

 **CHIASMA**  
A Site For Thought

#4

MATERIALISM AND THE  
MEANS OF PHILOSOPHICAL PRODUCTION

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# CHIASMA



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## ‡ EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

What ought philosophy do with science? This question is actually several questions, collapsing under the term “science” the scientific method, the actual practices of scientists, the array of scientific theories, and the material production of those theories. To say that one is “philosophizing” about science could include things as disparate as an excursion into the formal logic of Baysean inference, a sociological critique of a particular methodological practice, a discourse analysis of environmentalist rhetoric, a Marxist critique of Silicon Valley ideology, or any number of other approaches differing as much in method as in topic. This is precisely the problem that we faced when composing our latest call for papers on the recent renaissance of interest in science and materialism in Continental Philosophy – an upsurge obviously linked to the rise of Speculative Realism and yet also in many important respects independent from it. For a humanities scholar, grappling with science means grappling with the multiplicity of sciences, with the decentred mesh of tendrils encompassing the grounded and the abstract, the real and the ideal.

This issue of *Chiasma* embodies this multiplicity with a series of articles that consider in turns the multitudinous ways that science and materialism can function as both the subjects and objects of consideration. As is so commonly the case, the first (and perhaps eternal) task of critique is to turn its eyes upon itself and question the very terms of its inception: what science? what sciences? what material? what materiality? And what is the role of the

critic, of the philosopher, who at once imposes and responds, reads and writes, produces the critique even as the terms of criticism lie outside of their control? In pursuing these questions, the works collected here analyze the mosaic of relations between science and materiality at different points and with diverse methods, representing collectively the divergence of approaches that the problems of science and philosophy, in their very nature, call for and demand.

We open this issue with an essay by Austin Lillywhite, entitled “Relational Matters: A Critique of Speculative Realism and a Defence of Non-Reductive Materialism”. In the article Lillywhite performs a broad critique of Speculative Realism and in particular the work of Quentin Meillassoux, for whom correlationism, “is a conflation of two hundred and thirty-five years of philosophy into one master error.” Lillywhite points to the many convergences between Speculative Realist thought and the earlier poststructuralist philosophy that it attempts to dethrone – such as the convergence between Bruno Latour’s notion of “bad transcendence” and Deleuze’s concept of “molarity,” and doubles back on the latter, offering a political rejoinder to Object Oriented Ontology’s emphasis on the “autonomy” of objects paralleled in the atomism that Foucault sees in neoliberal ideology. The critique then seeks to undermine not only the terms and logic of Speculative Realist thought, but its claim to novelty as well.

The issue’s second article is Phillip Lobo’s “0. < an intervention into the critical discourse around Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* >,” which presents an analysis of the apocalypticism of Atwood’s novel in relation to its depiction of ecological disaster and the effects of the onset of the anthropocene. Lobo takes great care to emphasize the novel’s attention to ontology, writing that “[t]he question of what things *are*, and how the collapse of certain social structures undermine the very terms by which beings can be described, plays out in numerous passages,” and that “*Oryx and Crake* offers up its ontological mysteries but provides no such closure: its distinctly apocalyptic (and apocalyptically distinct) tone emerges from its refusal to do so.” The ontology of the apocalypse is integral to the logic of the novel’s ecology, evacuating the ten-

dency toward “pastoral” depictions of ecology and nature, thus undermining attempts to “domesticate” the novel by reading it as a simple attack on the hubris of science in relation to the classical dualisms counterposed to “Nature.”

The third article, “Zero, Zero, and Zero’: Beckett’s *Endgame*, Automation, and Zero-Player Games” by Andrew Wenaus, reads Beckett’s play as a “zero player game,” an autonomous system proceeding automatically, producing in reading and performance a state of “readerly non-involvement, diminution of agency, and, ultimately our exclusion from interpretive agency” which “encourages speculation on the rapid shift from human involvement with language as alphanumeric to that of code that proceeds according to its own logic indifferent to humanism.” This state of indifference is not merely present in the content of the play itself – in the bleakness for which it is known – but also in its structure, and in particular its metaphorical use of chess. It is a game without players, an assault on the human agency that the term “game” usually implies, and thereby “reveals itself in the thought experiment as radically unchangeable.”

The issue concludes with an interview between the Italian political theorist Franco ‘Bifo’ Berardi, our interview editor Thomas Szwedska, and Dillon Douglas on the topic of technology and the subjectivity of capitalism. In their extensive discussion – touching on the philosophies of Baudrillard, and Deleuze and Guattari, the role of futurity in production, and the relationship between desire, idolation, and capitalism – Bifo, Douglas and Szwedska interrogate the material and psychological underpinnings of contemporary life. At the fore across the discussion is the social and political role of technology, how it shapes and then is shaped by the larger, if less tangible, social forces with which it interfaces.

Rounding out the issue are reviews of Jacques Rancière’s recently translated *The Lost Thread: The Democracy of Modern Fiction* by Anthony Christopher Coughlin; Michael Ruse’s critical monograph on Darwinism, *Darwinism as Religion: What Literature Tells Us about Evolution*, reviewed by Jennifer Komorowski; and Terry Eagleton’s recent introductory volume, *Materialism*, reviewed by Jeff Ray.

The editors at *Chiasma* would like to offer their sincerest thanks to the Center for the Study of Theory and Criticism at The University of Western Ontario for its continued funding and support, as well as to its Director, Dr. Jan Plug, whose aid and encouragement has made this journal possible. We would also like to thank our advisory board for their valuable aid and comments, and the many anonymous peer reviewers who ensured that the present issue lives up to the high standards that the journal has set for itself. Finally, and most of all, we would like to thank the issue's contributors, without whose work the journal would cease to be. Thank you.

–Jeremy Colangelo, Chief Editor

**‡ ARTICLES**



# RELATIONAL MATTERS

## *A Critique of Speculative Realism and a Defence of Non-Reductive Materialism*

AUSTIN LILLYWHITE

The new materialist movement has spawned a diverse and sometimes conflicting array of opinions over how to define its intervention in relation to poststructuralism. One of the most prominent approaches, exemplified by Latour, Bennett and the speculative realists, has been an explicitly ontological one that seeks to escape the “haunting association of matter with passivity.”<sup>1</sup> Such thinkers argue that the linguistic turn has been debilitated by a suspicion of material reality as mechanistically fixed and thus prone to essentialism; although their theoretical orientations vary, they each seek to rehabilitate material, non-human objects as “active,” “lively,” “agentive,” “resistant” and “autonomous.” For example, Bennett’s materialist vitalism argues that the indeterminacy found in quantum physics and in stem cells suggests that the humanities need to go beyond “mechanistic” and “deterministic” conceptions of matter that are based on outdated Euclidean, Cartesian and Newtonian models.<sup>2</sup>

These ontologies, insofar as their guiding principle is the inherent value of inhuman matter before it is taken up in conscious human activity, represent a distinct break with previous theories of

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1 Jane Bennett, “A Vitalist Stopover on the Way to a New Materialism” in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency and Politics*. Eds. Diane Coole and Samantha Frost. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010): 49.

2 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

social constructionism. Indeed, a central component has been a bold call for a return to object-based realism to counter the radical skepticism and relativism of postmodernity. As early as 2004, Latour vigorously argued for the prospects of such a realism, provocatively comparing the “knee-jerk” reaction of social constructionists to conspiracy theorists, and concluding that the conceptual tools of such an approach are philosophically bankrupt.<sup>3</sup>

The most explicit backlash against the linguistic turn has been voiced by the speculative realists. This group of realist ontologists has also been one of the most popular. The movement has its own journal (*Collapse*) and has been widely published (by Zero Books, Continuum and Edinburgh University Press, among others). Graham Harman, the most prolific writer in the movement, has especially developed a dedicated following, most notably with Timothy Morton who has received much attention for his application of Harman’s object-oriented ontology (OOO) to ecocriticism over the last several years. As a result, there seems to be a growing consensus that speculative realism is “a serious disciplinary question” across the humanities.<sup>4</sup> For example, literary scholars, from medievalists to modernists, have widely taken up the call for the development of object-oriented approaches to literature.<sup>5</sup>

Despite some internal differences (which will be mentioned at the beginning of the next section), speculative realism is centred on *anti-relationality*: a rejection of any approach that substitutes relations (of words, ideas, representations, power, etc.) for real objects in themselves, independent of human consciousness.<sup>6</sup> On the one

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3 Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern” in *Critical Inquiry* 30, no. 2 (2004): 225-48.

4 Kate Marshall, “The Old Weird” in *Modernism/modernity* 23, no. 3 (2016): 640.

5 See for example *New Literary History* 43, no. 2 (2012), a special issue dedicated to “Object-Oriented Literary Criticism.”

6 Meillassoux calls such philosophies correlationist: “the central notion of modern philosophy since Kant seems to be that of correlation. By ‘correlation’ we mean the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other.” *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier, (London: Continuum 2008), 2, 5.

hand, this valorization of matter in itself is appealing as a crucial part of the effort to create new philosophical concepts to meet the needs of the anthropocene – most importantly, to combat the consumerist, capitalist view of the environment as expendable and fully instrumentalizable. Yet, there have been growing concerns over the difficulties facing such a putative ontological return to objects. Alexander Galloway has argued that the object ontologies of Harman, Meillassoux and Latour share a strikingly similar logic with software programs employed by contemporary capitalist big businesses. If it is true that the speculative realists are “repackaging” contemporary ideology, he believes we should abandon their philosophies as both “antiscientific” and “politically retrograde.”<sup>7</sup> This has led him to call for a more thorough return to the debate between realism and materialism in order to find a “special kind of materialism” that doesn’t succumb to these pitfalls. While Galloway’s findings are perhaps not sufficient by themselves (Harman for example, dismisses the article as an insubstantial analogy), Galloway is not completely alone in his disfavor. Mathematician Ricardo Nirenberg has argued that it is flatly wrong to draw political and philosophical claims from realist mathematical set-theory – which is Badiou’s project in *Being and Event* (and a crucial component of Meillassoux’s ontological realism in *After Finitude*).<sup>8</sup> Andrew Cole has pointed out that, ironically, the object-oriented approaches of Bennett, Harman and Latour, despite casting themselves as avant-garde posthumanism, rely on a quite traditional, humanistic logocentrism and ontotheology; for example, they consistently claim to do “justice” to objects by listening to them “speak,” harkening to their voices, feeling their presence, and “respecting” their autonomous indifference to us.<sup>9</sup> Most provocatively, Jordana Rosenberg has argued that Meillassoux’s concept of “ancestrality,” Sara Ahmed’s “queer orientations,” and especially Morton’s

7 Alexander Galloway, “The Poverty of Philosophy: Realism and Post-Fordism” in *Critical Inquiry* 39, no. 2 (2013): 348.

8 Ricardo Nirenberg and David Nirenberg, “Badiou’s Number: A Critique of Mathematics as Ontology” in *Critical Inquiry* 37, no. 4 (2011): 583-614.

9 Andrew Cole, “The Call of Things: A Critique of Object-Oriented Ontologies” in *Minnesota Review* 80 (2013): 106-118.

“queer ecology” – which, tries to find ways of conceiving of matter in some sense as inherently resistant – represent a dangerous return to biologism that threatens to erase any social realities and masks an attitude of privilege and white settler colonialism.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the clear need for a new materialism in continental philosophy, there seems to be growing concern that speculative realism exhibits a counterproductive, reactionary response. Yet, there have been few attempts to seriously think through what this “special kind of materialism” – one that presumably would combine the critiques of social constructionism with a realist, material ontology – might look like. The goal of this essay will be to work through what a materialism that is both relationally constructed and ontologically realist might look like. Before discussing such a materialism, it will be instructive to examine first the decidedly anti-relational philosophy of autonomous, inhuman objects provided by the speculative realists.<sup>11</sup> To this end, I will consider two of the primary “anti-anthropocentric” arguments against such relationality: first, Meillassoux’s arguments against Kantian “correlationism” and second, Harman’s arguments against “undermining” and “overmining” autonomous, real objects. Both cases, I will argue, fail to provide the substantial critique they claim. Following this, the second section will argue that this anti-relational assumption that constructedness and material realism are incompatible reveals a neo-positivist conception of reality: an atomistic, fundamentally non-relational, non-contextual ontology combined with a muscular, exhaustively absolute objective science that is uncontaminated by human political investments. Finally, having seen the shortcomings of such an approach, I will argue instead for one that is post-positivist rather than neo-positivist in its conception of materialism: it upholds both the status of an object’s outer, relational constructedness as constitutive of its inner *thisness*, as well as an objective, ontological realism that contributes to the new materialist agenda of undermining the passive, mechanistic conceptions of

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10 Jordana Rosenberg, “The Molecularization of Sexuality: On Some Primitivisms of the Present” in *Theory & Event* 17, no. 2 (2014). Online.

11 Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* (Melbourne: Re.Press, 2009), 195.

matter as ineluctably alien and non-sentient. Drawing on analytic philosophy of mind, I will call such a position a “non-reductive” materialism, and look to ontologies of flesh in Merleau-Ponty and Jean-Luc Nancy for some crucial examples of such a position on the continental side. This position, I suggest, will provide a more productive direction for the new materialist project of undermining the haunting image of passive matter that is subtended by the rigid sentient/non-sentient binary.

### I. Problems with the Correlationist Critique

It will be helpful moving forward to qualify what speculative realism refers to, and the extent to which it can be considered a cohesive movement. Harman is perhaps most responsible for solidifying its status as such, frequently assigning its definitional origin to a workshop held by Quentin Meillassoux, Ray Brassier, and Iain Hamilton Grant in 2007 at Goldsmiths, University of London.<sup>12</sup> However, Harman equally remarks on the diversity of the movement: “this was a loose confederation of separate realist approaches, and the four original members quickly went their separate ways.”<sup>13</sup> Harman’s argument for a realist metaphysics based on the life of objects dates to his idiosyncratic reading of Heidegger in *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects*. Harman uses *Vorhandenheit* (presence-at-hand) and *Zuhandenheit* (readiness-to-hand) to argue for anti-relationality as the central pillar of OOO: the withdrawal and inexhaustibility of objects not just from humans, but from other objects as well. Quentin Meillassoux, on the other hand, draws on three primary counter-arguments against correlationism: 1) scientific evidence for a reality that predates human existence, which he terms “ancestrality” and “arche-fossils,” 2) the contingent nature of all such correlations, which he terms “factuality” or simply “Chaos,” and 3) building off of Alain Badiou’s *Being and Event*, Meillassoux claims that Georg Cantor’s

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12 Grant’s work is less clearly anti-relational than the other three. For the sake of cogency, I have confined my considerations to the central three thinkers.

13 Graham Harman, “The Future of Continental Realism: Heidegger’s Fourfold” in *Chiasma* 3, no. 3 (2016): 82.

set-theory – which discovers the paradox that there can never be any set of all sets, i.e., there can be no sum total of all possibilities – is a form of absolute knowledge into this utter contingency of world-as-“Chaos.” Ray Brassier (who translated Meillassoux’s *After Finitude*), builds off of this concept of chaotic contingency and the ultimate extinction of all being; however, his work is especially distinctive for the way it argues for the scientific inevitability of this nihilism through the concept of eliminative materialism, which is drawn from two analytic philosophers, Wilfrid Sellars and Paul Churchland (and more recently, neurophilosopher Thomas Metzinger). Drawing on these thinkers, Brassier supports the eliminative and cognitivist computational paradigm, which argues that there are neither any such things as minds, nor any (philosophically or scientifically) meaningful subject-positions.

Due to these differences, these four have voiced disagreements over how to truly escape anthropocentric correlationism. Harman argues that Meillassoux is guilty of a lingering anthropocentrism,<sup>14</sup> a critique which echoes an earlier one by Brassier, who also argued that Meillassoux’s attempt to reclaim math as genuine form of “intellectual intuition” ironically “re-establishes a correlation between thought and being.”<sup>15</sup> Iain Hamilton Grant, as well as more process-oriented thinkers such as Steven Shaviro, fault Harman for being unable to account for any genuine changes or interactions between objects; they are baldly given to us as “particular substances” unable to account for any of the “becoming of being.”<sup>16</sup> Most polemically, Brassier has attempted to distance himself from the movement, calling it “actor-network theory spiced with panpsychist metaphysics,” developed by “bloggers” in “an online orgy of stupidity,” which has “little

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14 “Here, humans remain at the center of philosophy, though their knowledge is no longer finite.” Graham Harman, “The Road to Objects” in *Continent* 3, no. 1 (2011): 172.

15 Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 91.

16 Iain Hamilton Grant, “Mining Conditions: A Response to Harman,” in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, eds. Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, Graham Harman (Melbourne: Re.Press, 2011), 43.

philosophical merit.”<sup>17</sup>

Given these divisions, Harman’s definition of what drew these thinkers together in the first place is useful for arriving at a qualified sense of their unity despite their differences. First, they each were inspired by the weird, horror sci-fi of H.P. Lovecraft as a “mascot” for the movement, “since his grotesque semi-Euclidean monsters symbolize the rejection of everyday common sense to which speculative realism aspires.”<sup>18</sup> Although only Harman has directly written on Lovecraft, Lovecraft’s influence is clearly borne out in the strange, alien nature of the “hyper-chaos” so central to the projects of Meillassoux and Brassier. Second, they all have a foundational touchstone in Meillassoux’s critique of correlationism; both Brassier and Harman write extensively on it and acknowledge it as central to their own programs. The anti-correlationist program, serving as the common cornerstone for diverse speculative realist approaches, holds that the history of continental philosophy since Kant, culminating with postmodernity, gives us only ideas, representations, words or relations instead of actual objects. All continental philosophy, accordingly, is “anti-realist.” This is “an intellectual catastrophe”<sup>19</sup> insofar as the future of realism in philosophy is decidedly anti-anthropocentric, “despite the presumptions of human narcissism”<sup>20</sup> to the contrary. Whether in Harman’s OOO or Brassier’s eliminative materialism there is, then, a shared strategy of anti-correlationism and anti-relationality as a way to reclaim a realist material ontology that ostensibly disrupts traditional, bourgeois definitions of the “human.”

