroy life, the desire to kill, the desire for death. Very early in *Anti-Oedipus*, for example, they name this desire, even though they do not yet tie it to fascism: “the death instinct: that is its name, and death is not without a model. For desire desires death also, because the full body of death is its motor, just as it desires life, because the organs of life are the working machine”.⁵¹ Nearer the end of *Anti-Oedipus*, they again refer to this desire, “what is this death that always rises from within...?”⁵², and they read this desire for death in the context of Nietzsche’s critique of *ressentiment*:

All the cynical tactics of bad conscience, just as Nietzsche...analyzed them to arrive at a definition of civilized European man...the torpor...the hatred of life and of all that is free, of all that passes and flows; the universal effusion of the death instinct; depression and guilt used as a means of contagion...aren't you ashamed to be happy? follow my example, I won't let go before you say, "It's my fault," ... let me deceive, rob, slaughter, kill! ... the double direction given to *ressentiment*, the turning back against oneself, and the projection against the Other...⁵³

As Nietzsche understood it, *ressentiment* is a particular form of the desire for death.⁵⁴ It is the desire of the weak, the "slaves," not for their own thriving, but for the death of the strong, the "masters." The slaves desire the destruction of the masters' world. *Ressentiment* is a bitter, consuming desire for revenge against one's enemies. In its purest form, Nietzsche says, it is the fantasy of the weak that in the next life the strong will burn in Hell. Nazi desire, for example, with its constant railing against the humiliation imposed by the Treaty of Versailles, and its vigorous efforts to undo every provision of it, consisted greatly of *ressentiment* against Germany's enemies, the desire to destroy the world they had built on their own terms.

Over the course of their thinking, Deleuze and Guattari begin to realize that this desire for death does not exclude the self, and so it often manifests as a desire for suicide. In an early passage in *A Thousand Plateaus*, for example, as they are advocating their "geological" project of destratification, they warn that doing so too rapidly will lead to "demented or suicidal collapse".⁵⁵ "A body without organs [BwO] that shatters all the strata," they warn us, "turns immediately into a body of nothingness, pure self-destruction whose only outcome is death".⁵⁶ In this same discussion, they begin to associate the desire for one's own death with fascism. They want to discover how we "can fabricate a BwO for ourselves without its being the cancerous BwO of a fascist inside us, or the empty BwO of a drug addict, paranoiac, or hypochondriac? How can we tell the three Bodies apart?".⁵⁷ Then, in that same section:

the BwO is desire; it is that which one desires and by which one desires.... Even when it falls into the void of too-sudden destratification, or into the proliferation of a cancerous stratum, it is still desire. Desire stretches that far: desiring one's own annihilation, or desiring the power to annihilate. Money, army, police, and State desire, fascist desire, even fascism is desire.... The material problem confronting schizoanalysis is knowing whether we have it within our means to make the selection, to distinguish the BwO from its doubles: empty vitreous bodies, cancerous bodies, totalitarian and fascist. The test of desire: not denouncing false desires, but distinguishing within desire between that which pertains to stratic proliferation, or else too-violent destratification, and that which pertains to the construction of the plane of consistency (keep an eye out for all that is fascist, even inside us, and also for the suicidal and the demented)...There is a fascist use of drugs, or a suicidal use, but is there also a possible use that would be in conformity with the plane of consistency?⁵⁸

But it is in Plateau 9, when they are exploring their well-known concept of “lines of flight” and how they can escape the apparatuses, that they really cement this connection between fascism and the desire for death.⁵⁹ They first establish that lines of flight are not always happy occasions, that they bring with them “four dangers.” One danger is that the lines will be recaptured. But, they say, that is far from the worst outcome. Lines of flight themselves

emanate a strange despair, like an odor of death and immolation, a state of war from which one returns broken.... Why is the line of flight a war one risks coming back from defeated, destroyed, after having destroyed everything one could? This, precisely, is the fourth danger: the line of flight crossing the wall, getting out of the black holes, but instead of connecting with other lines and each time augmenting its valence, turning to destruction, abolition pure and simple, the passion of abolition. Like Kleist's line of flight, and the strange war he wages; like suicide, double

suicide, a way out that turns the line of flight into a line of death”.⁶⁰

One page later, they turn to Virilio in order to connect this desire for death to fascism:

A bizarre remark by Virilio puts us on the trail: in fascism, the State is far less totalitarian than it is suicidal. There is in fascism a realized nihilism. Unlike the totalitarian State, which does its utmost to seal all possible lines of flight, fascism is constructed on an intense line of flight, which it transforms into a line of pure destruction and abolition. It is curious that from the very beginning the Nazis announced to Germany what they were bringing: at once wedding bells and death, including their own death, and the death of the Germans.... And the people cheered, not because they did not understand, but because they wanted that death.⁶¹

“Nazi statements,” they go on, “always contain the ‘stupid and repugnant’ cry, Long live death!”⁶² A “reversion of the line of flight into a line of destruction” is what “animated the molecular focuses of fascism.” This more generalized desire to destroy in fascism is captured in a quote from Witold Grombrowicz who says that Hitlerism and fascism set about “destroying all that was held dear until then”.⁶³ Hitlerism became “a war machine that no longer had anything but war as its object and would rather annihilate its own servants that stop the destruction.”⁶⁴ In the face of this danger, they conclude, “all the dangers of the other lines [of flight] pale by comparison”.⁶⁵

As the passages above suggest, we can understand this desire for death as merely a specific instance of a more general desire to destroy. Fascism is a “intense... line of pure destruction and abolition,” as they put it. The “realized nihilism” of fascism is animated by the desire to annihilate, which means, strictly, to *make nothing* out of that which is now something. This non-specific desire to destroy appears in Plateau 10 in a discussion of music. “Music,” they write, “has a thirst for destruction, every kind of destruction, extinction, breakage, dislocation. Is

that not its potential ‘fascism?’”.⁶⁶ In the last Plateau they sum it up tersely: “the lines of flight themselves...always risk abandoning their creative potentialities and turning into a line of death, being turned into a line of destruction pure and simple (fascism)”.⁶⁷ In their subsequent book, *What Is Philosophy?* they do not discuss fascism very much, but even there they sing the same refrain: “...the thinker’s tired eye mistakes one for the other...the fascist for a creator of existence and freedom”.⁶⁸ The fascist is, evidently, the *destroyer* of existence and freedom.

DELEUZE AND GUATTARI DESIRE TO DESTROY...

So by the middle of *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari have come to understand that fascism is produced not only by the desire to be ruled but also by the desire to destroy (see its location in the lower-left quadrant of Figure 1). With that understanding in place, we can return to *Anti-Oedipus* and discover that they install there, right at the heart of what Foucault says is an “Introduction to the Non-Fascist Life,” the desire to destroy so integral to fascism. The book’s very title, *Anti-Oedipus*, sets the agenda: we are *against* Oedipus. We want to *destroy* Oedipus. Their alternative psychoanalytic project, “schizoanalysis,” takes as its first task the destruction of Oedipus. “Destroy, destroy. The task of schizoanalysis goes by way of destruction—a whole scouring of the unconscious, a complete curettage. Destroy Oedipus, the illusion of the ego, the puppet of the superego, guilt, the law, castration”.⁶⁹ Before it can be anything else, they say, schizoanalysis must be a frontal assault on Oedipus. It must

devote itself with all its strength to the necessary destructions.... And when engaged in this task no activity will be too malevolent. Causing Oedipus and castration to explode, brutally intervening each time the subject strikes up the song of myth or intones tragic lines...⁷⁰

Of course capitalism must be destroyed too, tightly linked as it is to Oedipus. “The schizophrenic deliberately seeks out the very limit of capitalism: he is its inherent tendency brought to fulfillment, its surplus product, its proletariat, and

its exterminating angel”.⁷¹ Our revolutionary practice, they argue with gusto, must devote “all its strength” to brutal, malevolent destruction. This horrific spree reaches its most intense frenzy when their schizo-hero “liquidates even his grandmother with a machine for tying shoes”.⁷²

We learn later that there are other tasks in schizoanalysis, ones that are positive and creative, and so not *all* our strength, it turns out, must be devoted to destruction. Nevertheless, throughout this first book together they fully embrace the desire to destroy. They accept the very Hegelian (and oxymoronic) idea that in order to engage in any kind of creation, any productive act, we must *first* destroy the thing we oppose.⁷³ This erroneous algorithm is everywhere in the book.⁷⁴ We are told we must: shatter Oedipus in order to rediscover desiring production;⁷⁵ denounce illegitimate syntheses so as to rediscover a transcendental unconscious;⁷⁶ “de-oedipalize the unconscious in order to reach real problems”;⁷⁷ and undo the Oedipal unconscious so that we can attain the productive unconscious.⁷⁸ If any doubt remained about the order in which we must do these tasks, they actually number them for us later in the book: “a true politics of psychiatry, or antipsychiatry, would consist therefore in the following praxis: (1) undoing all the reterritorializations that transform madness into mental illness; (2) liberating the schizoid movement of deterritorialization in all the flows...”⁷⁹ It is like a chanted mantra: we must *first destroy* the world we do not want in order to create the world we do want. The first task of schizoanalysis, Deleuze and Guattari think, is to become an advancing army of exterminating angels whose mission is violent, brutal, and malevolent destruction.⁸⁰

In Foucault’s preface to *Anti-Oedipus*, he offers a set of seven principles for living a non-fascist life. Given what we have just seen, the third is of particular note. It advises us to “withdraw allegiance from the old categories of the Negative (law, limit, castration, lack, lacuna), which Western thought has so long held sacred as a form of power and an access to reality. Prefer what is positive and multiple...”⁸¹ Clearly Deleuze and Guattari are having trouble withdrawing this allegiance. In *Anti-Oedipus* they retain what can only be called a relish for the negative, for

opposition, for destruction. And I should note that even Foucault himself, as he is telling us to prefer the positive, begins with the negative: “*withdraw allegiance....*” In fact, six of Foucault’s seven principles for the non-fascist life are negative imperatives: “*Do not think...Do not use...Do not become...*” and so on. Negate, denounce, rupture, undo, oppose, cancel, shatter, explode, kill, annihilate, abolish, liquidate, destroy. The (fascist) desire for destruction.

...AND THEY DESIRE TO CREATE

To be sure, their eager embrace of the desire to destroy is not fully fascist, since they cannot be said to also embrace fascism’s other desire, the desire to be ruled. In fact, the opposite is true. The Hegelian algorithm they reiterate throughout the book is also very much driven by the desire to manage our affairs ourselves. We must destroy what rules us, it urges, so that we will be able to rule ourselves. This mix of desires—destruction and self-management—is actually more typical of Marxism than fascism (see Figure 1). Nevertheless, any project for a non-fascist life should be cognizant—and concerned—about the striking overlap between the two: both Marxism and fascism embrace, with relish, the desire to destroy. They are both steeped in *ressentiment*. At the same time, we should not cast Deleuze and Guattari out because their desire resonates with fascism in this way. This would be to miss Foucault’s point, that fascism is in all of us. The desire for fascism is not someone else’s problem. It is not only broken or evil people that desire fascism. Fascism is “in us all,” even in radical thinkers who are writing an “introduction to the non-fascist life.” We should not be surprised that they exhibit this desire to destroy, especially at the outset of their project. We should notice instead that, over the course of their work together, they steadily leave behind their desire to destroy, and they become increasingly motivated, instead, by a creative desire, a desire to produce, a desire to invent: both new concepts and new lives in common.

That other, creative desire is already there, even if it is in the background, at the beginning of *Anti-Oedipus*. Again Foucault’s preface is instructive. His third principle asks us to “prefer the positive.” His second is even more productive:

“develop action, thought, and desires by proliferation....” Even if his non-fascist principles call mostly on our desire to destroy, they still intimate, and even speak out loud of, this other desire, the desire to produce, to develop, to generate, to create new things. Deleuze and Guattari are certainly aware of this desire in the book. Near the end, gushing about Henry Miller (as they will), they give us this passage:

Everything is said in these pages from Miller: Oedipus (or Hamlet) led to the point of autocritique; the expressive forms—myth and tragedy—*denounced* as conscious beliefs or illusions...the necessity of a *scouring* of the unconscious, schizoanalysis as a curettage of the unconscious; the matrilineal fissure in opposition to the line of castration; the *splendid affirmation* of the orphan- and producer-unconscious; the *exaltation* of the process as a schizophrenic process of deterritorialization that must *produce a new earth*; and even the functioning of the desiring-machines *against* tragedy, *against* “the fatal drama of the personality,” *against* “the inevitable confusion between mask and actor”).⁸²

Notice how they begin by again denouncing and scouring (and curettage!), but then they turn to a “splendid affirmation” of the orphan-unconscious and an “exaltation” of the schizophrenic process, which “must produce a new earth,” even if they end the passage by forcing our desiring-machines back down into the morass of “against...against...against.” You can almost see them working on it here, working on their own desire. They are engaging in their own schizo-analytical process to embrace the desire to create and leave aside the desire to destroy.⁸³ Nearer the end of the book, they give schizoanalysis an unabashedly positive task when they tell us that

the task of schizoanalysis is that of learning what a subject’s desiring-machines are, how they work, with what syntheses, what bursts of energy in the machine, what constituent misfires, with what flows, what chains, and what becomings in each case”.⁸⁴

Unfortunately, on that same page they are quick to add that “this positive task cannot be separated from indispensable destructions, the destruction of the molar aggregates, the structures and representations that prevent the machine from functioning”.⁸⁵ Here, at the end of *Anti-Oedipus*, they are not able to see the possibility that these tasks can be separated. They assume schizoanalysis must involve a destructive first task. They have not come to see, yet, that schizoanalysis can have only one task, a positive task: learn—and learn to use—our desiring-machines; discover what flows and connections we can produce; discover what becomings we are capable of.

But, again, they are working on it. Just a few pages later they offer one of their first glimpses of a what a project driven fully by a desire for creation might look like:

Nonfigurative loves, indices of a revolutionary investment of the social field ... which are neither Oedipal nor pre-oedipal since it all amounts to the same thing, but innocently anoedipal, and which give the revolutionary the right to say, “Oedipus? Never heard of it”.⁸⁶

So much is contained in that change of prefix! They are able to perceive, here in a book called *Anti-Oedipus*, the possibility of moving from *antioedipal* indices, in which we desire to *destroy* Oedipus, to *anoedipal* indices, in which we desire on our own terms, as though we had “never heard of” Oedipus. These “nonfigurative loves” reappear in *A Thousand Plateaus* and are developed further, and the “revolutionary investments of the social field” are not only creative rather than destructive, but they are also explicitly non-fascist, since “revolutionary” and “fascist” are how they name the two poles of political desire.⁸⁷ In these loves, and these revolutionary investments, the entire focus of our desire shifts: from destruction to creation. It is an enormous breakthrough for them to say ‘Oedipus? Never heard of it,’ when they have, for so very many pages, been saying, ‘Oedipus? I am obsessed with it. I am its exterminating angel.’

Perhaps it is this breakthrough near the end of *Anti-Oedipus* that allows A

Thousand Plateaus to become a work that spends most of its time prospecting in the positive, in the creative tasks of schizoanalysis. Right from the outset, the first plateau begins constructing the rhizome and its burgeoning connections that are organized horizontally, without any centralizing nodes. In the second plateau, we meet Franny, who learns to connect to a spontaneously coordinated wolfpack, never in the center yet never letting go, such that she experiences “vertiginous happiness”.⁸⁸ In the second half of plateaus 12 and 14, we find “war machines,” which are bands or tribes that live outside of State society, populating the steppe by drawing creative lines of flight. In between, in plateau 13, they develop the concept of “revolutionary movement” in which flows are connected, nondenumerable aggregates are composed, and we witness the “becoming-minoritarian of everybody/everything”.⁸⁹ Lines of flight, which appear throughout the text, are perhaps the most well-known example. While they are clear that these lines are subject to becoming fascist, as we saw, for the most part Deleuze and Guattari explore the “collective, positive, and creative” affects the lines can produce.⁹⁰ A line of flight always has the potential to contain, they insist, “a message of joy,”⁹¹ and here they mean the Spinozan affect of joy, the affect that is bound up with an affirmation of life.⁹²

Early in *Anti-Oedipus*, there is a little scene where a good psychoanalyst asks a patient, “Tell me a little bit about your desiring-machines, won’t you?”⁹³ It is almost as though *A Thousand Plateaus* is Deleuze and Guattari on the couch (or out on a walk, as they prefer) offering an extended response to that question. We might see the whole book as offering a series of variations on the theme of affirmative desire, explorations of the immense creativity our desiring machines are capable of.⁹⁴ The rhizome retold as the wolfpack retold as the war machine and so on. Here schizoanalysis becomes less anti-Oedipus and more pro-body-without-organs. They even get to the point of saying, in italics, that the body without organs “*is the only practical object of schizoanalysis*.” What is your body without organs? What are your lines? What map are you in the process of making or rearranging? What abstract line will you draw...what is your line of flight?”⁹⁵

As *A Thousand Plateaus* rehearses these affirmative variations, we begin to see that it is possible to see all these variations together, as one fundamentally and powerfully *creative* project, a project that engenders and gives rise to new things. One such new thing that project might produce is what they call “a people yet to come.” Over the course of *A Thousand Plateaus* the question becomes

whether molecular or atomic “populations” of all natures...continue to bombard the existing people in order to train it or control it or annihilate it—or if other molecular populations were possible, could slip into the first and give rise to a people yet to come. As Virilio says in his very rigorous analysis...the question has become: “To dwell as a poet or as an assassin?” The assassin is one who bombards the existing people with molecular populations that are forever closing all of the assemblages, hurling them into an ever wider and deeper black hole. The poet, on the other hand, is one who lets loose molecular populations in hopes that this will sow the seeds of, or even engender, the people to come, that these populations will pass into a people to come, open a cosmos.⁹⁶

Here, late in *A Thousand Plateaus*, the assassin—the exterminating angel—is disavowed at last. We are given permission to let go of our desire for destruction, our desire to cancel, our desire to give death to what we are against. We are invited to turn instead to the incredibly empowering possibility that we might “dwell as a poet,” that we might set ourselves to the task—the sole task—of creating the life-in-common we want to live. The poet is one who is devoted to *poiesis*, to creative production. The poet produces, sows seeds, engenders, propagates, brings forth. The poet gives life. New ideas, new selves, new peoples: a people yet to come.⁹⁷ It is a project—I want to call it a democratic project—that always and only *gives life*.

A PROJECT FOR DEMOCRACY

So, by the end of their second book together Deleuze and Guattari have made considerable progress. They have moved from the more Marxist combination of

the desire to manage our affairs ourselves and the desire to destroy to this other combination, the desire to manage our affairs ourselves and the desire to create (see the right side of Figure 1). In this section, I bring this new combination into conversation with my own work on democracy. In the past I have understood democracy as a project that is driven by our desire to manage our affairs ourselves, but it seems apropos at this point to extend that understanding, to see democracy as also driven by the desire to create.

I have argued that we need to “recapture” the idea of democracy from the conventional meaning, in which democracy is thought to be bound tightly to the State apparatus.⁹⁸ That conventional meaning uses the word “democracy” to signify something that is in fact a liberal-democratic government that is chosen by citizens in periodic elections. I argue that democracy is capable of accommodating a much fuller and more radical meaning. Democracy has the potential to signify a form of life in which people (*demos*) reclaim their power (*kratos*) and use it to manage their affairs themselves.⁹⁹ In thinking democracy in this more radical way, I draw on a tradition of political thought that emerged in the middle of the 20th Century and set out an ethical commitment to the idea and practice of popular self-management. Important touchstones in this tradition include Castoriadis’ concept of “autonomy”¹⁰⁰ developed in the 1950s, Fanon’s support in the 1950s and 1960s for decentralized self-management in the context of a decolonizing African continent¹⁰¹, the idea of *autogestion* in the texts of Lefebvre and Vaneigem in the 1960s,¹⁰² and the work in Italy on *autonomia* beginning in the 1970s.¹⁰³ This tradition of political thought had strong roots in the workers’ movement, and initially the idea of self-management was understood to mean workers directly managing economic production in the factory. However there was always, simultaneously, a move to extend this idea of popular self-management beyond the factory. Castoriadis and Fanon, for example, advocated that rural people directly manage agricultural production in their villages. Lefebvre and the Italian autonomists, for their part, imagined urban residents managing the production of domestic space in their neighborhoods. And so, over time this work came to theorize a

“generalized self-management”¹⁰⁴ that championed direct popular control in all areas of life.

I have mostly understood democracy this way, as generalized self-management. Clearly democracy in this sense is driven by people’s desire to manage their affairs themselves. In democracy, people’s desire to be ruled is weak, and so they retain their power. They do not allow their power to be institutionalized, centralized, or bureaucratized. This is already a deeply radical concept, because in modern societies such institutionalized power is entirely normal. We have fully internalized, deep in our unconscious assumptions about how the world must work, the “social contract” that Hobbes invented in the 1600s.¹⁰⁵ In *Leviathan*, Hobbes offered us his extraordinary proposal: people cannot be allowed to keep their power and use it as they wish. That would mean that any person could attack or kill any other, at any time, and that would produce, in his famous line, a “war of all against all.” Therefore, persons outside State society who retain their own power—whom he called “natural persons” living in a “state of nature”—must agree, by means of a social contract, to surrender their power. To whom? Not to another natural person, since natural persons having power is precisely what he thinks causes war. Instead, natural persons must surrender their power to what he calls an “artificial person,” an imagined or “feigned” entity whose purpose is to receive the power that natural persons surrender, keep that power separate from them, and use it to stop the war of all against all.¹⁰⁶ The artificial person is, of course, the modern State. It is designed explicitly to be *other than* natural persons. It is a disembodied “body” that is a different kind of thing than our bodies are: alien, fantastical, unreal. Moreover, it is designed explicitly to be hierarchically *above* us. It rules us. It is a sovereign entity, a transcendent power that rises above and looms over us, terrifying us into peace.

So in the context of our life under Leviathan, to say that in democracy people manage their affairs themselves is to say that in democracy people do not surrender their power to the unreal body of the artificial person. They are not driven by the desire to be ruled, but by the desire to manage their affairs themselves. They retain

their power—it remains vested in their own, real, natural bodies—and they use their power to manage their lives in common. The archetypical artificial person is Hobbes' modern State. But of course a capitalist Corporation¹⁰⁷ is equally an artificial person, in this case granted the power to make economic decisions. A workers Union is, similarly, an artificial person to whom workers surrender their power. Democracy envisions a move from a world in which artificial persons hold power to one in which real persons do, driven by their desire to manage their affairs themselves.

Clearly, then, democracy offers a stark alternative to fascism's desire to be ruled. But taking our cue from Deleuze and Guattari's analysis of fascism, I think we can see democracy as also the polar opposite of fascism's desire to destroy. We can see democracy as driven by the desire to create, to produce, to invent, to dwell as a poet, to engender new lives in common. If we do, we will understand that democracy is a project that does not have a first task of destruction. In democracy we invest ourselves fully in the project of creating new democratic lives in common. Seen that way, democracy offers a path forward that avoids the disastrous relish for destruction that fascism, Marxism, and *Anti-Oedipus* embrace. Moreover, this way of seeing democracy makes sense because the desire to engender new lives in common is entirely consonant with the desire to manage our affairs ourselves. That is because, as we engage the latter desire, as we practice self-management together, we will need to be inventing new forms of community. We will necessarily be creating new democratic ways of living together. Both the desire to manage our affairs ourselves and the desire to create are integral to any project for democracy. When we understand democracy this way, the project for democracy becomes a project in which we work to understand and encourage those two desires in combination. It is an enormous change. We will not become democratic overnight. And so we should see democracy, instead, as a long-term project into the future.

SO, THEN, WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

We find ourselves today, in 2025, in the midst of a powerful re-emergence of fascism, which combines the desire to be ruled and the desire to destroy. The capitalist social machine, which combines our desire to be ruled with our desire to create, continues to dominate the planet. Its partner, the modern State, is also founded on our desire to be ruled. What, then, is to be done, now? What is the nature of the project we should commit ourselves to?

The Madisonian Temptation

My previous conception of democracy essentially conceived of it as a line of flight on which we escape the State apparatus of capture and develop our desire to rule ourselves outside State control.¹⁰⁸ That way of seeing democracy, however, is deeply troubled by Guattari's warning that "everybody wants to be a fascist." Both democracy and fascism are produced by desire, by our *own* desiring-machines. Fascism is in all of us, and it is on the rise. And the liberal-democratic State, even if it blocks our desire for real democracy, *also* blocks our desire for fascism. In the last eight years in the United States, for example, we have lived through an open struggle between a rising popular desire for fascism and the Madisonian institutions of the liberal-democratic State that were designed to ward off just such a calamity. That struggle has been traumatic, and it is far from over. In such a circumstance, it is extremely tempting to put our faith in a State that is so well designed to protect us from fascism.

But I argue that we should not give in to that temptation. We should not abandon the project of democracy for the safety of the artificial person. While the State prevents us from developing our desire for fascism because it blocks our desire to destroy, it also prevents us from developing our desire for democracy because it stokes our desire to be ruled. It blocks democracy by design. And so the State prevents us from working on the problem, which is a problem of desire. We should work on the problem. In the face of our desire for fascism, we must become even more intentional and focused on our desire for democracy. We need to more rigorously attend to it, to understand what affects, relations, attitudes,

and behaviors it produces.

Foucault's "Old Categories of the Negative"

It is also be tempting, in the context of waxing fascism, to assume that some form of anti-fascism is the right way forward. But as we saw with Deleuze and Guattari's misadventures in *Anti-Oedipus*, such "anti" projects are animated by our desire to destroy. That does not make them fascist necessarily, since they can combine the desire to destroy with the desire to manage our affairs ourselves. That is what anti-fascism typically does. Marxism does too, insofar as it desires to destroy capitalism in order to make way for a more self-managed society. In fact, there is a whole cluster of radical political thought—anti-fascism, anti-racism, abolitionism, anti-colonialism—that reanimates this Marxist combination of the desire to destroy and the desire to manage our affairs ourselves.¹⁰⁹ Woody Guthrie wrote on his guitar: "This machine kills fascists." Fanon demanded the "liquidation of colonialism".¹¹⁰ Anti-racists want to "abolish" prisons and police. In this work, moreover, it is common for the desire to destroy to very much take the lead, to be the first and overwhelmingly most vibrant desire. The desire to manage our affairs takes a back seat, waiting patiently until we have first destroyed what we oppose.