Accordingly, I would like to focus on this central thesis of anti-correlationism, and analyze some of the ramifications of its conflation of two hundred and thirty-five years of philosophy into one master error. To do this, I would like to consider the historical starting and ending points of correlationism – Kant and poststruc-

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17 Ray Brassier, “Ray Brassier Interviewed by Marcin Rychter: I Am a Nihilist Because I Still Believe in Truth” in *Kronos* (March 2011), available at [kronos.org.pl/index.php?23151,896](http://kronos.org.pl/index.php?23151,896)

18 Harman, “Road,” 171.

19 Harman, “Future,” 81.

20 Brassier, *Nihil*, xi.

turalism respectively – as presented by the speculative realists.

Meillassoux (and Brassier and Harman following him) define correlationism as originating with Kant, and develop their arguments against him on the assumption that his transcendental idealism is an extreme form of phenomenalism (whereby objects in space are identical to our mental representations of them). Occasionally, they attribute to Kant a slightly weaker version of phenomenalism that maintains that there are external objects, but their existence depends wholly on our mental representations of them. In this way, Kant’s transcendental idealism is supposed to be fundamentally indistinguishable from Berkeleyan phenomenalism – *esse est percipi* (to be is to be perceived).

While the correlationist critique assumes that this is a self-evident interpretation, this is, in fact, far from the case. Such a common-sense reading of Kant has been a central controversy since the first review of the *Critique*, in 1782, which makes precisely the same attack on Kant that the speculative realists suggest – that it upholds a strong, mind-dependent, Berkeleyan phenomenalism. Yet the speculative realists make no justification of such an interpretation vis-à-vis the fact that Kant himself took enormous pains in subsequent years to explicitly denounce such a reading. First, in the “Appendix” to the *Prolegomena*, Kant vigorously argues that the *Critique* crucially maintains that objects do exist outside and independent of us in space. Secondly, Kant points out that his idealism is purely “formal.” That is to say, that while our minds dictate to us the form that objects take in our mental representations, the sensory content of experience does not originate in the mind, but rather originates with mind-independent objects. Kant then deepens his attack on this type of reading of his work as phenomenal idealism with the B Edition of the *Critique*. In one of his most commented-upon passages, “The Refutation of Idealism,” Kant argues that inner and outer experiences are crucially interdependent. As a precondition for me to have any consciousness at all, there must already be genuine, real objects existing in space outside and independent of me.

Once this exaggeration of Kant's idealism as grossly Berkeleyan is rectified, it turns out that counterarguments of "ancestrality" and the "arche-fossil" fail to amount to any serious critique. Despite what Meillassoux suggests about correlationist refusal of "ancestral" facts, Kant's transcendental idealism upholds empirical and scientific realism. At the level of phenomena, Kant argues in favor of the naturalist scientific view that there is an empirical in-itself and an empirical for-us, the former of which is an object of valid scientific inquiry; e.g., while there is the empirical rainbow as it appears for-us (a band of color in the sky), there is also the empirical rainbow in-itself (minuscule water droplets arranged and lit up in a particular way). Moreover, Kant believes that science enables us to know, with objective certainty, real things that could never be apparent to human sensory faculties, such as the scientific explanations of magnetism, "lamellae" and Newtonian light particles.<sup>21</sup> In light of Kant's post-A Edition writings, the "ancestral" critique of correlationism appears to depend on a misguided definition of Kant's idealism.

In this case, what do we make of the even more strained claim that poststructuralism is also guilty of the supposed correlationist problems of phenomenalism and anthropocentrism? After all, both Deleuze and Foucault, in different ways, were committed throughout their careers to critiquing the Enlightenment legacy of Kant; thus, lumping them together seems a suspect interpretation. In fact, while the speculative realists routinely reject poststructuralism, closer examination reveals that the Foucaultian/Deleuzean critique of Kant's transcendent apperception subtends the materialism and anti-anthropocentrism that the speculative realists seek to uphold.

For example, in his several discussions of overmining and undermining, Harman has accused both Deleuze and Foucault of

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21 For magnetism, see *Critique of Pure Reason* A226/B273. For lamellae, see Kant's "On a discovery according to which all future critiques of reason have been rendered superfluous by a previous one," in *Theoretical Philosophy after 1781* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2002), 298. For light particles, see Rae Langton, *Kantian Humility* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998), 186–204.

undermining objects. In Deleuze’s case, Harman equates “flux” or “becoming” with monism because objects are reduced to “*nothing more than* the fleeting impulse” of some “deeper reality.”<sup>22</sup> In Foucault’s case – the “so-called ‘genealogical’ approach to reality” – an object is “taken to be *nothing more than* its history.”<sup>23</sup> In a recent essay, Harman claims that Latour represents Foucault’s “replacement” as the default citation in the humanities because Latour (like Harman) enables us to take objects “on their own terms,” whereas Foucault instrumentalizes objects as “human accessories” – mere means to anthropocentric ends.<sup>24</sup> Both essentialist and constructionist theories, Harman argues, are “naggingly inadequate” due to their “shared assumption that human nature must be the central focus.”<sup>25</sup> He concludes: “postmodern ‘scenesters’” are responsible for creating an “energy-draining discourse” that amounts to nothing more than “pretending to subvert everything while actually moving nothing a single inch.”<sup>26</sup>

How, then, does Latourian network theory (and implicitly the OOO that Harman claims it is tied with as a fellow object-oriented philosophy) get us out of this postmodern hall of mirrors? It turns out that the novelties Harman claims for Latour are considerably indebted to those very philosophies of immanence and posthumanism suggested by Deleuze and Foucault in their own critiques of Kant.

According to Harman, Latour’s first major contribution, actor-network theory (ANT), demonstrates his crucial stance as a “thinker of immanence.”<sup>27</sup> Harman describes ANT as an immanent or “flat ontology” that makes no leaps beyond the plane that experience or being inhabits: “this means that all entities are *actors*,

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22 Graham Harman, “On the Undermining of Objects: Grant, Bruno, and Radical Philosophy,” in *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, eds. Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, Graham Harman (Melbourne: Re.Press, 2011), 23.

23 Ibid., 23.

24 “Demodernizing the Humanities with Latour,” in *New Literary History* 47, nos. 2-3 (2016): 249.

25 Ibid., 250.

26 Ibid., 272.

27 Ibid., 256.

and are only real insofar as they have some sort of effect on something else... The actor is not an autonomous substance that preexists its actions, but exists only *through* those actions. There are no nouns in the world, only verbs.”<sup>28</sup> However, Harman ignores the fact that this aspect of ANT, which he casts as a breakthrough, derives from poststructural critique that he repudiates. Consider, for example, how closely the notion of ANT as no nouns, only verbs resembles Judith Butler’s version of performativity as the Nietzschean critique of the “metaphysics of substance.” Butler explicitly states that the central definition of performativity is, in fact, from *On the Genealogy of Morals*, which she quotes: “there is no ‘being’ behind doing, effecting, becoming; ‘the doer’ is merely a fiction added to the deed – the deed is everything.”<sup>29</sup>

Towards the conclusion of his discussion of Latour’s object-oriented approach, Harman discusses the critique of “bad transcendence” or “maxi-transcendence” found in *An Enquiry into the Modes of Existence (AIME)*. Bad transcendence is the invocation of large-scale, molar forces to explicate empirical phenomena. Latour writes in response to such thinking: “As if there were INDIVIDUALS! As if individuals had not been dispersed long since in mutually incompatible scripts; as if they were not all indefinitely divisible, despite their etymology, into hundreds of ‘Pauls’ and ‘Peters’ whose spatial, temporal, and actantial continuity is not assured by any isotopy.”<sup>30</sup> Harman argues that it is this aspect of Latour’s *AIME* that “reminds us that there are no vast social structures conditioning everything else, but only local assemblies of loosely correlated actors.”<sup>31</sup>

Despite Harman’s insistence that the poststructural critique of power must be “dethroned,” there is a clear link between Latourian “bad transcendence” and Deleuzean “molarity.”<sup>32</sup> Deleuze and Guattari argue in a strikingly similar way to Harman’s

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28 Ibid., 252-3.

29 Quoted in *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 2010), 34.

30 Quoted in Harman, “Demodernizing,” 268-9.

31 Ibid., 269.

32 Ibid., 269.

Peter and Paul passage, that schizophrenics are long past the archaic notion of an “I” behind the material desiring-productions of the unconscious: “the schizo sums up by saying: they’re fucking me over again. ‘I won’t say *I* any more, I’ll never utter the word again; it’s just too damn stupid.’”<sup>33</sup> Such a view substitutes a monolithic, transcendent, unitary subject (a “molar” entity) for what in reality is an immanent, differentiated multiplicity (a “molecular” entity, or what Latour refers to above as “dispersed”). Deleuze and Guattari, like Latour, argue on the contrary for a dispersed materialism that has no proper name representing a proper individual (extensive, molar), but rather only social, outer, material multiplicities (intensive, molecular).

## II. “There is no such thing as society”: Neo-Positivist Autonomy of the Inner

Such mischaracterizations of their interlocutors constitute a significant problem for the ostensible radicality and tenability of the anti-correlationist intervention. However, perhaps more troubling is speculative realism’s unequivocal refusal of the epistemological and ontological status of relationality as unamenable to materialism. Because of the movement’s genesis with the critique of correlationism (which sees itself as critiquing all forms of “relational” philosophies from Kantian idealism to poststructuralism), it is understandable that the speculative realists would harbor serious doubts about whether relations between beings ought to be accorded any such status. In its most outlandish form, this leads to the strains of dualism and neo-Platonism in Harman’s invocation of “vicarious causation”<sup>34</sup> (given his view that “real objects are non-relational”).<sup>35</sup> But even in Meillassoux and Brassier, we see repeatedly that their key frustration is that a hard object has been

33 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, et al., (New York: Penguin Books, 2009), 23.

34 This is the view, inspired by mystical occasionalism, that “objects hide from one another endlessly, and inflict their mutual blows only through some vicar or intermediary.” Graham Harman, “On Vicarious Causation,” *Collapse II* (2007): 190.

35 Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks*, 195.

replaced by a soft, socially constructed relation. Thus, in the return to objects themselves advocated by Harman and the “view from nowhere” advocated by Brassier, there is a distinctly neo-positivist notion of truth predicated on an atomistic, non-hermeneutic view of reality.<sup>36</sup>

Of course, this provocative claim that there is an atomism underlying the anti-relationality of speculative realism needs qualification. One would rightly object on the basis that speculative realism’s Lovecraftian view of the “hyper-chaos” of objective nature – as kaleidoscopically grotesque and alien – is distinctly opposed to the atomist “sense-certainty” of historical English empiricism. However, while speculative realism eschews the common-sense, scientific, non-skeptical aspect, it still wants to retain the basic sense of atomism, the notion that objects are basically atomic (individual and independent) and thus non-relational (ergo, non-dependent on an idealist correlation). This is evident in Meillassoux’s explicit call for a return to the “pre-critical” atomist thinkers, especially Hume, who believe that one can access “the Great Outdoors” (albeit only in a contingent manner), in order to avoid the correlationist pitfall that has plagued western philosophy since Kant’s critical, idealist turn. Hume’s induction problem is an especially important touchstone (Meillassoux devotes a whole chapter to “Hume’s Problem”); rather than reaching the conclusion of scientism from atomism, Hume synthesizes atomist realism and the underlying alien randomness and unlawfulness of nature. Thus, like atomism, the approach speculative realism is most opposed to is a “gestaltist” one – one that insists that objects can only be perceived as distinguished/differentiated from the contextual field or background they are related to – prefigured by Kant and Hegel, but carried through most forcefully by the phenomenology of Heidegger and Merleau-Ponty.<sup>37</sup>

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36 Harman’s dualism argues that there are two levels of objects: the sensual and the real. Real objects withdraw from both humans and from other objects and never actually interact with anything else. Any talk of “relationality” between objects does violence to their autonomy.

37 This is how Heidegger is traditionally interpreted by almost all philosophers excluding Harman.

The specific sense in which I apply atomism to speculative realism, while also broadly applicable to anti-relationality, is especially relevant for Harman's contention that the "watchword" for OOO is the "autonomy" of objects (which derives from their infinite "withdrawal" from all contact with otherness). Interestingly, Foucault analyzes neoliberalism as animated by an atomist logic, which he finds most paradigmatically in Hume's conception of subjecthood. Specifically for Hume, the subject is not defined by a soul in need of salvation or by natural rights in need of justice. The subject is simply the irreducible, non-transferrable possessor of an interest. So the autonomy of self-interest, which falls under economic purview, has a more fundamental logic that will always trump juridical logic. As Foucault puts it, this is what enables *homo economicus*, as distinct from *homo juridicus*, to say to the sovereign: "You must not. You must not because you cannot. You cannot because you do not know, and you do not know because you cannot know."<sup>38</sup> Similarly, on Harman's account, much like *homo economicus*, objects in their inviolable autonomy all withdraw from any gaze that would attempt to subordinate them to belonging in a larger gestalt, field or network. It is precisely this logic – one that is anti-teleological, anti-collective, and anti-relational that is shared by atomism and the return to objects posited by speculative realism.<sup>39</sup> It is interesting to note that such a conception of existence also animates the foundational neoliberal critique of Keynesian socialism. Any attempt to situate the individual's inner experience within a larger social context that mediates it risks sliding into socialism; as Von Mises writes: "Only the individual thinks. Only the individual reasons. Only the individual acts."<sup>40</sup> Or in another, more famous

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38 Michel Foucault, *Birth of Biopolitics* (New York: Picador, 2010), 283.

39 Brassier's eliminative realism is beholden to this problem, albeit in a different way. The "nemocentric" view of the brain shares the aspect of neoliberal logic that Wendy Brown describes as follows: "Neoliberalism retracts this 'beyond' and eschews this 'higher nature': the normative reign of *homo economicus* in every sphere means that... there is nothing to being apart from 'mere life.'" *Undoing the Demos* (New York: Zone Books, 2015), 44.

40 Ludwig von Mises, *Socialism: An Economic and Sociological Analysis* (New Haven: Yale UP, 1962), 113.

formulation exemplifying the same ontology of atomistic autonomy: “They’re casting their problems on society. And, you know, there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families.”<sup>41</sup> In a similar manner, as we have already seen, Harman has called for a “dethroning” of questions of ideology and power as irrelevant to those of ontology – such considerations can only interfere with pure metaphysical attempts to do justice to the autonomy of reality. Similarly, when questioned over the ethics of OOO, Harman responded: “I can’t say that I see any ‘ethical considerations’ at all as concerns calling an army an object. Whether or not an army counts as a unified object is a metaphysical question, not an ethical one.”<sup>42</sup> There are no societies of objects, only individual objects that are withdrawn, pure, and never touch each other.<sup>43</sup>

Such statements demonstrate the neo-positivist belief that the true reality is one fully divested of the biases, interests, fallibility, etc., that inevitably arise from the way a particular being is situated in the world. Thus, for Harman and his colleagues, considerations of such relationality and situatedness of being do not have any substantial philosophical status, and can only devalue our investigations into an individually autonomous, non-interactive reality. Inner, real being is not affected by such concerns over outer influences of ideology. The invidiousness of this neo-positivist desire for a “pure” philosophy – what Louise Antony calls a Drognet theory of truth as “just the facts ma’am” – has been tirelessly demonstrated by poststructural, postcolonial, queer and feminist critics for decades.<sup>44</sup> Such critics would understandably be suspi-

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41 Margaret Thatcher, Interview with Douglas Keay in *Woman’s Own*, 31 October 1987, 8–10.

42 Quoted in Peter Gratton, *Speculative Realism: Problems and Prospects* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2014), 117.

43 Exemplified by Harman’s mystical occasionalism: “When fire burns cotton... The being of the cotton withdraws from the flames even if it is consumed and destroyed. Cotton-being is concealed... from all entities that come into contact with it.” *The Quadruple Object* (Washington, DC: Zero Books, 2011), 44.

44 Louise Antony, “Quine as Feminist: The Radical Import of Naturalized Epistemology” in *A Mind of One’s Own: Feminist Essays on Reason and Objectiv-*

cious of anti-correlationist, anti-anthropocentric arguments, and the proposed solution of a “flat ontology that treats humans no differently from candles, armies, and stars.”<sup>45</sup> For such a view seems to sanction philosophical disinterest in the epistemologically and metaphysically meaningful ways that social systems of hierarchy and caste, as well as racist and sexist ideology, result in constructing unequal, real, lived experiences. That it is unnecessary, and even unintellectual for our philosophical concepts to be salient vis-à-vis such realities, seems to be entailed by the message offered us by the speculative realists.

### III. Externalism: Ontologies of Flesh and Non-Reductive Materialism

Rather than simply assuming that constructedness and material realist programs are incompatible, which seems to lead to neo-positivism, I would like to argue in this section that they are, in fact, compatible. In order to do this, I will look to two ontologies of flesh, Merleau-Ponty’s “The Intertwining – The Chiasm” and Jean-Luc Nancy’s *Corpus*. I will analyze these works as making crucial contributions to the new materialist program of combining relationality with realism, as well as finding a middle path between a materialism that is mechanical or behaviorist on the one side, and one that is mystical, monistic or panpsychist on the other. I will call this particular sort of middle-path a “non-reductive materialism,” a term that is borrowed from analytic philosophy of mind. Accordingly, a brief look at how this term originally applies is helpful.

In debates over materialism in philosophy of mind, there are at least three positions: eliminative, reductive and non-reductive materialism. Eliminativists, such as Paul Churchland (whose views are foundational for Brassier) and Daniel Dennett, argue that there are simply no minds. Thus, beliefs or “propositional at-

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*ity*. Eds. Louise Antony and Charlotte Witt (Boulder: Westview Press, 1993), 185–226.

45 Graham Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh UP, 2011), 136.

titudes” do not exist – they are simply vestiges of a mistaken “folk psychology.” Reductive materialists, such as Jaegwon Kim, believe that the mind has a reality, but that it is in no way an autonomous domain; it is always reducible to neurobiological causes. A non-reductive materialist, such as Hilary Putnam or Louise Antony, on the other hand, argues both for the principle of psychological realism (i.e., minds do exist, which the eliminativist denies) and for autonomy of the mind (i.e., that it can be viewed as causing events, which the reductivist denies). Antony offers a helpful definition of the non-reductive materialist position: “This is the view that (a) there are mental phenomena; (b) they are material in nature; and (c), notwithstanding (b), they form an autonomous domain.”<sup>46</sup> In suggesting that the stance of such non-reductive materialism is a fruitful way to understand what Merleau-Ponty and Nancy are doing, I hope in part to also demonstrate that the new materialisms could greatly benefit from a closer relationship with analytic philosophy.

Merleau-Ponty’s goal in this chapter is to undermine binaries of traditional western metaphysics – subject/object, body/mind, self/environment – in a way that is fully materialist, and yet slides into neither a non-relational, mechanistic view of matter nor a monistic, spiritualized view of matter. However, such a non-reductive position is quite a paradoxical, even perhaps embattled position to philosophically uphold. For, as someone who denies or reduces the mind will argue, to think of experience in a way that subtends mental autonomy will inevitably be debilitated by precisely the sort of dualisms one wants to avoid. This is analogous to the speculative realists’ assumption that to give any philosophical considerations to context is to slide back into anthropocentrism and correlationism. Indeed, in order to avoid such dualism, any materialist would generally accept the unconditional causal priority of physical material; that is, even a materialist who upholds the causal autonomy of mental events is compelled to agree that

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46 Louise Antony, “Everybody Has Got It: A Defense of Non-Reductive Materialism” in *Contemporary Debates in Philosophy of Mind*. Eds. Brian McLaughlin and Jonathan Cohen. (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 145.

ultimately those mental events, at some point, always begin with a physical event. If this is the case, then the mental events seem quite superfluous, as the reductivist would argue. How can one accept this causal priority of the physical, and yet still endorse the autonomy of mind? How can a *non-intentional, non-representational physical state* give rise to a state that *is* intentional and representational? These are the problems that scare many materialists into denying the mind. But it is these problems that I view ontologies of flesh as addressing, alongside the similar efforts of new materialists and non-reductive materialists.

Merleau-Ponty's guiding metaphors of chiasmic intertwining and reversibility suggest a direction for thinking about being in a way that is both realist and relationally constructed, and also neither binaristic, nor totally flat (e.g, the eliminativist denial of minds or the object-oriented claim for absolute autonomy). Merleau-Ponty argues that there is a profound interlinking between sentience and non-sentience: "an intimacy as close as between the sea and the shore."<sup>47</sup> Yet at the same time, there is always a difference between us and the world around us; for if there wasn't, then the subjective would disappear into the objective, or vice versa. Merleau-Ponty attempts to analyze this intertwining through his ontology of flesh. Deepening his earliest work on gestaltist perception, he argues that *quale* is not just a simple, isolated atom, "a pelticle of being without thickness." Rather, he argues, there is an invisible, non-substantial "connective tissue" that all sensible percepts are subtended by. The *thisness* of a given object is only possible as a difference or a variance from "its relations with the surroundings," a punctuation or a node in a "fabric," "weave," "field," or "constellation."<sup>48</sup> As William Connolly points out, drawing on a neuroscientific example, there is an interweaving of history, habit, and bodily learning, a whole way of being enmeshed with the environment, that preconditions our vision: "adults who have the neural machinery of vision repaired after having been blind from

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47 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "The Intertwining – The Chiasm" in *The Visible and the Invisible* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 131.

48 Ibid., 132.

birth remain operationally blind unless and until a new history of inter-involvements between movement, touch, and object manipulation is synthesized into the synapses of the visual system.”<sup>49</sup> The notion that there is an “absolutely hard, indivisible” object, offered “all naked,” is misguided. We find instead “momentary crystallizations” of sensations that we must nevertheless always recognize as sunk into a fabric: “a tissue that lines them, sustains them, nourishes them” and that is neither material nor ideal, but is rather a potency that arises from relation through difference.<sup>50</sup>

Similarly, in order to perceive the depth that subtends objects as distinctly *out there*, Merleau-Ponty insists that the sensation of what it feels like to be seen as an object necessarily structures, or encroaches on our very capacity to perceive objects as other. The subject-position must be imbricated with a sensation of oneself in the object-position. This crisscrossing between touching and being touchable, seeing and being seeable, is a fundamental precondition of perception. As he puts it: there would be no possible touch if the touching subject were not able to also “pass over to the rank of the touched, to descend into the things.”<sup>51</sup> As much as we think that we sentient bodies possess the non-sentient when we visualize it, we must also be possessable by the non-sentient.

To evoke this notion of imbrication, Merleau-Ponty suggests that being is a folding or a coiling over of the flesh of the world onto itself, forming the lining of a fabric, or “two leaves” that are an obverse and reverse. Although the structure of experience is this folding or overlapping of the positions of sentient subject and non-sentient object, the opening of touching the world returned by being touchable – even though the body is thus *of* the world – we never get the full experience or ideal essence that philosophy (including Husserlian phenomenology) is often searching for. It is not a question of collapsing the identities of subject and

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49 William Connolly, “Materialities of Experience” in *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency and Politics*. Eds. Diane Coole and Samantha Frost (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 137.

50 Merleau-Ponty, “Intertwining,” 133.

51 *Ibid.*, 134.

object, but rather realizing that they overlap in a way that is radically de-centred. Thus Merleau-Ponty argues that we experience a never-finished differentiation, fission and dehiscence: “reversibility is always imminent but never fully realized.”<sup>52</sup> Any attempt to collapse the touching and the touched into absolute identity, on the one hand, or to maintain that they are firmly separate, dual substances that do not participate in the same field, on the other hand, will end up reducing the complexity of this intertwining.

The way in which such an ontology of flesh-as-fold (thus, naming the way the “human” is open to or interrupted by an affinity for objectness) contributes to a non-reductive materialism is theorized by Jean-Luc Nancy. What I have in mind in particular here is the way Nancy develops his work on the politics of community (in *Being Singular Plural*) into an explicit ontology of flesh (in *Corpus*) which would subtend it at the most basic perceptual levels of subjectivity. The singular plural, a distinctly relational theory, aims to reconceptualize community – largely in response to both the capitalist neoliberal atomism analyzed above that attempts to realize only the singular, and the totalitarian communist regimes that eliminate the singular in order to emphasize only the realization of the plural. To escape this, the singular plural seeks to excavate the ways subjectivity and community are imbricated; it argues, most fundamentally, that being is always “being-with,” which means that “I” and “we” are not prior to or reducible to each other, but mutually constitutive.

In order for this relationality of the singular plural to avoid becoming a banal platitude about diversity, Nancy first theorizes it as an actual ontology of flesh. In *Corpus*, one finds that this singular plural involves a discomfiting, ambivalent ontology of flesh as being that which has a *thingness* to it, due to the way it is extended in space outside itself. This thingness of flesh is constitutive of the singular plural, for it means that flesh involves a mutual exposure and contacting of other bodies, other singularities, such that it is impossible to reduce flesh to its mere function as a subject-position. This is succinctly expressed by one of Nancy’s most impor-

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52 Ibid., 147.

tant terms, *expeausition* (punning on “peau,” the French for “skin”) which defines flesh’s affinity for alien, inhuman thingness and objecthood – that is, its “being-exposed” or the inside which senses it is outside in relationship with other bodies.<sup>53</sup> Being flesh, then, is more capacious than being “human”; flesh names that aspect of being that is *open* space rather than simply space that is already full and thus nonimpenetrable and non-interruptible.

However, where Nancy’s ontology of flesh becomes most relevant is in its disruption of inner/outer, surface/depth binaries. He develops this fundamental outsidedness of the body – its aptitude for touchable, penetrable thingness – into one of his most important theses: *exscription*. The *exscription* of the body, according to Nancy, is the way in which flesh is inscribed as outside itself. Based on this notion, Nancy argues that the flesh refers outwardly, relationally to other singularities which situate it, mediate it, consume and construct it. As a result, he develops a powerful theory that appears to be both distinctly materialist, and yet also non-reductive, retaining a notion of the inner mental: “The *soul* is the form of a body, and therefore a body itself.”<sup>54</sup> This disruption of dualisms is taken up most explicitly in *Corpus* in the essay “On the Soul.” As the title suggests, he is also quite provocatively and blatantly claiming that materialism, in order to be non-reductive, must reclaim a healthy sense of the soul: “I don’t want to speak of a body without a soul, any more than of a soul without a body.”<sup>55</sup> He insists, paradoxically, that this does not regress into dualism or the bourgeois transcendent subject; it does not entail the insipid belief in “a very ugly Socrates who’s very beautiful inside” nor does it mean that “there’s a little subject back behind.”<sup>56</sup> Rather, Nancy argues that the soul is the form of the body – not that we have the body on one side, as inert non-sentient matter, and then the sentient soul on the other side as the spontaneous thing that gives it shape and or-

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53 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), 11.

54 Ibid., 75.

55 Ibid., 129.

56 Ibid., 132.

ganization. Rather, this formal soul is not substance but the mode, articulation or way through which the body exists as a body.

Pushing forward the way that flesh is singular plural, that it is an *open* space, he argues that flesh is that which is not a mass. A mass on the one hand is that which is a “closed, shut, full, total, immanent world, a world or a thing, whichever, so on its own and within itself that it wouldn’t even touch itself, and we wouldn’t either, a world alone to itself and in itself.” On the other hand, “the body is the open.”<sup>57</sup> Nancy argues that to be open (what defines a body from the impenetrable mass) means fundamentally to be touchable by something that is other than yourself, which means crucially, he thinks, to be able to be “suspended” or “interrupted” from one’s grasp on the world as subject. He suggests then, I argue, that a non-reductive materialism is one where the soul is not some ineffable, “vaporous,” authentic, *interior* identity; rather, the soul is that which is *outer* to the body. That is, it is the body’s openness, its ability to be touched, interrupted, sensed and exposed to others that gives it its sentience. It is, instead of the authentic inner, the tension with these outer, communal contacts, human and nonhuman alike, that mediate and form the body. This is where Nancy is particularly helpful in clarifying Merleau-Ponty’s thought; Nancy critiques the way in which Merleau-Ponty’s work with Husserl’s famous example of the hands as “self-touching” tends to refer back to interiority. Nancy suggests that this image of flesh as an open fold means the way it always *first* has being on the outside. This is what Nancy means to do by provocatively deploying the word *soul* as a way to further his thesis of exscription: the body is always first outside itself, exscribed and touched as an object in relation to others, *before* it can consequently constitute an interiority. Nancy then gives us a definition of the soul that is diametrically opposed to traditional ones. He insists that we do not have an “interior” soul; rather, Nancy argues that we always begin with an “exteriority” in order to have any sensation of self at all. The soul is literally the body’s *extension*, its “being outside,” its “*ex*-istence,” its “articulation” in relation to other bodies that it touches and that touch it.

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57 Ibid., 123.

This Nancyan ontology of flesh has considerable political implications. Nancy suggests that if we give ourselves soulless, non-touchable bodies (as eliminativists and reductivists claim), then we lose the necessity of a given body's existence; the *haecceity* or *thisness* of the body's soulful exscription. If we instead eliminate soul, we get mass, the body's opposite: "Where there's a mass of bodies, there's no more body, and where there's a mass of bodies, there's a mass grave."<sup>58</sup> However, poststructural ideology critique has dogmatically avoided such ontologies of flesh. As a result, putting ontologies of flesh into dialogue with Foucaultian and Deleuzian political theory, for example, has been regrettably undertheorized. The major innovation of Nancy is to synthesize the way a fully material, real flesh relates to these issues. Recent work has, however, tried to recuperate a sense of political relevance to Merleau-Ponty's work that may be helpful in understanding the politics of flesh so central to Nancy's thinking. Diane Coole for example, points out that both Foucault and Deleuze inherited from Merleau-Ponty the conception of the subject as a fold or as hollow. Similarly, William Connolly puts Merleau-Ponty's work on perception into dialogue with Foucault to suggest that together they give us a more powerful concept of the "micropolitics of perception" – the notion that "power is coded into perception."<sup>59</sup> Connolly argues that both Merleau-Ponty and Foucault show in rich detail that "perception requires a prior *disciplining* of the senses in which a rich history of inter-involvement sets the stage for experience." The result draws together the way ontologies of flesh argue that perception is conditioned by a feeling oneself as passing over to the rank of objects, with a contemporary sense of the way in a disciplinary society this implicit sense morphs into being an "object of *surveillance* in a national security state."<sup>60</sup> Moreover, TV shows like the *O'Reilly Factor*, Connolly argues, intersperse rhythm, image, music, and sound to tap into a tonal, mood-based, gut-level belief that is often much stronger than a fully conscious one. According

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58 Ibid., 123.

59 Connolly, "Materialities," 189.

60 Ibid., 188.

to ad executive Robert Heath, the most successful ads take place at this background level, in such a way that one's full mental attention is not focused on it, but is somewhat distracted. This tactic encourages "implicit learning" below the level of focused analysis. Thus the ad disseminates "'triggers' that insinuate a mood or an association into perception." Such implicit background learning, according to Heath, "is on all the time," is "automatic," and is "almost inexhaustible in its capacity and more durable" in its retention.<sup>61</sup>

Similarly, William Wilkerson has interpreted Merleau-Ponty's emphasis on the inseparability of exteriority and relationality from *thisness* as providing a critique of the Freudian *Id*. In Wilkerson's reflective essay on coming to terms with his sexual orientation, he remarks on the phenomenon of how one's own supposedly "inner" desire can be ambiguous and even radically misinterpreted. Glossing an example from Naomi Scheman, Wilkerson argues that the Freudian *Id* does not substantially revise the Cartesian dualism of desire and emotion as something that the "inner" soul has a privileged access to (the sort of interior starting point that both Nancy and Merleau-Ponty criticize, as we have seen). If Descartes gives us a picture of a "stream" of consciousness on which float the clearly labeled leaves of sensation, thoughts and feelings, then Freud merely gives us a picture in which some of the leaves have sunk (been repressed) to the bottom of the stream; one must infer their presence by tracing the minute influences they exert on the surface-level flow of the stream. On the contrary, Wilkerson argues that Merleau-Ponty's theory of perception, that I believe is even more profoundly achieved by Nancy's work on flesh as the singular plural, gives a starting point of experience that is radically exterior and predicated on outer, contextual relations. Thus, our desire is not simply there, existing already as a leaf waiting to come to the surface; rather, drawing on Merleau-Ponty's theory of experience, Wilkerson argues that desire is constructed and "mediated by one's current tasks and social location."<sup>62</sup> It is this constructed nature of

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61 Ibid., 189.

62 William Wilkerson, "Is There Something You Need to Tell Me?: Coming Out and the Ambiguity of Experience" in *Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism*. Eds. Paula Moya and Michael Hames-García

desire as invested by social relations that makes desire “not self-evidently meaningful but rather contextualized, ambiguous, and subject to interpretation.”<sup>63</sup> Wilkerson’s interpretation of Merleau-Ponty, like Nancy, Coole and Connolly, helps further show how we can think about the micropolitics of perception and ontologies of flesh. Such a reading of ontologies of flesh resonates profoundly with the Deleuzian concept of molecularity and multiplicity, the schizoanalytic critique of the Freudian *Id* and the dogmatic insistence on maintaining the authentic, inner, atomistic “I.” Desiring-production, contrary to the concept of the *Id*, is not some hidden reservoir of repressed desires applying pressure on the ego via codified symbols. Desire, on the contrary, is directly related to social production. Thus, Deleuze and Guattari argue that the Freudian insistence that sexual libido must be sublimated (and repressed) before social investments can occur is simply to reintroduce “a new brand of idealism” that replaces outer, socio-material productions with inner, impenetrable spiritual representations.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, we can see how profoundly Nancy and Merleau-Ponty show us the depth and accuracy of the Foucaultian aphorism: *the soul is the prison of the body*. In sum, the non-reductive materialism proposed by an ontology of flesh combined with poststructural micropolitics is one of externalism. This externalist account avoids the pitfalls of the neo-positivist, atomist commitment to an autonomous “inner” life of objects, which views the “political” considerations of the external context as inconsequential and even as anathema to the pure, objective “metaphysical” ones.