We tend to think that the problem with Marxism was that it insisted that class was the primary form of oppression, to the exclusion of race, gender, sexuality, and so on. But maybe the problem was more fully that Marxism embraced, with relish, the desire to destroy. This desire trapped us, as Nietzsche showed so clearly, in a bitter resentment of capitalism that took up all the oxygen and prevented us turning our attention to creation, to what new ways of life the working class has the power to imagine and produce instead.

The Project of Democracy

Democracy embraces neither our desire to be ruled nor our desire to destroy. The aim of democracy is not to destroy fascism. That would stoke the desire to destroy so integral to fascism itself, and it would move us away from the desire

to create that is proper to democracy. The project of democracy, instead, should stoke, encourage, and strengthen our desire to manage our affairs ourselves and our desire to create. As we invest ourselves in this way, as we gain experience in the practice of democracy, we will become better at using our power to manage our own affairs and our power to create new forms of life. As our practice develops and our skills increase, those desires will grow stronger and lead us to make still more democratic investments in the social field. If we are successful, a positive feedback loop will emerge between desire and practice such that our project grows ever more robust and ingrained in our daily life.

A schizoanalytic project for democracy, may the authors of *Anti-Oedipus* forgive me, does not go by way of destruction. Our first task—and our *only* task—is to create democracy. Engender our desire for democracy. Analyze our desire, learn it, cultivate it, help it grow, and practice using it. “Tell me a little about your [democratic] desiring-machines, won’t you?” Invent new democratic communities, and practice managing our affairs ourselves. If we choose this path, if we really do devote “all our strength” to that one task, we will not have any strength left over for fascism. We will neglect it. We will ignore it. And even then, we will ignore it indirectly, simply as a byproduct of the fact that we are devoting all our attention to inventing new democracies. As long as we are diligent about our project for democracy, as long as we remain intentional and active in cultivating our desire for democracy, our desire for fascism will grow weak.

Understood that way, democracy is a very, very long-term project, a generational project, even a perpetual one. Our desire for democracy must be maintained, tended, and cultivated slowly, and on a daily basis. Democracy is not a spectacular project, or a revolutionary one. It does not emerge during one news cycle, and it is never a victory that is finally won. Democracy is, instead, a quiet practice, an insistent daily habit of care in which we encourage our desire for democracy to grow, slowly but insistently. Democracy involves not periodic bursts of terrific power, but an insistent routine of patient, resolute attention. And for all that practice, democracy is never an onerous chore. Instead, when our practice is going

well, democracy produces delight. A slow-burning but pervasive delight that can fuel our project into the future. Into the very long-term future.

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47. Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari. (1980) 1987. *A Thousand Plateaus*. Translated by Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 359.

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50. Consider, for example, "the war machine," their concept of a human grouping that lies radically outside State society. This is precisely Hobbes' formulation: he said the condition of humans outside the State is a condition of *war*.

51. Deleuze and Guattari, [1972] 1977, 8.

52. Deleuze and Guattari, [1972] 1977, 262.

53. Deleuze and Guattari, [1972] 1977, 268–69.

54. Nietzsche, Friedrich. 1989. *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Translated by Walter Kaufmann. New York: Vintage.

55. Deleuze and Guattari, [1980] 1987, 161.

56. Deleuze and Guattari, [1980] 1987, 162.

57. Deleuze and Guattari [1980] 1987, 163.

58. Deleuze and Guattari, [1980] 1987, 165.

59. It is strange that they take so long to reach this point, given that in 1974 Guattari had already seen the connection: "the fascist machine, in its Italian and German forms, became a threat to capitalism and Stalinism because the masses invested a fantastic collective death instinct in it"

- (Deleuze and Guattari, [1974] 1977, 96).
60. Deleuze and Guattari, [1980] 1987, 229.
 61. Deleuze and Guattari, [1980] 1987, 230.
 62. This was better known as a motto of Franco's Falangists (Eco, 1995).
 63. Deleuze and Guattari, [1972] 1977, 98.
 64. There is a debate in the Deleuze and Guattari scholarship about whether historical fascism desired suicide (see: Holland, 2008; Michelsen, Nicholas. 2013. "Fascist Lines of the Tokkotai." In *Deleuze and Fascism*, edited by Brad Evans and Julian Reid, 148–72. New York: Routledge; Neocleous, Mark. 2005. "Long Live Death! Fascism, Resurrection, Immortality." *Journal of Political Ideologies* 10 (1): 31–49; Protevi, John. 2000. "A Problem of Pure Matter." In *Nihilism Now!*, edited by Keith Pearson and Diane Morgan, 167–88. New York: St. Martin's Press). While interesting, this debate does not change the fact that for Deleuze and Guattari fascism includes the desire for suicide. And in any case, fascism, for Deleuze and Guattari, is produced by the non-specific desire to destroy, the desire for abolition (see: Evans, Fred. 2016. "Deleuze's Political Ethics: A Fascism of the New?" *Deleuze and Guattari Studies* 10 (1): 85–99, 91).
 65. Deleuze and Guattari, [1980] 1987, 231.
 66. Deleuze and Guattari, [1980] 1987, 299.
 67. Deleuze and Guattari, [1980] 1987, 506. On this point see (Protevi, 2000).
 68. Deleuze, Gilles, and Felix Guattari, (1991) 1994. *What Is Philosophy?* Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell. New York: Columbia University Press., 109.
 69. Deleuze and Guattari, [1972] 1977, 311.
 70. Deleuze and Guattari, [1972] 1977, 314.
 71. Deleuze and Guattari, [1972] 1977, 35.
 72. Deleuze and Guattari, [1972] 1977, 318.
 73. This error very much plagues radical politics more generally, as its intense attachment to "antis" demonstrates: anti-Oedipus, anti-capitalist, anti-fascist. Our most recent version is anti-racism (see: Kendi, Ibram. 2019. *How to Be an Antiracist*. One World), which so often embraces the "passion for abolition" that sits at the heart of fascism, as we saw above.
 74. Deleuze and Guattari claim theirs are not "Hegel-style destructions," (Deleuze and Guattari, [1972] 1977, 311), but it is hard to square that denial with the avowed program: *first* destroy the structures that restrain us *so that we can then* produce something new.
 75. Deleuze and Guattari, [1972] 1977, 53.
 76. Deleuze and Guattari, [1972] 1977, 75.
 77. Deleuze and Guattari, [1972] 1977, 81.
 78. Deleuze and Guattari, [1972] 1977, 88.
 79. Deleuze and Guattari, [1972] 1977, 381.
 80. Deleuze and Guattari, [1972] 1977, 381.
 81. Foucault, [1972] 1977, xiii.
 82. Deleuze and Guattari, [1972] 1977, 299, my emphasis.
 83. Henry Miller's presence is not incidental here. His work, and that of other novelists in the same vein (e.g. Lawrence and Melville), are an important force pushing Deleuze and Guattari in the direction of the desire to create rather than the desire to destroy (see: Deleuze and Guattari, [1980] 1987, 186).
 84. Deleuze and Guattari, [1972] 1977, 338 & 290–291.
 85. Deleuze and Guattari, [1972] 1977, 338.
 86. Deleuze and Guattari, [1972] 1977, 366.

87. Terms they take from Reich.
88. Deleuze and Guattari, [1980] 1987, 29.
89. Deleuze and Guattari, [1980] 1987, 473.
90. Deleuze and Guattari, [1972] 1977, 367.
91. Deleuze and Guattari, [1980] 1987, 205.
92. Braidotti, 2019.
93. Deleuze and Guattari, [1972] 1977, 45.
94. Massumi, Brian. 1987. "Translator's Forward." In *A Thousand Plateaus*, ix–xv. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, xi.
95. Deleuze and Guattari [1980] 1987, 203. And in *What is Philosophy?* the purpose of philosophy is understood to be "the art of forming, inventing, and fabricating concepts" in order to intensify life (Deleuze and Guattari, [1991] 1994, 2 & 72–74). [To which compare Italian futurist Filippo Marinetti's "beautiful Ideas which kill" (Marinetti, Filippo. 1909. "Declaration of Futurism." *Poesia* 5 (6): 1–2, 1)].
96. Deleuze and Guattari, [1980] 1987, 345.
97. See: Braidotti 2019, 473; Lee, Alex Taek-Gwang. 2021. "Deleuze and the Third World." *Deleuze and Guattari Studies* 15 (2): 250–65.
98. Purcell, Mark. 2008. *Recapturing Democracy: Neoliberalization and the Struggle for Alternative Urban Futures*. New York: Routledge.
99. Purcell, 2013; Purcell, 2016.
100. Castoriadis, Cornelius. 1997. *The Castoriadis Reader*. Edited by David Curtis. Oxford ; Cambridge, Mass: Wiley-Blackwell. See: chapters 8, 10, and 11.
101. . (1961) 2004. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Richard Philcox. New York: Grove Press, 94, 104, 121–4 & 141–3.
102. Lefebvre, Henri. 2009. *State, Space, World: Selected Essays*. Edited by Neil Brenner and Stuart Elden. Translated by Gerald Moore, Neil Brenner, and Stuart Elden. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; Vaneigem, Raoul. 2012. *The Revolution of Everyday Life*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. Oakland, CA: PM Press.
103. Negri, Antonio. 1999. *Insurgencies: Constituent Power and the Modern State*. Translated by M. Boscagli. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press; Virno, Paolo. 2004. *A Grammar of the Multitude*. Los Angeles: Semiotext(e).; Agamben, Giorgio. 1993. *The Coming Community*. Translated by M. Hardt. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
104. The French phrase, for Lefebvre and Vaneigem, was "*autogestion généralisée*."
105. Hobbes, [1651] 1985.
106. Hobbes, [1651] 1985, chapter 16.
107. Note that a Corporation is etymologically an "embodiment" of something that does not in fact have a body. An artificial person.
108. Purcell, 2013.
109. I would suggest that it is feminism, very broadly speaking, that has been the least eager to embrace the desire to destroy and the most likely to cultivate the desire to create: new relations of care, to take just one example.
110. Fanon, Frantz. (1964) 1967. *Toward the African Revolution*. Translated by Haakon Chevalier. New York: Grove Press, 113.

new normativity and the normativity of the new in adorno

hamed movahedi

THE DILEMMA OF NORMATIVITY

The third generation of the Frankfurt School, following Jürgen Habermas' objection to the problem of normativity in Critical Theory, has acknowledged that any critical social theory which seeks normative aims and conclusions must account for its normative foundations. In *The Theory of Communicative Action*, Habermas pointed out this problem and wrote: "...from the beginning, critical theory labored over the difficulty of giving an account of its own normative foundations since Horkheimer and Adorno made their turn to the critique of instrumental reason early in the 1940s, this problem has become drastically

apparent.”¹ After this criticism, many have followed and acknowledged Habermas’ objection and have attempted to discover or reconstruct the normative basis of Adorno’s critical project.

The problem of normativity arises when Adorno’s philosophy presents an indispensable commitment to both *negativism* and *critique*. Adorno’s negativism is usually conceived as the unavailability of the experience and knowledge of the good within an evil society which solely avails the bad. Nevertheless, Adorno seems to appeal to some understanding of the good in his critiques; after all, any critique inevitably involves normative judgments and therefore assumes an understanding of the good. In fact, if he eschewed *all* conceptions of the good his theory would be merely descriptive or explanatory rather than *critical*.² Moreover, although he avoids formulating a full-fledged moral theory, Adorno’s theory has moral judgments and imperatives. The dilemma that we find in Adorno is that his critical and moral claims are inherently normative, whereas his negativism seems to ban any form of normativity, either as the standard of judgment or as a demand from the individual to act in a particular way. As Fabian Freyenhagen frames this dilemma, it seems Adorno must either give up his negativism, which would imply “losing the substance of his theoretical stance”, or should erase all traces of normativity from his thought which would consist in dropping the critical standpoint of his thought and losing all his ethical claims.³ James Gordon Finlayson refers to the same problem, arguing that this “justification gap” can be resolved neither by “weakening the normative conclusions” (to make them adequately “supported by the available premises”) nor “strengthening the moral premises” (to support the conclusions). He claims neither of the two solutions are available to Adorno, as weakening the conclusions would result in a theory that is *less critical* and *more descriptive*, and strengthening normative grounds would counteract the spirit of Adorno’s thought, which avoids theorizing normative standards.⁴ This unresolved paradox, according to Finlayson, threatens to leave Adorno’s theory unsupported and incoherent.

Axel Honneth also argues that any social theory must account for the normative

basis of its critique, which consists in “describing and justifying a standpoint from which society and its institutional practices can be meaningfully theoretically criticized.”⁵ This *standpoint*, akin to the problem of normativity, can be established based on either transcendent or immanent approaches. Honneth holds that the central problem of social theory is formed in the face of these two strategies in treating the problem of normativity. On the one hand, any critical standpoint which lacks a *transcendent* normative reference point seems unjustified insofar as it does not rely on the normative standards of evaluation and criticism. On the other hand, any social critique must aim to have a foothold in the given social reality and *immanently* presuppose a certain affirmation of the prevailing moral culture in the society at stake. The advocates of immanence, according to Honneth, claim that any normative principle must correspond to the preexisting axiological horizon of the given society; that any transcendence with respect to the local value horizon and any appeal to “external universalist moral principles” necessarily becomes too distanced and indeed irrelevant to its addressees. The transcendent approach is accused of being disconnected from social reality, claiming an elitist or theological knowledge that can be abused for manipulative purposes, and being exposed to different forms of paternalism or despotism. In turn, the immanent method is criticized for relying on particular moral principles contingently available in society and failing to offer a defensibly reliable normative reference point. All immanent models, Honneth claims, require “an additional step to justify why the ideal raised by one’s own culture should have normative validity.”⁶

At this juncture, it becomes crucial for Honneth to show that the methodology of Critical Theory overcomes the shortcomings of both models. On the one hand, Honneth aims to surpass the *weak criticism* of Walzer (1987), wherein moral principles are interpretatively drawn from the values of the given society, arguing that merely *hermeneutic* criticism would fail to justify the normative validity of its ideals. On the other hand, he attempts to surmount the *strong criticism* of John Rawls (1971), which is indebted to Immanuel Kant and appeals to a universally

accepted process of *construction* for the establishment of norms. Honneth argues that the Frankfurt School has accomplished this task by adopting a left-Hegelian strategy which differentiates it from both weak and strong models while also mediating between the two. Left-Hegelianism enables a mediation between immanent and transcendent aspects of each model, which is called *immanent transcendence*⁷, affirming that normative principles “are available as ideas within the social reality, and they express an embodiment of social rationality.”⁸ The *transcendent* moment of this model resides in its left-Hegelian conception of reason which takes history “as a process of the realization of reason” and then serves as a normative reference point for the justified critique.⁹ At the same time, it remains committed to *immanence*, since reason is incarnated in existing social practices, and normative ideals can be discovered within the given social reality since they are the embodiment of social reason. Honneth stresses that the Frankfurt School members, including Adorno, have concurred with this left-Hegelian model of immanent transcendence.

Given this brief glance at Honneth’s treatment of the problem of normativity, it remains unclear how this left-Hegelian account of *transcendence* can be compatible with Adorno’s far-reaching *immanent* critique. First, Honneth’s account of immanent critique is not equivalent to Adorno’s understanding of this concept. For Adorno, immanent critique does not remain committed to the axiological horizon of society. Second, the Hegelian metaphysics of history that assumes a process of reason’s realization in the actual society is incompatible with Adorno’s negativism that evinces the convergence of “the intellectualist disenchantment of the world” and “societal rationalization.”¹⁰ Indeed, Honneth’s solution seems to be unavailable to Adorno and in that case, the paradox of Adorno’s negativism, accompanied by his critical (and moral) standpoint, would seem to call into question the coherence of his overall theory. However, as will be discussed, Adorno’s immanent critique does not match with any of Honneth’s methods of critique (immanent, transcendent, or Left-Hegelian immanent transcendence). This new space is where Adorno’s new normativity is formed, where his negativism

and critique do not exclude one another.

This article argues that Adorno's idea of nature-history can be connected to his notions of suffering and experience as the structural moments of transience and transition. This reconstruction of concepts will show that the ideas of nature-history, weaved into suffering-experience, have the structure of *ought*, which then enables a new normativity tied to critique and negativism, without requiring to rely on transcendent or immanent norms (in the sense that Honneth and others define them). This discussion will unfold in following steps. In the first section, I will explore Adorno's critique of moral philosophy, showing why any positive philosophical endeavor to establish normative grounds would resurrect new forms of oppression. This will foreground the significance of Adorno's immanent critique for achieving a new metaphysics and ethics. But if we grant that critique activates or unblocks the new, then, it will become essential to unravel the philosophical status of this novelty for Adorno. This will lead us to the second section, wherein we will examine the dialectic of nature-history, and its associated moments of transience and transition, which is structured through an *ought*. Then, in two sections, Adorno's idea of natural-history, in his early lecture, will be connected to his mature notions of suffering and experience, which will further elucidate Adornoian normativity. Finally, it will be shown how the experience of a work of art and the experience of dispersed fragments of reality can hold a promise, a possibility, and an *ought*.

THE CRITIQUE OF MORAL PHILOSOPHY

As noted, the question of normativity has been one of the preoccupations of both Anglo-American political thought and the new generations of the Frankfurt School. But, Adorno avoids normative commitments and refrains from rooting his critique in normative foundations drawn from deductive and inductive reasoning. In fact, instead of reconstructing the normative ideals based on the incarnated reason in social practices (Honneth), Adorno stresses a thoroughgoing failure and bankruptcy of historical reason, moral principles, and any form of normative

ideals. History has proven that the whole culture and the enlightened reason not only failed to give rise to universal liberation but swayed humans into barbarism.

In *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, *Minima Moralia*, and *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno reflects on the dialectical interrelationship between morality and domination.¹¹ He draws attention to the dialectical entanglement of normativity and morality with domination and illuminates how normative principles instead of grounding critique or utopia reify into different forms of totalitarianism. Adorno's critique of moral philosophy reveals that, despite their intention to guide ethical action or uphold justice, normative principles replicate social antagonisms and, hence, "there is no right behavior within the wrong world."¹² Adorno holds that Kant's theory of morality overlooks its own contradictions and its correspondence to the universal domination of bourgeois society, such that the categories of his practical philosophy exhibit ambiguity and ambivalence in a manner that freedom involves unfreedom. Adorno's method to criticize Kant's practical philosophy consists in unraveling these internal oppositions and making explicit the sedimented socio-historical conflicts concealed in the Kantian concept of freedom. However, this critique does not involve barring morality as such, just as the critique of our disenchanted world, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, was not to bar reason as such. In his critique of morality, Adorno strives to disclose the tacit threads of domination, weaved into moral categories, to activate a form of *resistance* to the oppressive dimensions of morality. He asks "whether moral philosophy is possible today."¹³ Adorno cannot claim that his critique of "moral philosophy can be used to establish a canonical plan for the good life, because life itself is so deformed and distorted that no one is able to live the good life in it."¹⁴ Instead, the only thing that can be claimed "is that the good life today would consist in resistance to the forms of the bad life that have been seen through and critically dissected by the most progressive minds."¹⁵ This "negative prescription" involves resistance to the dominating dimension of morality that is made visible only through critique; "the power of resistance to all things imposed on us, everything the world has made of us, and intends to make of us."¹⁶ Critique, by uncovering what is involved

in “joining in” with the existing order, as Adorno puts it, makes us conscious of how we contribute to what is wrong, and “then everything we do ... will be a little different from what it otherwise would have been.”¹⁷ Hence, Adorno’s conception of “good” or “good life” is characterized by enacting resistance to the forms of the bad life. Although a positive canonical plan for the good life is not accessible, the forms of the bad life can be disclosed and resisted.

Adorno’s gesture of articulating a negative moral philosophy goes hand in hand with his materialist project of going beyond German Idealism. Adorno insists that the attempts to surmount idealism cannot simply claim to perform a fresh start and then establish the foundations for a new system. This is not possible for two reasons. First, idealism, Adorno holds, is not a mere intellectual error and involves certain moments of truth insofar as it makes the antagonisms of social reality visible. The commodity form of bourgeois society corresponds to Kantian subjectivity. Just as the fetishized commodities are severed from their social conditions and invested with an abstract exchange value, the logicized object in Kant’s idealism exposes the abstract separation of content (concept) from form (intuition). Thus, any attempt to simply dismiss idealism would blur this moment of truth. Second, every attempt to start a *new* metaphysical system beyond idealism, by the positive act of a thinking subject (philosopher), will inevitably relapse into idealism because it will covertly assume the autonomy and self-sufficiency of a subject that, divorced from its socio-historical conditions, can found a new system. This endeavor, whilst claiming to surpass idealism, will ineluctably recapitulate idealism. As is well-known, Adorno’s strategy to tackle this dilemma is *immanent critique*. It is only by means of the immanent critique of idealism that we might overcome idealism. This critique entails disclosing and “retranslating” how the theoretical concepts of idealism express “an antagonistic system in itself—antagonistic in reality, not just in its conveyance to the knowing subject,” and intensifying these conflicts “so that its concept would force its self-liquidation.”¹⁸ It is in this framework that Adorno aims to use “the strength of the subject to break through the fallacy of constitutive subjectivity.”¹⁹ Transcending

idealism is only conditioned by immanent criticism, which fractures the structure of idealism by disclosing its inherent contradictions and pushing its categories via their intrinsic logic to the point of self-liquidation; it reveals how “the coercive state of reality, which idealism had projected into the region of subject and the mind, must be retranslated from that region.”²⁰ The critical disclosure of this coercive reality embedded in idealism is pivotal and it is in the course of negating and resisting these antinomies of reason *and* reality that Adorno’s materialistic dialectical metaphysics can emerge.²¹

Now, a similar strategy is at stake in Adorno’s negative moral philosophy. The only way to condition a new morality is through the immanent critique of the idealist moral theory and the explication of its repressive moments (which reflect the socio-historical reality) to shun its dominating force. Otherwise, every positive intention to establish a new moral system, without this dialectical negation, will naively restore the old oppressive moments of bourgeois morality. As seen in Kant, moral concepts can be dialectically linked to the contradictions inherent in society.

The three cardinal propositions of Kant—the existence of free will, the immortality of the soul, and the existence of God—are expelled, by Kant, from his theoretical philosophy. Adorno claims that this exclusion is concerned with *experience* in two senses. It means, “we can neither obtain any answer to these questions from our experience, nor do they really enter effectively into the apparatus of our categories” as the constitutive forms that organize experience.²² This separation is problematic, Adorno holds: “practical philosophy cannot really be separated from experience in any absolute sense.”²³ Adorno finds the separation of form and content in Kant’s practical (and theoretical) philosophy problematic because any “action involves empirical realities” and relates in some way or other to empirically existing beings.²⁴ He adds that Kant has a highly tendentious idea of practice: practical reason is always pure, that is, “the *a priori* ability to distinguish between right and wrong, good and evil” and, thus, from the outset is cut off from experience.²⁵ This exclusion of experience and undervaluing of its role means that

“[t]he material of my feelings, therefore, and indeed everything that comes to me from outside, everything that is not me in the sense of being my own reason, is really no more than a stimulus.”²⁶ An action is practical only if it is independent and bound to me as a rational being. Adorno argues that the prototype of the bourgeois social reality is recognizable here, as in Kant’s philosophy, “something like a supreme metaphysical principle has been created out of the idea of the emancipation of the bourgeois individual – the idea of bourgeois autonomy.”²⁷ At the end of the eighteenth century, the philosophical theories reflected the “struggle for bourgeois emancipation from tutelage” and this freedom became the supreme principle of philosophy and, as the pinnacle of philosophy, was equated with reason. For Kant, Adorno notes, freedom and reason are identical; he can after all resolve the problem of *freedom* and *law* by invoking the categorical imperative and the fact that the principle of freedom must be itself nothing but pure reason so that it is not subject to any external, alien, and non-rational factor. Kant’s rigorism, then, ties freedom to the suppression of the natural impulses, to the suppression of affection and sympathy.²⁸ Moreover, the moral law, being a *fact*, a *given*, allows Kant to deduce the existence of freedom. However, Adorno contests that our problem with this moral philosophy is that “there might be a real contradiction between such a law, between the idea of a good and moral action and the ability to put it into practice.”²⁹ What is absent in Kant’s moral theory is whether, in our sociohistorical circumstances, this *ability* is available. Kant overlooks the possibility “that the idea of the good can exist, and the obligation to do good and act in conformity to the law likewise, but that human beings might be denied the possibility of so acting by the general social context from which they cannot escape.”³⁰ Hence, Adorno points out that the problem of contradiction between different principles, like *freedom* and *determination*, is not resolved by Kant’s gesture of combining freedom and necessity in the concept of reason and, indeed, the demand for the good life leads us to insoluble and ineliminable contradictions. He writes in *Negative Dialectics*, “[p]hilosophy had an unexpressed mandate from the bourgeoisie to find transparent grounds for freedom. But that concern is antagonistic in itself. It goes against the old oppression and promotes

the new one, the one that hides in the principle of rationality itself.”³¹

Adorno’s treatment of moral philosophy, which is aware of the inadequacy of merely formal attempts to eliminate the contradictions in thought, consists in criticizing Kant’s moral theory and revealing the “concrete specificity” which lies hidden in the underlying substance of Kant’s abstract concepts.³² This concrete specificity, disclosed in the process of critique, exhibits the dual character of morality, its *oppressive* and *emancipatory* character. Adorno remarks that Kant’s moral philosophy can be conceived as bourgeois in its *positive* sense, that is, implying the idea that the subject can freely give himself a law, in opposition to traditionalism in forms of corporatist, feudal, or absolutist order. Adorno holds that abstractness in Kant “may be seen to express the increasing rationalization and emancipation of society from the blind, organic elements which serve mankind as a guide to its behavior.”³³ This abstractness, itself a sociohistorical category, reflects the youthful bourgeois class that strives to extricate itself from all sorts of tutelage. However, this moral system is also bourgeois in a *negative* sense in that its absolutized concept of reason leads to the “universal suppression of nature.”³⁴ And, as Adorno and Horkheimer discuss in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, this universal suppression and domination over nature are associated with two other sorts of domination: the repression of human nature and its impulses, *and* social domination over individuals. Therefore, Adorno argues that the inherent contradiction in the bourgeois moral system is that it conditions emancipation and at the same time thwarts it. Indeed, morality is inextricably entangled with domination in both social *and* intellectual life, and Adorno’s strategy of immanent critique is an endeavor to disclose this dialectical mediation and, thereby, rob the actuality and concept from their coercive power over human’s real *and* intellectual life. This double dialectical negation dovetails with the coincidence or intersection of the intellectualist disenchantment of the world and the rationalization of society, a nihilism pervading intellectual reason and practical rationality.