The externalist, non-reductive account presents instead a post-positivist conception of materiality.<sup>65</sup> Such an account is not predicated on a notion of being as unchanging, unaffected by bias, and accessible by a privileged introspection to the inner self. Objectivity, then, rather than being some authentic truth, would derive from the specific location of a being in relation to its external

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(Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 257.

63 Ibid., 262.

64 Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*, 24.

65 I am indebted here to the work of Satya Mohanty on developing the concept of “post-positivist” and “realist” identity in philosophy of race.

circumstances. This finds a middle-path between relativism and the neo-positivism that baldly rejects the findings of poststructuralism. I have argued that Merleau-Ponty and Nancy crucially advance such an externalist, post-positivist ontology in their work. Moreover, I have interpreted this work as sharing a productive compatibility with the non-reductive materialist position in philosophy of mind. For example, the thesis that being is the *ex*-istence of the body as touchable by other bodies shares much in common with the non-reductivists' rejection of eliminativism and reductivism. Reductive and eliminative positions argue that a single physical state is directly responsible for a single mental state. Similar to speculative realism, such a position is anti-relational: it maintains reliance on a notion of individualism where it is the innerness of an organism's biology alone, in a vacuum, as it were, that determines its behavior. However, the non-reductivist position radically argues that internalism fails to give a robust account for the fundamental outsidedness of matter, being too abstract and interior. Rather, the mental state is radically dependent on its context, such that a phenomenon is always multiply realizable depending on the particular, functional situation at hand. This successfully taps into the fundamental outsidedness, extension and exposure – or even soulfulness – of matter that speculative realism fails to adequately account for in its theories of absolute inner autonomy.<sup>66</sup>

Contrary to the anti-correlationist notion that relationality always slides into a phenomenalist denial of materiality, a radically externalist account is predicated on the finding that relation matters if we are to have successful materialism. Moreover, such an account helps avoid certain pitfalls of the new materialist “return

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<sup>66</sup> This externalism attends to the growing empirical proof of the brain's plasticity. Catherine Malabou's in *Before Tomorrow* is particularly promising for providing a neuroscientific backdrop for the non-reductivism I am suggesting. This work shows that mental states are not linked in any straightforward or exhaustively determinable way to the neural “firings” of specific regions of the brain. Rather, there is a plasticity or alterability between the regions of the brain that cause a given state of being (i.e., being is multiply realizable), supporting the idea that there is, in fact, a radical, hermeneutic indeterminacy, or at least context-dependency of matter's inter-involvements.

to objects,” and thus perhaps points the way to the “special kind” of materialist realism that combines external constructedness with a sense of the real liveliness of matter. Here, the world possesses and touches us, and thus seems to exhibit some of the activeness that Bennett, Latour and the speculative realists want to develop. However, this activeness is not biologically reducible to any genetic inherency in the matter itself. Instead, material activeness evolves out of a radical relationality with other matter that, even if “sentient,” always knows its equal non-sentience and objectness, rendering any rigid sentient/non-sentient binary untenable. Such a new materialist, non-reductive, externalist ontology is indeed richly amenable to political implications gleaned from social constructionism, notwithstanding the speculative realist’s rejection of such a project.

## 0.

< an intervention into the critical discourse around  
Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* >

PHILLIP LOBO

### I – The Beginning of the End

The threat of nuclear annihilation has been supplanted in the cultural imaginary by a subtler yet no less serious crisis: the prospect of ecological catastrophe and global climate change. Not that the nuclear threat has disappeared or even dissipated, but the contemporary collective imaginary now feels less the shadow of the mushroom cloud and more the steady rising of the oceans. Yet the question before us today is much the same as confronted Derrida when he spoke at a 1984 conference on nuclear war: what can an assemblage of non-experts do with the looming prospect of environmental disaster? Might we, scholars of “the humanities, history, literature, languages, philology, the social sciences” and as such “foreign to any exercise of power” consider ourselves competent to address a crisis that, like nuclear war, “may decide, irreversibly, the fate of what is still now and then called humanity – plus the fate of a few other species”?<sup>1</sup>

Derrida's answer falls just short of an imperative: *For such a feat we may consider ourselves competent*. His reasoning is simple: because nuclear war is “a phenomenon whose essential feature is that of being *fabulously textual*, through and through.” This is because nuclear war, “has never occurred, itself; it is a non-event” which

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1 Jacques Derrida, “No Apocalypse, Not Now,” *Diacritics* 14.2, trans. Catherine Porter, Phillip Lewis, (Baltimore: John's Hopkins UP, 1984), 20, 22.

“...can only be the signified referent, never the real referent (present or past) of a discourse or a text.” As such, nuclear war exists *only* as “a pure invention: in the sense in which it is said that a myth, an image, a fiction, a utopia, a rhetorical figure, a fantasy, a phantasm, are inventions.”<sup>2</sup>

The temporo-ontological moorings of climate change are distinct from those of nuclear war. As opposed to nuclear annihilation, which has not and cannot have happened, climate change not only *is* happening, it already has happened and will – barring some unforeseen event or invention – continue to happen regardless of what action we take in order to prevent, delay or avoid it. Yet it is this very temporal smearing which makes climate change’s representation *as* an event challenging. Nuclear war better fits the tradition of eschatology, with its near-instantaneous shift from “before” to “after.” That the world could end in a day is, while terrifying, temporally comprehensible to human beings – it is not so unlike the expectation of our own individual deaths. Climate change, by comparison, is temporally confusing. Rather than taking place in a matter of seconds, it is spread out over decades and even centuries, the result of ongoing human activity, an inheritance of our industrial epoch, a debt accrued and still accruing.<sup>3</sup>

Both of these apocalyptic prospects are symptomatic of the larger epochal destining of our era, an era dubbed by some climate scientists as the “anthropocene,” in which human society has become a force of nature unto itself, an unprecedented state of affairs whereby humans are collectively “pushing the Earth toward planetary *terra incognita*.”<sup>4</sup> It is no longer a matter of decision, of whether or not to fire a missile. Such a disaster might be certain (certain in the totality of its disastrousness) but it was never

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2 Ibid., 23.

3 Robert Henson and Duncan Clark. *The Rough Guide to Climate Change* (New York: Continuum, 2001), 19.

4 Steffen, Will, Paul J. Crutzen, and John R. McNeill. “The Anthropocene: Are Humans Now Overwhelming the Great Forces of Nature.” *AMBIO: A Journal of the Human Environment* 36.8 (2007): 614-21. Web. 13 Mar. 2017. -- See also: Chakrabarty, Dipesh. “The Climate of History: Four Theses.” *Critical Inquiry* 35.2 (2009): 197-222.

assured. Climate change presses in on us from the other side, uncertain yet inevitable: it no longer matters if humans would opt to wield their power. Humanity, in its very manner of revealing and representing beings, will determine the fate of the world.

Humans achieved this power through what Martin Heidegger dubbed ‘enframing’ – *Ge-stell* – a method of ontological organization which makes possible the practice of modern science by securing a “ground plan” for experimentation. *Ge-stell* demands “that nature reports itself in some way or other that is identifiable through calculation and that it remains orderable as a system of information.”<sup>5</sup> Thus all the beings of nature revealed through *Ge-stell* manifest as calculable, and thus convertible, exchangeable, and ready for use, much to the advantage of modern industry.<sup>6</sup> Yet it is not only nature which undergoes the rigors of this revealing, as Hans Ruin notes: “In this situation the role of humans also obtains a new meaning; they are the ones who have to enact this ordering or commanding, this *Bestellen*, but at the same time are the ones exposed to it, as themselves something commanded and ordered about.”<sup>7</sup>

This is the third apocalypse we face: the end of what is understood as “the human” at its most fundamental. The anthropocene places the very essence of the human – our being-in-the-world – within the power of humans to change, and thus *be* changed; as never before the basis for our being is made subject to the myths and motivations, fantasies and fanaticisms, which will send what is still now and then called humanity to our common destiny. This cannot but concern those of us who fall under the

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5 Martin Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” in *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 23.

6 Indeed, the connection between *Ge-stell* and capitalism, which converts labor into exchangeable form in order to achieve “the maximum yield at the minimum expense,” is as fundamental as its link to science. *Ibid.*, 15.

7 Hans Ruin, “Ge-stell: Enframing as the Essence of Technology,” in *Martin Heidegger: Key Concepts*, ed. Bret W. Davis (Durham: Acumen, 2010), 191. – And indeed, modern biotechnology most fully realizes the essence of technology as primordially affecting humanity, through the prospect of control over the human genome.

disciplinary umbrella of “the humanities.”

## II – Apocalypse Please

Published in 2003, Margaret Atwood’s novel, *Oryx and Crake*, remains a trenchant and troubling depiction of an all-too-possible future, married to an engineered apocalypse and the birth of a strange, posthuman Eden. Extrapolating political and cultural trends of the present – the waning influence of the disciplinary humanities, the predominance of commercialized biotechnology, the eclipse of national governments by global corporations, precipitous disparities in economic equality, cascading environmental destabilization due to unchecked development, and capitalism’s speedy “cashing in” on the very disasters it precipitates – the novel confronts some of the most pressing problems facing the world as it plunges into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Following the friendship and lovers’ rivalry between the narrator, Jimmy (also known as “Snowman”), and the titular Crake, a biotechnologist of unparalleled brilliance, it functions both as a convincing example of speculative fiction in the realist mode, and as an allegorical critique of environmental discourse.

There has been some debate around how to view *Oryx and Crake*.<sup>8</sup> It vexes generic categories by shifting between registers; it is both parable and *bildungsroman*, both cautionary tale and adventure romance. Foremost, however, are the charged terms “dystopic” and “post-apocalyptic”. Both pertain thanks to the structure of *Oryx and Crake*, in which the sole-survivor narrator Jimmy/Snowman ekes out his existence in a genre-appropriate post-apocalyptic

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8 Initially Atwood herself argued against the term science fiction, preferring “speculative fiction” on the basis of its pressing potential reality, that instead of depicting “monsters and spaceships” it portrays a future that “could really happen.” To wit, the novel’s science was insufficiently fictional, its depicted future too pressing to be relegated to the “literary ghetto” of impossibility genre science fiction shares with genre fantasy. (Mancuso, Cecilia. “Speculative or Science Fiction? As Margaret Atwood Shows, There Isn’t Much Distinction.” *Public Books*. Guardian News and Media, 10 Aug. 2016. Web. 13 Mar. 2017.)

wasteland while recalling the dystopian society which preceded the catastrophe. The lynch-pin, then, is the apocalyptic event itself, towards which the narrative approaches from either end, backwards and forwards.

This apocalyptic preoccupation is timely. As Hui-chuan Chang states, in her own analysis of the novel's generic qualification, the "predominance of the apocalyptic in *Oryx and Crake*... is a reflection of the 'growing tide of eschatological sentiment in both genre fiction and mainstream cultural analysis' at the turn of the present century."<sup>9</sup> Indeed, *Oryx and Crake* functions as a contemporary apocalypse, emerging from an apocalyptic tradition reaching back into antiquity. As Mark Bosco argues, "Atwood's novel grows out of [a] tradition," to wit the "...long line of oracular literary texts in Western culture."<sup>10</sup> This connection rests not only in the novel's portrait of a devastated world, but more importantly in its depiction of transgressions of previously secure ontological boundaries. The novel's setting is replete with biotechnological innovations and hybrid creatures that defy such limits – pig/baboon, snake/rat, raccoon/skunk, chicken/hookworm and, ultimately, the hybrid humanoid Crakers – striking some characters with religious dread. Fearful of "interfering with the building blocks of life," they sense that "some line has been crossed, some boundary transgressed," and that the result is "sacrilegious."<sup>11</sup>

This troubling of boundaries is the condition of apocalyptic sentiment and discourse. As John R. Hall asserts, apocalypses proliferate when "[p]reviously taken-for-granted understandings of 'how things are' break down." While the process is frightening, it also contains radical transformative potential whereby "[h]

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9 Chang, Hui-chuan. "Critical Dystopia Reconsidered: Octavia Butler's Parable Series and Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* as Post-Apocalyptic Dystopias," *Tamkang Review* 41.2 (2011), 11; here Chang is quoting page 165 of Veronica Hollinger's *Apocalypse Coma*.

10 Mark, S.J. Bosco "The Apocalyptic Imagination in *Oryx and Crake*," in *Margaret Atwood: The Robber Bride, Alias Grace, Oryx and Crake*, ed. J. B. Bouson (New York: Continuum, 2010), 157.

11 Margaret Atwood, *Oryx and Crake: A Novel* (New York: Nan A. Talese, 2003), 57, 206.

historically new possibilities are revealed, so awesome as to foster collective belief that “life as we know it” has been transgressed, never to be the same again. Events or prophecies mark a collective crisis so striking that it undermines normal perceptions of reality for those involved.”<sup>12</sup> Apocalyptic times are periods of epochal change whereby the certainty of *beings* is lost. Apocalypses emerge due to *ontological crisis*.

*Oryx and Crake* is appropriately concerned with ontological issues. The question of what things *are*, and how the collapse of certain social structures undermine the very terms by which beings can be described, plays out in numerous passages. Early in the novel’s “post-apocalyptic” temporality the narrator, Jimmy/Snowman, is asked by the adolescent Crakers, the children of the genetically modified “New Humans”, to account for objects from “before”:

Opening their sack, the children chorus, “Oh Snowman, what have we found?” They lift out the objects, hold them up as if offering them for sale: a hubcap, a piano key, a chunk of pale-green pop bottle smoothed by the ocean. A plastic BlyssPluss container, empty; a ChickieNobs Bucket O’Nubbins, ditto. A computer mouse, or the busted remains of one, with a long wiry tail.

Snowman feels like weeping. What can he tell them? There’s no way of explaining to them what these curious items are, or were.<sup>13</sup>

Some of these objects begin as unknown even to the reader, who is invited to ponder the setting’s obscured ontology. This doubt also extends beyond inanimate objects. Snowman’s own being is theorized over, subjected to experimental ontologies based on everything from species, to diet, to sexual differentiation:

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12 John R. Hall, *Apocalypse: From Antiquity to the Empire of Modernity* (Cambridge, UK: Polity, 2009), 3.

13 Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 7.

...[The adolescent Crakers have] accumulated a stock of lore, of conjecture about him: *Snowman was once a bird but he's forgotten how to fly and the rest of his feathers fell out, and so he is cold and he needs a second skin, and he has to wrap himself up. No: he's cold because he eats fish, and fish are cold. No: he wraps himself up because he's missing his man thing, and he doesn't want us to see.*<sup>14</sup>

Even the name “Snowman” – short for “Abominable Snowman” – is taken for its association with an ontologically uncertain hybrid, one “existing and not existing, flickering at the edges of blizzards, apelike man or manlike ape, known only through rumors and backward-pointing footprints.”<sup>15</sup>

Elana Gomel locates this tendency towards ontological questioning, and ontological resolution, within other contemporary apocalyptic narratives which,

...link both apocalypse and utopia with a plot pattern that might be called “the ontological detective story,” thus displaying an additional aspect of Western eschatology: its connection with the hermeneutics of secrecy. ... What I have called “the ontological detective story” comprises texts in which the world where the action takes place becomes an object of investigation, a mystery to be solved, a secret to be uncovered. ... The question to be answered is not “who done it” but rather “what is it?”; the secret of death is supplanted by the secret of being.<sup>16</sup>

Thus contemporary apocalypse narratives consist of a playing out of Barthes’ hermeneutic code, whereby “...this technical “end” very often appears in the lurid colors of the literal end of the world.”<sup>17</sup> True to the etymological roots of apocalypse, the ancient Greek word for “unveiling,” such narratives tie the end of the world to a totalizing knowledge whereby “the world does not merely become visible, it is *made* visible, divested of its obscuri-

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14 Ibid., 8.

15 Ibid., 7.

16 Elana Gomel. “Mystery, Apocalypse and Utopia: The Case of the Ontological Detective Story,” *Science Fiction Studies* 22.3 (1995): 346.

17 Ibid.

ties, clarified into total intelligibility.”<sup>18</sup> Thus: “[i]n the ontological detective story the problematic of order is displaced onto the structure of the world as a whole. Secrecy equates a flaw in reality: knowledge – it’s apocalyptic rectification.”<sup>19</sup> And there is something apocalyptic in the very constitution of *Ge-stell*, in its totalizing power, its drive to make all beings into objects of knowledge.

*Oryx and Crake* offers up its ontological mysteries but provides no such closure: its distinctly apocalyptic (and apocalyptically distinct) tone emerges from its refusal to do so. This, however, has not prevented numerous critics from attempting to foreclose this ontological openness with readings reliant upon a notion of clear oppositions, cast in disciplinary and moral terms.

### III – The Ecocritical Paradox

Since its publication *Oryx and Crake* has quickly been adopted as a prophecy-cum-warning by a number of ecocritical works, an appropriate response considering the text’s foregrounding of ecological collapse and the motivations behind its apocalyptic climax. Particularly significant in the context of its critical reception is the dynamic between the two main characters – Crake the scientist, and Jimmy the rhetorician – which lends itself to analogies about the often distrustful dialogue between the humanities and the sciences, one that is already implicit within ecocritical discourse.<sup>20</sup>

Unfortunately it is common for readings in this vein to default to one of the most problematic, yet popular, strains of ecocritical discourse – that of “pastoral ecocriticism”<sup>21</sup> – as well as to foster a sentiment of sectarian division, using the text to direct a mis-

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18 Ibid.