Thus, Adorno notes in *Negative Dialectics*, “[f]reedom means to criticize and change situations, not to confirm them by deciding within their coercive structures.”³⁵

However, this critical position toward morality, as pointed out by Gerhard Schweppenhäuser, does not lead Adorno to an “affirmative countermorality,” nor to an “abstract negation of morality.” Instead, through “determinate negation,” he tries to sketch out “when and to what extent morality itself becomes immoral... so that the productive core of moral philosophy is further sublated.”³⁶

It is at this point that Adorno’s conviction in the kinship between negativism and critique is brought to light. Negativity implies the unavailability of a positive endeavor to erect a new metaphysics (beyond idealism), a new moral theory, or a normative foundation because, as shown, despite going against the old oppression, it will promote a new oppression. Hence, facing this dilemma, it is only an immanent critique that by demythifying the contradictions of real and intellectual life may give birth to a new metaphysics or a new normativity. Therefore, Adorno’s response to the objection of lacking the normative ground of critique seems to be threefold: First, critique will be guided by suffering and experience. Second, the critique can proceed because it engages with the internal contradictions of a system, without being forced to rely on Honneth’s transcendent, immanent, or Left-Hegelian methods of grounding critique. Finally, a new normative ground is not capable of justifying our critical standpoint since these grounds are themselves subject to critique, given their trait of resurrecting new forms of oppression. Thus, it is an immanent critique that, restoring the emancipatory capacity of our actual normative principles, may give rise to a new normativity stripped of its oppressive dimensions. Adorno’s negativism, the unavailability of living rightly in a wrong life, does not repudiate the possibility of any new ethics. Indeed, just as his critique of idealism aimed at inducing the creation of a new materialistic dialectical metaphysics, his critique of the wrong state of things, embedded in morality and normativity, also serves to unleash the possibility of a new normative horizon. However, the new ethics is made possible by the critique rather than the idealist endeavor of reason to found a new normative basis (the transcendent model) or the extraction of normative ideals out of the incarnations of reason in existing social practices (immanent transcendence).

This leads us to the notion of the *new* in Adorno's thought. If in the omnipresence of nihilism, in the rationalization of intellectual *and* practical life, the only way to philosophize is through immanent critique and negative dialectics, which might condition a new metaphysics and ethics, then we need to say more about the status of novelty for Adorno. It is, hence, essential to assess the significance and sense of this concept, showing how it marks a recurrent motif in Adorno's thought, namely, the dialectic of nature and history.

NORMATIVITY AND THE DIALECTIC OF NATURE AND HISTORY

In "The Idea of Natural History" (1932), Adorno develops a notion of natural-history, which is, as noted by Max Pensky, "among the most persistent and influential theoretical structures in Adorno's work," playing "a crucial and, typically enough, often subterranean role in virtually all of Adorno's works."³⁷ Adorno engages with the classical problem of historical experience and phenomena in contrast to nature, as the eternal and ahistorical essence which is regarded as the substance in history. Nature is that which stands beyond the reach of reason and exercises a mythical power over individuals who possessing no control over it submit to it as a timeless fate. In contrast, history is "that mode of conduct established by tradition that is characterized primarily by the occurrence of the qualitatively new: it is a movement that does not play itself out in mere identity, mere reproduction of what has always been, but rather one in which the new occurs, it is a movement that gains its true character through what appears in it as new."³⁸ Though, in this early lecture, Adorno is not concerned with a static account of nature and history but with their dialectical relation and interdependence: How a historical being, where it is most historical, can be comprehended as natural being and how nature, where it rests most deeply in itself as nature, can be comprehended as historical being?³⁹

To explicate this relationship, Adorno refers to the concept of natural history in György Lukács' *Theory of the Novel* and Walter Benjamin's *Origin of the German Mourning Play*. Lukács' concept of "second nature" allows Adorno to describe one

dimension of the idea of natural-history. Second nature is the mythical appearance of the historical phenomena as ahistorical, absolute, and natural. The world of conventions portrays an ossified history that exhibited a strict lawfulness and, as described by Susan Buck-Morss, “wielded a mythical power over men reminiscent of primitive societies in which ‘first nature’ dominated as an inexplicable force.”⁴⁰ Adorno’s question is how “this world of estranged things that cannot be decoded but encounters us as ciphers” can be interpreted.⁴¹ How can this reified dead world, that takes on the countenance of nature, obscuring its historical genesis, be decoded and deciphered? This cipher-character and strangeness of the ossified history is foregrounded in Lukács’ formulation of second nature as “a charnel-house of rotted interiorities.”⁴²

With Lukács, Adorno depicts the metamorphosis of the historical into nature and, drawing on Benjamin, articulates another dimension of natural-history: “nature itself is seen as transitory nature, as history.”⁴³ What Adorno underscores through Benjamin’s interpretation of the “baroque allegory” is the exposition of nature qua *transience*. In allegory, the death and mortality of nature and the corporeal are not presented as a kind of redemption but are manifested as ungarnished transience. Benjamin writes, “in allegory the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history ... Everything about history that, from the beginning, has been, ultimately, sorrowful and unsuccessful, is expressed in a face—or rather in a death’s head.”⁴⁴ Although this horrifying face, this figure of the most extreme subjugation to nature, has lost all its symbolic freedom of expression, enunciates the nature of human existence and the biographical historicity of an individual in the form of a riddle.⁴⁵ Invoking this bare expression of transience, Adorno regards transience as “the deepest point where history and nature converge.”⁴⁶ Nature is also transitory like history: “whenever a historical appears it refers back to the natural element that passes away within it.”⁴⁷ Thus, nature exhibiting an inherent ambivalence or ambiguity, claiming to both timelessness *and* transience is, indeed, natural *and* historical. On the other side, history also exhibits a natural and historical character. History is *discontinuous* insofar as it contains “structural

disparities” and is not transformable to a “structural whole.” History, on the one hand, presents itself as the “mythical archaic, natural material of history, of what has been”—that is, as nature—and, on the other hand, as “dialectically and emphatically new.”⁴⁸ Transience is the deepest point where nature and history converge; this point is deepest and convergence asymptotical because nature and history never become identical in a third term. Adorno stresses, “all being or everything existing is to be grasped as the interweaving of historical and natural being,” but this convergence does not mean that nature and history are “fused with each other, rather they break apart and interweave at the same time [...]”⁴⁹ Nature and history do not resolve into an identity in or through transience because transience itself, rather than being a static concept, involves internal ambivalences and movements.

To illuminate the inherent tension of the concept of transience, I refer to Max Pensky and Iain Macdonald, as their discussions elucidate different connotations of this notion. As already discussed, Benjamin’s account of transience presents nature bereft of its claims to eternity and timelessness, to coherence and continuity. In “Natural History: The Life and Afterlife of a Concept in Adorno,” Pensky stresses that transience denotes an individuality “whose presence [...] can only be defined by its absence.”⁵⁰ Transience is an uncanny essence, defining a presence by its absence, its “impending non-existence.”⁵¹ To show the relation of transience to forgetting, Pensky notes that transitoriness is always constituted *retrospectively* when the transient turns out to be that which “can no longer be remembered.”⁵² Transience “marks all the huge portions of a shared lifeworld that vanish without a trace as the lifeworld moves through time; elements that are non-recuperable.”⁵³ The “incapability of being remembered” in transience, Pensky stresses, implies that “conditions that render persons transient or unmemorable, non-recuperable in this sense are social conditions that make impossible the memory of historical suffering.”⁵⁴ Indeed, modernity with its disruptions and transformations in the faculty of remembering can be envisaged as a “memory crisis” in which the predominance of rationality is connected to the compulsory

forgetting of suffering. Transience, in this sense, is the product of the social circumstances that force the bodies to forget their suffering and, for Pensky, this assertion implies the normative dimension of the possibility of a “critical memory” that resists the evaporation of suffering in time, a remembrance that resists reification and its associated refusal of the registration of suffering in memory.⁵⁵

Thus, *transience* evokes the false compulsory historical *forgetting* and effacement of suffering which unsurprisingly underlies historical progress. However, transience also has another face that is portrayed in Macdonald’s *What Would Be Different: Figures of Possibility in Adorno*. In light of Adorno’s account of history as the movement “in which the new occurs and gains its true character through what appears in it as new,”⁵⁶ Macdonald regards transience as one of the constitutive moments of history. As he remarks, history marks the emergence of the *new*, and “as the new, it is that which ‘makes history,’ as it were, by breaking with archaic nature and time-honored concepts that turn out to be contingent—even false—despite their venerability. As such, history implies both radical *transience* (the downfall of the ever-same) and *transition* (the emergence of the new), which properly occur in the moment of liberation from nature as ideology.”⁵⁷ The reified second nature does not necessarily end up in a historical impasse, and Adorno’s insistence on the riddle-character of nature, according to Macdonald, suggests that the “promise of something new” is detectable “within the ossified forms of the old.”⁵⁸ This time, transience is associated with the disclosure of the contingency and transformability of the heteronomous force of second nature, or in other words, the activation of the dialectical movement from nature to history, the transfiguration of what has hitherto been marked as necessity into the possibility of its transgression.

Thus, transience, here, instead of implying the *forgetting* of suffering points to the *remembrance* of the fact that what is presented as nature with its imposed inescapable necessity is, indeed, historical, contingent, and surmountable. This internal tension within the notion of transience explains why transience, despite

being the cross point of history and nature, is not where they become identical since, like nature and history, transience also dialectically oscillates between its own multidimensional references. Transience is the compulsory social effacement of the memory of suffering but, simultaneously, denotes the transitoriness and contingency of the petrified social mechanisms of forgetting. The source of our confinement concurs with the condition of our liberation.

Though, transience, in Macdonald's view, is not the only moment in the history-becoming of nature. History involves both transience, the downfall of the mythical ever-same, and *transition* as the emergence of the new.⁵⁹ The moment of transition plays out the promise or the emergence of the new. However, since transience is often followed by an unsurmountable historical impasse rather than transition (like in Benjamin's study of the mourning play), Macdonald explicates Adorno's treatment of this "blocked possibility" and unfolds the possibility of transition in the conceptual pairs of society/individual and history-of-art/artwork which are, indeed, different figures of the nature-history dialectic in Adorno's later works. After a decisive analysis of the traces of the ideas of natural-history and blocked possibility in Adorno's *oeuvres*, Macdonald maintains that "society is a figure of nature in its denial of transience and transcendence" (or transition), whereas the "pathos of singular" and the "artistic more" are the epitomes of history—the new—that incarnate the possibility of the different.⁶⁰ Having sketched out the incarnations of the dialectic of nature-history in the concepts of society and art, Macdonald asks how this movement is related to the Adornian "ought." To articulate this normative implication of nature-history dialectic, he invokes Adorno's account of socially conditioned suffering and notes "when suffering is *shared* because society universally and systematically produces it in us" and when these are "*contingent* and *socially remediable* forms of suffering that are falsely presented as being necessary and natural," then this understanding may take on the form of the "imperative of a suffering that *ought not to be*." Macdonald writes:

The imperative of suppressed possibility is, as Adorno puts it, "Woe says: pass" (*Weh spricht: vergeh*). It is the imperative of a suffering that *ought*

not to be, however unable the individual sufferer may be to name the suffering adequately. More specifically, as the German *vergehen* (to pass, wear off, fade) suggests, it is an imperative of transience and transition from a painful actuality to another actuality that has eliminated the prior actuality's condition: a particular kind of transition from essence to existence that operates on the basis of the "ought" of possibility rather than remaining on the level of the "is" of what happens to be real. It is here that the nature-history dialectic begins its work of revealing necessity to be contingency; and likewise, it is here that the "ontology of the wrong state of things" reveals its driving force: "The lived moment tells cognition that suffering ought not to be, that things ought to be different. (ND, 203)"⁶¹

Macdonald's formulation of the "imperative of transience and transition" accords a normative impetus to these concepts. Accordingly, I attempt to carry this idea farther and focus on the normative dimension of transience/transition in relation to critique/creation and suffering/experience. *Transience* is intimately bound to the disclosure of a *critical* perspective that deciphers the natural order and drains it of its claim to necessity, and as such, it may lead to *transition* or, alternatively, the *creation* of the new. In this transfiguration toward history, transience is tied to critique and transition to creation. Now, it can be suggested that, for Adorno, the normative standard of the good rests on a *process* rather than a product in the forms of a static image of utopia or a deduced rational principle: the process of transposition from the natural necessity of "what has always been" to the possibility of novelty. The normative, instead of involving another ideal image of morality or health, is a process that opens up the possibility of criticizing the existing normative framework and creating a new horizon of normativity by unleashing its emancipatory moments. It is in this sense that the process of novelty (and not simply the state of mere newness) has normative dimension.

Adorno does not install a static normative ground as it will turn into a reified nature, cut from history, serving as an origin or ground with a claim to mythical timelessness and repetition. Nevertheless, he cannot idealistically vindicate

mere groundlessness, like a history dissociated from nature, which would naively appear as a perpetual production of novelty. It is only through a dialectical relation between nature and history that a moment of transition would be conditioned. The intersection of nature and history promises a coincidence of critique and creation. This new normativity qua movement is reflected in Adorno's purposeful use of ambivalent concepts and dialectical maneuvers, which aim to frustrate identity thinking and its perpetual categorizing tendency. Critique as the moment of transience is supposed to crack the ossified surface of existing norms and creation, as the moment of transition, unblock the production of unprecedented possibilities.⁶² There is an inner *ought* in the experience of possibility, in this promise of otherness.

For Adorno, the normative process of becoming-history, with its constitutive moments of *critical transience* and *creative transition*, is often out of reach. First, critique is not often available and must be first enabled in a society that imposes a universal marginalization and suppression of all forms of critique. Thus, resisting this repression and conditioning the critique is, for Adorno, the "lifeblood" of philosophy.⁶³ Moreover, even after the critique is made possible, the moment of transience does not always inaugurate the new but often lapses into a "historical impasse" and an incessant return of the experience of hopelessness and impotence.⁶⁴ Hence, Adorno's philosophical project consists in making the critique-transience possible and, then, thinking the possibility of surmounting such impasses to open up a space for transition-creation. Indeed, many of Adorno's concepts can be construed in this framework. Two of these notions that are pivotal for understanding this critical/creative transience/transition are the Adornian concepts of *suffering* and *experience*.

SUFFERING, CRITIQUE, AND TRANSIENCE

The significance of the concept of suffering for Adorno is made manifest when we are faced with the pressing question of how the subject can experience the reification of which it itself is the result. How the deformed and pathologized

reason can diagnose its own deformation and can recognize what is wrong and ought not to be? Honneth discusses this question in *A Physiognomy of the Capitalist Form of Life*, and correctly points out that Adorno's resolution to this problem lies in the category of *suffering* which "is 'transcendentally' presupposed everywhere there is the justified suspicion that human beings have to experience loss of their distorted self-realization and happiness through the restriction of their rational capacities."⁶⁵ Adorno holds (inspired by Freud) that reification or any constraint on reason, any deformation or loss of our rational capacities, entails a reaction with a somatic feeling of suffering. Thus, reification can be experienced based on the embodied impulses of suffering. Furthermore, suffering is tied to the "pre-reflective desire" for freedom and the ability of *resistance*.⁶⁶ In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno calls pain and negativity "the moving forces of dialectical thinking."⁶⁷ This "somatic element" is "the unrest that makes knowledge move;" this physical moment of suffering "tells our knowledge that suffering ought not to be, that things should be different."⁶⁸ He also asserts that "freedom follows the subject's urge to express itself. The need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth."⁶⁹

In the absence of normative ground, critique is driven by suffering and its implied knowledge and normative impetus that things should be different. Thus, critique qua transience in the dialectic of nature-history is intimately linked to suffering. As already shown, the material suffering which is subject to compulsory forgetfulness (the first sense of transience) is that which must be remembered in the critique. Put succinctly, the critique conditions the transience (second sense) or the downfall of nature by disclosing what has become transitory (first sense) or impossible to remember, that is, the suffering of the first nature. Transience is, as we saw, that which its presence is defined by its absence. If nature erases gradually the historical entities, social conditions also, replicating nature, force a compulsory forgetting of suffering; these conditions, as the very causes of historical suffering, cannot kill the pain (just like the usage of chloroform in surgical operations) so just render its remembrance impossible. Transience,

as forgetting suffering, should be critically remembered to activate transience, in the sense of denaturalizing history. Critique animates this movement from transience to transience. The dilemma of critique, for Adorno, is the paradoxical quest for remembering the forgotten suffering, presenting something that has slid into absence. That perhaps explains why Proust is a pivotal figure for Adorno. In Proust, Adorno discovers an “immersed gaze” through which “the present is virtually transformed into prehistory, into childhood.” This struggle with transience, or natural history, is expressed in Proust’s endeavor to discover the possibility of interconnection between “the childhood potential for unimpaired experience” (as it “has at his disposal infinite possibilities of experience”) and “the reflectiveness and awareness of an adult”⁷⁰; a dialectical coincidence of reason and mimesis. *Remembrance of Things Past* is a response to transience, with its involved suffering, to “overcome” transience qua “aging and death” through memory. If “[t]he polarity of happiness and transience directs him [Proust] to memory,” the inherent disparity of transience directs Adorno to a memory qua critique. Adorno writes: “Total remembrance is the response to total transience, and hope lies only in the strength to become aware of transience and preserve it in writing. Proust is a martyr to happiness.”⁷¹ This directs us to the second reason for the cruciality of Proust for Adorno. As was the case with Adorno’s method of transcending Idealism (through immanent critique) which was itself his materialist dialectical philosophy in action, his endeavor to criticize intellectualist moral philosophy is his new normativity in action. This is also seen in Proust. As Roland Barthes has noted, the subject of Proust’s book is the book itself: “The Narrator wants to write but he cannot; when he finally reaches the inauguration of his work, Proust’s book is finished: the real book was only the failure of the desired book: in exhaustion, the fantasy produced the book of its exhaustion.”⁷² Proust writes the impossibility of writing, and Adorno thinks the impossibility of thinking. With a tiny twist in Barthes’ reading, we might say that the narrator’s movement toward the activation of the work is itself the work in action. Likewise, in Adorno, the movement of conditioning a normativity through transience/transition is his normativity in action. It is also in this sense that critique and creation coincide.

EXPERIENCE, CREATION, AND TRANSITION

After examining the relation of suffering to critique and transience, we are led to Adorno's notion of *experience*. The reified nature in which suffering is forgotten also results in the deformation and decay of experience. Experience (*Erfahrung*) is a concept that can account for the *transition* out of nature's spell to history. The atrophy of experience is associated with the disenchantment and rationalization of the historical that reverts to nature, whereas experience, in its undistorted form, is a condition of transcendence.

Here, it is worth noting that suffering and experience, associated with transience and transition, are not two separate steps because experience involves a sort of suffering. As Jay Bernstein puts it in *Disenchantment and Ethics*, "to have an experience is to undergo something, to suffer something, and to do so in such a manner that one is changed thereby ... Experience is the arena of what we learn through 'suffering.'" Modern society with its petrified nature of conventions and excessive archaic familiarity destructs experience. As Bernstein describes it in broad terms, "what is experienced is something that one had not anticipated or predicted, something that occurs counter to expectations."⁷³ Thus, in the prevalence of the naturalness of everything, even human suffering, what is excluded is experience.

Bernstein articulates three characteristics of the structure of experience: "First, novelty and transformation are intrinsic to the structure of experience."⁷⁴ We will return to these elements of *novelty* and *transformation* that will clarify how experience underlies the transition toward history. Second, it is the object which determines the state of the subject that undergoes a transformation. The subjects must be "*present*" and "*exposed* to what they experience;" experiences of love, death, war, childbirth, beauty, and so on, "expose individuals to a domain of meaning that nonetheless remain bound to the events and objects precipitating the exposure." Thus, in Bernstein's view, the communication of experience tends to be "aesthetic" and "narrative" in character. Experience is necessarily inscribed

and communicated in the form of a contextual narrative. Finally, experience, along with the transformation of the individual, also entails “the emergence of a new object domain of consciousness.” Then, Bernstein relates the experience to history and writes, “the image of life without experience is ultimately the image of life without history ... There can be no meaningful historical life without experience; and only lives articulated through experience can be fully and self-consciously historical.”⁷⁵ Lives articulated through experience are endowed with transformation and novelty and, hence, fully historical. Consequently, the moment of transition in the idea of natural-history is inseparable from experience.

A few points are worthy of note here. One of the motivations of Adorno’s critique of identity thinking lies in the fact that what is expelled in it is precisely the *narrative* character of experience. Identity thinking abstracts and decontextualizes the object and, thereby, decays experience and its contextual narrative character. Indeed, the social mechanisms which attempt to destruct experience are those that also seek to establish a universal forgetfulness. Hence, experience is intimately tied to critical remembrance. Proust’s involuntary remembrance involves recovering the experience of an event that happened to us but was never experienced. Therefore, experience is bound to the moments of transience and transition inasmuch as it resists forgetting. The normative claim of suffering and experience lies in their relentless demand for the remembrance of what has become unmemorable, the remembrance of the nature-becoming of history in which the actual historical progress has suppressed and effaced its underlying material suffering.

Thus far, it was shown how experience is connected to suffering and critique. Now, let us see how it characterizes the moment of transition and the possibility of novelty. For Adorno, experience names a relation between subject and object in which the coercive and dominating character of this interaction is transcended. Experience is supposed to rupture this coercive mechanism which is nothing but a blockage of history. Adorno’s conception of experience, indebted to Hegel, enables the possibility of a dynamic subject-object relation wherein both the subject and object can be transformed. As Adorno quotes Hegel, experience is a

“dialectical movement which consciousness exercises on itself and which affects both its knowledge and its object” in a way that the “new true object issues from it.”⁷⁶ This subject-object interaction can be described as a dynamic dialectical process in which subject and object mutually constitute and alter one another.⁷⁷ As described by Martin Jay, experience “comes only with an encounter with otherness in which the self no longer remains the same” and to remain undamaged must “treat the other in a nondominating, nonsubsumptive, nonhomogenizing manner.”⁷⁸ A redeemed, undamaged or authentic experience, Jay notes, means “a nondominating relationship between subject and object ... A passive suffering or undergoing through an encounter with the new and the other, which moves us beyond where we, as subjects, were before the experience began.”⁷⁹

Thus, Adorno’s notion of experience involves an uninhibited openness to the unexpected, an encounter with otherness and the new, and characterized by transformation and novelty, echoes the moment of *transition* in the dialectic of nature and history. It might be said that the openness of experience marks the unblockage of history, an openness that can untether the dialectical *transition* and the *creation* of the new. Experience, being irreducible to a mere epistemological or metaphysical problem for Adorno, carries a normative dimension, an inherent ought.

Suffering and experience involve resistance to the reification of consciousness. The reified consciousness “is a consciousness blinded to all historical past, all insight into one’s own conditionedness, and posits as absolute what exists contingently.”⁸⁰ In a reified world, to which this reified consciousness corresponds, the utopian image is also petrified. Adorno points out in *Resignation*, “the utopian moment in thinking is stronger the less it...objectifies itself into a utopia and hence sabotages its realization.”⁸¹ This statement has an important implication. It implies that what is barred in Adorno’s critical theory is not the utopian moment in thinking but its *objectification*. This is different from a conception of negativism which presumes Adorno’s theory advocates a thought deprived of any utopian moment. Here, Adorno endorses the utopian moment in thought and even seeks

its conditions for realization, but what he denigrates is the objectification and reification of this utopian moment. The ossification of the normative figures of the good life as a sort of transcendent standard that imposes itself on individuals and demands the adjustment, obedience, and conformity of lives will sabotage the realization of the utopian moment because it will restore domination, shun the critique and block the transition. Thus, when Adorno depicts the *figures* of right life his theory is not incoherent; his negativism does not forbid thinking the figures of the good.⁸² What he eschews is reifying them into *correct* images that, imposing rectitude and rectification, escape the ruthless critique, and adhering to these images as ends in themselves invested with a fetishized character. Negativism is thus reconcilable with thinking the good on the condition that the quest for the right life is practiced in terms of the Adornian *experience* and subject to ceaseless renewable critique.⁸³ Suffering and experience, critical transience and creative transition, portray Adorno's solution to belie the reification, with its involved forgetfulness, and becoming-nature of the utopian moment in thought and, thereby, unclog its realization.

Thus, Adorno's theory does not exclude every utopian or normative moment in thought.⁸⁴ He even seems advising "to hold fast to moral norms" and "the question of right and wrong," but this must involve a constant critical consciousness of the fallibility of the authority corresponding to these norms.⁸⁵ In "Why Still Philosophy?," Adorno writes: "Dialectic is not a third standpoint but rather the attempt, by means of an immanent critique, to develop philosophical standpoints beyond themselves and beyond the despotism of a thinking based on standpoints."⁸⁶ This formulation of immanent critique can be put in contrast to what we quoted from Honneth earlier about the requirement of a justified standpoint for social criticism. The immanent critique, contrary to Honneth's conception, does not entail an affirmation of the value horizon of the existing society or the reliance on contingent moral principles but rather involves the criticisms issued against the despotism of the existing normative standpoints to unblock their emancipatory moments. Also, in contrast to Finlayson's formulation, immanent critique does

not solely imply that its standard belongs to or inheres in the object of criticism but, more significantly, consists in disrupting the reification of every normative standard, using the inherent ambivalences and contradictions of the object of criticism, and unveiling how they replicate the coercive social reality.⁸⁷ This critique is *immanent* insofar as it enables its own conditioning; thus, it critiques that which makes the critique impossible, that is, any utopian image that might turn into an objectified despotic standard. The immanent critique must have immanent conditions. This self-conditioning of critique implies that transcendent normative standards are banned inasmuch as they block the relentless critique of the normative image and violate this immanent conditioning.

PROMISE, POSSIBILITY, AND OUGHT

In *Negative Dialectics*, Adorno inquires into the possibility of metaphysical experience. Metaphysical experience seems to be conditioned through a space opened between logical and actual possibility. If the moment of transition, in the dialectic of nature-history, shall be explained by an experience, which is supposed to be intramundane, then the question is how a worldly experience will be an experience of a possibility that is neither actual nor logical. This question is formulated by Bernstein, “how can we have an experience of something that is neither fully actual nor fully nonactual?”⁸⁸ Adorno’s response seems to be found here: “The concept of the intelligible realm would be the concept of something which is not, and yet is not merely nothing.”⁸⁹

Curiously, this state of “is not” without being “nothing” echoes Gilles Deleuze’s notion of the *virtual*. The virtual is also not actual, without any actual existence, yet it is not nothing, being real without being actual. Hence, its status is subsistence/insistence rather than existence. Adorno and Deleuze, despite their differences, are seeking a way to surpass the identity of the concept, the former through *nonidentity* and the latter through *difference*. This complicated though interesting relationship between Deleuze and Adorno requires independent research, but it suffices here to note that establishing this connection with Deleuze’s virtual, can

open new interpretative paths in both thinkers, helping us to see the status of possibility in Adorno, and also unveiling the ethico-political connotations of the virtual by benefiting from Adorno's rich critique of society.⁹⁰

This peculiar modality of neither being fully actual nor fully nonactual is also the modality of what is *experienced* in *transition*, a possibility of otherness. Modern artworks, for Adorno, offer a semblance that exhibits such a possibility. They are worldly material entities that while being real exhibit a kind of unreality. They are actual *and* not actual; actual as material things but "not fully or practically actual," as Bernstein notes, since they lack "purpose, function, or practical use." Indeed, artworks turn into "non-fungible material object of attention only in virtue of their not being beholden to the norms that govern the rest of social practice."⁹¹ In this sense, they are both more and less; like Adorno's possibility. "Art is semblance," according to Adorno,⁹² and being non-representational and owing nothing to the concept, establishes a "meaning" and "order," as noted by Bernstein, just through "the medium and the matter;" consequently, "works of art say that nature *can* be like this;" and this can is "a promise."⁹³ Bernstein writes: "Like a promise, a work of art is a fully (materially) substantial present object; like a promise, a work of art 'intends' a future that is not legible from the present other than through its very being, only providing a sign that a certain nonpredictable future will come to pass; and finally, like a promise, a work of art is impotent in the face of future reality."⁹⁴

This notion of promise expresses the peculiar modality of possibility, which in our formulation, is *experienced* in *transition*. Artworks, exhibiting an incommensurability with the actual world, which is also shown in their state of being *useless*, serve as a promise of another order, a promise of novelty. This promise involves an *ought*; a *can* that slides into an *ought*. Hence, it is in this sense that Adorno's normativity can be depicted by suffering/critique/transience and experience/creation/transition.

However, is there any other metaphysical experience, other than artworks? As Bernstein notes, art has a special status insofar as it holds this modality

systematically, “that is, in accordance with the demands of the practice itself.”⁹⁵ Nevertheless, Adorno seems to be claiming that such experiences are also found in social practice. As foregrounded by Bernstein, this promise of otherness is also “found in social experience,” and this implies that Adorno’s negativism cannot be absolute. In *Negative Dialectics*, after evoking Kafka’s writings, Adorno notes, “[i]t resists all attempts of a desperate consciousness to posit despair as an absolute. The world’s course is not absolutely conclusive, nor is absolute despair; rather, despair is its conclusiveness. However void every trace of otherness in it, however much all happiness is marred by revocability: in the breaks that belie identity, entity is still pervaded by the everbroken pledges of that otherness.”⁹⁶ These pledges, or promises of otherness reveal that the disenchanted world, as notes Bernstein, “is not utterly closed in on itself;” indeed, “[i]f despair were truly total, we would not be speaking of despair,” and “the assertion of total negativity belies it, necessarily bespeaking the hope that is denied.”⁹⁷ Consequently, there are “fragmented and heterogenous” moments of happiness, which are incompatible with the course of the world, but precisely, “[i]n not fitting, these negative others promise otherness – the world enchanted.”⁹⁸ There are small intramundane events that despite their actual occurrence, due to their incommensurability with the world, promise otherness. Adorno holds, there is intense despair in a concentration camp, and “yet the lightening up of an eye, indeed the feeble tail-wagging of a dog one gave a tidbit it promptly forgets, would make the ideal of nothingness evaporate.”⁹⁹ This can be connected to our earlier discussions of natural-history. It seems here animality-nature fuses dialectically with humanity-history. Ironically, one finally discovers some traces of humanity, where it is not supposed to be, in an animal; and instead finds animality in the camp’s brutal humans. The lightening of an eye, or the tail-wagging of a dog, are the experiences of some dispersed fragments of reality that carry a promise, a possibility and an ought.

Returning to Bernstein’s reading, he stresses that despite the undeniable significance of metaphysical experience, Adorno cannot say anything further “*philosophically or conceptually*” about it “beyond this negative determination,” since

it would entertain the risk of subsuming it under the domination of a concept.¹⁰⁰ Bernstein writes: “The point of the doctrine of metaphysical experience is that it cannot be conceptually prescribed, that the sort of meaningfulness such events reveal cannot be conceptually or rationally grounded because *they* represent all the grounding that is possible: the dog’s tail-wagging itself the reason for any further reasons one might have for wishing to live and live a human life.”¹⁰¹

Adorno’s ought cannot be conceptually or rationally grounded. Instead, there is an implied ought in the structure of suffering-experience. Experiencing the possibility of otherness, with its anomalous modality, involves a passage from *can* to *ought*; what can happen, ought to happen. And experience is weaved into suffering. In Adorno’s example, it is perhaps in the concentration camp and its associated suffering that some tail-wagging can evoke an *experience*, possessing the structure of a promise, a promise that its realization is perpetually deferred. Metaphysical experience is then constituted in suffering and its involved critique, or critical memory. Remembering is connected to both suffering and experience: Remembering an eradicated suffering, and remembering, through experience, that the social order could be otherwise. The former is a *critical memory* and the latter a *creative memory*; critical memory is a denaturalization toward history and creative memory is the experience of transition, in the mode of a promise. Proust, in the face of suffering (transience), appeals to memory, and it is for this reason that Adorno can discover transcendental experiences in Proust. The Proustian experiences are often the remembrance of an anonymous childhood, which leads to the fusion of child and adult, a dialectical fusion of nature and history.

Adorno’s normativity is therefore implied in the structure of ought which informs the opened space for the modally anomalous notion of possibility. This possibility, a promise of novelty and otherness, is disclosed in suffering-experience. As is the case with Adorno’s method of surmounting idealism, he cannot attempt to construct (or reconstruct) a new normative foundation (to support the construction of critical and evaluative judgments) because far from bringing about genuine novelty, it will tacitly incarnate the old and resurrect the intertwinement

of domination and morality which will, thereby, guarantee its failure to ground the social critique. We are reminded in *Negative Dialectics*, that “[i]t is a moment of dialectics that the new is the old, and otherness is familiarity.”¹⁰² In order to avoid a new form of oppression while constructing a new positive normativity, Adorno must call for the critique of the established normative order to rob it of its repressive dimension.

This analysis attempted to foreground a constellation of concepts around two moments in the dialectic of nature and history. Drawing on Macdonald’s moments of transience and transition, and developing Adorno’s notions of suffering and experience through Pensky and Bernstein allowed us to foreground Adorno’s ought, which characterizes these two moments and their dialectical movements. In this process, suffering gains a voice and expression in the critique of nature as the trammel of norms. Adorno’s critique discloses the antagonistic totality of society that blocks remembrance and experience. This fracture in totality expresses the promise of a thought that “can perhaps catch a glimpse of an order of the possible and the nonexistent, where human beings and things would be in their rightful place.”¹⁰³ This involves a moment of freedom and experience which, in turn, might untether the *more* from the spell of social reality and unleash its blocked novelty. Indeed, what is at stake, rather than a normative *ground*, is a normative *process-force* meant to fuel this dialectical movement. What Buck-Morss observed about Adorno’s metaphysics¹⁰⁴ is no less true about his conception of normativity: the process of arriving at a new normativity (critical transience/creative transition) is itself the new normativity in action. This is a new normativity, the normativity of the new.

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NOTES

1. Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*. Vol. 1, trans. Thomas McCarthy. (Cambridge: Polity, 1987), 374.
2. Fabian Freyenhagen, "No Easy Way Out: Adorno's Negativism and the Problem of Normativity." In *Nostalgia for a Redeemed Future*, ed. Stefano Giachetti Ludovisi (Rome: John Cabot University Press, 2009), 50–1.
3. Freyenhagen, 50–1.
4. James Gordon Finlayson, "Morality and Critical Theory: On the Normative Problem of Frankfurt School Social Criticism." *Telos* 146, no. 7 (2009), 23.
5. Axel Honneth, *Pathologies of Reason: On the Legacy of Critical Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009) 43.
6. Honneth, 48.
7. See Piet Strydom, *Contemporary Critical Theory and Methodology* (London: Routledge, 2013).
8. Honneth, 52.
9. Honneth, 50.
10. Jay M. Bernstein, *Adorno: Disenchantment and Ethics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 9–10; Bernstein summarizes this problem: "Adorno's philosophy is routinely interpreted as directly embodying the pessimism implied by the intersection of the sociological picture of rationalized society and the philosophical dilemma of being left without a usable conception of reason. If there is a rationality deficit in modernity, and all subject positions are forms of hurt or flight, damaged, then how might a critical analysis of ethics advance? The acuteness of the social situation and Adorno's own commitment to some form of historicism in which there is no access to forms of reason and rationality that are not historically embodied appears to lead to an ethical cul-de-sac without recuperative possibilities" (Bernstein 2001, 20).
11. For Adorno's works, after their first citation, abbreviations are used: *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, MP; *Negative Dialectics*, ND; "The Idea of Natural History", NH; *Critical Models*, CM; *Hegel: Three Studies*, HTS.
12. Theodor W. Adorno, *Problems of Moral Philosophy*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity, 2000), 174.
13. MP, 167.
14. MP, 167.
15. MP, 167–8.
16. MP, 168.
17. MP, 168.
18. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (London: Routledge, 1973), 10; 26.
19. MP, xx.
20. MP, 10.
21. Adorno writes, "Thought as such, before all particular contents, is an act of negation, of resistance to that which is forced upon it" (ND, 19).
22. MP, 68–9.
23. MP, 69.
24. MP, 69.
25. MP, 70.
26. MP, 70.
27. MP, 71.

28. MP, 71.
29. MP, 75.
30. MP, 75.
31. ND, 214.
32. MP, 152.
33. MP, 152.
34. MP, 152.
35. ND, 226.
36. Gerhard Schweppenhäuser, "Adorno's Negative Moral Philosophy." In *The Cambridge Companion to Adorno*, ed. Tom Huhn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 336.
37. Max Pensky, "Natural History: The Life and Afterlife of a Concept in Adorno." *Critical Horizons* 5, no. 1 (2004), 228.
38. Adorno, "The Idea of Natural-History." In *Things beyond Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 253.
39. NH, 360; see also Philip Hogg's *Communication and Expression: Adorno's Philosophy of Language*, trans. Antonia Hofstätter (New York: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017), where he reconstructs Adorno's philosophy of language and develops the theory of language acquisition drawing on Adorno's idea of second nature and natural-history.
40. Susan Buck-Morss, Susan. *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt Institute* (New York: Free Press, 1977), 55.
41. NH, 261.
42. György Lukács, *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature*, trans. Bostock Anna (London: Merlin Press, 1978), 54.
43. NH, 262.
44. Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (London: NLB, 1977), 166.
45. Benjamin, 166.
46. NH, 262.
47. NH, 264.
48. NH, 266.
49. NH, 264.
50. Pensky, 241.
51. Pensky, 241.
52. Pensky, 241.
53. Pensky, 242.
54. Pensky, 242.
55. Pensky 243–4.
56. NH, 253.
57. Iain Macdonald, *What Would be Different: Figures of Possibility in Adorno* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2019), 59.
58. Macdonald, 61.
59. Macdonald, 59.
60. Macdonald, 77; 91; 94.
61. Macdonald, 95–6.
62. These possibilities have a new modal status. As stressed by Macdonald, this blocked possibility is a new space opened between Hegel's formal and real possibility. Formal possibility,

what can be thought without contradiction, “contains the ‘ought’ (Sollen) or that which ought to be” but it is “powerless in the face of actuality,” insofar as it is construed as that which actuality cannot produce, “the possible, but under the shadow of the impossible” whose actualization is suspended or “indefinitely postponed.” (Macdonald 2019a, 3-4) Real possibility, taking real actuality “as its criterion and content,” refers to “the sum total of real circumstances that are at the same time the real conditions for the further development of actuality.” (Macdonald 2019a, 4) In Hegelian metaphysics, all real possibilities become actualized and all remaining non-real possibilities are formal “so have no claim on actuality.” (Macdonald 2019a, 5) It is not a Hegelian real possibility, “since the circumstances-conditions of actuality have not produced it and do not seem on the point of producing it;” yet, rather than a formal possibility, “a vain hope or a mere ought,” it is “a real possibility that has been ‘cheated’ of its actuality.” (Macdonald 2019a, 6).

63. Adorno writes in “Why Still Philosophy”: “Philosophy...has its lifeblood in the resistance against the common practices of today and what they serve, against the justification of what happens to be the case” (Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords, trans. Henry W. Pickford and Lydia Goehr (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005a), 6).

64. Like Benjamin’s analysis of the mourning play, as discussed by Macdonald, which depicts an unsurmountable impasse, where the transience encounters a blockage that makes the transcendence out of reach. The era does not offer any possibility of redemption and gives rise to a sort of “melancholy impotence.” (Macdonald 2019a, 61-63).

65. Honneth, 68.

66. However, Honneth believes that suffering and its claimed cognitive content needs to be justified. He takes Adorno’s occasional empathetic account of childhood as an effort to anchor suffering in a normative image of childhood. But as shown, Adorno would not need this justificatory normative image, as he aims to ensure the movement of the critique and creation of the normative horizons.

67. ND, 202.

68. ND, 203.

69. ND, 17.

70. NL, 315.

71. NL, 317.

72. Roland Barthes and Bernard Comment, Marcel Proust: mélanges (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2020), 179.

73. Bernstein, 114.

74. Bernstein, 114.

75. Bernstein, 115.

76. Adorno, Hegel: Three Studies (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 54.

77. As Adorno writes in Negative Dialectic, “they constitute one another as much as—by virtue of such constitution—they depart from each other” (174).

78. Martin Jay, “Is Experience Still in Crisis? Reflections on a Frankfurt School Lament.” In The Cambridge Companion to Adorno, ed. Tom Huhn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 140–1.

79. Jay, 145.

80. CM, 200.

81. CM, 292–3.

82. On the usage of “figure” in Adorno, see Honneth, “A Physiognomy of the Capitalist Form of Life,” wherein he discusses the constellation of figures which reveals a historical cipher and

indicates the objective meaning of the historical condition. Honneth compares Adorno's notion of figure to Weber's "ideal type." (Honneth 2009, 58).

83. For more on correctness and rectitude see Macdonald's remarks (Macdonald 2019a, 1-2) in parallel to the relationship between normativity, norm, and normalization (Genel 2019, 70-88).

84. Finlayson writes, "we can have no positive conception of the good, and that what they call variously 'reconciliation,' 'redemption,' 'happiness,' and 'utopia' cannot even be thought" (Finlayson 2009, 29) Stressing this negative utopianism which is associated with the theological ban on graven images, Finlayson notes that "no standard of goodness or rightness is available" (Finlayson 2009, 30).

85. MP, 169.

86. CM, 12.

87. Finlayson writes: "What makes a criticism immanent is that the standard of criticism belongs to or inheres in (in a suitably specified sense) the object of criticism." (Finlayson 2014, 1144-5).

88. Bernstein, 435.

89. ND, 393.

90. Curiously, there is also intriguing literature about the coincidence of critique and creation in the work of Deleuze, which can be examined in relation to Adorno. See in particular *Difference and Repetition* trans. Paul Patton (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), where Deleuze writes, "the conditions of a true critique and a true creation are one and the same" (Deleuze 1994, 139); and Daniel W. Smith's intriguing articulation of the relation between normativity and the principles of critique and creation in Deleuze (Smith 2003, 299).

91. Bernstein, 435.

92. ND, 404.

93. Bernstein, 436.

94. Bernstein, 436.

95. Bernstein, 437.

96. ND, 404.

97. Bernstein, 438.

98. Bernstein, 438.

99. ND, 380; Bernstein, 440.

100. Bernstein 440

101. Bernstein, 441.

102. ND, 64.

103. CM, 15.

104. "[T]he process of arriving at such a philosophy [dialectical and materialistic] was itself the new philosophy in action" (Buck-Morss 1977, 64).

viral memory and the philosophy of morphogenesis

annu dahiya

“Memory is not the property of bodies. Bodies, or what appear as ‘bodies,’ are the property of memory.”

— Raymond Ruyer, “The Status of the Future and the Invisible World”

Life inherently carries something of its past into its present. It inherits some form of heredity from its past that it further develops and complexifies in its present in order to generate a future that cannot be predicted or given in advance. According to nineteenth-century German evolutionary biologist August Weismann, the problem of heredity must entail “the existence of a special organized and living

hereditary substance, which in all multicellular organisms, unlike the substance composing the perishable body of the individual, is transmitted from generation to generation.”¹ For Weismann, this hereditary substance was “immortal” in a sense and resided in germ-plasm (found in egg and sperm cells), which he distinguished from “mortal” somatoplasm (soma or body cells).² The development of genetics in the twentieth-century, with the deciphering of the structure of DNA as well as the nature of chromosomes, in a way confirms Weismann’s concept of germ-plasm with increasing detail. It is easy for us to understand heredity in relation to a physical entity such as a germ-plasm or gene in and across life that has already formed, but how might we understand the origins of heredity before there is a definite hereditary substance of some sort? What are the conditions of heredity itself that make a heredity substance possible? And furthermore, does a *substance* of sorts—whether germ or gene—mark the beginning of heredity, or is substance itself an effect of some larger process?

In this essay, I engage with the concepts of heredity in a way that accounts for genetics but deals with heredity and memory in a much broader ontological sense. Although Weismann does not use the term, I am interested in a theory of *memory* that conditions and subsists within cellular life. This theory of memory and heredity may encompass and explain the emergence of genetics, but it would also necessarily extend further back in time before the advent of genes. In other words, one of the central premises of this essay is that neither memory nor heredity begin with genetics. To argue that memory can be wholly explained by genetics, which always tends towards reductionism, would generate a theory of origins that is binaristic. Such a theory would be binaristic because it would (attempt to) pinpoint exactly when memory ‘enters,’ and therefore would erect an insurmountable gap between matter and life. My aim is to think how a philosophy of memory is part and parcel of a philosophy of life in a way that does not create a dualism between ‘nonliving’ and ‘living’ or ‘inorganic’ and ‘organic,’ and to offer a more philosophical engagement with memory, specifically by calling on a lineage of philosophy that challenges the idea of memory as substance.

In *Creative Evolution* (1907), Henri Bergson argues that living systems are guided by organic memory, in which the whole of the past is concentrated in their living present. The whole of past endures within a living system and it is this complete immersion in the past that constitutes organic memory:

The evolution of the living being, like that of the embryo, implies a continual recording of duration, a persistence of the past in the present, and so an appearance, at least, of organic memory.

The present state of an unorganized body depends exclusively on what happened at the previous instant; and likewise the position of the material points of a system defined and isolated by science is determined by the position of these same points at the moment immediately before. ... Is it so with the laws of life? Does the state of a living body find its complete explanation in the state immediately before? Yes, if it is agreed a priori to liken the living body to other bodies, and to identify it, for the sake of the argument, with the artificial systems on which the chemist, physicist and astronomer operate. But in astronomy, physics and chemistry the proposition has a perfectly definite meaning: it signifies that certain aspects of the present, important for science, are calculable as functions of the immediate past. Nothing of the sort in the domain of life. Here calculation touches, at most, certain phenomena of organic *destruction*. Organic *creation*, on the contrary, the evolutionary phenomena which properly constitute life, we cannot in any way subject to a mathematical treatment. It will be said that this impotence is due only to our ignorance. But it may equally well express the fact that the present moment of a living body does not find its explanation in the moment immediately before, that *all* the past of the organism must be added to that moment, its heredity in fact, the whole of a very long history.³

Bergson distinguishes between the concrete time of living systems and the

abstract time of artificially closed systems of scientific experiments. Living systems are systems that Nature itself has closed off while artificial systems are closed off by Man. Artificial systems (what Bergson also refers to as unorganised matter) abide by *abstract* time, in which time conceptually and mathematically figures as an independent variable *extrinsic* to a system. The present state of an artificial system finds its “complete explanation in the state before.”⁴ In contrast, living systems (or organised matter) live in *concrete* time. Here the present state of a living system cannot be understood from the state that immediately comes before. Instead, “[i]ts past, in its entirety, is prolonged into its present, and abides there, actual and acting.”⁵

The physics and chemistry of the late nineteenth and early twentieth-century that coincide with the time during which Bergson wrote *Creative Evolution* utilised abstract time. They therefore were unable to account for concrete time, the specific kind of time in which organic memory unfolds. Writing a generation after Bergson in the wake of major advances in physics that revolutionised how we understand the reality of Nature, Raymond Ruyer is able to take up the question of the relation between organic memory and life in novel ways.⁶ The binary between the living systems demarcated by Nature and the artificial systems of science becomes undone by the time Ruyer is writing in the mid-twentieth century. More specifically, physics and chemistry cease to only address artificial systems and a continuity between the physical and chemical *that could* engender organic memory becomes possible. The theoretical relation between *memory* and life is a central question for biology (even if it is not explicitly voiced as such) and therefore must be attended to within a philosophy of life that addresses the continuity of the real. Ruyer does exactly this. Thinking with Ruyer about life and memory in relation to morphogenesis provides a rich resource to theorise the relation between chemical morphogenesis and organic morphogenesis in a way that does not parse physics and chemistry from biology.

In *Neofinalism*, Ruyer argues that the problem of the origins of life can no longer be seen as an enigma we will never solve. For Ruyer, this means that

[i]n a certain superficial sense, we can say that contemporary science has realized the hopes of the old materialism concerning the problem of life. We can say that the problem of the historical origin of life no longer arises. The appearance of life from a geologically “dead” world can no longer be considered as one of the forever-insoluble “enigmas of the Universe.” The modes of emergence of complex organisms are far from being known, but the emergence of life, considered as an absolutely novel mode of being, is no longer a philosophical problem. There is no longer any reason to believe that from a chemical molecule to a bacillus, the abyss is greater than from a bacillus to a vertebrate. Physicochemical sciences and the sciences of the organism are much closer to each other than they were in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. They have already blended together in practice. The study of crystallizable viruses, genetic mutations, and large organic molecules in general attracts both chemists and biologists.⁷

The origins of life ceases to be enigmatic because the gap between physics and chemistry on the one hand and biology on the other no longer exists. This paper thinks in the space that unfolds from the physicochemical and the organic to consider how viruses offer us the grounds to theorise how memory, reproduction, and instinct begin in the organic realm.

In origins of life research, the beginning of genetics is often rooted in a “RNA world,” a hypothetical time period before the emergence of cellular life in which RNA, rather than DNA, was the primary genetic material. Through a focus on RNA, the centrality of DNA is displaced in discussions regarding cellular emergence. A hypothetical RNA world is thought to solve the chicken-or-egg conundrum. At the molecular level, this problem exists as follows: if DNA, a structure that is remarkably stable and inert, cannot replicate itself without proteins, how did the first genetic systems arise if they were primarily DNA-based? A speculative RNA world offers one possible solution to this problem. Research from the 1980s to the present has demonstrated that RNA has strange and interesting formative properties: RNA can be *both* a source of information storage as well as a catalyst

that can splice (or cut) itself, thereby presenting a possible solution to how genetics may have come into being.

RNA world experimental researchers deploy either a ‘top-down’ or ‘bottom-up’ approach. The top-down approach scans contemporary living forms for vital clues that an RNA world may have existed before DNA-based cellular life. The central role RNA plays in present day ribosomes (cellular factories that build proteins), as well as its ability to catalyse its *own* formation (something that is impossible for DNA to do), are contemporary clues that RNA has capabilities that could have made it a critical nucleic acid in the origins of cellular life. Bottom-up research, by contrast, aims to *simulate* the ancient RNA world by creating RNA molecules *de novo*, an experimental analogue to how RNA may have operated in the origins of life. Such bottom-up approaches run into a whole host of issues, all of which have to do with the concept of *invention*, elaboration and continuous generation of *living form*. RNA world cannot be recreated in laboratory experiments because *living form*—i.e., the self-making, self-splicing, and inventive properties of RNA—cannot be created ‘from scratch’ in a piecemeal fashion within a laboratory. Though a bottom-up approach does not succeed in making genuine living forms, virological research brings us much closer to the possibility of an ancient RNA world. Viruses and viral-like entities known as viroids are considered by some scientists to be connected to the RNA world. Viroids help us conceptualise the RNA world because they are, to use Ruyer’s terminology, “primary forms” that are self-making, and thus possibly explain how living form of RNA itself came into being.

The origin of genetics is deeply linked to the ontological question of form in a Ruyerian sense of the term. The genesis of living form poses a difficult question for gene-centric origins research in non-preformationist terms, which is a particularly problematic issue because proto-genesis has everything to do with form. While modern-day genetic explanations often conventionally understand that DNA in cellular forms acts as a kind of blueprint, how do we make sense of a scenario of life’s origins where there is no initial informational storage to draw from or

use to construct an organism? In relation to this, some researchers suggest that the beginning of RNA was viral in nature. My goal in exploring the possible viral origins of genetics (in a putative RNA World) has been to consider the ontological consequences of this speculative hypothesis regarding the beginnings of cellular life. Here I continue this line of thought by focusing on how Ruyer's conception of viruses as primary forms provides us with a philosophical model to understand the relationship between chemistry, biology, and memory that does not depend upon, and indeed makes possible, some kind of hereditary *substance*.