19 Ibid., 352.

20 Greg Gerrard, *Ecocriticism* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 10-11.

21 The pastoral is premised on “the idea of nature as a stable, enduring counterpoint to the disruptive energy of human societies” which, while it is no longer supported by environmental science, “continues to shape environmental discourse”; it infers an ecocritical position that calls upon humans to assume a harmonious relationship with this alleged natural equilibrium. See, Gerrard, *Ecocriticism*, 64-65.

placed polemic.<sup>22</sup> When viewed within the historical tradition this is unsurprising: apocalypses have long foretold not only the end of the world but further identified the parties that will engage in the eschaton's final struggle. Thus we find in *Oryx and Crake*, or rather in its critical literature, a modern instantiation of this kind of sectarian thinking whereby one group are deemed to have "access to truth" of which the guilty party are ignorant.<sup>23</sup>

This struggle plays out across well-worn lines of opposition:

human vs. nature  
 reason vs. emotion  
 rationality vs. creativity  
 secular vs. spiritual  
 modernity vs. tradition  
 artificial vs. natural  
 instrumental vs. cultural

The struggle is ultimately summed up in that disciplinary opposition embodied in the friendship and rivalry between Crake and Jimmy: Science vs. Humanities. No oracular vision is needed to discern which element the critical literature tends to favor. Time and time again the critics exhort us to read in line with the author's presumed and oft-cited intention to "[show] the calamitous impact that scientific knowledge, if misused, has on the human realm."<sup>24</sup> Or, more succinctly, to level a "critique of scientific arrogance".<sup>25</sup>

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22 The range of ecocriticism is broad and includes many strains that address the inadequacy of the pastoral mode. However, much of the critical literature around *Oryx and Crake* emphatically leans towards the pastoral, for reasons that are symptomatic both of the text's content as well as the present anxiety about the fate of the humanities as an academic field. As the most Romantic instantiation of ecocritical discourse, it is called upon to refute the mastery of the sciences.

23 Martha Himmelfarb. *The Apocalypse: A Brief History* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 50-51.

24 J. B. Bouson, "It's Game Over Forever: Atwood's Satiric Vision of a Bioengineered Posthuman Future in *Oryx and Crake*," *The Journal of Commonwealth Literature* 39.3 (2004): 140.

25 Karen F. Stein, "Problematic Paradise in *Oryx and Crake*," in *Mar-*

This line is often accompanied by an assumed counter-valuation of those things seen as classically opposed to the amoral, Godless science which rules the day: that is to say “traditional wisdom” and “ancient, enduring spiritual belief.” In this view *Oryx and Crake* is deemed a “Prophecy” whose purpose, ecological salvation, is “best achieved by those of us who, like Jimmy/Snowman, value the power of words.”<sup>26</sup>

Yet at once we find an instability between the terms, most of all in the category of the “human” which falls on the side of “science” when opposed to nature, but which itself becomes “naturalized” when faced with the prospect of biotechnological modification. “Culture” too, is similarly naturalized to “the human” and the common critical response inevitably leads to the valorization of humanity through “the humanities”, the very discipline out of which the critical literature is born. Thus these pairs are not only reductive, they are pathological, emerging from the sectarian “fear and resentment” which apocalypses tend to generate, along with a concurrent assertion of the “elect” status of the humanities as opposed to the amoral efforts of the Frankensteinian scientists. In short, these critiques pay lip service to nature (or, rather, Nature<sup>27</sup>) but end up valorizing *humanity* as defined by the *cultural humanities*.<sup>28</sup>

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*Margaret Atwood: The Robber Bride, Alias Grace, Oryx and Crake*, ed. J. B. Bouson (New York: Continuum, 2010), 146.

26 Shannon Hengen, “Moral/Environmental Debt in Payback and *Oryx and Crake*.” *Margaret Atwood: The Robber Bride, Alias Grace, Oryx and Crake*, ed. J. B. Bouson (New York: Continuum, 2010), 131, 140.

27 That is to say, nature as ideologically personified/reified/deified either through New Age spirituality or the Lovelockian formulation of the self-regulating “Gaia.” From an ontological perspective the pastoral ecocritic’s totalized “Nature” amounts to the role of God as *ens essendi* - the substance and guarantor of the authentic being of beings.

28 An attitude exemplified by Jayne Glover’s assertion that the stakes of *Oryx and Crake* are how “to create and ecologically ethical society without becoming instrumentalist or destroying that which makes us human” while defining “what makes us human” as “idols and funerals, kings and slavery,” which are worth preserving as they are what “separate us from animals.” Jayne Glover “Human/Nature: Ecological Philosophy In Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx And Crake*.” *English Studies in Africa* 52.2 (2009): 50-62.)

Far from confirming a pastoral-ecocritical attitude, *Oryx and Crake* challenges it. An examination of the more traditional, humanist takes on Atwood's work exposes the strain placed on these arguments when applied to a text which refuses to be domesticated into these particular discourses. Indeed, careful counter-readings uncover no small amount of guilt on the part of the "humanities," in its apparent inadequacy to, and even complicity in, the present crises within the very definition of *humanity*.

In the face of this threat to the "natural" constitution of humanity – a concept central to pastoral ecocriticism as well as traditional humanist ideology – it should come as no surprise that the critical literature is very concerned with what qualifies as "human" and "natural" in the text. This is most clearly seen when dealing with the Crakers, the "genetically modified, peaceful, sexually harmonious New Humans" who inhabit Atwood's post-apocalyptic terrain, establishing a "tiny utopia."<sup>29</sup> Modified to exist within a sustainable ecological niche, they are also designed to have cyclical sexuality and an incapacity to understand representations or possess religious reverence, mitigating or outright negating the intraspecies conflicts caused by sexual frustration and ideology.

Thus the Crakers formally answer the imperative that each being take their place within the natural order – they are designed to be just that which pastoral ecocriticism would have humans become, no longer alienated from or exploitative of our natural surroundings. For the Crakers, Nature is no longer the Other, and they are no longer Others to Nature. Yet the ecocritical paradox again rears its head as we find ourselves dealing with a definition of "human nature" which itself is a "separation" from our natural roots. Within the critical literature Crakers are frequently decried as insufficiently human,<sup>30</sup> yet what makes them inhuman is their

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29 Margaret Atwood, *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination* (New York: Nan A. Talese/Doubleday, 2011), 93.

30 E.g., "Crake's creatures... have been engineered ... to lack the emotional complexities of humans." Stein, "Problematic Paradise," 143; "... what has been bred out of the Crakers are the very fractures that define our humanity, the attributes that create culture and religion and... a meaningful history." Bosco, "Apocalyptic Imagination," 165; "...the Crakers are specifi-

very lack of that which alienates humans from nature – a capacity for culture and representation. Indeed, Crake has aimed to make them incapable of *Ge-stell*, never having “to create houses or tools or weapons” or the “harmful symbolisms” that lead humans, through abstraction, to enframe nature.<sup>31</sup> The irony is that he accomplishes this feat through a supreme act of enframement, plundering the animal kingdom for adaptations, treating the entire biosphere as a standing reserve.<sup>32</sup>

Thus the Crakers inhabit a complementary position to the paradoxical state of the human within the pastoral ecocritical utopia: whereas humans *ought* to play their “natural” part but stubbornly refuse to, the Crakers actually *are* able to exist in harmony to nature, but only by virtue of their “unnatural” origins.

#### IV – The Humanist Complicity

The blame must lie with Crake, then – or so this logic would suggest – using biotechnology to neutralize those harmful but “intrinsic” hierarchies like kings and slavery and thus “reject[ing] ... what makes us human.”<sup>33</sup> And indeed, the next step in the common critical discourse is to put Crake on trial and, by extension, science as such.

Much of the critical literature deploys Crake as both an ecocritical and humanist scapegoat, denouncing “the misuse of science” and “the arrogance of Promethean scientists who not only seek to manipulate and control nature”<sup>34</sup> In his “extreme instrumentalism”<sup>35</sup> Crake fails to “believe in God or Nature,” or even, “in the value of human life.”<sup>36</sup> He is painted as Jimmy’s constitutive other, drawing up clear disciplinary battle lines, portraying

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cally designed without features like emotion, love, imagination or creativity. ... Crake’s rejection of ‘culture’ therefore is a rejection of part of what makes us human.” Glover, “Human/Nature,” 57.

31 Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 305.

32 Ibid., 164.

33 Glover, “Human/Nature,” 57.

34 Stein, “Problematic Paradise,” 143. Note the capitalisation of terms.

35 Glover, “Human/Nature,” 55.

36 Bouson “*It’s Game Over Forever*,” 146

them as “opposites” whereby “Crake is the cynical, unsentimental, hyperrational, brilliant scientist; Jimmy is the humanist who loves language and art.”<sup>37</sup>

Yet for all that Jimmy/Snowman serves as a humanist stand-in, he is a poor ecocritic. Indeed, Crake’s ethics – environmental and otherwise – frequently seem more developed than those of Jimmy, as their discussions reveal:

“When any civilization is dust and ashes,” [Jimmy] said, “art is all that’s left. Images, words, music. Imaginative structures. Meaning – human meaning, that is – is defined by them. You have to admit that.”

“That’s not quite all that’s left over,” said Crake. “The archaeologists are just as interested in gnawed bones and old bricks and ossified shit these days. Sometimes more interested. They think human meaning is defined by those things too.”<sup>38</sup>

Karen Stein believes these words provide “a clue to Crake’s dangerous thinking.”<sup>39</sup> Yet what should strike us is the danger of abjecting those aspects of human being, the shit and the bones - that Crake places on equal grounds with “imaginative structures.” While the humanist is invited to identify with Jimmy’s outrage and frustration, it is telling that in this, as in every debate Jimmy and Crake engage in, Crake triumphs. Our sympathy may lead us to echo Jimmy’s resentment at the implication that “human meaning,” the wheelhouse of the cultural humanities, can be reduced to the seeming obscenity of excrement or public masturbation.<sup>40</sup> However, the valorization of culture is hardly coherent with a robust ecocritical stance, which ought to view the biological and cultural as mutually entangled, and if we suggest Crake’s interest in them is somehow a moral failing, another symptom of his lack of empathy or his “scientific arrogance,” we must at least attribute to Jimmy an equivalent failure: “humanist sentimentality.”

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37 Stein, “Problematic Paradise,” 149.

38 Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 167.

39 Ibid., 150.

40 Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 167.

Such a failure may indeed be the cause of our “fears and resentments;” Jimmy’s are written into the text, produced by just such an anxiety. The above passage continues, uninterrupted: “Jimmy would have liked to have said *Why are you always putting me down?* but he was afraid of the possible answers, *because it’s so easy* being one of them.”<sup>41</sup>

If it’s easy it may be because Jimmy makes it easy. One example of this emerges around a game they play as adolescents:

Blood and Roses was a trading game, along the lines of Monopoly. The Blood side played with human atrocities for the counters, atrocities on a large scale. [...] The Roses side played with human achievements. Artworks, scientific breakthroughs, stellar works of architecture, helpful inventions. *Monuments to the soul’s magnificence*, they were called in the game. [...] The exchange rates – one *Mona Lisa* equalled Bergen-Belsen, one Armenian genocide equalled the *Ninth Symphony* plus three great pyramids – were suggested, but there was room for haggling.<sup>42</sup>

The game’s procedural rhetoric is pessimistic, as evidenced by the fact that “the Blood player usually won, but winning meant you inherited a wasteland.” Crake identifies this as the point while Jimmy bemoans it as pointless. To call the game pointless is at best an act of repression, as Jimmy’s unconscious later registers the lesson of “Blood and Roses” in “some severe nightmares... where the Parthenon was decorated with cut-off heads...”<sup>43</sup>

This humanist repression is understandable. This idea is troubling not simply because the “priceless” Roses are considered exchangeable, but because they are made *directly equivalent* to the horrors of Blood. It constitutes, for humanists, an impossible choice between atrocity that should be unequivocally opposed, and a masterpiece that should be unequivocally cherished. The trick is that, in history, you don’t get one without the other. Thus Jimmy’s dream amounts to a chilling visualization of Benjamin’s

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41 Ibid.

42 Ibid., 78-79

43 Ibid., 80.

maxim: that every achievement of culture is also a record of barbarism.<sup>44</sup> It posits the question: “what *is* humanity, after all, since it is capable of producing both a Bergen-Belsen and a Mona Lisa?”<sup>45</sup>

This question of human *definition* is foregrounded in *Oryx and Crake* because that definition is up for grabs thanks to the advent of advanced biotechnology. And it is over the right to define what the human is and will be, and to what purpose, that we find the sticking point for the debate between Crake-as-scientist and Jimmy-as-humanist. Crake’s means seem extreme: he opts to re-define the human entirely, refusing to balance Blood and Roses and choosing instead a world in which neither need exist. Yet this intervention is only necessary because culture – the sacred cow of the humanities – has *failed* to deal with the problem of humanity’s “moral ambivalence.”<sup>46</sup>

And indeed, a certain “moral ambivalence” may be constitutive of civilization in that the domestication of the human animal always amounts to a (potentially disastrous) program of social control. Hannes Bergthaller aptly describes the humanist enterprise as:

A discourse about the right means for taming the human animal in which the humanist casts himself in the role of the shepherd. What humanists have blinded themselves to is the fact that a shepherd does not only guide but also cull, that he is both a herder and a breeder. For all of its professed harmlessness, and largely unbeknownst to itself, humanism was thus engaged in what amounts to a eugenicist project *avant la lettre*. [This blindness accounts for why the humanities have failed to] muster an adequate response to the challenges of the dawning biotechnological age.<sup>47</sup>

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44 Walter Benjamin. “On the Concept of History,” *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938-1940*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, et al., (Cambridge, USA: Belknap Press, 2006) 390-411.

45 Hannes Bergthaller, “Housebreaking the Human Animal: Humanism and the Problem of Sustainability in Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*,” *English Studies* 91.7 (2010): 736.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid., 734.

Thus Jimmy's conscious dullness to the sharp point of Blood and Roses is symptomatic of his complicity in the bloodier aspects of the humanist project. Jimmy and Crake may be "opposites", set on either side of a disciplinary divide that has only widened in the centuries since their institutionalization, but they are still playing the same game: both aim to domesticate the human animal. There is, after all, a deep genealogy linking the sciences and humanities. Derrida takes note of just this link, the "sudden 'synchronous' appearance, of a cohabitation of two formations: ... principle of reason ... the domination of the subject/object structure, the metaphysics of will, modern techno-science" and at the same time "the project of literature in the strict sense," both of which emerged in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>48</sup>

Both born of the same metaphysical mother, the scientific and the literary have thus been caught in a sibling rivalry. Derrida refers to a document of this rivalry: Kant's *Von einem neuerdings erhobenen Vornehmen Ton in der Philosophie*. Criticizing both the methods and the pretensions of those whom he styles "mystagogues" – "not true philosophers" but deployers of "poetic schemas" which amount to a "perversion" – Kant accuses his rivals of miscegenation and presumption: they confuse the voice of reason with the voice of the oracle, speaking as if possessed of an authority that is not theirs, based on an intimacy with the truth, personified as a "veiled Isis".<sup>49</sup>

Yet both Kant and the mystagogues, Derrida notes, "would accuse the other of castrating the *logos* and of taking off its phallus" and thus agree on one point, that "there is only male reason, only a masculine or castrated organ or canon of reason, everything proceeds in this just as for that stage of infantile genital organization wherein there is definitely a masculine but no feminine." Here Derrida points to the basis of a proposed truce between Kant and his rivals, a "peace treaty" based on what they "together exclude as the inadmissible". That inadmissible is "precisely the body of a

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48 Derrida, "No Apocalypse, Not Now," 27.

49 Jacques Derrida, "Of An Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted In Philosophy," *Semeia* 23 (1982): 74-76.

veiled Isis, the universal feminine principle, murderess of Osiris all of whose pieces she later recovers, except for the phallus.”<sup>50</sup>

I wish to suggest an alliance as well, the end to a sectarian resentment that cannot but paint aspirant ecocritics and ecologically-minded humanists as mystagogues claiming a privileged relationship to our own sublime goddess, whom we might as well call Gaia. Yet we must take Derrida’s advice very seriously, and avoid any exclusionary clauses. For even without an alliance in place, such an exclusion is already operative. Despite his perspicacity, Bergthaller falls into just this trap. Even as he states that “Jimmy and Crake thus represent two different but equally flawed answers to the problem of taming the human animal,” he claims that “[w]hat is absent from *Oryx and Crake* is a perspective that would, as it were, put these two half-understandings together.”<sup>51</sup> Yet we find the true absence in the critical literature, since it is nothing less than the exclusion of the character of Oryx.

## V – The Irresistible Inadmissible

All this time spent talking about Crake and Jimmy, science and the humanities, the bickering of brothers who insist they could not be more unlike one another. Yet within the text of *Oryx and Crake* the rivalry between science and humanities takes the form of a lovers’ rivalry, one of the most tried and true exclusionary measures of the homosocial.