In addition to focusing on research that directly considers the role viruses may have played in the beginnings of genetics, in this paper I consider scientific experiments that highlight the strange capacities of viruses that can be gleaned from contemporary research. Viruses 1) comprise a significant portion of existing genomes, 2) can be crystallised by researchers, 3) can spontaneously re-assemble after they are chemically denatured or disassembled, and 4) can be generated by researchers *de novo* by downloading their genetic code from online databases. I pay particular attention to research that manipulates viruses by disassembling them, only to have the disintegrated viruses re-assemble themselves. These experimental manipulations of viruses are an invitation to delve deeper into understanding their status as primary forms. I will argue that these experiments are akin to the famous "vitalist" embryological experiments of the early twentieth-century, such that of Hans Driesch and Hans Spemann, well known among humanities scholars interested in the nonhuman.⁸ These experiments signify the internal resonance of matter that can be observed when it is in its embryological unfoldings, when it is most in touch with itself and full of equipotentiality as a primary form. These strange experimental demonstrations—though they focus and manipulate *present-day* viruses (which range from ones that infect bacteria to viruses that cause polio) rather than viruses from the origins of genetics billions of years ago (which are impossible to access)—nonetheless provide the raw materials to understand what a feminist philosophy of life would entail.

VIRUSES AND EVOLUTION: INSIGHTS FROM CONTEMPORARY SCIENCE

Viruses have invented (and here I am using these words deliberately in relation to a nonhuman agent) a vast array of genetic systems more so than any other cellular life forms. The latter exclusively use double-stranded DNA as their form of informational molecular storage. In contrast to this singular form of storage, viruses use four: viral genomes can be single or double stranded RNA as well as single or double stranded DNA. This wide variety of nucleic hereditary possibilities suggests that viruses have an intimate connection with, and creative capacity to invent, genetic systems and novel genes. Moreover, when we assess the contemporary genetic makeup of life forms such as human beings, we find that specific kinds viruses called retroviruses are integrated within and account for a sizable portion of our genome.

That viruses have been key agents in the evolution of life cannot be disputed. This has especially become evident with the discovery that mammalian evolution, including human evolution, has been profoundly shaped by viruses. One particular example that underscores this point occurred in 2000, when a study published in *Nature* demonstrated that the evolution of mammalian live birth (as opposed to egg laying birth) was made possible by a protein derived from a gene that was originally *viral* in nature. Live birth is made possible by the mammalian placenta, which is a temporary organ that facilitates the exchange of nutrients and waste between a fetus and the maternal body it gestates within.⁹ A study published in *Nature* in the year 2000 argued that syncytins, a class of proteins in mammals that allow for bodily fluid exchange between fetus and its maternal body, were genomically derived from retroviruses.¹⁰ These types of viruses translate their RNA genomes into DNA and fuse with host DNA. Viruses, or viral genes to be more exact, enabled the evolutionary shift from an external embryogenesis (egg-laying and maturation outside a body) to internal embryogenesis rooted in gestation. Syncytin allows the embryo to implant in the womb. Syncytin is the mammalian name of the protein; in viruses these kinds of proteins are formed from *env* viral

genes (which enable viruses to fuse to the membrane of their host cells). The presence of endogenous retroviruses within mammals has enabled mammalian species to *exapt* (i.e., adopt for their own purpose) what were originally viral genes (necessary to merge with cellular membranes) and, in the process, fundamentally transform the process of birth.

Many of the viral remnants in human genomes are no longer active due to undergoing many mutations over time, becoming molecular fossils in our DNA. Calls for understanding viruses as novel genetic engineers have been increasing those attuned to the reality of the effects of viral evolution. One article summarises this point as follows: “Viruses and related elements introduced genetic information and have shaped the genomes and immune systems of all cellular life forms.”¹¹ Viruses invent genetic novelty and thereby drive the evolution of species. The idea that viruses may have had a central role in the emergence of cellular life is increasingly being accepted, something that is largely aided by the growing research that demonstrates the symbiotic, inventive effect viruses have had across diverse evolutionary lineages. This is an active area of research that continues to generate novel insights, such as the viral origins of mammalian gestation discussed above. Acknowledging that viruses and viral-like entities are the creators of novel genes, and therefore new traits, is a moment in origins research where morphogenesis as an activity of invention can be discussed. So long as we are talking about genetics, we can discuss invention. While it is important to acknowledge viral inventiveness and that we are in many ways viral effects, my aim here is to not to focus on these viral evolutionary effects but rather to explore the particular ontological nature of viruses as primary forms. In other words, while still acknowledging the (often evolutionarily eventful) consequences of viral inventiveness, here I explore the ontological nature of viruses that allows such inventiveness to occur.

The question that interests me here is not whether viruses are alive.¹² Not only has the value in debating this problem largely been exhausted within virology and origins research, it also preemptively forecloses the possibility to engage with the ontological nature of viruses. The primary reasons viruses are considered nonliving

are that they do not have any kind of metabolism and because they use cellular machinery to self-replicate. The definition of “life” employed here highlights what viruses lack (a metabolism and ‘true’ unassisted ‘self’-replication). Focusing on why viruses are or are not alive sidesteps the more interesting question of how their liminal status can help reframe how we understand the genesis of living forms and the emergence of heredity and organic memory. I am interested in the inventive qualities of viruses, and how such qualities derive from their status as primary forms that enjoy a particular kind of liminality. This Ruyerian designation is much more generative to think with than debates about whether viruses are ‘fully alive.’¹³

That viruses are major agents in evolution cannot be disputed. Though a Ruyerian perspective would affirm this viral capacity to invent—an activity characteristic of a primary forms—it would deploy embryogenesis rather than evolution to understand this phenomenon. Ruyer develops “the process of embryogenesis into a philosophical model for the operation of form as such” over and above evolution.¹⁴ As such, embryogenesis “must take primacy” over both evolutionary theory and genetics.¹⁵ This is because embryogenesis clearly demonstrates the operations of an absolute surface, where the ability for one to reproduce *oneself* (something a machine is incapable of doing) becomes possible and where we most directly witness thematic behavior in its most robust form. Ruyer’s assertion that embryogenesis must take primacy over evolutionary theory is, in a way, a direct response to Darwin. In *On the Origins of Species*, Darwin considers whether “descent with modification” can account for embryogenesis, ultimately arguing that it can. Darwin writes:

How, then, can we explain these several facts in embryology, namely the very general, but not universal difference in structure between the embryo and the adult; of parts in the same individual embryo, which ultimately become very unlike and serve for diverse purposes, being at this early period of growth alike; of embryos of different species within the same class, generally, but not universally, resembling each other; of

the structure of the embryo not being closely related to its conditions of existence, except when the embryo becomes at any period of life active and has to provide for itself; of the embryo apparently having sometimes a higher organization than the mature animal, into which it is developed. I believe that all these facts can be explained, as follows, on the view of descent with modification.¹⁶

Ruyer does not deny that evolution (or “descent with modification”) occurs. He takes issue with that idea that it can explain embryogenesis. Formative activity provides the basis of evolution; it is evolution’s condition of possibility. This is the reason why Ruyer rejects the infamous biological dictum that “ontogeny recapitulates phylogeny.” Ontogeny is the development of an individual and connected to embryogenesis while phylogeny is the evolutionary history of a species. Originally developed by German biologist Ernst Haeckel in the late nineteenth century, this is the idea that during the development of an embryo, one can ‘spatially’ witness the entire history of its species past. For Ruyer, ontogenesis is never a passive process that simply repeats phylogenesis. On the contrary, it is ontogeny that prefigures phylogenesis. This is why for Ruyer “ontogeny does not recapitulate Phylogeny: it creates it.”¹⁷

I want to return to the discussion of viruses and the origins of cellular life, but in a tangential way by continuing to explore the relationship between viruses and form, specifically Ruyer’s concept of primary form. To recap, primary forms are dynamic structures

that can never be produced by the accumulation of parts or mechanically, but must always produce themselves before anything can be produced with or from them. Such forms are no longer composites, with parts existing side by side, but a unity or cohesion of forces, a form, that is a structuring activity, one which can be understood but not decomposed. Dynamic forms are self-structuring, that is, they maintain and “repair” themselves, they maintain a consistency and an orientation in the processes by which

they continually create themselves. ... Primary forms are composed of relations that can be inferred but not observed, or at least are not capable of being observed from an external position.¹⁸

Primary beings are thematic activities that are self-making, and thus coincide with any and all morphogenetic activity because they are themselves these activities. In other words, primary forms are synonymous with the structuring activities that mark the morphogenetic activity of the atom, as well as the molecule, the virus, the cell, and the embryo. This particular kind of auto-affection allows primary forms to create themselves through thematic activity. For Ruyer, “Nature manifests something that at first appears impossible: as if through imperceptible turns, it engenders organic forms from molecular ones.”¹⁹ He dissolves a difference in kind between molecular forms and organic form by arguing that *if* there is a “vital principle,” it encompasses both molecular and organism forms. The formative activity of organic forms (such as cells) is a direct continuity, as well as a further elaboration, of molecular morphogenesis. If the emergence of organic life entails memory (or some form heredity) at work, how might Ruyer help us understand viruses’ relation to memory and reproduction? This essay addresses how the thematic development of primary form moves from the molecular to the organic, by focusing on how viruses have theoretically and scientifically understood to be key agents in this shift.

CONTINUITY AND THEMATISM

In his chapter “From the Molecule to The Organism” in *The Genesis of Living Forms*, Ruyer asks how physics and chemistry lead to organic life. To him, it is clear that origin theories that bring “matter” to life from an external force cannot answer this question. Instead, he asks what qualities in certain physical and chemical structuring behaviors condition the possibility for life to occur. More specifically, if morphogenesis is the unfolding of thematic behavior in space, Ruyer asks: “How can an individualising formative theme come into being or come to be inserted into a[n] edifice constituted, it would seem, by bonds that

are linked edge to edge?”²⁰ The bonds of chemical molecules, when framed as particular pieces stacked side by side, cannot bring about the thematic behavior that would further transform into the organic. This is because such a conceptual schema understands molecules to be composed of chemical bonds that are “hooks” between static objects. Molecules, here, have no internal unity or activity that binds them together because they are externally brought or “glued” together. Inventive, thematic activity with this formulation of chemical molecules becomes impossible. Chemical morphogenesis conditions, and is further complicated by, the activity of organic morphogenesis. Below I delve into how viruses can potentially answer the question of how physics and chemistry can lead to organic life.

Given that individual organic development has a thematic character, Ruyer asks how this pertains to origins. In the case of a living cell, “[w]here does this formative theme come from, and at which moment does it intervene in processes of physical functioning?”²¹ While the development of an egg or a specific living cell is a complex process that is not (yet?) fully understood, it is less mysterious for Ruyer than the origins of cellular life because it does not involve “the passage of one mode of being to another” that the former entails.²² Put differently, Ruyer is interested in the origins of organic morphogenesis, where primary forms that are physical and chemical become organic. If embryogenesis is the unfolding of a theme in spacetime, this complexity does not “prefigure the future organism” in a preformationist sense (even if an egg has an intricate organic architecture). Form is never spatially pregiven (the hallmark of preformationist theories).

The passage from an inorganic to an organic mode of development entails that this thematic character continues the activity already found in some kind of chemical molecule, one that Ruyer speculates may be viral in nature:

The morphogenesis of a species as a whole certainly does not originate with a completely constituted cell but rather something which must have resembled what we today call a virus, a self-reproducing macromolecule.

From viruses to higher animals, thematic development seems to come into being at the level of the chemical molecule.²³

The virus, or chemical molecules like viruses must then have a relationship to thematic activity. If this is the case, they may be understood as absolute forms that have a relation to memory because one can witness a kind of replication at work.

VIRUSES AS CHEMICALS

If viruses can be theorised as agents invested in thematic activity, they can also, almost paradoxically, be understood as chemicals in a quite literal sense. In 1935, Tobacco mosaic virus (TMV), a virus that infects tobacco and related plants resulting in a characteristic mottled or ‘mosaic’ appearance on plant leaves, became the first virus to be *crystallised*.²⁴ This was accomplished in the laboratory using large amounts of TMV infected plant leaves. TMV’s ability to be crystallised led to the understanding of viruses as giant *molecules* that existed at the boundary of life, making them key objects of study in molecular biology. Because the crystallisation of cellular life is impossible, that viruses could be crystallised signaled the radical difference between these two modes of life. Wendell Stanley, the biochemist and virologist who accomplished the crystallisation of TMV, was awarded the Nobel Prize in Chemistry in 1946. In his Nobel Lecture, Stanley comments on the unique nature of viruses:

The fact that, with respect to size, the viruses overlapped with the organisms of the biologist at one extreme and with the molecules of the chemist at the other extreme only served to heighten the mystery regarding the nature of viruses. Then too, it became obvious that a sharp line dividing living from nonliving things could not be drawn and this fact served to add fuel for discussion of the age-old question of “What is life?”²⁵

Around the mid-twentieth century, viruses were understood as chemicals due to their crystallisable ability. Ruyer uses this significant biological feature of viruses

as an opportunity to further refine his analysis of how chemical morphogenesis may lead to organic morphogenesis. He writes:

Of course, not everything in the individualised domains of chemistry or at the level of the organism is primary bond. It is clear that the articulation of the knee or the shoulder is no more mysterious than the articulations of a machine. The same holds in chemistry: *given* carbon-hydrogen and carbon-carbon bonds, the passage from methane to ethane, and from butane or aspartic acid to glutamic acid through the H-C-H relay is as clear and straightforward as the construction of a tower of dominoes. The process by which nucleoprotein chains are constructed is on the way to being just as well understood. However complex their subunities might be, crystallisable viruses appear to be composed of regular groupings of these piled-up sub-unities; the crystal of the virus is made in turn of these piles, according to the ordinary laws of the physics of crystals. A mass of these crystals is a long way from primary bonding and consequently from the primary mystery of the virus's individuality.²⁶

That viruses can be crystallised (when aggregated in large quantities) demonstrates that they are *chemical* in nature at least in one sense of the term. This ability to be crystallised, however, does not speak to the chemical morphogenetic properties that viruses have within a proto-cellular or bona fide cellular milieu. The thematic development of viruses cannot be approached through their crystallisable capacity. This would instead require a different modality of “chemical” at work in order to account for how chemical morphogenesis becomes organic morphogenesis. From this perspective, the “chemical” nature of viruses must be more than something that is an aggregate of parts that “seemingly function in a step-by-step fashion” such that its “pieces can be added, subtracted or replaced by others.”²⁷ Put differently, what is needed for organic morphogenesis from chemical morphogenesis to arise is a particular kind of macromolecule that shares, and thus preconditions, the kind of morphogenesis one witnesses in a developing organism. The crystallisable nature of viruses does signify their relation at the edge between the inorganic and

organic mode, but does not directly signal how they might be primary forms.

A 1955 experiment at the Virus Laboratory at The University of California, Berkeley raises interesting questions of viruses as primary forms that are in a sense “embryonic.” This study used tobacco mosaic virus (TMV), the virus discussed above that was the first virus to be crystallised. TMV has a relatively simple architecture: it is a single-stranded RNA molecule encased in a rod-shaped protein envelope. The protein envelope accounts for 94% of the entire virus particle, with the RNA nucleic acid being the remaining 6%.²⁸

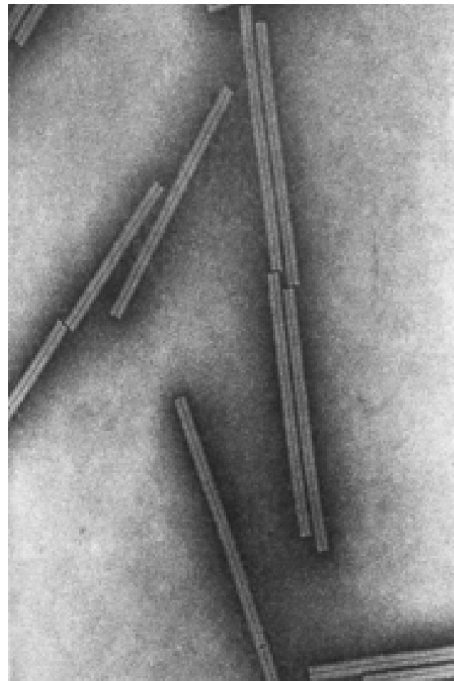


Figure 1: “Electron Micrograph of Rod-Shaped Particles of TMV magnified 300,000 diameter”²⁹

In the 1955 experiment, the RNA nucleic acid component of TMV was dissociated from its protein coat using gentle chemical detergents. Researchers found that TMV was able to reconstitute itself even when disassembled, so much so that

viral regeneration could occur through the interchanging of parts of different viral strains of TMV. The thematic behavior of viruses allows for the manipulation and interchanging of viral parts to not deter its self-assembly to become a viable viral particle. What is perhaps most significant in the case of the reassembled tobacco mosaic virus is that it retains, albeit in a much weaker form, its ability to infect. To put this into context, if one were to disassemble a mature adult living cell, and sought to reassemble it after disintegrating into its component parts, its self-organisational capacity would be impossible to regain. According to two researchers, “therefore all the information necessary for constructing the virus is inherent in its parts, which ‘self-assemble’ spontaneously in solution.”³⁰ That Tobacco-mosaic virus self-organises into a virus particle after being cut up into different parts—sometimes with different parts from other viruses—signals something critical about viruses and the question of form. It signifies the presence of a kind of absolute surface at work on which self-assembly occurs. The thematic behavior of the virus allows for the manipulation and interchanging of viral parts which can reassemble even after what seems like a completely destructive act.

Experimental disaggregation of TMV into its protein exterior and nucleic acid interior also allows researchers to experiment with how heredity is passed down from parent to progeny. If one were to disassemble two separate strains of TMV (shown in the figure below) by breaking up its exterior protein coat while keeping its single-strand of RNA intact, and then subsequently reassemble a hybrid TMV that had nucleic acid surrounded by a protein coat from a different TMV strain (represented by the “red” and “black” colors in the figure), the replication of the constructed hybrid produced progeny that fully resembled the TMV particle of the nucleic acid of its parent. This demonstrated to researchers that RNA can be a hereditary material like DNA, something that was not known prior to this 1955 experiment.

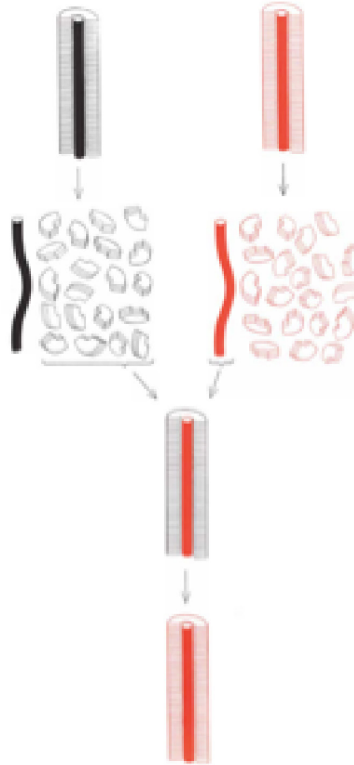


Figure 2: Creation of viral hybrid from two virus strains, and reproduction of created hybrid resulting in non-hybrid offspring (Fraenkel-Conrat, 1957)

The last example I would like to discuss about viruses as chemicals that are embryonic is a more recent experiment from 2002, when a group of researchers constructed a strain of poliovirus by downloading its genetic code from an online genomic database.³¹ One significant feature about this experiment was the generation of an infectious virus *in the absence* of a natural template. In other words, this strain of poliovirus did not come from a preexisting poliovirus molecule. Instead, using the genetic code of poliovirus they downloaded from a genomic database, researchers carefully constructed together the corresponding nucleic acids of the virus' genetic sequence. Though poliovirus is a single-stranded RNA molecule, because its genetic code was stored as in its corresponding DNA sequence in the genomic database, a DNA nucleic sequence was initially strung

together. An enzyme called phage T7 RNA polymerase (originally derived from a virus that infects bacteria) was then used to produce the poliovirus RNA from this constructed sequence. This synthetic poliovirus RNA was then added to a “cell-free extract,” which was made by centrifuging or powerfully spinning cells to distill and separate their inner components. A cell-free extract is not “alive” in that the integrity of the cells has been destroyed by centrifugation, but the proteins and other sub-cellular entities are still available for poliovirus to use to replicate. The synthetically created poliovirus was able to generate viral progeny, which was evidenced by the viral “plaques” or colonies visible on the cell-free extract, just like the “native” poliovirus that was not synthetically produced (labeled as “wild type” virus in the figure below).³²

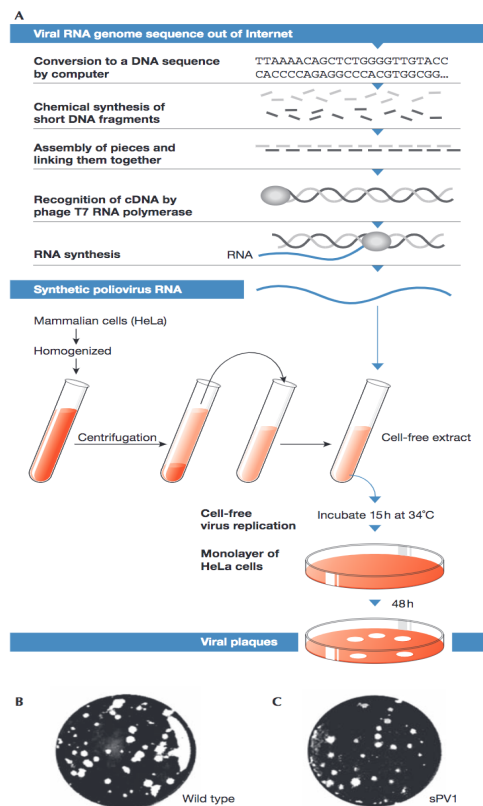


Figure 3: Synthesis of a poliovirus in the absence of natural template³³

Viruses are a *theme* that begins to unfold or “play” when in its milieu. According to the authors, these “results show that it is possible to synthesize an infectious agent by in vitro chemical-biochemical means solely by following instructions from a written sequence.”³⁴ This led the lead researcher of this work to argue:

The chemical synthesis of the viral genome, combined with de novo cell-free synthesis, has yielded a synthetic virus with biochemical and pathogenic characteristics of poliovirus. In 1828, when Wohler synthesized urea, the theory of vitalism was shattered. If the ability to replicate is an attribute of life, then poliovirus is a chemical $[C_{332,652}][H_{492,388}][N_{98,245}][O_{131,196}][P_{7501}][S_{2340}]$...with a life cycle.³⁵

While the lead researcher of this experiment takes this to be the apotheosis of the idea of a virus as a chemical that has a life cycle, it should be noted that this virus is constructed using the enzyme T7 polymerase. It is this enzyme that generates the RNA code of poliovirus from the downloaded DNA template. That being said, this experiment does indeed give new force to the idea that viruses are chemicals with life cycles.

FROM CHEMICAL MORPHOGENESIS TO ORGANIC MORPHOGENESIS

The activity of morphogenesis that marks all primary beings for Ruyer necessitates a concept of form that is neither static, geometric (i.e., spatial), nor external to matter. Ruyer’s idea that there is an inseparable relation between form and matter is a powerful critique of preformationism—here, form is a dynamic activity inherent to matter. As such, morphogenesis begins long before organic morphogenesis. Indeed, studying primary forms that are chemical beings makes clear the specific operations of form. This is because “in the molecular world, the chemical properties of bonds and formative properties are indiscernible.”³⁶ Ruyer writes:

In a molecule, all morphological change implies a chemical change: matter

and form are strict correlates. The organic world simply manifests the same great fact: form is inseparable from matter. Living matter only ever appears as formed, just as the benzene molecule only ever appears, as matter, in its well-known hexagonal shape. Benzene is not an amorphous matter that comes to be ‘informed’ by the shape of the hexagon, produced like an Aristotelian form. *It is this form itself*, which is in turn derived from the modes of bonding of carbon and hydrogen. In the same way, biological forms arise without hiatus from molecular morphology. We do not yet know how the specific visible forms of cells are derived from molecular networks, but doubtless relations exist between molecular morphology and the morphology or organic morphogenesis already found in the chemistry of enzymes or the asymmetrical synthesis of organic compounds.³⁷

A morphological change in a molecule always accompanies a chemical change; in this sense, “matter and form are strict correlates.” In the twentieth century, science can no longer hold that “inanimate” matter is fundamentally different in composition than “animate” matter. This idea can be further revolutionised if one then contemplates how matter itself is dynamised for this continuity between the inorganic and organic to be possible. If the morphogenesis of living beings does not come from a vital principle (especially one that is only rooted in organic cells), then, Ruyer argues, we must extend verticalism—that is, thematic and formative activity—to chemical morphogenesis itself. The indissoluble connection between “morphological change” and “chemical change” in a chemical molecule signifies a key element of morphogenesis, one that must be kept in mind for the organic morphogenesis that such chemical morphogenesis can begin to unfold.

Ruyer is a rich resource to understand the genesis of living forms because of the ample attention he gives to theorising the relationship between organic morphogenesis and chemical morphogenesis. He writes:

Organic morphogenesis continues chemical morphogenesis and seems to put it into its service. Conversely, chemical behaviour is sometimes put to

use quite directly, even at the highest level of organic life ...[for example,] the movements of amoebae, which were thought to be a phenomenon of diffusion or surface tension, are more likely to be explained by the self-folding and unfolding of protein molecules in the amoeba. Like movement in the protozoa more generally, moreover, this constitutes a true comportment. A continuity can therefore be observed here, as before in the case of the virus, between chemical and biological comportment. Incidentally, contractile proteins also play many other roles, notably in the movement of vibrating cilia and in muscular contraction in general – so much so that human movement derives, in a quite direct fashion, from the contractile properties of molecules.

But we should be wary of concluding that a disincarnated intention makes use of molecular behaviour, and thereby returning to a completely nominal vitalism. Ends and means are very difficult to distinguish in an organism precisely because the constituent individualities of a higher organic individuality, with its cycles of behaviour and complicated relays, are themselves assembled and transformed into agents in one of its cycles. When, lacking a tool for the job, people form up into a chain so that a bucket of water can be sent to extinguish a fire, they are also subordinated to a total behaviour: consciousness of the system envelops the conscious attention of each person as they pass the bucket to their immediate neighbour. In all collective behaviour, constitutive individualities are at once ends and means. What is gained, in human or even animal society of a high enough level, by the adjustment of instincts or conscious calculation, is gained at the molecular level through the indetermination of the individuality of the constituents in a system of interactions. This indetermination of individuality implies an indetermination of means and ends.³⁸

I quote Ruyer at length here because he undertakes a detailed analysis of how the complex relationship between the chemical and the organic cannot simply

be understood as a unilateral movement that only moves *from* the chemical to organic. Morphogenetic activity can be organic morphogenesis continuing chemical morphogenesis just as much as it can be chemical morphogenesis putting organic morphogenesis to use. The case of the amoeba in this regard is especially interesting. If the unique way this organism is able to change shape—which allows it eat and digest without having a digestive system—is due to organic morphogenesis working in the service of chemical morphogenesis, then all primary forms are agents of activity. The theme that guides organic activity can use either chemical or organic morphogenesis (or both).

This is because at the border “between” the chemical and biological, there is an “indetermination of individuality” that allows for an “indetermination of means and ends.” This indeterminate individuality is observed in viruses, as well as enzymes and proteins; in other words, in all “organisms” that exist at the border of what is chemical and organic. The line between what is a chemical substance and a primitive organism is never definitive. As a result,

[t]his is why, for example, it is impossible to say whether the remarkable energetic properties of ATP molecules or chlorophyll are utilised by the molar organism because it requires substances that use or emanate energy or if ATP molecules and substances capable of photosynthesis are primitive organisms which are subsequently associated through more complicated cycles of functioning. Or rather, it is not a matter of choosing, and that both of the two hypotheses must in truth be accepted at once. A protein, or a virus with its chains of peptides and the attached amino acids, resembles a living tool – though not the pure tool of an organism, even if we consider the protein that has become an enzyme, or the virus integrated into a bacterium as a kind of gene. The extreme difficulty in deciding between theories of the virus as an autonomous, primitive organism and of the virus as a part of a ruptured cell is thus only a particular case of the same phenomenon.³⁹

To reiterate a point I made earlier, if chemical beings exhibit thematic behavior, they are, then, agents of finalist activity. It is in this sense that they are primitive organisms. This embrace of the indetermination of individuality we see at the components of sub-cellular life reorients how organic activity is fundamentally understood. It does away with debates about whether nucleic acids, proteins, and other sub-cellular components are alive, and instead foregrounds a much more interesting orientation to the origins of life. Rather than try to directly pinpoint a protein or a virus as a chemical used by a cell *or* an organism in itself, Ruyer affirms the duality here. Returning the question of what theory of memory would inform a non-binaristic theory of life, the duality of virus as both chemical and organism, as a “chemical with a life cycle,” suggests that the origins of memory are more primordial than even the border zones where chemicals can behave as organisms.

VIRUSES AND REPRODUCTION: THE QUESTION OF MEMORY

Throughout his discussion of the shift from a chemical to an organic mode of being, Ruyer draws attention to how viruses, due to their peculiar properties can be molecules as well as organisms, can act as a threshold between the molecule and the organism. He considers the abilities of phages (viruses that infect bacteria) to reproduce, as well as the correlation between viruses and genes:

What yet remains mysterious is the question of knowing why certain molecules, genes and viruses have the property of reproducing themselves while, in general, ordinary molecules do not. Why, for instance, is a molecule of alcohol added to carbonated water unable to reproduce itself, even when all of its elements are found there? ...The response will probably be able to be given when, on the one hand, the energetic conditions for the reproduction of molecules are better known and, above all, when chemistry will have been able to establish the developed formulae of virus molecules.

It is highly likely, for example, that only certain types of chemical bonds involve *a true systemic unity* and also that only certain networks of these bonds can provide a complex molecule with an *individuality* capable of being imposed on neighbouring materials.⁴⁰

Viruses embody the simplest kind of reproduction, and this ability may stem from the particular kind of individuality that can be engendered by specific chemical bonds.

Following Ruyer, we can say that viruses are specific kinds of chemicals that can self-reproduce. This characteristic differentiates them from other chemicals. While a machine can reproduce a form, information, and, on the basis of information, another machine like itself, the limits of a machine for Ruyer are that “it cannot ‘reproduce itself.’”⁴¹ In contrast to producing another,

‘to reproduce [oneself or] itself’ designates an action, inconceivable outside of a field of ‘absolute surface’ in which the forms ‘read themselves’ by themselves, and can consequently ‘read’ the possible resemblance between themselves and their own limbs (that is, an analogous ‘self’ within their own numerical ‘self’). After which, through an internal break, due most likely to the chemical substitution of localizing joinings for delocalized joinings, the two similar parts become autonomous and differ numerically. When a gene or a virus reproduces itself, in *seeming* to induce at a distance the formation of a proteinic chain resembling it, this ‘at a distance’ must be a quasi-distance analogous to that of the details of a field of vision, rather than a true distance of ordinary physics.⁴²

Reproduction, like embryogenesis, occurs within a field of absolute surface. Viral reproduction, like all true reproduction, “is a division into two of an organic consciousness, not a fabrication of an organic machine by another organic machine.”⁴³ He hesitates in his earlier work about whether viral replication invokes themes (i.e., memory), something that is obvious in the embryogenesis of

higher organisms.⁴⁴ This is because viral reproduction can be understood through a Neo-Darwinist lens. Briefly stated, Neo-Darwinism is a conceptual synthesis that tries to marry Darwinian evolution (which emphasises change) with Mendelian genetics (which emphasises genetic stability).⁴⁵ For Neo-Darwinists, “the morphogenesis of a species is the accumulation of fortuitous mutations.”⁴⁶ Indeed, viral reproduction *seems* to affirm Neo-Darwinism because here we are dealing with reproduction via division where “all structural mutation is naturally transmitted.”⁴⁷ “We cannot maintain that the progress of morphogenesis, from the virus-molecule to the human being, is explained by an accumulation of errors in the duplication of the ‘instructions’ in the automated manufacturing of an automatic machine by an automatic machine.”⁴⁸

While one way to understand viruses as chemicals is through their ability to be crystallised, another understanding becomes possible if we consider the relation between chemicals and temporalised activity—in other ways, when we deploy a more complex concept of ‘chemical.’ The particular kind of chemical nature of viruses when they exist as crystals brings us further away from an understanding of how chemical morphogenesis may lead to organic morphogenesis. In contrast, what may lead towards an understanding of the mode of chemical morphogenesis to organic morphogenesis is a consideration of the role and force of temporality, and how it relates to Ruyer’s conception of nature more broadly. Following developments in quantum chemistry that move away from a strict valence-based structure of atoms—which relies on a model of the atom as a miniaturised solar system with a central nucleus that has fixed orbit of electrons revolving around it—Ruyer argues that “chemical substances as characterised less by a structure than by an ensemble of structural states or *structural behaviors*.”⁴⁹ In other words, the atom itself is a structuring activity in touch with its form. An example of this is how carbon, which has the capability to form four bonds, “is not a structure but a *structuring activity*.”⁵⁰ It cannot be understood as a rigid structure that is simply geometric. The positions of electrons in the carbon atom cannot be precisely pinpointed. It instead involves “electron density maps which represent, depending

on the profile of the level, the means of structuring comportment.” This brings Ruyer to argue that “verticalism, the dynamic deployment of functional elements is primordial, *in chemistry as in biology*.”⁵¹ “Verticalism” is synonymous with thematic formation. To say that verticalism is primordial in chemistry as much as it is in biology means that thematic, self-making activity—in other words, what we directly witness in cellular life—exists in the primary forms of chemistry just as much as biology. Thematic activity (what we could call an incorporeal theme) subsists in chemical beings just as much as biological beings. This temporalised structuring thematic activity that marks chemistry conditions or “prepares” the possibility of a kind of hereditary memory of viruses.

The typical, individualised behaviour of the virus, its active and combative perseverance, appears to be of the same nature as the individualised comportment of a benzene molecule, a molecule of water or of any molecular, atomic or subatomic individualities. The temporal, and not simply geometric, aspect of bonding activities at every level *prepares* for the ‘historical’ and ‘hereditary’ subsistence of the virus, which is wrongly taken to be a simple molecular structure in space but which reveals their vertical ‘temporalisation’ such that they are capable of passing from the virtual to the actual through a kind of reproductive mnemonic comportment. At first glance, it appears more economical and scientific to explain the reproduction of the virus in terms of a spatial ‘moulding’, but we must ask if we are not buying into a bad deal. For whatever the particular path the immensely complex process of the reproduction of the adult organism takes, the metaphor of spatial moulding is practically worthless. What is really economical is to redeploy in each case the modern category of bonding through temporalized structuring activity drawn from the level of molecular reproduction.⁵²

Indeed, activity and being are one and the same: “For the atom as for the living being and the conscious being, we ‘cannot separate what matter is from what it does.’”⁵³ This is to say that the structure of matter cannot be separated from its temporal

behavior.⁵⁴ Because a “rhythm of activity” is always inherent to matter, matter can never be instantaneous. “A physical element is nothing if it is instantaneous, if it is not a certain prolonged rhythm of activities.”⁵⁵ This rendering of matter challenges the idea of time as an empty dimension or “empty and foreign frame.”⁵⁶ Instead, “the time of action is inherent to this action as a temporal melody. This amounts to saying that it can only be conceived as the mnemonic rhythm of activity. The physical rhythms are indiscernible from a memory.”⁵⁷ Memory for Ruyer is the directionality and form-given process of self-creation according to a theme.

This ability to reproduce connects to memory, but in a very specific way. Though viruses can call on or invoke memory to reproduce, evolutionary memory in itself does not begin with organic beings such as viruses. The situation is more complex. For Ruyer, physical beings are not devoid of memory. To be clear, “physical beings” here are different from the more common objects of chemistry and Newtonian-Einsteinian physics, which are secondary forms or aggregates. Physical beings—in other words, primary forms such as atoms and molecules—are not devoid of memory because, as I mentioned above, their physical rhythms are *indiscernible* from memory. Memory is not invented *de novo* at some point in between chemical or organic morphogenesis (the space that liminal entities like viruses occupy). Rather, the difference is that in physical beings there is a *lack of detachment* of memory from temporality. This results in these beings not generating a “transspatial reserve,” a virtual domain where memory can become a resource for future thematic activity. On this Ruyer writes:

The main difference between physical beings and the most complex organisms does not probably derive from the instantaneity or the absence of memory in the former but from a *lack of detachment of this memory*, which in physical beings is always inherent to the rhythm of activity, which is only ever “the form in time” and does not constitute a transspatial “reserve” clearly detached from the actual...In all organisms proper, organic memory constitutes specific potentials that can be reincarnated in innumerable individuals. In physical beings, no enrichment of this kind is found. The

semisubstantialization of activities into “mnemic beings” does not take place for physical beings.⁵⁸

Physical beings are not static precursors. They enjoy a structuring activity that coincides with temporality, and thus, for Ruyer, also with memory.⁵⁹ Physical beings neither lack temporality or memory. The key difference for Ruyer is that the flow of time inherent to matter does not automatically generate memory that can act as a future virtual reserve. Virtuality requires a *detachment* of memory from temporality for it to begin its “life” as a mnemic theme that can be invoked to guide future becoming in spacetime. The *lack of detachment* of memory (rather than the lack of memory itself) results in the temporal, rhythmical activity of physical beings not generating a transspatial reserve.⁶⁰

When memory *does* detach itself from the temporality that constitutes physical beings, it constitutes a transspatial “reserve” that removes itself from the actual and thus able to become organic memory proper that can guide future spatiotemporal becomings. In a transspatial domain of themes, reproduction becomes virtually infinite (though it is restricted by “available material of realization”). Invention here is in direct relation to, or occurs in contact with, a virtual that in itself can never be exhausted. Because it calls on memory from the transspatial domain, the reproduction of viruses, like that of cells, is (potentially but not actually) infinite:

In the psychobiological order and in the *number* of actualizations seems indifferent; it seems to cost nature nothing and is only limited by the occasion or the available material of realization. Viruses, protean-viruses, unicellulars, and the embryos of superior organisms, like the mnemic evocations or the evocations of ideas, can be divided and multiplied to infinity. The indifference *of the number* of actualizations perfectly responds to the indifference *to the number* of essences and themes.⁶¹

This idea weaves into contemporary insights of viruses as genetic engineers that may have had a central role in the beginnings of genetics in the beginnings of

cellular life, but it does so in a way that speaks to the question of memory that does not equate or locate memory squarely in material genes, or, for that matter, in materiality. Something more than just the material of genes must explain the ways in which organisms appeal to or call on memory to guide their formations, and with which they invent.

If we return to the question of what the relation between viruses and invention is, one possible way inventiveness can be accounted for is through the idea of mutations. In contemporary scientific literature, viruses are linked to mutations: they generate novel genes that drive evolution by generating new proteins and capabilities that are transferred to its hosts when there are symbiotic mergers. A mutation—which can arise from an error in replication or repair, or due to a genetic substitution, insertion, or deletion—can be understood as a structural change that may or may not have an effect on an organism’s phenotype (i.e., its observed characteristics). Mutations can in theory be positive or negative, though random mutations are much more likely to be negative than positive.

In this consists Ruyer’s critique of Neo-Darwinism. According to Neo-Darwinism, the morphogenesis of species is the accumulation of fortuitous mutations and the elimination of mutations “incompatible with survival.”⁶² In this emphasis on mutations (the accumulation of ‘advantageous’ mutations and the removal of negative mutations), individual morphogenesis within a Neo-Darwinian framework is wholly reduced to the question of mutation. Ruyer rejects the emphasis that Neo-Darwinism—because of its strong resistance to understanding “the morphogenesis of species as a *thematic* invention” or the work of memory—places on *mutations* in the generation of species. That is, he critiques the idea that undirected mutations can randomly benefit individuals and species.⁶³ He writes:

If each new being, in each new generation, were produced through a sort of tracing, everything would make sense. It is *possible* that it happens a little like this in the virus – since it reproduces by division, all structural mutation is naturally transmitted. But it is not at all the same for

multicellular organisms, which must reconstitute adult forms in the course of a long embryogenesis and which do so, as we will note, on the basis of very schematic forms. If, for example, a human being is a simian *plus* mutations, why is the embryonic human less than a simian and even less than a fish or a vertebrate? If mutation is, by origin and nature, completely mechanical, entirely ‘structured’ in the properly spatial sense of the word, how can it remain virtual during the first stages of embryogenesis?⁶⁴

Building on the Neo-Darwinian refusal to understand the morphogenesis of species as a thematic invention, mutation in this context is mechanical and completely separate from thematic activity and memory. Viral replication may be the only case for Ruyer in which the mechanist mutation of morphogenesis *may* be plausible. From multicellular organisms onwards, and especially in the case of animals, morphogenesis must be the continuation and further unfolding of thematic behavior.

The study of viruses as chemicals accomplishes two almost paradoxical effects. First, in a Ruyerian sense, it entails a continuity between physical and chemical forms on the one hand and organic forms on the other. This is in a way to be expected, as all three are primary forms that enjoy a certain kind of self-consistency that allows them to be dynamic self-making activities. Ruyer is not the first to fashion a continuity thesis of some sort in relation to the origins of life. Indeed, a continuity thesis undergirds all of twentieth-century origins research. The continuity in the latter, however, focuses exclusively on a continuity of chemistry and biology (in the beginnings of biochemistry), but it does *so without addressing memory or heredity*, or any sort of virtual. Questions of heredity in the sciences almost always begin with genetics. What is significant about Ruyer’s “continuity thesis” of memory and heredity is that it begins before cellular life. It is produced from the temporal activities of primary forms creating a virtual that future embryonic becomings can call upon and invoke.

Studying viruses as chemicals in contemporary virology also coincides with an engineering ideal that runs through arguably all of the current life sciences, an ideal or desire that is further strengthened every time there is new research that demonstrates the “chemical” nature of viruses. The “chemical” nature of viruses allows for the laboratory genesis of viruses from different component parts. This engineering of viruses—either from carefully denatured or disassembled parts, or from the generation of new virus particles by constructing their genetic codes using enzymes and subsequently planting them in a cellular milieu—is a sign of not only the increasing ways life can be manipulated and controlled, but also evidence of the embryonic qualities viruses embody as primary forms. The memory that serves as a virtual reservoir for chemical and organic morphogenesis that conditioned the possibility of the emergence of life is the reason why the scientific manipulation of life is possible to such a large degree.

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NOTES

1. August Weismann, *The Germ-Plasm: A Theory of Heredity*. Trans. W. Newton Parker. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1898, xi.
2. This substance is "immortal" for Weismann only to the extent that there is reproduction.
3. Henri Bergson, *Creative Evolution*. Trans. Arthur Mitchell. New York: Random House, 1944, 23-4.
4. Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 25.
5. Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 19.
6. Ruyer is mostly critical of Bergson in the few places in *Neofinalism* (1952) and *The Genesis of Living Forms* (1958) he addresses him. In his 1959 essay called "Bergson and the *Ammophila Sphex* [Bergson et le *Sphex ammophile*]"—a piece in which he mainly defends Bergson's concept of instinct against prominent critics of his day—Ruyer diagnoses Bergson's problematic binarisation between physics and chemistry on the one hand and life on the other as a symptom of him being born at the wrong time. Ruyer writes: "Bergson's real philosophical misfortune is to have been born at a very bad time. At the end of the nineteenth century, one had doubts about the artificial character of mechanistic and deterministic science but one saw no other solution than to seek the truth outside of science. One could not anticipate the scientific revolution that micro-physics was about to bring by discovering the domains of individuality beneath the secondary and statistical laws. Micro-physics also permits one to follow the progressive complication of lineages of individualities, from the atom to macro-molecules, to viruses, to cells, to multicellular organisms on the one hand, and the appearance of classical secondary laws when multitudes of individuals are considered in their assembly [ensemble] and in their statistical effects on the other." "Bergson and the *Ammophila Sphex*." Trans Tano S. Posteraro. In "Instinct, Consciousness, Life: Ruyer Contra Bergson." *Angelaki* 24:5 (October 2019, 134).
7. Ruyer, *Neofinalism*. Trans. Alyosha Edlebi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016, 154.
8. Jane Bennett can be credited with popularising these experiments in *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.
9. I use "maternal body" in a wider sense than simply the reproductive bodies of cis-women. I define maternal body in a non-anthropomorphic sense as a body that provides the conditions of gestation necessary for birth.
10. Sha Mi, Xinhua Lee, Xiang-ping Li, Geertruida M. Veldman, Heather Finnerty, Lisa Racie, Edward LaVallie, Xiang-Yang Tang, Philippe Edouard, Steve Howes, James C. Keith Jr and John M. McCoy, "Syncytin is a captive retroviral envelope protein involved in human placental morphogenesis," *Nature* 403 (2000, 785-9).
11. Felix Broecker and Kain Moelling, "What viruses tell us about evolution and immunity: Beyond Darwin?" *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences* 1447 (2019, 53).
12. For an argument on why viruses are not "alive," see David Moreira & Purificación López-García, "Ten reasons to exclude viruses from the tree of life," *Nature Reviews Microbiology* 7 (2009, R306-R311). For a perspective that firmly disagrees with such an argument, see Luis P. Villarreal and Guenther Witzany, "Viruses are essential agents within the roots and stem of the tree of life," *Journal of Theoretical Biology* 262 (2010, 698-710).
13. On the other hand, one could also argue that by conceptually expanding the category of life to encompass viruses actually further complicates the conditions from which life arises. Put differently, viruses can be inventive and creative and not be alive because it is not only life

that is privy to these kinds of activities. On this Ruyer argues that “[t]he price to be paid, if it is one, is clearly that of admitting that every molecule and even every atom is as ‘alive’ as a virus. An observer of this evolution inattentive to contemporary science might believe they find here a return to vague and out-dated conceptions of animism, to the imaginary attribution of a consciousness to physical matter – a miniaturised human consciousness in the form of a small demon or homunculus, the bearer of freedom, memory and intention. We think that the fear of ‘verbalising’ must not lead us to fear words. We must not be afraid, that is, of using the words ‘organism’ and even ‘consciousness’ apropos of molecules for it is no longer here a question of a careless use of words but, on the contrary, of an interpretation made possible by chemistry and modern microbiology concerning the reality that these words designate...Wherever there is non-functional, formative activity, there is inevitably a ‘for itself’, self-possession, self-given form bound to itself absolutely and not constituted by secondary step-by-step bonds. Wherever a being comports itself – that is, does more than function within the limits of a given structure – there is necessarily consciousness, that is, the improvisation of bonds according to a theme which is not given in space.” Ruyer, *The Genesis of Living Forms*. Trans. Jon Roffe and Nicholas B. de Weydenthal. London: Rowman & Littlefield, 2020, 38-9.

14. Mark B. N. Hansen, “Introduction: Form and Phenomenon in Raymond Ruyer’s Philosophy” in Ruyer, *Neofinalism*, ix.
15. Ruyer, *The Genesis of Living Forms*, 25.
16. Charles Darwin, *The Origins of Species*. New York: Signet, 1958, 369.
17. Ruyer, *The Genesis of Living*, 25, citing Joseph Needham, *Order and Life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015 [1936], 157.
18. Elizabeth Grosz, *The Incorporeal: Ontology, Ethics, and the Limits of Materialism*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2017, 215.
19. Ruyer, *The Genesis of Living Forms*, 30.
20. Ruyer, *The Genesis of Living Forms*, 29-30.
21. Ruyer, *The Genesis of Living Forms*, 29.
22. Ruyer, *The Genesis of Living Forms*, 29.
23. Ruyer, *The Genesis of Living Forms*, 29.
24. Tobacco mosaic virus holds a crucial place in the history of virology. Discovered in the late nineteenth century, TMV was the first pathogen to specifically be called a virus (as opposed to an infectious cellular pathogen such as bacteria). Unlike cellular pathogens, which could be filtered out of mediums using filters, TMV was a pathogen that could not be “caught” by filters due to its extremely small size, and thus retained its capacity to infect in laboratory experiments. Since then TMV has become a model organism in virology and genetics more broadly. I will return to scientific experiments using TMV later in this piece.
25. Wendell M. Stanley, “The isolation and properties of crystalline tobacco mosaic virus” in *Nobel Lectures: Chemistry, 1942-1962*. Singapore: World Scientific, 1999, 140.
26. Ruyer, *The Genesis of Living Forms*, 40, original emphasis.
27. Ruyer, *The Genesis of Living Forms*, 29.
28. Heinz Fraenkel-Conrat, “Rebuilding a Virus,” *Scientific American* 194:6 (June 1956, 42).
29. P. Jonathan, G. Butler, and Aaron Klug, “The Assembly of a Virus,” *Scientific American* 239:5 (November 1978, 63).
30. Jonathan, Butler, and Klug, “The Assembly of a Virus,” 62.
31. Jeronimo Cello, Aniko V. Paul, Eckward Wimmer, “Chemical Synthesis of Poliovirus cDNA: Generation of Infectious Virus in the absence of Natural Template.” *Science* 297 (2002, 1016–

1018).

32. The one difference between the “native” poliovirus and the “synthetic” poliovirus was that the latter produced far fewer viral progeny, i.e., plaques or “colonies” than the native or “wild” virus. Researchers speculated whether this may be due to an error in genetic construction of the originary complementary DNA strand generated from the genetic code downloaded from the database. I would be interested to learn whether the subsequent generations of the synthetic viral progeny also exhibited increasingly less viral infectivity, which could be interpreted as an “error” in the code, or, alternatively, signify something about the limits of this type of experiment (in that it is unable to produce a genuine primary form, i.e., a “native” virus).

33. Eckard Wimmer, “The test-tube synthesis of a chemical called poliovirus: The simple synthesis of a virus has far-reaching societal implications.” *EMBO Reports* 7 (2006, S3-S9).

34. Cello, Paul, and Wimmer, “Chemical synthesis of poliovirus cDNA,” 1016.

35. Cello, Paul, and Wimmer, “Chemical synthesis of poliovirus cDNA,” 1018.

36. Ruyer, *Neofinalism*, 30.

37. Ruyer, *The Genesis of Living Forms*, 31, emphasis added.

38. Ruyer, *The Genesis of Living Forms*, 42-3.

39. Ruyer, *The Genesis of Living Forms*, 43.

40. Raymond Ruyer, *The Genesis of Living Forms*, 38.

41. Raymond Ruyer, “The Mystery of Reproduction and the Limits of Automatism.” *Diogenes* 12 (1964, 54).

42. Ruyer, “The Mystery of Reproduction,” 54-5, emphasis added.

43. Ruyer, “The Mystery of Reproduction,” 55.

44. Ruyer, *The Genesis of Living Forms*, 22.

45. Ruyer is not alone in his charge that Neo-Darwinism cannot explain morphogenesis.

Lynn Margulis was also highly critical of Neo-Darwinism. In a 2011 interview, she says, “Neo-Darwinists say that new species emerge when mutations occur and modify an organism. I was taught over and over again that the accumulation of random mutations led to evolutionary change—led to new species. I believed it until I looked for evidence.” See Dick Teresi, “Discover Interview: Lynn Margulis Says She’s Not Controversial, She’s Right,” *Discover Magazine*, June 16, 2011, <https://www.discovermagazine.com/the-sciences/discover-interview-lynn-margulis-says-shes-not-controversial-shes-right>. Furthermore, Margulis also challenges the Neo-Darwinist idea that evolution occurs through a slow “gradualism,” arguing that there is no evidence of this “slow gradualism” in the fossil record.

46. Ruyer, *The Genesis of Living Forms*, 21.

47. Ruyer, *The Genesis of Living Forms*, 22.

48. Ruyer, *The Genesis of Living Forms*, 25.

49. Ruyer, *The Genesis of Living Form*, 35.

50. Ruyer, *The Genesis of Living Form*, 36.

51. Ruyer, *The Genesis of Living Form*, 36.

52. Ruyer, *The Genesis of Living Forms*, 38, emphasis added.

53. Ruyer, *Neofinalism*, 148, citing Louis de Broglie, *Continu et discontinu en physique moderne*. Paris: Albin Michel, 1951, 66; 74.

54. Ruyer 148, citing Robin George Collingwood, *The Idea of Nature*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1945, 146.