Just who is Oryx? The critical literature often avoids engaging with her character, yet she looms so large in the text – it isn’t titled *Jimmy and Crake*, after all – that this avoidance strikes us as an oversight. The literature treats her as ancillary because it doesn’t know what to do with her, and thus tend to treat her as the men in the text treat her, as “a fantasized object of desire” possessed, at best, of a “general representative status as a female sexual victim and commodity” who serves to “instruct... readers about the baneful social and economic effects of global climate change on

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50 Ibid., 77-79.

51 Bergthaller, “Housebreaking the Human Animal,” 737.

the poor of the world.”<sup>52</sup> Sometimes she appears only as “Crake’s lover.”<sup>53</sup> Often, just as in Jimmy’s fantasies within the text, she fails to materialize at all.<sup>54</sup>

Alluded to throughout the novel and introduced with grave fanfare, “... *Enter Oryx*. Fatal moment,”<sup>55</sup> Oryx’s history is both one of sexual exploitation and personal fortitude. Born into abject poverty in “[s]ome distant, foreign place,”<sup>56</sup> sold into slavery and pressed into various criminal and pornographic enterprises, she makes her way from the fringes of power to the very heart of Crake’s biotechnological complex. Tasked to teach the Crakers, as well as to provide Crake and Jimmy with sexual companionship, she is the bridge between the old humanity and the new. She obsesses both the scientist and the rhetorician, haunting the latter well after her demise at the climax of the novel, acting as a vehicle for their fantasies by dint of her beauty and her remarkable elusiveness. This elusiveness is perhaps her most significant feature; as stated above, she escapes critical capture as thoroughly as she eludes Jimmy’s many attempts to fix her history.

Susan Hall is one of the few critics who dare to make Oryx the central object of her investigation, and she too makes note of the critical reluctance around the character, asking “what of Atwood’s own representation of Oryx? When discussing Oryx critics frequently describe her as ‘elusive,’ ‘mysterious,’ and ‘enigmatic.’”<sup>57</sup> Yet when critics allege that Oryx is, “vague and evasive about her traumatic past”<sup>58</sup> it is this very insistence on the trauma of her past – a trauma which Oryx unequivocally refuses to avow – which should appear suspect. As a passage from the text illustrates:

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52 Bouson, “*It’s Game Over Forever*,” 148.

53 Glover, “Human/Nature,” 59.

54 Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 112.

55 Ibid., 307.

56 Ibid., 115.

57 Susan L. Hall, “The Last Laugh: A Critique of the Object Economy in Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*,” *Contemporary Women’s Writing* 4.3 (2010): 180.

58 Bouson, “*It’s Game Over Forever*,” 148.

“I don’t buy it,” said Jimmy. Where was her rage, how far down was it buried, what did he have to do to dig it up?

“You don’t buy what?”

“Your whole fucking story. All this sweetness and acceptance and crap.”

“If you don’t want to buy that, Jimmy,” said Oryx, looking at him tenderly, “what it is you would like to buy instead?”<sup>59</sup>

Jimmy’s is the “new” Orientalism of contemporary liberal ideology, a benevolent othering of the victims of global capitalism which goes hand in hand with their continued exploitation.<sup>60</sup> But Oryx will not submit or admit to the role of victim, which – besides that of the fundamentalist, the “bad Other” – is the proscribed ontological position for all “good Others” of the third world.

Ontological uncertainty is Oryx’s hallmark. As Hall notes: “there is much uncertainty about even the most basic elements of Oryx’s identity, starting with her real name.” Rather than providing a definitive narrative, “stories about her past proliferate but never coalesce into a coherent account.”<sup>61</sup> In lieu of a true name we get “Oryx,” the name of a creature mistaken for a unicorn. Jimmy’s subversive choice of the “Snowman” epithet turns out to be no innovation, but rather, a mimicry.

Oryx’s very ontological uncertainty generates her fascination for both Jimmy and Crake. Hall equates her position with that of the Lacanian *objet petit a*, the disruptive secret which incites masculine desire even as it eludes it. This relationship between masculine desire and the *objet a* should be read as strictly analogous to the relationship of the human subject and nature within the metaphysical constellation of *Ge-stell*. As Hall puts it: “By reducing her to the object of his fantasies and by turning her into an object that would complement or sustain his own identity, the masculine

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59 Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 142.

60 That Jimmy is implicated as an exploiter is more than inferred by the text - he seems well aware of it himself. His trick of talking to his watch, one of the many innocuous deceptions he uses on the Crakers, is borrowed from the slave trader that first bought Oryx.

61 Hall, “The Last Laugh,” 180-181.

subject fails to recognize the uniqueness of his partner's identity."<sup>62</sup> So too does *Ge-stell* dissolve the distinctness of beings, ultimately transforming them into objects of exchangeability and transactability – appropriate considering Oryx's (alleged) background as a "professional sex-skills expert."<sup>63</sup>

Crake and Jimmy are equally complicit in this sexual *Ge-stell*. Both wish to fix Oryx in place, to "get her into the picture" to borrow a Heideggerian formulation. This is dramatized in the text from the moment of her first (retroactively posited) appearance, when a young Crake and Jimmy visit the kiddie porn site "Hott-Totts." At first Jimmy, imagining himself a detached observer, is free to theorize about the structure of fantasy within pornography, enjoying it while placing himself above it. Then a young girl in the video, whom Jimmy will later insist is Oryx, returns the viewer's gaze:

Oryx paused in her activities. She smiled a hard little smile that made her appear much older, and wiped the whipped cream from her mouth. Then she looked over her shoulder and right into the eyes of the viewer – right into Jimmy's eyes, into the secret person inside him. *I see you*, that look said, *I see you watching I know you. I know what you want.*<sup>64</sup>

The reversal here is stark. Jimmy performs an act of routine analysis, unpacking the system of fantasies at work in the pornography he is watching. For him, this is the real pleasure of viewing, the pleasure of critique. The moment his own interiority seems to be under attack, however, the moment he becomes the object of the gaze or, rather, receives the gaze of the object. In short, the moment he encounters something he is not prepared for, he is transfixed.

He's not alone. As Hall points out, "[e]ven Crake is not immune to her influence, as evidenced by his decision to freeze

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62 Ibid., 186.

63 Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 11.

64 Ibid., 90.

and then to print out the frame of her piercing look.”<sup>65</sup> Jimmy and Crake both save copies of the frozen image of this gaze for years to come, Jimmy on the printed scrap of paper, Crake as a digital gateway through which he eventually effectuates apocalyptic project.<sup>66</sup>

When Jimmy shows the printout to Oryx, the “real” Oryx, she does not confirm his suspicions. Her answers are, typically, confounding and even infuriatingly evasive:

“I don’t think this is me,” was what she’d said at first.

“It has to be!” said Jimmy, “Look! It’s your eyes!”

“A lot of girls have eyes,” she said, “A lot of girls did these things. Very many.” Then, seeing his disappointment, she said, “It might be me. Maybe it is. Would that make you happy, Jimmy?”

“No,” said Jimmy. Was that a lie?

“Why did you keep it?”

“What were you thinking?” Snowman said instead of answering.

[...]

“You think I was thinking?” she said, “Oh Jimmy! You always think everyone is thinking. Maybe I wasn’t thinking anything.”

“I know you were,” he said.

“You want me to pretend? You want me to make something up?”

“No. Just tell me.”

“Why?”

[...]

“Because I need you to.” Not much of a reason, but it was all he could come up with.

She sighed. “I was thinking,” she said, tracing a little circle on his skin with a fingernail, “that if I ever got the chance, it would not be me down on my knees.”<sup>67</sup>

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65 Hall, S. L., “The Last Laugh,” 187.

66 Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 215.

67 Ibid., 91-2.

Jimmy's fascination (and frustration) is with the indeterminacy of her interiority, the very grounds for ontological security within subject/object metaphysics. He wants, needs, the truth of who she is, what she is, because he is certain that *she* knows his own truth, knows "what he wants". The short circuit here is that what he wants, the innermost desire he thinks she has access to, is to have access to *her* interiority, an interiority that she does not simply refuse to divulge but of *which she questions the very presence*.

Thus from the beginning, as Hall notes, "[a]lthough Oryx is in the passive position of being viewed, her gaze as *object a* acts upon him in a disruptive manner, resisting a movement of simple assimilation whereby he would appropriate her as an object to satisfy his drive."<sup>68</sup> This unassimilability makes Oryx the object of longings which are definitively *apocalyptic*. The text is not ambiguous about this, though ambiguity itself is constitutive of that object which creates apocalyptic longing:

Because now he's come to the crux in his head, to the place in the tragic play where it would say: Enter Oryx. Fatal moment. But which fatal moment? ... Which of these will it be, and how can he ever be sure there's a line connecting the first to the last? Was there only one Oryx, or was she legion?<sup>69</sup>

In hopes of answering the Oryx aporia, Jimmy takes on the role of Gomel's ontological detective, following up upon the least clue regarding Oryx's past – a red parrot painted onto the side of a truck for example:

Jimmy held onto it, this red parrot. He kept it in mind. Sometimes it would appear to him in reveries, charged with mystery and hidden significance, a symbol free from all contexts. It must have been a brand name, a logo. He searched the Internet for Parrot, Parrot Brand, Parrot Inc., Redparrot. ... He wanted the red parrot to be a link between the story Oryx had told him

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68      Hall, S. L., "The Last Laugh," 188.

69      Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 307

and the so-called real world. He wanted to be walking along a street or trolling the Web, and eureka, there it would be, the red parrot, the code, the password, and then many things would become clear.<sup>70</sup>

No such clarity is forthcoming. Still, Jimmy takes solace within his rivalry with Crake by imagining his relation to Oryx as privileged – one which is also analogous to the role of nature/Nature within the ecological debate. While Crake, the scientist, has professional claim upon her, Jimmy, the humanist, satisfies himself in the belief that his (presumably) illicit affair with Oryx is the “real” thing, proper intimacy with the Other. Of course Oryx knows better. “All sex is real,”<sup>71</sup> she says, turning one of Lacan’s formulations on its head, even as she plays her part in a Lacanian *matheme*.<sup>72</sup>

Jimmy’s apocalyptic efforts, his attempts to fix and foreclose Oryx into knowability, are mostly restricted to an ineffectual narrative violence. All potential for real violence, while fantasized, is never realized.<sup>73</sup> He wishes to fix her past and thus apprehend her present, to unspool her narrative and thus the truth of her being, an endeavor proper to literary scholars and their inheritance from psychoanalysis. Willful anachronism that he is, Jimmy has little interest in the future. His mode of longing is proper to the disciplinary humanities, moored as it is in history (both personal, as with his obsession with his “dire, feathered mother,”<sup>74</sup> and collective, as in *Blood and Roses*) and nostalgia (as evidenced by his collections of obsolete, forgotten words). The deficiencies of this mode are its pettiness – if he could have, Jimmy would have given up the entire world if he could have kept Oryx; he will accept the “big picture” apocalypse if his own “small picture” still contained

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70 Ibid., 138.

71 Ibid., 144.

72 S1 / S → S2 / a – describing the doomed totalization of the Master’s Discourse. Jacques Lacan, and Jacques-Alain Miller. *On Feminine Sexuality: The Limits of Love and Knowledge: Encore 1972-1973*, trans. Bruce Fink (New York: Norton, 2005), 16.

73 Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 135.

74 Ibid., 191. Of course, of all the women to whom Jimmy discloses his carefully groomed trauma, Oryx is the only one who is “not ... impressed.”

his beloved<sup>75</sup> – and its lack of self-reflection. Obsessed as he is with her “traumatic past”, as full of fury he is towards her exploiters, he never reflects upon his own complicity in Oryx’s exploitation, both individually as a consumer of pornography, and in the larger sense, as a member of the privileged elite whose luxury is sustained precisely by the exploitative relations it maintains with the rest of the world.

Crake, on the other hand, follows the apocalyptic longing to its absolute conclusion, deploying Oryx as a central part of his master plan to shape the future of the world, to seize control over human destiny. Decidedly future-oriented, Crake aims to undo history and exorcise the most deleterious elements of human consciousness. Crake uses Oryx as a point of transmission for his two creations, the Crakers and the virus he uses to annihilate the human race. Oryx is the go-between for him and the Crakers, teaching them survival skills, interacting with them so Crake does not have to reveal himself to them; he sees her as the bridge between the old, defective model of humanity and his new, ecologically perfect replacement. As noted above, her image, her eye, is the link to the communications network he uses to contact his fellow MaddAddam splicers who (unwittingly) help him to create the JUVE virus. She is, in short, a medium and inspiration for the transmission of his apocalyptic ideas, and eventually even serves as the primary vector for his virus: she delivers the pills which contain the inert virus to cities all over the world.

Crake’s last act is to cut Oryx’s throat, prompting Jimmy to shoot him an instant later. This murder/suicide is prefigured in a question Crake once asks Jimmy, about whether he’d be able to kill a loved one “to spare them pain”.<sup>76</sup> While this can most directly refer to Crake’s intention to prevent Oryx from living through the nightmare of the viral apocalypse, it also serves as a stand-in for his grand assisted suicide of humanity. In seeking a definitive end to the dangerous indeterminacy facing the human species, and indeed the whole biosphere, Crake forces apocalypse because he sees

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75 Ibid., 318.

76 Ibid., 320.

no alternative. Crake's actions, whether he is aware of it or not, amount to an attempt to seal over the very ontological hole Oryx herself represents, the slitting of her throat an act of final symbolic suturing.

In both cases, the confrontation with ontological uncertainty generates unrecoverable disaster. Without Crake's interest in futurity and broad vision, not to mention his effectuality, Jimmy's nostalgia and self-absorption lead to complacency and resentment; let the world wither away, as long as his is the privileged relationship with the "veiled Isis". Yet, left to his own devices, Crake reproduces the fallacious pastoral notion that humanity must either destroy itself and/or assume a stable relation with regard to a presumable stable natural world, forcing apocalyptic closure. The Oryx aporia unites both men in desire, but divides them in action; Crake's decision to let Jimmy live, to entrust him with his final words – "I'm counting on you."<sup>77</sup> – hints at some consciousness of their interdependence, on an unfulfilled alliance, flummoxed by a basic failure to reconcile epistemologies. The problematic of past, present and future – a temporal confusion that echoes the difficulty of representing climate change – defeats both representatives of the sciences and the humanities. The Oryx aporia motivates both men, sets both disciplinary modes into motion, but in instrumentalizing they fall prey to the same error in epistemology even as their responses differ. Both defer to the apocalyptic as the only solution, closure as the only option.

The apocalyptic longing is, thus, a reaction to the ontological challenge Oryx embodies. The world, groaning under the pressure of its human inhabitants, still continues, threatens to go on and on, though how we don't know. Like Jimmy, we often assume a presence, a secret interiority to nature and we demand to know the consequence, to somehow settle the score, to know what nature must think of this. But the final judgment never arrives, and the openness of our universe's ontology both tortures and obsesses us. If God or Nature will not give us an apocalypse, the need for ontological completeness convinces us of the necessity to create

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77 Ibid., 329.

one. We begin to long for it, that final disclosure, an ontological guarantee, “the assurance of the destination, but also death, another apocalypse.”<sup>78</sup>

Thus, unless we are capable of receiving that openness *as* openness and *for* its openness, we are prone to apocalyptic resort. We mistake openness for oblivion, and take unassimilability as grounds for an attempted apocalyptic dis/foreclosure, even as we are drawn towards the very obscurity of our desired object:

The only “subject” of all possible literature, of all possible criticism, its only ultimate and a-symbolic referent, unsymbolizable, even unsignifiable; this is, if not the nuclear age, if not the nuclear catastrophe, at least that toward which nuclear discourse and the nuclear symbolic *are still beckoning*: the remainderless and a-symbolic destruction of literature. Literature and literary criticism cannot speak of anything else, they can have no other ultimate referent, they can only multiply their strategic maneuvers in order to assimilate that unassimilable wholly other.<sup>79</sup>

Of course Oryx herself by no means constitutes a threat of “remainderless destruction”. This is a displacement by which she stands-in for the radical undecidability which confronts us in our historical moment. That is, the possibility not just of the destruction of the literary archive but the very definition of the human. While seemingly guaranteed as the “subject” among “objects” within the modern metaphysical constellation, it is, in turn, increasingly threatened by the implications of that very metaphysics. This undecidability is *our own*, and it is part and parcel with the essence of modern technology, of *Ge-stell*. It manifests as a *shadow*, and it is this shadow – the specter of ontological openness – to which we must now turn.

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78 Derrida, “Apocalyptic Tone,” 84.

79 Ibid., 28.

## VI – Ontological Hole-ness

In his writings on *Ge-stell*, Heidegger refers to a peculiar consequence of its reliance upon calculability, the power to predict cause and effect and thus be prepared for all foreseeable outcomes. While *Ge-stell* uses formal logics such as mathematics to manage potentialities and thus prepares humans *a priori* for whatever and however beings appear to us, this rigorous process generates a by-product – a shadow at its margins, the umbra of the *incalculable*:

...[M]an brings into play his unlimited power for calculating, planning, and molding of all things. Science as research is an absolutely necessary form of this establishing of self in the world; it is one of the pathways upon which the modern age rages toward fulfillment of its essence, with a velocity unknown to the participants. With this struggle of the world views the modern age first enters into the part of its history that is the most decisive and probably the most capable of enduring.<sup>80</sup>

This emphasis on velocity, a speeding towards a destined fulfillment, is in keeping with Derrida's assessment that "no single instant, no atom of life (of our relation to the world and to being) is not marked today, directly or indirectly, by that speed race."<sup>81</sup> The decisiveness, too, is constitutive of our era, but as Derrida would have us remember, there is insecurity in the very grounds of decidability. Our velocity is unknown. Time and space rush by, contracting as they do, warping and compressing being:

But as soon as the gigantic in planning and calculating and adjusting and making secure shifts over out of the quantitative and becomes a special quality, then what is gigantic, and what can seemingly always be calculated completely, becomes, precisely

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80 Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," *The Question Concerning Technology, and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt (New York: Garland, 1977), 135.