55. Ruyer, *Neofinalism*, 149.

56. Ruyer, *Neofinalism*, 149

- 57. Ruyer, *Neofinalism*, 149
- 58. Ruyer, *Neofinalism*, 149, emphasis added.
- 59. Ruyer, *Neofinalism*, 149.
- 60. Ruyer's conception of memory differs from memory is automatically preserved for Bergson. See Ruyer, *Neofinalism*, 128: "A memory is always necessarily an idea. Bergson's assertion that every actual automatically becomes a memory is false. The actual becomes a memory only when it is imbued with "sense," which renders it incorruptible."
- 61. Ruyer, *Neofinalism*, 132.
- 62. Ruyer, *The Genesis of Living Forms*, 21.
- 63. Ruyer, *The Genesis of Living Forms*, 21.
- 64. Ruyer, *The Genesis of Living Forms*, 22, original emphasis.

**ecco echo: andrew
benjamin's 'writing in the still'**

lisa gorton

What are poetry's angels? Andrew Benjamin's collection opens with the poem "The Angel Stayed". Even when, later, it switches to prose, the collection as a whole derives its hesitating gait from this first poem, in its self-correcting insistent attempts to be precise about far-off, uncertain, illuminating presences.

"Were the angels to return?"

"And the other cry? / What sound?"

"Who spoke?"

The reader eavesdrops on these questions raised to the angel — this angel whose

being is configured by (is the corollary of?) the questioning.

So, in this beginning bravely Benjamin takes up the first line of Rilke's *Duino Elegies* — a line something like, "And if I did cry out, who'd hear me among the ranks of angels?" I think maybe Rilke had been reading Balzac's *The Lily of the Valley* when he wrote that. "Does an angel exist somewhere who collects the sighs of sensitive, constantly rejected souls?"¹ In *The Lily of the Valley*, Balzac's angel is not exactly a stand-in for the character's cold mother, who gives no succour; instead, it is a possibility living inside that space the mother's withdrawal has made. Andrew Benjamin's angel is not Balzac's, though it has perhaps inherited that angel's bond with the unanswered question. Nor is it Walter Benjamin's angel of history, wings outspread, forever being blasted back from Paradise. Andrew Benjamin's angel is more like Rilke's: it is not so much watching as watched for; it is not to blame for its indifference. It waits in the place that a question invents, or in those absences (desire, regret ...) which make themselves felt and, in so doing, make "nothing happen" — make it resound with feeling.

Benjamin's poems take their energy from essaying this blankness. On the blank page they configure the space that expectation marks out in thought. For this they use prepositions like markers in an otherwise blank treasure map. Also, these poems configure the space that memory marks out in thought. For this they use conjunctions, markers of the kind of time that works inside one-thing-after-another syntax — this human language raised like a torn white flag at the back of that now time pours through. Yes, here is Bergson, saying:

Matter resolves itself into numberless vibrations, all linked together in uninterrupted continuity, all bound up with each other, and traveling in every direction like shivers ... this undivided act that your consciousness grasps in the movement that you yourself execute ... farther and farther, and by crossing over each time enormous periods of the internal history of things, quasi-instantaneous views are going to be taken, views this time pictorial, of which the most vivid colors condense an infinity of repetitions

and elementary changes. In just the same way the thousands of successive positions of a runner are contracted into one sole symbolic attitude, which our eye perceives, which art reproduces, and which becomes for everyone the image of a man who runs ...²

This shivering, flickering, vanishing sense of existence is (I think) what Benjamin wants to awaken inside the poem's patterned language: "Something other. / Unvoiced"; "Singing there in the instant". The poem neither invents nor describes a scene. Instead, it seeks out the boundaries of that placeless place which the subjunctive tense opens in the mind: "Were the angels to return?" "What would I have been?" "What would have been seen?" For this, Benjamin strips language back so far that he can wring meaning out of small changes. The words break open: "return" turns into "turn", "caring" into "carrying". The words also change around repeating vowel sounds, such as "sound" and "ground", or, "alone" and "though". "What sound?" writes Benjamin, "Sounding while the angels' / Ground stood — always there, always distancing". The argument is in the assonance: the sound itself summons its ground, the word's dominion. These poems depend also on repeated words, which emphasise Bergson's irreconcilables: time's single instant, and speech's "symbolic attitude". So, the words "instant" and "then" ring through the poem. There is the instant, fixed in the language, and irrecoverable.

It is a risk, to be so bare. It is always part of the interest of this kind of stringency in poetry: it risks portentousness. These poems skirt that risk because of their musicality, and because of their line breaks. These sudden stops bring sound to some brink of expectation. The expectation that rises in the mind is the feeling that Benjamin wants to summon: the fleeting realisation of some lasting elsewhere: infinite possibility, or blank array. Perhaps Novalis stands at the back of this, saying that language — most noticeably the language of poetry — provokes a feeling of incompleteness, which is itself the proof of some "being outside of being that is within being".³ In this vision, poetic language is a kind of mirror in which consciousness, in seeing itself fail to see itself, sees something else: some conceivable elsewhere. In Benjamin's poems, the fragments are placed

to make uncertainties reverberate. That title “The angel stayed”, for instance. Is it intransitive, as in paused, ceased, remained or (obsolete) waited in attendance? Or, transitive, as in waited for, halted the advance of, as in, the angel stayed its sword?

This collection has what could be thought of as a two-way mirror cut through the middle of it. On the one side is poetry, on the other side is prose, and each side can be seen reflected in the other. Turning to prose, this collection composes a scene. “Sitting in the breakfast room in an inexpensive hotel in Tours ...” Here sits a man who is trying to write about art. He is writing about Mantegna’s “Christ in the Garden of Olives”, of Poussin’s “Diogenes” — those great, still paintings, filled with their own untouchable life. He is writing about the feeling of difficulty that arises when he writes about art.

The question took him elsewhere. Writing, for this is what he did, directed him. The question that he continued to ask concerned what was there, there continually pushing at the limits that were encountered (76).

As that echo of “there, there” from the opening poem signals, the angel still figures in this prose part of the book. Sometimes the angel lives at the back of vanishing point perspective; or, is that feeling of life in the artworks, which escapes description. For instance, thinking of how Dürer’s drawing drew on Mantegna’s drawing, the writer finds himself feeling out the presence of another question: “there was always another element one that continued to be at work in the openings that had confronted him in the breakfast room that morning” (82). In the breakfast room that morning, the opening appears in the figure of a woman, a stranger, who, like Aby Warburg’s Nymfa Florentina of the tousled hair, hurries through the scene, “and there was already a cold wind blowing” (78). This damp-haired woman — damp hair being her epithet — escapes from the breakfast into a mirrored lift. Briefly, her face in the mirror meets the writer’s reversed, reflected face —

“Looking at her” is one section heading. At about this point, admittedly, this reader’s feeling for the poetic figure breaks apart. The reader thinks of Wallace Stevens’ essay “The Noble Rider and the Sound of Words”. In this, Stevens’ describes the difficulty of altogether yielding to Plato’s image of the human soul as a pair of winged horses and a charioteer, a contraption of ignoble and noble mix.

The truth is that we have scarcely read the passage before we have identified ourselves with the charioteer, have, in fact, taken his place and, driving his winged horses, are traversing the whole heaven. Then suddenly we remember, it may be, that the soul no longer exists and we droop in our flight and at last settle on the solid ground. The figure becomes antiquated and rustic ...⁴

Reading “Looking at her”, the reader has this drooping feeling. Yes, she recognises that this woman with damp hair belongs here: she introduces Warburg’s Nymfa Florentina into the living scene. Warburg himself set up this essay on the Nymfa as a fictive exchange of letters with his friend André Jolles, in which the Nymfa figures as a prompt of desire. For Benjamin’s writer, this damp-haired woman drinking coffee concentrates about herself a sense of possibility, the feeling “that somewhere there had been a secret”. Like Warburg’s hurrying Nymfa, her power to compel depends on her retreat, insofar as it awakens a sense of elsewhere:

Watching her face meant watching this vanishing. If, within him, there was now a stilling, an absence linked to impossibility, and then it was inextricably bound up with the vanishing that had pervaded him as he watched her. (86-87)

Yet here we are in the living scene, and the reader’s sense of this sense of possibility is troubled by the imagined reality of this imaginary woman, escaping into her own life outside the work’s conceptual scheme. The co-option of this woman into the role of muse: that is troubling. “Her looking at it and his looking at her created

a space” (86). Perhaps we do not identify with that him looking at her. Perhaps we stand on some other side of that space.

The result is that we recognize, even if we cannot realise, the feelings of the robust poet clearly and fluently noting the images in his mind... Yet we do not quite yield. We cannot. We do not feel free ...

We recognize it perfectly. We do not realise it. We understand the feeling of it, the feeling, clearly and fluently communicated. Yet we understand it rather than participate in it ...

— Wallace Stevens, “The Noble Rider”

But, then, perhaps that is exactly the point of this effort to place this living figure in the hotel breakfast room — to install some irreducible element, to complicate the relationship between the face in the mirror and the living face? We think of her being outside the scheme he makes, and the transactions of him looking at her looking at it. This goes back to something strange in Aby Warburg’s study of the Nymfa. She is moving. This is seen in her wind-blown garments, her tousled hair. This feeling of movement introduces a sense of life-like, unrepeatable existence into the still picture. The picture is something to be looked at; but, inside that contraption, the nymfa looks elsewhere, and away. She represents some thing representation cannot enclose. Warburg was still thinking about this, years later. These figures, moving as if into their own existence, awaken, he thought a different kind of question — “no longer ‘What does this expression mean?’ but instead: ‘Where is this going?’ The eye performs against the figures an ‘after-movement’”.⁵ Now the watcher is not simply looking, but sensing an elsewhere which the picture itself does not contain, and yet contains the power to awaken in the watcher.

“There there”. Ecco ecco. Echo. Writing in the Still is written inside the kind of space that Narcissus and Echo set up between them. It sets up this echo play between disembodied and embodied desire, embodied and disembodied speech. In this it calls to mind those haunting episodes in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* when

Narcissus and Echo speak to each other. Solitary, strayed, Narcissus said: “Is there any body nie?” and, “straight Echoe answerde: I”.⁶ I, answering, but there is no body — or, only the body of a sound. “And nought is left but voyce and bones: the voyce yet still remaynes ...” (18). That disembodied answer is already hidden inside the words. Is Benjamin’s angel the force that prompts Narcissus still to call out, wondering, or is it whatever gives body to the sound of words? The angel doesn’t answer.

Stilled echoes.

A word. A word.

“Coming Back”

NOTES

1. Peter Bush's translation, *New York Review of Books*, 2024, 8
2. Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory*. Trans. N.M. Paul and W.S. Palmer. New York: Zone Books, 1994, 208-209.
3. Novalis (Friedrich von Hardenburg), *Fichte Studies*. Ed. Jane Kneller. Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University press, 2003, #2.
4. Wallace Stevens. Princeton Lecture, first published by the Princeton University Press in 1942; republished in *The Necessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination*. New York: Alfred and Knopf, 1951, 4
5. Aby Warburg, *Viewer and Movement* (1890), translated by Phillipe-Alain Michaud, *Aby Warburg et l'image en mouvement*, Paris (1998) 2012, 93, cited in B. Pascaleva, *The Nude Nymph*, "La Rivista de Engramma", no. 135, aprile/maggio 2016, 47-76
6. See Arthur Golding's 1567 translation, Ovid, *The vi. Booke of P. Ovidius Naso*, entytuled *Metamorphosis*. London: Wylliam Seres, 1567, 70- 71 (3: 356-510).

**7 times x false starts /
kineses in the still of reading
writing in the still**

george mouratidis

X EPILOGUE

Are the poems good? Jade's question solders my steps to the greige square of plastic office flooring as we leave the Milton reading group, where our poet Andrew Benjamin oft holds court, rejoicing in (and yes, pontificating upon) the artistry and the ethical and existential implications of the Fall. This deep reading and philosophizing over an epic such as *Paradise Lost* every Monday is really something more. From the copy of AB's debut collection *Writing in the Still* handed me by Porphyry, corridors of sensuous, dramatic vision — fluid angels' luminous tumult, blazing armour torso torn, honey dusk on skin canopied in flowers... — telescope

outwards, from matte muted shapes of a detail of Helen Johnson's painting "The Blower" on the cover. I can't make out the blur of what the image is nor why it's important to the poems herein, or to the creation of a space or temporality in which to read them. I am not an art critic (respect, Janet Malcolm).¹ Nor am I an architect, nor a philosopher, nor a rhetorician.

X

I find it very strange that the poems of a debut collection should be framed by exegesis and analysis. *Still* opens with John W. Philipps' essay "The Place of Poetry: Andrew Benjamin's Writing in the Still" (also curious is the fact there is no marked separation — e.g. a blank or title page — between it and the first poem) and concludes with AB's own "Notes on Poetry". Two critical, rhetorical, didactic discussions of what (AB's) poetry *does* insulates and directs the reader and are not for me. While I'm sure they are good, interesting etc., they feel like an obstacle and I'm choosing to forego both and go straight to the poems. If this sturdy fencing and firm, guiding hand through the poesy is something you feel you need, gentle reader, then look no further than AB's article for *3:AM Magazine*, "Declaring Poetry" — it's all there. AB writes:

And yet, poetry though always within the poem, retains the question to the extent that any answer while evincing a necessary fidelity to what was asked, and it is this fidelity that carries the project of the poem, cannot escape the presence of further, though now unknown, answers.²

I need movement more than answers at this point. This didactic insularity—this enclosure of the poems, this prescriptive circuitry of an internal logic is hard to shake as I jump to the first poem "The Angel Stayed" (35). SPLAT! The visionary telescope contracts. *Caveat lector*. And now for something completely different.

X

I regret just standing there and being talked at by another pale-aled ontologist

on a pub Friday (this is the hill you're going to die on?): Red tells me a poet is by nature a phenomenologist. I don't think AB is one.

X

There is this spectral soupçon of sensuousness in *Still* from “Looking Back” — the fifth and final part of the final section, “Looking” — which is spangles of sun on rolling fish tail: “her departure could be noted in what remained. There were moments of immediacy: touch, smell, the insistence of moments” (96). Wait, could it be? Then, “Then, and by ‘then’ all he meant was at least initially, her not being there was simple. She was not there” and it's gone, back into deep. The report of sensation — “Her touch, he could still feel” — by a third-person speaker gestures towards experience in a rearview mirror. The flux and dynamics of sensorium, body, affect, memory are ekphrastic notations, exemplified in “Looking”, not counting actual ekphrastic poems such as “Rembrandt's Homer” (74).

X

I pause forever in a florescent breath and answer Jade. This book is pushing me hard, making me think a lot about poetry on a very fundamental level, almost elemental: *Still* makes me question how I recognize, engage with, understand poetry as poetry, what I value, seek, respond to, what I'm moved by, want a poem to do *for me*. Is it enough that a poem, a single strophe or image should light up the receptors that allow me to receive it as a one-off transmission of consciousness and body and affect, and not as an exegesis or flatpack instructions for meaning in ideas of things? I want flux and things, things-a-plenty. Long story short, *Still* goes right to the heart of these things, pushes me up against them to see close up what poesy, by contrast, is, in my humble abode.

X

“Labour well the Minute Particulars, attend to the Little-ones” — William Blake, *Jerusalem* (1804-1820); “no ideas but in things—” — William Carlos Williams,

Paterson Book I (1946)... No particulars (of any size). No things... “There is nothing to fear. There is no thing in space” — William S. Burroughs, *The Soft Machine* (1966).³

X

These *Still* poems feel like the inversion or obverse of my sensorium and body — my poetry brain — and I am lost for anything to touch and hold on to. That line from part two of Allen Ginsberg’s “Howl” tumbles around like a single sock in a dryer as I stand amid AB’s strophes — “in whom I am a consciousness without a body”. Check back in, touch home. Denise Levertov on “organic form” in poetry:

First there must be an experience, a sequence or constellation of perceptions of sufficient interest, felt by the poet intensely enough to demand of him their equivalence in words: he is *brought to speech*...

So — as the poet stands open-mouthed in the temple of life, contemplating his experience, there comes to him the first words of the poem: the words which are to be his way in to the poem, if there is to be a poem. The pressure of demand and the meditation on its elements culminate in a moment of vision... of the correspondence between those elements occurs.⁴

X

Nothing more alien to me in poetry than “starting from the idea” as AB oft insists. We are not after scientific knowledge in writing and reading poetry... Kerouac: “reason can never win out, because poetry is NOT a science”.⁵

X

I share with Blue and Red some of raw nerve-ending impressions of AB’s poems and what I think he might be doing, or not doing. The collection is surprisingly opposite to what I was expecting to see. Given AB’s enthusiasm for Milton and the poet’s presence in the collection, the noticeable (perhaps deliberate) lack in

these poems of the sensuousness and corporeality of Milton is most curious. Blue shares my surprise and for a point of comparison points me to a 1637 letter by Milton himself, in which he confesses to a friend that he no longer wishes to take holy orders but will seek the immortality of the poet:

For though I do not know what else God may have decreed for me, this certainly is true: He has instilled into me, if into anyone, a vehement love of the beautiful. Not so diligently... as I seek for this idea of the beautiful, as if for some glorious image, throughout all the shapes and forms of things (“for many are the shapes of things divine”); day and night I search and follow its lead eagerly as if by certain clear traces.⁶

Where is AB in all of this? Blue’s answer: Whereas for Milton beauty is the vehicle through which the poet arrives at truth and illumination, for AB there appears to be “a scission between truth and beauty.” Beauty, even the idea of the beautiful, is not overt — it doesn’t seep into the eyes, it has no scent, no senses.

X

I take up this Miltonic divining rod of Beauty and Truth and run with it through, obviously, Keats’ “Ode to a Grecian Urn” (1819): “Beauty is truth, truth beauty,’ — that is all / Ye know on earth, and all ye need to know” to less obvious ports such as Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s “A Vision of Poets” (1844): “These were poets true / Who died for Beauty, as martyrs do / For Truty — the ends being scarcely two”, but Emerson’s waving me back a bit before I reach AB.⁷ In *Nature* (1836) Emerson writes:

Whilst thus the poet delights us by animating nature like a creator, with his own thoughts, he differs from the philosopher only herein, that the one proposes Beauty as his main end; the other Truth. But, the philosopher, not less than the poet, postpones the apparent order and relations of things to the empire of thought... The true philosopher and the true poet are one, and a beauty, which is truth, and a truth, which is beauty, is the

aim of both.⁸

X

What does the absence of concrete nouns — objects, things, people — do to the temporality of a poem?

X

AB is deliberately toying with the temporality of poetics: that is, his architectural awareness of the mechanics of the poem — the arrangement of the syllable and foot to propel the line through space, perhaps a nod to Aristotle's *Poetics* — reveals a process of building, of creating an enframement of conceptual space to be subsequently populated by things, or ideas of things, then arranged in way through which the reader can then be directed. This expands and stills (suspends?) time.

X

AB has a keen sense of space, especially as it relates to the dis-/arrangement of objects within a field or (preconceived) topos. In these poems these objects are abstractions here — concepts or ideas of things. The result is a slowing down, a stilling, even suspension of temporality as it relates phenomenologically to things, objects, concrete nouns, images, details, sensorium, perception, sensuousness, corporeality, affect — actual life being lived.

X

The units which comprise the line or strophe here — syllable, foot, word (text-object) etc. — are ideas of things, conceptions, abstractions, presupposed absolutes employed and arranged in an equation or equivocation of awareness as cogitation almost separate from the idiosyncrasy and dynamics of an individual consciousness in flux.

X

Straw-clutching — or, as Nick Tsiavos the contra bassist says, in a pitch-dark room chasing after a black cat that isn't there: Mimesis — Wilhelm Worringer's *Abstraction and Empathy* (1908) pointing to Stein's *Tender Buttons* (1914) — “nothing strange... an arrangement in a system to pointing” — pointing to AB's book on mimesis and the avant-garde? Language of surfaces as symbol-system reproducing/mimicking to point to the Real Thing (“there's a meaning there...”).⁹

X

In Dante or Milton group I write this on my bookmark: AB says that in a poem you must have “a sense of geography and therefore movement” — i.e. there can be no kinesis in the poem without (the reader?) first having (or been given, either by poet or God) some notion, some idea or conception of the space and topography of the poem, both of the text and the world it gestures towards in its representation of it. Just a guess, and I couldn't agree less: what, a poem stubbornly refuses to accommodate the preconceptions you impose upon it so that in this prognosis you are better placed to navigate, diagnose and define it? Just walk in, look around, even if you get lost. I am completely lost in these poems, but I'm not standing still, waiting for them to turn into Whitman or Lorca or Ritsos.

X

In my negotiation of what appears to me to be AB's penchant for poetic prognosis, I neither feel I should nor see any point in attempting to read these poems diagnostically — to figure them out — and then evaluate them as art (more than philosophy) with close reading. Rather, what keeps happening is, like what happens in the poems themselves which are ever pointing to actors and objects and sensation outside the proscenium of the poem, AB's poetics keep pointing away to other ideas, practices, sensibilities of poetry which are so vastly different, that by so doing, the poems clarify what they are doing by negation.

X

Red observes that in the history of philosophy, an aesthetics text is often a philosopher's last book — for example Kant, Hegel; Blue adds Badiou — whereas in more recent times this text appears to be a collection of poems. When and why did this shift occur? By chance (again), I received in the post the third poetry collection by another late-career Melbourne philosopher, George Vassilakopoulos, *To σκοτάδι της παλάμης / The darkness of the palm* (urtext, 2024), his third collection. My resistance to doing a comparative reading with AB's *Still* lasts about five seconds, seeing as how both collections have almost opposing poetics, especially when it comes to sensuousness and the body, and the temporality of the experiential. A quick one. Take AB's poems "Warmth" (58) and "Holding" (59) for example. In "Warmth" the sensation is the space of the idea of warmth as a presence departed into which the speaker is looking, cogitating upon the possibility of a definite point of ending:

There was still a playing out.

The moment staying on.

Can there be any signs of life if the object is not there? Sensation here is the empirical fact of sensation, beyond the noun, nary an adjective:

Lights continued.

Stones warmed.

Shadows passed.

This abstraction of sensation is reinforced by the rhetorical questions that follow empirical statements, as often occurs in many of AB's poems. Further, they reinforce the speaker's pointing outside the immediate scene of the poem, which bears traces of that which is absent — a *not there*.

Were there others?

And to answer....?

What is expressed, or rather, declared, is the concept or idea of the empirical fact of a perception, sensation, experience from which the speaker is always separate, detached — statements of fact reinforced by the period at the end of almost every strophe in the poem:

Seeing the sun on a stone.

Warming seen.

Remaining untouched

caught in the continuity of distancing.

Seeing within separation.

To even speak of a speaker of the poem here seems as the voice is so separate from the facts it imparts that the fact of the seeing, and the words themselves, even belonging to a who or a what is ambiguous.

In stark contrast, the sparse, haiku-like poems of Vassilakopoulos (always a curious form in the Greek language — in Seferis, for example) — with each leaf containing a single poem, drips with sensuousness and bespeaks of communion of body and sensorium:

Πριν σμίξουμε σώματα

Before we merge bodies

Οι παλάμες

Palms

Τα τυλίγουνε

Enwrap them into a

Κενό

Space

Με το κενό μας υφαίνουν

With our space are woven

Μανδύες το καινού

Cloaks of the new

Μανδύες

Cloaks

Λικνιζόμαστε

We rock

Space here is a space-between of mutual anticipation, of total presence, of imminent merging, not one of separateness, disengagement, absence. In “Holding” there is no sense of touch but rather a retaining of an idea of a hand “grasping”:

What of the holding?

The hand reaching across

taking the moment. Fingers slipped through

grasping

To grasp, here, to hold, is to retain, contain and understand a thought or idea. What is reached for is elusive, at once “slipped” (slippage?) and “grasping”. In G. Vas, by contrast, touch is also speech, language — finger and tongue-tip are one in the face (or body) of silence

Τα δαχτυλα μου

My fingertips

Γλωσσάρια στο κορμί σου

Glossaries upon your body

X

Notes on a train stuck between stations: Conception as opposed to (phenomenological) perception — how something (a thing, noun, object, topos) is to be conceived, thought of, constructed to be its (ideal, ultimate, highest — Absolute) self, form, state — is it actually here to be experienced, felt, engaged by a sensorium-in-flux, affect, imagination (possibility), memory transposed onto perception (including the body — eye, ear, touch, breath, voice, speech — word) — kinesis in all directions of space... AB must be a Platonist, right? — the Idea of the thing, not the thing in representation/symbolic order, nor (Heaven forefend!) as it is experienced, as it really is in-real-time and thus be transmitted. What. Does this make AB a Lacanian? Maybe? Lacanian poetics: The poetics of keeping from drowning or rejoicing in a symbolic order in order to point towards if not to grasp at the Real deal of an object or place, a face, or a soft red-purple-orange-blue dapple-lick of light from eyelid onto eyeball in a blink. If we are looking for how poetry declares itself here (ideas preceding things), perhaps the verso are the particularities of how a poem transmits or speaks the poet's reaching, sans preconceptions or prejudices wielded like a dowser's wand as they attempt to reveal, map and navigate a space or a topos without leaving any footprints, without any sign of life.

X ENTER HERR HEIDEGGER

Recognising my desperation for a way into this house that AB has built with such obvious care and love, Blue recommends a critical anthology *Philosophy and Poetry*.¹⁰ Thank God. Not a week has gone by without me throwing my arms up in defeat. By sheer chance I open to the second essay, which is on Heidegger, which seems to resonate with AB. According to Abbeele, Heidegger's work is the point where philosophy returns to and becomes reconciled with poetry following Plato's expulsion of the poets from the Republic. For Abbeele, the relation

between poetry and philosophy cannot be reduced “to the mere expression of the difference between form and content, appearance and being”, which belong to the very principle of metaphysics which, since Plato, seeks an absolute, a truth or meaning which lies behind or beyond “mere phenomena of appearance.”¹¹ And while, for Abbeele, such “presentational and representational forms in which philosophy is written should not divert us from the critical discussion of the concepts proposed”, this, in Heidegger’s appreciation of poetry, “should not be understood as a mere ‘reversal’ of the representational paradigm that would maintain the fundamental structure of metaphysics.”¹² Rather, “the question of poetry”, in Heidegger’s case is, for Abbeele, “inextricably bound with the related question of his ‘turn’ (*die Kehre*) from the earlier ‘fundamental ontology’ of *Being and Time*... to the later work characterized by a more adventurous manner of ‘thinking’ that strives to overcome the metaphysical forgetting of Being by opening onto the event of its disclosure or *aletheia*.”¹³ Reading AB’s poems strophe by strophe might feel a lifetime away in this language if not for words like origin, metaphysical, mere phenomena of appearance, event, disclosure, ἀλήθεια (to me — non-philosopher — clear/simple truth told, more than Absolute Truth).