81 Derrida, "No Apocalypse, Not Now," 20; It is worth noting, too, that it is precisely the *rate* of carbon emissions, the *speed* of their release in excess of the abilities of re-absorption mechanisms, and the *momentum* of modern industrial development which drive anthropogenic climate change.

through this, incalculable. *This becoming incalculable remains the invisible shadow that is cast around all things everywhere when man has been transformed into subiectum and the world into a picture.*<sup>82</sup>

This shadow appears at the sites of those aspects of Being which precisely cannot be revealed by the predictive mechanisms of *Ge-stell* – it marks possibilities and entities for which we are not prepared, and which no place within the formal constellation of *Ge-stell* and its ways of knowing:

Everyday opinion sees in the shadow only the lack of light, if not light's complete denial. In truth, however, the shadow is a manifest, through impenetrable, testimony to the concealed emitting of light. In keeping with this concept of shadow, we experience the incalculable as that which, withdrawn from representation, is nevertheless manifest in whatever is, pointing to Being, which remains concealed.<sup>83</sup>

To the modern subject, formed and in-formed by *Ge-stell*, such an obscurity is almost always interpreted as a dangerous mystery. Its darkness makes us long for the light of revelation, even at the cost of a catastrophe of our own devising. As Michael Lewis elaborates in his own in-depth consideration of *Ge-stell* and environmental catastrophe:

In this way would things both “show and hide” themselves in the contemporary world. Things, Heidegger seems to say, can appear *only* in their own concealment, in their elision, which occurs today, and only today, in the technological spanning of distance and the rapid eradication of nature through exhaustive challenging-forth and induced catastrophe. But this is precisely what technology always does: to illuminate darkness, abolish distance.

[...]

This is precisely why Heidegger classes technology as a

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82 Heidegger, “The Question Concerning Technology,” 135. Emphasis added.

83 Ibid., 154.

revelation: “Technology is a mode of revealing [*Entbergens*].”<sup>84</sup>

Lewis also deals extensively with Lacan within his work, and in so doing equates the shadow – that for which Oryx stands in – with “the thing”, the object that lies outside symbolic representation. Suddenly Lacanian terms are swirling around us, with Oryx appearing alternately as *objet petit a* and “the thing”. How to resolve this overdetermination? It might be worth suggesting that overdetermination is precisely in keeping with Oryx’s function as point of ontological openness, and any desire for a clear resolution might itself amount to an apocalyptic disclosure. But for the sake of our academic rigor, bound as it is to *Ge-stell*, I propose this resolution: *the thing is the objet a of Ge-stell*. When taken within the metaphysical constellation of *Ge-stell*, Oryx as the unassimilable *objet a* becomes a constitutive point of ontological incompleteness,<sup>85</sup> which generates ambivalent fascination in the modern subject, and its desire to disclose the thing in its entirety, to assimilate it into its system of regulation – to “reach it” and thus “reveal it” – constituting a properly apocalyptic (that is to say, revelatory) desire:

Science, therefore, which is the decisive influence on the way beings appear to us today, harbours the illusion that the thing has been reached, when all its properties have been discovered. But this belief in the abolition of darkness has forgotten two things: 1) that the thing is not susceptible of this, because it *is* darkness, it *is* void or “no-thing”, and 2) *because of this* it can appear *only* when everything is supposed to have been illuminated. This is the revelatory nature of extremes which so interests Heidegger, here at the extremity of metaphysics, where we dwell so precariously, under so many of Damocles’ swords. If the thing can never appear in the light of day, if it is essentially a nocturnal animal, then it is only when light becomes all penetrating and

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84 Michael Lewis, *Heidegger Beyond Deconstruction: On Nature* (London: Continuum, 2007), 68.

85 Lacan considers this openness indicative of a “feminine” ontology, a view that fits in well with Atwood’s strong feminist leanings, and which femininity intercedes in the previously wholly-masculine dialogue between science and the humanities.

dazzling that in the very blindness caused by this dazzling the thing as non-apparent can be intimated.<sup>86</sup>

Lewis is careful to note the potentials hidden within the shadow. That obscurity marks the presence of Being means that Being's presence can still be located – it can yet be recovered from the objectlessness of *Ge-stell's* standing-reserve. On these grounds he claims “this is why it is only today that the thing might appear, and appear, paradoxically, in the light of its impending exclusion...” and also, “at the same time, this is why Heidegger does *not* urge a return to some ‘rustic idyll.’”<sup>87</sup>

To attempt a return to tradition would not only be futile, it would be amount to a refusal to confront the destiny, *Geschick* to use Heidegger's term, which comes about as a consequence of *Ge-stell* and thus to lose any possibility of an authentic encounter with Being. That concerned ecocritics and green-leaning humanists should wish to avoid this destiny is understandable, for it does appear likely that, as with a Blood player's victory, we are going to inherit a wasteland. But this destiny is not fixed and unavoidable. Indeed, *Ge-stell* is tied up with humanity's essential freedom, “as a demand inherent to the human being himself, as an aspect and a consequence of his freedom. It is not a destiny in the sense of being something ordained by some superior power, by nature or by being itself, but a way in which humans encounter nature, and themselves.”<sup>88</sup>

The stakes of this freedom become even more pressing in the face of our burgeoning biotechnological mastery. Our *destiny* is necessarily tied up with *Ge-stell*, but our *destination* is uncertain. This is the crux of our current crisis, the profound uncertainty around the *sending* of human Being, which, under the reign of *Ge-stell*, “gives itself over, by calculation, to the incalculable, to chance and luck,” what Derrida calls the “missivity” inherent to Heidegger's conception of being:

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86 Lewis, *Heidegger Beyond Deconstruction*, 68.

87 Ibid.

88 Hans Ruin, “Ge-stell: Enframing as the Essence of Technology,” *Heidegger: Key Concepts*, Ed. Bret Davis (New York: Routledge, 2014), 193.

This emission or sending of Being is not the firing of a missile or the posting of a missive, but I do not believe it is possible, in the last analysis, to *think* the one without the other. ... The destinerrance of the envois is connected with a structure in which randomness and incalculability are essential. ... That unthinkable element offers itself to (be) thought in the age when a nuclear war is possible: one, rather, from the outset, *some* sendings, many sendings, missiles whose destinerrance and randomness may, in the very process of calculation and the games that simulate the process, escape all control, all reassimilation or self-regulation of a system that they will have *precipitously* ... but irreversibly destroyed.<sup>89</sup>

Nuclear war threatens the annihilation of the human race; so too, in the most dire of its predicted outcomes, does environmental catastrophe. Biotechnology, however, endangers the sending of being on an even more fundamental level. Insofar as human life, and indeed all life, consist of a series of codes which reproduce themselves in new forms in order to commit themselves to continuance, missivity, and the sending of being in its material-informational basis amount to one and the same. Biotechnology has placed this essential missivity of biological being firmly within the power of *Ge-stell*, exposed it to the human will.

Yet this power brings us no security, for the subject that changes its own material basis challenges the grounds of subjectivity itself, the sole guarantor of being within the subject/object order. This is why the prospect of the Crakers is so frightening: the possibility of extensive genetic manipulation is no longer a thought experiment, the “science” is no longer sufficiently buffered by “fiction”. The new figure of the human that emerges from this, what may be the most decisive and the most enduring epoch, may be something unimaginable, yet it will still be “our” doing, “our” destiny.<sup>90</sup> Thus Derrida’s observations on the looming apocalypse thus

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89 Jacques Derrida, “No Apocalypse, Not Now,” 29.

90 The stakes of just who makes the decision about what will endure are thus as high as those of who holds the power of decision in the matter of nuclear war.

appear even more urgent today:

Our *apocalypse now*: that there is no longer any place for the apocalypse as the collection of evil and good in a *legein* of *aletheia*, nor in a *Geschick* of the dispatch, of the *Schicken* in a co-destination that would assure the “come” of the power to give rise to an event in the certainty of a determination.<sup>91</sup>

No judgement, no assurance that the accounts will be settled. No certainty of determination. We know not to where we are bound, or what we will be when we arrive – the manner of our new being-there. This uncertainty of sending, both in origin and destination, which is the mark of the *apocalyptic tone* produces, in turn, the *apocalyptic drive*. You don’t get one without the other:

*Verstimmung* is called derailment, the sudden change of tone as one would say the sudden change of mood, it is the disorder or the delirium of the destination (*Bestimmung*), but also the possibility of all emission or utterance. The unity of tone, if there was such, would certainly be the assurance of the destination, but also death, another apocalypse.<sup>92</sup>

In confronting this ambiguous situation we must avoid the apocalyptic drive, the urge to disclose or foreclose – such a forcing will result in annihilatory catastrophe. Rather, it is in just this ambiguity that Heidegger locates hope. As Ruin notes:

In the obvious danger inherent in contemporary technologically defined modernity, there also lies a saving potential. In his later writings Heidegger would often quote lines from Holderlin’s “Patmos”, “But where danger is, grows the saving power also”... [this line] summarizes the way in which he wants *Ge-stell* to be understood, namely as an “ambiguous” situation of (manifest) danger and (potential) saving at once.<sup>93</sup>

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91 Derrida, “Of an Apocalyptic Tone,” 94.

92 Ibid., 84.

93 Ruin, “*Ge-Stell*,” 193.

Lewis specifies this possibility of salvation in relation to the ontological-alethic dimension of the *Ge-Stell*:

This saving power rests precisely in the shadow of ontological uncertainty, the hole in the whole of being, for “the fact that such an empty place inhabits beings... opens up the possibility that in the future the whole might *change*.”<sup>94</sup>

## VII – Open Letter to Humanity

For change we must. The world will not wait for us. Our great fear is irrelevance, consignment to the role of steward in a moldering archive. In *Oryx and Crake*, Jimmy invites our identification because this is precisely the role he assumes:

Part of what impelled him was stubbornness; resentment, even. The system had filed him among the rejects, and what he was studying was considered – at the decision-making levels, the levels of real power - an archaic waste of time. Well then, he would pursue the superfluous as an end in itself. He would be its champion, its defender and preserver. Who was it who’d said that all art was completely useless? Jimmy couldn’t recall, but hooray for him, whoever he was. The more obsolete a book was, the more eagerly Jimmy would add it to his inner collection.<sup>95</sup>

If we feel inclined to share his resentment, we can’t afford to adopt the same quixotic attitude towards our task. If we’re ever to have any influence upon the workings of real power we must renounce fatalism. We must first, however, examine our own complicity in the mechanisms we’d critique, before we can hope to advance some alternative.

What is the alternative? It may as yet be unimaginable or, rather, it contains the element *of* the unimaginable. For believe it or not, the end is nigh, and we cannot escape the fire by ignoring our role in determining if and how and what sort of being rises from

94 Lewis, *Heidegger Beyond Deconstruction*, 32.

95 Atwood, *Oryx and Crake*, 195.

the ashes. We must accept indeterminacy as a crucial element of the openness that is required for an overcoming of *Ge-stell* in the inevitable confrontation with its implications. And this openness must be extended to those we mistake as rivals, even if we are not sure to what strange lands such a common path may take us.

# “ZERO, ZERO, AND ZERO”

## *Beckett’s Endgame, Automation, and Zero-Player Games*

ANDREW WENAUS

Everyone knows his part by heart. Words and gestures follow each other in a relaxed, continuous manner, the links as imperceptible as the necessary elements of some properly lubricated machinery. Then there is a gap, a blank space...And then suddenly the action resumes, without warning, and the same scene occurs again.

– **Alain Robbe-Grillet**

An experiment is a text about a nontextual situation, later tested by others to decide whether or not it is simply a text if the final trial is successful, then it is not just a text, there is indeed a real situation behind it, and both the actor and its authors are endowed with a new competence.

– **Bruno Latour**

As a reader I find myself locked within an automaton I cannot control, which will never do what I would do (even by chance), and which provides no nourishment.

– **Steve Aylett**

In his piece “Trying to Understand *Endgame*,” Theodor Adorno comments that in the work of Samuel Beckett “poetic procedure surrenders...without intention.”<sup>1</sup> This is a remarkable claim, not about Beckett’s work, but the effect it has on the way we experience intimacy with narrative and how we can consider how literature thinks.

In Adorno’s sense, *Endgame*’s poetic procedure establishes a confined and constitutive dwelling from which the language users cannot escape – this dwelling is expressed through the sparse

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1 Theodor Adorno, “Trying to Understand *Endgame*,” trans. Michael T. Jones. *New German Critique*. 26 (1982), 119.

and claustrophobic staging of Beckett’s work. The dwelling clears the path for the question of what exactly is “taking its course”<sup>2</sup> – a phrase that is ominously repeated – in *Endgame*. Not only does it open an interrogation of *what* is taking its course, but also *how* the text proceeds according to its own logic, as a kind of automation or zero-player game (a game played without a player). Adorno suggests that with *Endgame* “thought becomes as much a means of producing meaning for the work which cannot be immediately rendered tangible, as it is an expression of meaning’s absence.”<sup>3</sup> He continues: Beckett’s text “can mean nothing other than understanding its incomprehensibility.”<sup>4</sup> It is here that one may note the distinction between *poiesis*, thinking, and automated poetic procedure. While the poetic is an intentional act of making something come forth or an act of agential creativity, thinking is an act of submission. A poetic *procedure* (in the sense of a set of logical instructions) as automation or zero-player game, on the other hand, both surrenders and proceeds without intention; in this sense, *Endgame* conflates thinking and *poiesis* by eliminating the possibility of agential creativity and replaces it with an automated logic that unfolds of its own accord.

This is at the heart of Adorno’s provocative statement: the poetic should be intentional by definition, thinking should be submissive, but the *procedural* is both without intention and without agency. So, the process that animates *Endgame* is one that ultimately demands of the reader the assumption of an unusual interpretive pose: that of readerly non-involvement, diminution of agency, and ultimately, our exclusion from interpretive agency. Indeed, the text provides certain insight into the present shift from the dominance of language to that of code and automation. *Endgame*, in its forceful expression of the exclusion of the liberal subject within a digitally run apparatus or system, takes its course without recourse to the desire or suffering of the human. As a result, the work encour-

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2 Samuel Beckett, *Endgame, A Play in One Act, Followed by Act Without Words, a Mime for One Player*, trans. Samuel Beckett, (New York, Grove Press, 1958), 13, 32.

3 Adorno, “Trying to Understand *Endgame*,” 120.

4 Ibid.

ages speculation on the rapid shift from human involvement with language as alphanumeric to that of code that proceeds according to its own logic indifferent to humanism.

To do so, we must first establish certain premises for this argument:

1. *Endgame* here is an ideal text divorced from materiality or performability (it is, after all, a play); this ideal text is an extended metaphor for code unfolding according to a set of well-formed instructions.
2. The text is a poetic procedure that proceeds without intention.
3. The text continues to take its course without readerly intervention.
4. The reader assumes an imaginary pose: of exclusion and non-agential involvement.

So, what we have here is a thought experiment: a text as extended metaphor that proceeds without intention and without a reader, a kind of textual automaton. What this thought experiment is asking is: what are the effects of this ideal text? What might it say about our relation to narrative; what is the significance of our exclusion in an era of automation? *Endgame* offers itself to us as a means to meditate on the encroaching shift in the predominant narrative code: the increasing dominance of digital code over alphanumeric-linguistic narrative.

Accordingly, *Endgame* demands that the reader identify *as* openness and exclusion toward the end of taking up identification with incomprehensibility and become transposed directly into that which is without semantic value. Here, the reader must submit *as* absence or exclusion from the text at hand. The human condition, Heidegger claims, is to *be there/here*. The concern here is with the strange role Beckett asks the reader of the text to assume. What *being-there* means is more nuanced than simply being-in-the-world. This nuance will help bring our thought experiment a little closer to earth. *The effects* of Beckett's text strive for a kind of paradoxical and imaginative rigor rather than for existential exactness. *End-*

*game* is experimental, and so its effects are experimental: it employs nothingness as a means of making manifest what we wish to forget: meaningless, nothingness, our exclusion from cultural or political narrative. Heidegger writes that “interrogating the nothing – asking what and how it, the nothing, is – turns what is interrogated into its opposite. The question deprives itself of its own object.”<sup>5</sup> What the task here asks is how the textual object may take its course by depriving itself of its questioner; that is, its reader. Our experiment asks of *Endgame* how the determinism of closed systems may be made significant when the text is considered as that which proceeds without intention, takes its course, and is animated without a reader. James Acheson suggests that Beckett’s early plays are preoccupied with “the relationship between art and the limits of human knowledge.”<sup>6</sup> *Endgame* certainly is a demonstration of this: it pushes this concern to the ends of practicable experience. And yet, this procedure demands that narrative disclose itself *as* narrative simply by taking its course. In order to do so, the procedure of *Endgame* is that which inverts Heidegger’s troublesome formulation of the interrogator investigating nothingness by allowing nothingness to assume the role of procedure and the reader to assume the pose of nothingness.