X

Flying blind, I feel my way feel my way. Does this “*Kehre*” have anything to do with that in Heidegger’s *Die Technik und die Kehre*? This “*Technik*” sticks my waxy fingertips on page, invokes τέχνη (art, the action or event of artistry), τεχνική (method or technique), also τέκνον (offspring or descendent). The event of the production of art announcing itself? I’ve only read *Being and Nothingness* right through, so this is new.

X

There is also an essay, “The Question of Technology” (“*Die Frage nach der Technik*”) from sometime postwar. There’s that word again. There must be an interrelation between τέχνη (*techne*), τεχνική (*technike*) and ποίηση (*poieses*: a

making, manipulation, construction), ποίημα (*poiema*: made thing, construct, object).

X

More blind luck. As I search in the stacks for Heidegger's *The Event* (I'm sensing there is something here and in AB about the poem as an event/space — event space), *Poetry, Language, Truth* (1971), a collection of H's essays literally falls off the shelf, I kid you not, face down on the first section, "The Thinker as Poet" (this sounds so made up but it's as true as my own confusion).¹⁴ Heidegger wrote poetry? Who knew... There is an immediately striking resonance between the poetry of H and AB, even down to their deployment not just of rhetorical questioning but the ellipsis ("...") — this has to be a deliberate dialogue.

We are too late for the gods and too

early for Being. Being's poem,

just begun, is man.

To head toward a star — this only.

To think is to confine yourself to a

single thought that one day stands

still like a star in the world's sky.¹⁵

Confining yourself to a single thought that stands still — this *has* to be IT.

X

I bump into Porphyry at the photocopier, rant at him about AB, possible Talmudic

approach of questionings — multiplicities of perpetuating inquiry/scrutiny — the dialogue between metaphysical/Divine conception vs. *poiesis*/making of idea/ thinking, expansion/stilling of (poetic) temporality, and “I’ve finally got it! — AB’s book is a paean to Heidegger and poetic thought!” “Yes!” he exclaims with characteristic double-point and informs me of a Heidegger symposium the next day which AB himself has organised. Done.

X

[Here with my copies of *Still* and *Poetry, Language, Thought*, hoping something happens.] Notes from ACU Heidegger Workshop 2024, Wed 12 June: Heidegger’s “The Question Concerning Technology” — New Readings: An “enframing”; an absolute access to the absolute real (Real?); objects in the life frame and those outside it... Heidegger: “The piety of thought”... Bacon: ‘putting Nature to the question’ — Kant — Heid.... H: The question concerning technology — the role of poetry to facilitate this; the Greek etymologies of *technè* (tek-nay) — τέχνη (I knew it!)... H: *Gestell* (ghesh-tell) “bringing forth” — relate w/ “poiesis”... Can the “saving power” of art save us? ... 1st vol. of H’s Nietzsche lectures — the will to power as art (?... The rupturing of time — primordial or technological/clock time — of the *Event* (of art)... H: “Technology” essay ca. 1949 onwards (delivered 1955) — postwar sociocultural and political context (Eur.-U.S.), e.g. poetics as instrument of inquiry/negotiating existential climate (Note. “The Thinker as Poet” ca. 1947, published. 1954?)... AB on H: Poetry is itself the topology of Being — both a rupture and return to language; The inheritance of language; The place of *poiesis* is always a Place; The Heideggerian *event*... Porphyry on H und poetry: H is not a poet but is guided by poetry towards something(/somewhere poetry can give; asks “how do poets temporalise?”; Poetry as a model for Heideggerian thought — you are lead through the dark forest of language until you no longer know where you are. All of the poets of modernity are obsessed/lead by classical poets: a model for where poetry might lead/points to... Thinking machinations on/ for the poetry of thought. [Ambergold’s paper on “the scene” as event (the last of the day) seems to be angrying up the blood of a few unyielding Heideggerians

with his brazen talk of literature as (shock horror) art and artistry (τέχνη/*techne*) — a space/*place* in which to unfold scenes of human drama beyond the staging of ideas and thinking. One white-haired man (I don't know his name) seems to take an inordinate amount of umbridge this, so I quietly exit this proscenium.]

X

Red points out something fundamental which I've completely ignored: Is it even possible to advance an aesthetic judgement of a poem presented within the philosophical framework of AB's collection: the "I" of poetry and that of philosophy are not the same, and the declarative ego makes for awkward movement between the two.... In "Seminar XI" Lacan enigmatically asserts, "I am a poem, not a poet".¹⁶ Could it be that AB's "I" and "he" in *Still* is a *poiema*? How is the philosophical or poetic ego "made"? Pub Lacanians, don't fail me now.

X PROLOGUE

Writing in the Still is the yellow fog rubbing its back upon the window-panes of most of the poetry I've been reading this year, oftentimes peering, sometimes creeping in. I keep knocking into it, tripping over it constantly, rubbing up against its poems, against the grain of its ideas (about ideas) about language arranging and declaring things, perception, sensation, affect, action, memory, et al. — what and why poets write. The abstracting insularity of AB's poetics — the deliberate stiling of versification to convey if not perform a kinetics of cogitation (rhetorical "mind breaths"?), the laconic disengagement of the speaker within the spartan domain of the *poiema*, stands still, looking to transmit, declare, pronounce the looking more than the seeing, the idiosyncrasies of the kinesis of a consciousness, its poetics and language. The result has been a dialogue, often a frustration-fueled argument, shouted between two far flung galaxies of poesy, voice at times so hoarse, so exhausted and defeated, but ever glad for looking at poetry this other way, wrestling with and pushed by it: looking at a philosopher-reader of poetry exercising his looking at poetry from the outside-in and, in that stasis and

quietude of recognition, formulation, construction, writing it from that inside, outward — to question, to prompt, to provoke you to recognize, and explain, and declare yourself as a poem, if you were a poem.

NOTES

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12. Ibid.
13. Abbelle, pp. 23-24.
14. Martin Heidegger. *The Event*. Translated by Richard Rojcewicz. Indiana University Press, 2013; "The Thinker as Poet." *Poetry, Language, Thought*. Translated by Albert Hofstadter, 1971, pp. 1-14.
15. Heidegger. "The Thinker as Poet", p. 4.
16. Lacan quoted in Jean Michel Rabaté. "'I Am a Poem, Not a Poet': Jacques Lacan's Philosophy of Poetry." Ghosh (ed.), 97.

still writing

miranda stanyon

Andrew Benjamin's *Writing in the Still* is the first volume of poetry from a prolific and influential philosopher who has worked across relationality, architecture, care, visual art, translation, myth, and injury — or, rather, not the violence of injury itself, but the temporal interval which might open up and allow us to defer or refrain from violence. This kind of advocacy for ethical and aesthetic space-making, pausing, mediacy, also marks the poetry gathered here. *Writing in the Still* is therefore important for the counterpoint it offers to Benjamin's philosophy; but also because of the importance it affords to words: to the "intertwined paths" of reading and writing poems, and to the poetic word that is always singular and yet

plural, with its own portal-like space or inscape of sounds, meanings, translations, and intertexts.¹

To those who know Benjamin's way of confronting the traditions of philosophy with those of philology and translation, it will be no surprise that this is a collection where every word counts: not in the sense that we are set counting beats or feet (this is mostly free verse and prose poetry), but in the sense that each word is given its own weight, its own potential to be weighed, contested and turned over, and its potential to overturn, to make us double back and reread. The title of the collection is no exception. To give some sense of the book's concerns and modus operandi, I have ventured to offer a gloss on those title words.

Writing: The collection stands in a long tradition of writing that worries at writing, make texts out of this worry, and manage to side-step the difficulty of writing by doing so. Benjamin's take on this, his poetry's insight, is to recognise the particular generative side-stepping potential offered by an approach to writing as translation, and especially translation between media and senses. This translational possibility is one of the allures of ekphrasis, a key mode in the collection. Accordingly, the book's longest reflection on writing is titled "Looking" (76-98). Its first section is "Looking. Writing". And its opening self-scrutiny about the impasse of writing gratefully digresses into sections on "Looking in Tours" (home to a Mantegna canvas which Benjamin's narrator has travelled to write about), "Looking at Poussin" (and his image of the philosopher Diogenes the Cynic), "Looking at Her" and the retrospective "Looking Back". "What would it mean to lay a claim to writing?", this section opens. "A claim to be made after what is now decades of work. Hardly singular", he reflects, but "Where was he with it? [...] The question took him elsewhere", as he observes, since "Writing", although his own action, "directed him"; perhaps what keeps writing from being merely circularly self-reflexive (that is, simultaneously introspective and evasive), is the admission of the "prompt" of "looking" (76).

Looking — or what we might call "writing looking" — is one way of making words

relational, dramatizing their interactions with people, places, and artefacts which others have attended to and loved, sometimes puzzlingly. Thus looking at Andrea Mantegna's *Christ on the Mount of Olives* means, among other things, wondering what Dürer saw in the Italian artist's curious carvings up of space and changes in perspective — a visual stage-management mirrored by Benjamin's switches between ekphrasis in the gallery, semi-didactic reflection, and a subliminal drama of gazes between travellers set in the mirrored elevator and breakfast room of his pension (and turning on a texture Dürer would have loved: the look of damp hair). "Moving between looking and writing had always defined forms of relation", that vital term in Benjamin's philosophical writings (76). Perhaps the happiest thing about that kind of movement is when it invites in other, future viewers and writers, as this piece originally written for the literary theorist Werner Hamacher seems to do.²

In: Historically, one concomitant of a focus on relationality has been attention to prepositional thinking: the *in*, *from*, *at*, *by*, *with*, or *against* which choreographs relationships and locates agents, not necessarily on a homogenous plane of empirical or mathematical space, but in relation to each other, in distances and collocations that themselves create "opening[s] that seem[] to be space" (37), as we hear in the opening poem, "The Angel Stayed".

Although this collection has many strains of reflection and retrospection, it also places its subject in the thick of things, often disorientingly. That question about writing, "Where was he with it?", echoes in the first poem, an extended encounter with angels and the myth of the fall of the angels. Here, after several floaty stanzas describing or evoking angelic action, the narrator asks, disconcertingly: "Where was I in all of this? / What would I have been?" (36) The poetry at such moments takes on almost the quality of a Jesuit contemplation, where the self is imaginatively positioned within a scriptural (here, apocryphal) narrative as if in a drama. Perhaps the impression is less surprising, since Benjamin's questions appears in a subsection of the poem called "*non valde boni*", the not wholly good. This was Augustine's phrase for those who fell into a middling category between

the wholly good and wholly bad: mediocre, but the best category to which most humans could aspire.

The: Perhaps the mediocre definite article could be left out. Yet this collection does prompt questions about the definite and indefinite in a larger sense; the abstract and concrete; the general (even universal) and the particular, meaning not the merely empirical but the historically particular. These contrasts matter philosophically, but they also matter generically and stylistically. This shows up in the shape of the collection. It is tempting to describe the arc of the book as moving from more poetizing to more prosy pieces, from the lyrical short-lined stanzas of “The Angel Stayed” to the prose meditations of “Looking” and the thetic “Notes on Poetry”. A better way to describe this sweep, I think, is the tendency to move from the general to the particularised. The formulations of the opening poems may be painstakingly precise and refer to a definite “I” and “you.” But they are nonetheless stylistically de-localised, de-identified, presenting a play of abstract nouns, iconic elements and processes: unnamed “angels”, “a cheek,” “a face,” “treetops”, “the sun,” “the dark”. This makes it almost shocking to meet, almost exactly half-way through the book, the comparative particularity of these lines:

One of his greatest fears is that he would not be able to hear his father’s voice.... He could recall the sound of his father reading. In the synagogue, on Saturday mornings, his father was often called to read the Haftorah. It was the power of his voice.... its remarkable timbre.... When his father read in either Hebrew or English, they... sounded filling the space. (“Within the Still, Silence”, 55).

To be sure, this evocation of “Jewishness” is not anecdotal and concrete *rather than* philosophical or abstract. Jewishness has, of course, been made to play an iconic role in the history of philosophy and theology, figuring the resolutely literal, the blindly over-particular, the non-spiritual. Benjamin’s commitment to rethinking the relation of particular and universal in the wake of this history goes with the grain of this collection as we move from an allusively and intertextually

invoked engagement with Milton, Augustine, and others in the early poems to the named interlocutors of the pieces “After Hearing Ibn Gabirol” (the medieval Jewish poet and thinker), “Rembrandt’s Homer” — a tribute to another great reciter, which homes in on the details of “Cap, shawl, beard / Each — their own way”, “The shawl’s gold, face and nose.../ Illumined” (74) — before the novella-like particularity in parts of “Looking”, and finally the “Notes on Poetry”, addressed to a named, living other, the poet Karen MacCormack, and date-stamped with day, month, year and suburb.

Still: Finally, there is the polysemous “still”, with its temporal sense of persisting, waiting; the kinetic sense of composure or calm (which also gives us “still” as a visual freeze-frame); and the related sonic sense of the still, small voice, or *stille Nacht* (a sense in German clearly connected to assuaging and care, with *stillen* being a verb for breastfeeding a baby). “Silence solicites [sic] care”, the collection suggests (56); yes, but silence can also be a mark of care. And, then again, as a sleep-deprived new parent might remind us, sometimes no amount of care brings a still. Then all we can do is *stay* — a keyword intimately connected with stilling in this collection.

As John Philipps notes in his helpful introductory essay, Benjamin’s opening poem, “The Angel Stayed”, writes back to Milton’s vision of sin and justice in *Paradise Lost*, working with the moment when the Archangel Michael cleaves Satan’s shield with a single stroke of his sword, “nor staid,” but with his upstroke “shar’d” or sheared “All his right side; then *Satan* first knew pain” (*Paradise Lost* 6.325-7).³ Duplicitous Milton: this is in fact not the first time Satan feels pain. That came several books earlier, and before the war in heaven, when Sin forced her way out of Satan’s head as he first contemplated rebellion (Sin at first horrifies Satan’s angels, but grows attractive in their eyes as war approaches (*Paradise Lost* 2.752-65)).

Benjamin’s probing of Michael’s double blow to Satan opens up the contradictory senses of staying as *pausing*, *stopping*, *refraining* (what Michael did not do), and as

keeping it up, the agonism of staying in the fight. Between them lies the sense of *staying or remaining with*, where agonism as hostility becomes harder to distinguish from genuine relationship and community. While the term “staying” is most prominent in the first poem, parallel scenarios surface through the collection, particularly in Mantegna’s *Christ on the Mount of Olives*, which depicts the scene where Christ repeatedly charges his disciples to “remain here, and stay awake with me” (Matthew 26:38). They fail, of course, and Mantegna makes much of their prone, sleeping forms as Christ prays, if it be possible, to be spared the pains of death.

For Benjamin, as I understand it, angelic action would constitute a paradoxical staying with and refraining from; hence his interrogation of Milton’s Archangel Michael and his tendency to dissent from Milton. Perhaps ironically, for Milton it was the Father who “suspend[ed]” Satan’s “doom” (6.692), and Christ himself who stayed ceaseless violence. After three days, he appears to end the war, whose immortal parties otherwise “in perpetual fight... must last / Endless, and no solution will be found” (PL 6.693-4). This is his Father’s story, at any rate, in justifying the decisive blow Christ will give to Satan’s forces. “Stand still in bright array”, Christ calls to his army, “here stand / Ye angels arm’d, this day from battle rest” (6.801-2); the angels are to refrain and remain, as witnesses. William Blake famously diagnosed Milton as being of the devil’s party without knowing it. Might one wonder to what extent Benjamin’s poetry is of the angels’ party, and how far it knows it?

Milton, of course, is just one of Benjamin’s many interlocutors, implicit and explicit. Although the German lyricist Rilke is not obviously invoked, the “still” in this collection, with its interest in joining voice and space, might put readers in mind of the first of his *Sonnets to Orpheus*. At the singing of Rilke’s Orpheus, beasts throng from their lairs and dens “*aus Stille*”, *from or out of* silence; quiet “not from cunning” and “not from fear” but “from hearing”: unlike in the traditional myth, Orpheus’ music doesn’t force animals to follow him, but it does transform them, and does so through a spatial opening or amplification that recalls a clearing in

the forest. Where before there was hardly a hut (with trembling posts), Rilke tells us, Orpheus creates for the animals “temples in their sense of sound” (*Tempel im Gehör*).

The poems in *Writing in the Still* are rightly cautious about many kinds of silence: enforced, peremptory, and deathly (like Niobe’s silencing when she is turned to stone, a recent focal point in Benjamin’s philosophical writing).⁴ But the poems also advocate for the kinds of stillness that allow attentive and recollective listening, and for past voices that “only survive□ now because of that silence”, and, at times, survive because of the continuing work of poetry (54). We find, then, more than a trace of a classic vision of the aesthetic as a “thinking space”, held open even after the collapse of traditional “devotional spaces” like the one modelled in Mantegna’s canvas.⁵ Credible or not, this is a promise of poetry, too, stretched out between the ends of its lines — as it is between poetry’s grounding memory of “what is already there” (a declarative “*There is poetry*” with which individual poems enter into “relation”) and the expectation that “[e]ach poem, every line begins poetry again” (“Notes on Poetry”, 100, 102, 105).

NOTES

1. Andrew Benjamin, *Writing in the Still*. Melbourne: re.press, 2023, 105.
2. Andrew Benjamin, "Looking in Tours", in *Babel. Festschrift für Werner Hamacher*. Ed. Aris Fiorestos, Weil am Rhein: Urs Engeler, 2008, 34-40.
3. John W. Philipps, "The Place of Poetry: Andrew Benjamin's Writing in the Still" in *Writing in the Still*, 9-33, here 9-13.
4. Cf. Benjamin, "Justice, Love, and Relationality: The Figure of Niobe in Hegel's Lectures on Fine Art", in *Towards a Relational Ontology* (Albany: SUNY, 2015), and "Countering Injury: On the Deaths of the Niobids", in *Niobes: Antiquity, Modernity, Critical Theory*. Ed. Mario Telò and Andrew Benjamin. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2024.
5. Cf. the Denkraum and Andachtsraum invoked by Aby Warburg, *Schlangenritual: Eine Reisebericht*, 5th edn. Postscripts by Ulrich Raulff and Claudia Wedepohl. Berlin: Wagenbach, 2011, 75.

**review of anne maxwell and
lucy van, australian women's
historical photography: other
times, other views (anthem,
2024)**

jane brown

Australian Women's Historical Photography: Other Times, Other Views by Anne Maxwell and Lucy Van is an important and profoundly moving book where photographs are at the very heart of its scholarship. Each image is discussed, analysed and looked at with great care, honesty and integrity. It drives home why photography and scholarship on photography can have such far-reaching consequences to our understanding of history.

There is a vexing issue for anyone interested in Australia's cultural history and for those of us that adore the medium of photography and that is, historical photography struggles in Australia. Specialist photography curators are disappearing from

our national museums. Dedicated galleries are rare and the conservation of photography in Australia is bundled-up with paper conservation. Paper is just one part of the photographic story whose stuff is a complex mix of silver, glass, tin, gelatin, celluloid and chemistry. Without a specialist domain valuable photographic material remains vulnerable.

The first photographs ever made astonished the public with their apparent ability to freeze time. This characteristic is unique to photography and sets it apart from other ways of picture making. As stated in Maxwell and Van's book: "The presence inscribed in photographs offers a visceral sense of the past."¹ Perhaps this is why historical photography has struggled in Australia—in the quest for modernity we have failed to address the past and at worst obliterated it from memory. It is also true from the outset; from the very moment of its invention photography struggled to be defined. Critics such as Charles Baudelaire considered photography a servant to the sciences and the arts: "Let it [photography] rescue from oblivion those tumbling ruins..."² In Baudelaire's view, photography was to be "thanked and applauded" only when it remained in the world of documentation, but if it were to cross into the realm of art it had become "art's most mortal enemy".³ Of course he was proved wrong, and by the late nineteenth-century, photography was considered an art form, flourishing in artistic movements such as pictorialism, surrealism and in the new objectivism. German born Hedda Morrison was a proponent of new objectivism, and her work (featured in chapter two) draws us into the European avant-garde with her sharply focused close-ups and birds-eye views. Acceptance into artistic circles created its own issues and divisions. Were photographers amateur or professional? Was the work defined as commerce or art?

Maxwell and Van's *Other Times, Other Views* manages to navigate this terrain adroitly and without falter. In its examination of Australia's late colonial era, it *remembers our forgetting* and draws attention to the deeply distressing events in our history as well as some of the more progressive experiences from that time. Maxwell and Van's work also cuts through the chatter and clutter looking at

photography in all its magnificent forms: Realist, documentary, artistic, amateur and commercial. In doing so, the book gives a voice to the many important women photographers neglected and overlooked in the history of Australian photography.

“Just gold”⁴ as her daughter, Dallas Phillips, so beautifully described them, are the precious negatives of Mavis Phillips (née Walley), one of the earliest known Indigenous Australian photographers. The book gives voice to the Australian women who travelled and made photographs abroad—Sarah Chinnery and Hedda Morrison, amateurs Doris McKellar and Ada Armytage, and the studio work of May and Mina Moore. In the spirit of the National Gallery of Australia’s “Know My Name” initiative⁵ the women in this book have claimed their place in the cultural life of this country.

Meticulously researched, it writes of seven women across three chapters each with a distinctive pairing that is both astute and revealing in their comparisons and contrasts. For instance, the handheld ‘home-front’ photos by McKellar contrast with the formal studio portraits of the Moore sisters with their luscious Rembrandt lighting. The Moore sisters were successful businesswomen photographing celebrities from Sydney and Melbourne’s theatre scene. During the war, the sisters turned their attention to the soldiers who would come to their studios requesting formal portraits to give to their loved ones—their uncertain future captured in gelatin and silver. Meanwhile, University student McKellar, using a Kodak 3A folding pocket camera, made spontaneous images of friends, family, and university life that included many portraits of young men in uniform before embarkation. These are documents of the Great War produced in vastly different ways but both profoundly affecting in their results.

The contrasts are more profound when looking at the photographs by Armytage and Phillips—a disparity born of colonisation. We have a document of a wealthy, white settler family, the Armytages, alongside the family photos made by Phillips of the Ballardong Noongar community of Western Australia. A pastoralist’s daughter, Armytage had wealth, privilege and time to pursue photography—a craze that

pre-occupied the Victorian era. Using glass dry plates and a bellows style camera, her interest in the medium commenced around 1880. Her subjects included a heady mix of tableau vivants depicting bushrangers and murderers to the refined existence of life on the grounds of Como House in Toorak, Melbourne. A striking image of a stagecoach with Armytage's cast shadow reveals the photographer in action—her bustled silhouette with camera, dark cloth and tripod. These are images of the Victorian squattocracy of southeast Australia but as Maxwell and Van assert: “in their genteel, aspirational Britishness, Armytage's photographs show a family forgetting Aboriginal people.”⁶

Almost a generation later and on the other side of the continent, the family photographs by Mavis Phillips (née Walley), a descendant of the First Peoples of the south-west Australia, tell a vastly different story. For 45 years Phillips's daughter Dallas carefully safeguarded a tin of negatives that once belonged to her mother Mavis. The tin contained over three hundred images of mainly portraits and the natural environment. Today, the digitised scans of Phillip's work are held in the State Library of Western Australia. The images are captioned with the dates 1900 to 1950—a time of racial stratification and economic inequality. How Phillips came to photography remains unknown. As noted by the authors: “[I]t was rare for an Aboriginal person to own a camera, let alone have the time and resources to take pictures and develop the film.”⁷ Considering the demands of assimilation and the trauma of dislocation brought about by the Native Welfare Act, this important collection of photographs prioritises the indigenous voice. There is joy in these photographs and the re-occurring motifs show that Phillips “used her camera not only to capture and preserve family memories but also as a tool for creative expression and visual pleasure.”⁸

The two remaining women discussed in the publication worked outside of Australia. In chapter two we are introduced to Sarah Chinnery who photographed in New Guinea and Hedda Morrison who worked in China and Malaysia. Both women lived for a significant period of time in their respective locations which sparked a deep interest in the peoples and cultures they experienced. Chinnery,

in her realist style, documented the enormous changes that were taking place in Rabaul, while Morrison captured pre-revolutionary China, and later the Sarawak people and what remained of their traditional culture. As Maxwell and Van observe:

Both women's photography involved a complex intersection of poetics, salvage and science, all wrapped up in a powerful wave of nostalgia for that bygone moment when, armed with nothing but a camera both were able to lose themselves in the pleasure that came from making objects of lasting value to themselves, the people that they photographed and the historical record.⁹

The authors of *Other Times, Other Views* recognise the physicality of the photographic medium as a lasting object. They also recognise the difficulties of picture making. No matter Eastman Kodak's 1888 slogan, "You Press the Button, We Do the Rest", photography back then was a complex mix of alchemy and timing that required skill and judgement. This notion of Chinnery and Morrison losing themselves in the pleasure of picture-making and the enduring value of their work can be applied to all the women featured in this important book.

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NOTES

1. Anne Maxwell and Lucy Van, *Australian Women's Historical Photography: Other Times, Other Views*. London and New York: Anthem Press, 2024, 41.
2. Baudelaire's art review of the National Academy's Salon of 1859 was first published in the *Révue Française*, June 10-July 20, Paris, 1859. This quotation is taken from Baudelaire's *The Mirror of Art*. Ed. and trans. Jonathan Mayne. London: Phaidon Press, 1955, 232.
3. Baudelaire, *Mirror*, 232.
4. Maxwell and Van, *Other Times, Other Views*, 94.
5. National Gallery of Australia, "Know My Name," accessed 30 September 2024, <https://nga.gov.au/know-my-name/#about>.
6. Maxwell and Van, *Other Times, Other Views*, 88.
7. Maxwell and Van, *Other Times, Other Views*, 92.
8. Maxwell and Van, *Other Times, Other Views*, 102.
9. Maxwell and Van, *Other Times, Other Views*, 66.