*Endgame* takes place in a room with two small windows, a door, a picture hanging near a door, two garbage bins, and, in the center, an armchair on castors. Beyond this room remains more or less unknown: most probably a wasteland. The title of the play derives from chess. It refers to the moment when a game nears its end and only crucial pieces – the two kings – are left on the board. There are four characters. Three are without mobility. Hamm sits in the chair at center stage; he is unable to stand and unable to see. Nagg and Nell, Hamm’s parents, are legless and confined to the garbage bins. Clov, the only character with mobility and whose movements are belabored and painful, cannot sit down. The play is character-

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5 Martin Heidegger, “What is Metaphysics?”, *Basic Writings*, (London: Harper Perrenial, 2008), 96.

6 James Acheson, *Samuel Beckett’s Artistic Theory and Practice: Criticism, Drama, and Early Fiction*, (Houndmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Macmillan, 1997), 141.

ized by isolation, claustrophobia, loss, nostalgia, and an extremely tight and structured repetitive form.

Early readings of the text are primarily concerned with its relationship to the intellectual and cultural influence of existentialism and post-war trauma. Alain Robbe-Grillet suggests that the characters/actors are *there* (on stage) in the sense that they must explain themselves. Martin Esslin's 1961 *The Theatre of the Absurd* also provides influential and long lasting existential reading. While compelling, this tradition of reading is reductionist, and consequently, by the 1970s and 1980s fell out of favor to nuanced readings focused on language. The title of the play had an influence on critical judgments of the text as "the last part of an on-stage game of chess."<sup>7</sup> The purpose of this chess game is to disrupt a definitive interpretation. Later critics, however, are more concerned with the mechanics of the text that make this destabilization possible. That is, more recently, the discussion regarding Beckett's work is concerned primarily with language and performance. Even more recently, there is a marked increase in textual studies of Beckett's work. The intervention here, however, concerns *Endgame* as an idealized text and the effects it has in excluding the reader as a metaphor for the shift from language to code: the coming of information illiteracy and its effects on agency. *Endgame* posits the reader in a movement of diminution. Text turns the *cogito* inside out demonstrating that something can proceed with no concern of a reader. Our idealized *Endgame* is a procedure, it exists, *non sum*.

### **Zero-Player Games and Proceduralism: *Endgame* as Automaton**

The impulse to understand a narrative system that excludes the participation of a reader has recently been undertaken in the theory of game and play. At the 2012 *Philosophy of Computer Games Conference* in Madrid, Spain, Staffan Björk and Jesper Juul presented an evocative paper titled "Zero-Player Games, Or: What we Talk about When We Talk about Players." Their argument discloses the biases behind the way we think about games

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7 Ibid., 150.

and players. For Björk and Juul, the most frequently cited definitions of games refer to the centrality of players in understanding what games are and what gaming means. Björk and Juul suggest that “many publications from the last few years have tried to argue that it is impossible to discuss games as designed objects, since games only actually exist when played, or *as played*” and that games are objects that “give players the ability to intentionally act towards reaching the goals of a game.”<sup>8</sup> In much the same way, we often think of texts as deliberate artifacts that only exist meaningfully when read. Citing the dominant literature on games and players, Björk and Juul find a noticeable bias in the role of player agency, intentionality, and aesthetic engagement.<sup>9</sup> Such features are fundamentally at odds with the procedurality of *Endgame* since the unfolding of the text is and will be, as Clov remarks, “the same as usual.”<sup>10</sup> Linda Hughes, Laura Ermi and Frans Mäyrä, Mia Consalvo, Gordon Calleja, and Miguel Sicart also privilege the role of the player in understanding games.<sup>11</sup>

While Björk and Juul acknowledge that games are “designed objects”<sup>12</sup> that imply intervention on behalf of a player, they argue “that many common conceptions of players are too vague to be useful”<sup>13</sup> and that any definition of a game overly reliant on the player will prove inadequate. In order to reconceptualize the player, Björk and Juul aim to examine the paradoxical idea of the

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8 Staffan Björk & Jesper Juul: “Zero-Player Games Or: What We Talk about When We Talk about Players.” Presented at the *Philosophy of Computer Games Conference*, Madrid 2012. <http://www.jesperjuul.net/text/zeroplayergames/>.

9 My survey of the critical literature is indebted to research compiled by Björk and Juul.

10 Beckett, *Endgame*, 4.

11 See, Linda Hughes, “Children’s Games and Gaming” edited by B. Sutton-Smith in *Children’s Folklore: A Source Book*, (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999); Laura Ermi and Frans Mäyrä, “Fundamental Components of the Gameplay Experience: Analysing Immersion” in *Proceedings of DiGRA 2005*, (2005); Mia Consalvo, “There is No Magic Circle” in *Games and Culture* 4, no. 4, (2009); Gordon Calleja, *In-Game: From Immersion to Incorporation*, (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2011); and Miguel Sicart, “Against Procedurality,” in *Game Studies* 11 (2011).

12 Björk and Juul, “Zero Player Games.”

13 Ibid.

zero-player game: a game that proceeds without agential intervention and thus an appropriate analogue to Beckett's narrative. The critical discussion surrounding the question of what a game is and what a game means is, Björk and Juul suggest, explicitly "player-centric."<sup>14</sup> As a result, the means of extrapolating upon the concept cannot reflexively account for itself as a phenomenon. With the very gesture of the player-centric debate, games are being defined by a sub-component (the player) that is assumed to be constituent and thus cannot disclose themselves to themselves as games. The player-centric bias is one that stems from the bias of the critic; indeed, it is odd to concede that one can consider an object of study without *one considering it*. Yet, what Björk and Juul propose here is not a study that wishes to argue against the significance of the study of players and their role in games but instead to bring to the discussion that examining games in the absence of the player concept is productive. With this logic of negation, Björk and Juul effectively establish the negative space through which one may consider both games and players *and* games and non-players. Here we note the analogue to our thought experiment on *Endgame*. Acheson suggests that Beckett undermines "whatever illusion the play might fortuitously create by insisting on *Endgame* as theatre."<sup>15</sup> Yet, we recognize the text as a kind of literary zero-player game in that it operates by a similar conceit: that of an excluded reader<sup>16</sup> and a text that proceeds impartially taking its course.

In *Endgame*, the role of player/reader is interrupted. Rather than a text that permits the performative expressive acts of play, *Endgame* is a text that reveals itself in the thought experiment as radically unchangeable: the text is the same as usual. Indeed, rath-

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14 Ibid.

15 Acheson, *Samuel Beckett's Artistic Theory and Practice*, 152.

16 Here the reader could conceivably constitute a traditional reader, a theatre spectator, or stage actor responding to textual prompts. For this discussion, however, we will limit the inquiry to the scope of this project: the reader in the conventional sense, a person who reads text from a printed book. There is much discussion regarding Beckett's intertextuality; that is, the relational role of text-as-text. See Michael Worton. "Waiting for Godot and *Endgame*: Theatre as Text," *The Cambridge Companion to Beckett*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994) for an introduction.

er than what Sicart identifies as creative play and agential flexibility, Hamm concurs that, within the parameters of the *Endgame* environment, “there’s no reason for it to change” and Clov, always lacking in his faith for any kind of diegetic intervention, utters the significant remark: “all life long the same questions, the same answers.”<sup>17</sup> What we may suggest now is that Beckett’s play, as a game, is proceduralist rather than player-centric. As a text, it is proceduralist rather than reader-centric. Its central diegetic conceit is, at its most extreme, that the text is a zero-player game.

Perhaps the most well-known kinds of zero-player games use cellular automata. Cellular automata “lend themselves to a variety of uses. In some cases, they are used to simulate processes for which the equations that do exist are not adequate to describe the phenomena of interest”<sup>18</sup> writes Keller. Conventionally cellular automata are implemented as a means of “producing recognizable patterns of ‘interesting’ behavior in their macrodynamics rather than in their microdynamics.”<sup>19</sup> “Cellular automata models are simulators par excellence,” she continues, “they are artificial universes that evolve according to local but uniform rules of interaction that have been pre-specified. Change the initial conditions, and one changes the history; change the rules of interaction, and one changes the dynamics.”<sup>20</sup> However, these changes can only be initiated *from without* and not from within. In this sense, cellular automata are apt parallel metaphors to the procedural dwelling established in *Endgame* both on the level of agency and setting. Tommaso Toffoli and Norman Margolus write in *Cellular Automata Machines: A New Environment for Modeling* that,

cellular automata are stylized, synthetic universes...They have their own kind of matter which whirls around in a space and a

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17 Beckett, *Endgame*, 5.

18 Evelyn Fox Keller, “Marrying the Premodern to the Postmodern: Computers and Organisms after World War II,” in *Mechanical Bodies, Computational Minds: Artificial Intelligence from Automata to Cyborgs*, Edited by Stefano Franchi and Güven Güzeldere, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005), 205.

19 *Ibid.*, 205.

20 *Ibid.*, 207.

time of their own...A cellular automata machine is a universe synthesizer. Like an organ, it has keys and stops by which the resources of the instrument can be called into action, combined, and reconfigured. Its color screen is a window through which one can watch the universe that is being “played.”<sup>21</sup>

Keller notes that Christopher Langton, computer scientist and researcher in artificial life systems, understands cellular automata as that which could be used to simulate universes or environments for living beings, “where the ultimate goal would be to create life in a new medium.”<sup>22</sup> Langton speculates that the simulation of artificial life:

is the study of man-made systems that exhibit behaviors characteristic of natural living systems. It complements the traditional biological sciences concerned with the *analysis* of living organisms by attempting to *synthesize* life-like behaviors within computers and other artificial media. By extending the empirical foundation upon which biology is based beyond the carbon-chain life that has evolved on Earth, Artificial Life can contribute to theoretical biology by locating *life-as-we-know-it* within the larger picture of *life-as-it-could-be*.<sup>23</sup>

The means of creating new kinds of life in a process that follows a “bottom-up synthesis,”<sup>24</sup> in which great complexity arises from very simple rules and within determined – limited and local – parameters, has “proved to have immense appeal for people far beyond the world of computer scientists. Perhaps especially, it proved appealing to readers and viewers who have themselves

21 Tommaso Toffoli and Norman Margolus, *Cellular Automata Machines: A New Environment for Modeling*, (The MIT Press, 1987), 1.

22 Keller, 209.

23 Christopher Langton, “Artificial Life” in *Artificial Life: Proceedings of the Santa Fe Institute Studies in the Sciences of Complexity, Vol 6*, (Redwood City: Addison-Wesley, 1989), 1-2.

24 Keller, 210. The virtual worlds to which Keller refers are extended here to those which range from various forms of social media to our engagement with aesthetic artifice.

spent a significant proportion of their real lives inhabiting virtual worlds.”<sup>25</sup> H. Porter Abbott suggests that what this kind of “formal experimentation requires from the critic is to find ways of talking about Beckett’s fiction as an imitation of life without producing those often elaborate structures of meaning, knit from a variety of ‘clues,’ which have marred so many otherwise excellent discussions of Beckett.”<sup>26</sup> When considering *Endgame* as zero-player game, as cellular automata, we are confronted with a game of life in which its substance is no longer connected with its semantic value, and in which its subjectivities (both diegetic and commentative) figure as mere operations or subroutines of the game.

There are no overt clues for us here since *Endgame* does not invite the reader to intervene in the procedure. Much in the way Langton imagines the significance of computer models of artificial life as creative mimesis, representation that looks forward and is future-directed, *Endgame* unfolds most intensively in the text, yet its effects are felt most intrusively on the extra-diegetic level. The life as it could be, horrific and sterile as it is on the textual level, is life as it is at the extreme of its future-directedness: absent.

The most famous example of a zero-player game is John Conway’s “The Game of Life.” The game follows the principles of automation expressed in the work of game theorist and mathematician John von Neumann. “A mathematical simulation of cellular genetics,” writes Justin Parsler, the game is more of an “intellectual puzzle” than a traditional game. In this sense, the game follows in the same spirit as that of *Endgame* a text that Acheson identifies as “a puzzle.”<sup>27</sup> The Game of Life, like *Endgame*, plays out on a metaphorical checkerboard. The squares on the board are representative of a cell that is either dead or alive. With each turn, “cells either die or come to life, depending on the number of living neighbors they have: a cell with two live neighbors dies, one with more than three dies, one with three stays stable. A dead

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25 Ibid., 210.

26 H. Porter Abbott, *The Fiction of Samuel Beckett: Form and Effect*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 8-9.

27 James Acheson, *Samuel Beckett’s Artistic Theory and Practice*, 204.

cell with three live neighbors comes to life.”<sup>28</sup> The game is, in essence, a Universal Turing Machine. First conceptualized in 1936 by mathematician and cryptologist Alan Turing, the Turing Machine can simulate the logic of any well-formed instructions. In other words, the Machine can be modified in such a way as to process the logic of any computer algorithm. The game also establishes a logic of complexity from simplicity: “The rules,” Gardner suggests, “should be such as to make the behavior of the population unpredictable.”<sup>29</sup> And, the rules are quite simple.<sup>30</sup> Once the pieces on the board are set up, there is no direct engagement by the player. “The initial setup of the game board,” writes Parsler, “constitutes ‘playing’ the game, even though there are no set goals, nor any winner.”<sup>31</sup> In this sense, the processes that follow from the well-formed instructions unfold as a series of deterministic nodes of mutation and change upon which the instigator may mediate. In other words, like *Endgame*, *The Game of Life* proceeds without intention and can operate as an expression of meaning’s absence and its paradoxical dislocation from agential engagement.

Similar to simple systems of chaos and unpredictability, Conway’s *The Game of Life* demonstrates that even within the confines of determinism, even simple determinism, the emergent complexity and variability of possible results is staggering. Hayles writes:

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28 Justin Parsler, “Life,” *Encyclopedia of Play in Today’s Society*, Ed. Rodney P. Carlisle. (Thousand Oaks: SAGE, 2009).

29 Martin Gardner, “The Fantastical Combinations of John Conway’s New Solitaire Game ‘Life’” in *Scientific American*. 223, (October 1970), 120.

30 In fact, Gardner identifies only three rules: first, “there should be no initial pattern for which there is a simple proof that the population can grow without limit,” second, “there should be no initial patterns that apparently do grow without limit,” and finally, “there should be simple initial patterns that grow and change for a considerable period of time before coming to end in three possible ways: fading away completely (from overcrowding or becoming too sparse), settling into a stable configuration that remains unchanged thereafter, or entering an oscillating phase in which they repeat an endless cycle of two or more periods.” *Ibid.*, 120.

31 Parsler, “Life”.

Emergence implies properties or programs appear on their own, often developing in ways not anticipated by the person who created the simulation. Structures that lead to emergence typically involve complex feedback loops in which the output of a system is repeatedly fed back in as input. As the recursive looping continues, small deviations can quickly become magnified, leading to the complex interactions and unpredictable evolutions associated with emergence.<sup>32</sup>

Gardner discusses this emergence further: “You will find the population constantly undergoing unusual, sometimes beautiful and always unexpected change.” He continues, “most starting patterns either reach stable figures – Conway calls them “still lifes” – that cannot change or patterns that oscillate forever. Patterns with no initial symmetry tend to become symmetrical. Once this happens the symmetry cannot be lost, although it may increase in richness.”<sup>33</sup> And here, with the “still life,” is where we find *Endgame*. Itself a kind of zero-player game – a loop of diegetic automata, a procedure that cannot change – which skips, endlessly oscillates. Hamm’s repeated phrase “don’t stay there, you give me the shivers” thus signifies something structurally metonymical: his shivers are the shivers of the simulated, still life universe.<sup>34</sup> He is not commanding Clov to cease standing because of the ominous sense it causes him to experience. Rather, it becomes indicative of the text itself and the recognition of it thereof: Hamm is addressing the simulated universe as much as he is addressing Clov. The shivers are the oscillating vibrations of still life, the characters’ recognition of the constitutive procedural apparatus in which they dwell. “Well, you’ll lie down then, what the hell!” expresses Hamm, “Or, you’ll come to a standstill, simply stop and stand still, the way you are now. One day you’ll say, I’m tired, I’ll stop. What does the

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32 N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 225.

33 Gardner, 120.

34 Beckett, *Endgame*, 32, 65.

attitude matter?”<sup>35</sup> Well, the attitude does not matter; one may say that they are tired and they will stop, but this termination of forward movement is not an end but an oscillation. The standstill, the simple stop, shivers and oscillates. The text itself takes on “nice dimensions, nice proportions.”<sup>36</sup> The text’s procedurality, assuming a symmetry that cannot be lost, thus bars the possibilities of agential *poiesis* through language. That is, while Heidegger differentiates *poiesis* from thinking in that the former is creative and the latter is submissive, the procedurality in operation in Beckett’s text *constitutes* rather than creates and its requirement of submission is simply axiomatic, not a willed opening to a clearing.

So, when Hamm demands to know “what’s happening,”<sup>37</sup> Clov’s response that something is taking its course is as indicative of the proceduralist rhetoric as it is an accurate description of the diegetic motion of the text. “Proceduralists claim that players, by reconstructing the meaning embedded in the rules, are *persuaded* by virtue of the game’s procedural nature,” writes Sicart.<sup>38</sup> In particular, we are concerned with how the narrative-as-game may disclose certain operations of reading *Endgame* on the extra-diegetic level. The work of Ian Bogost in his studies *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism* (2006) and *Persuasive Games: The Expressive Power of Videogames* (2007) are major contributions to proceduralist criticism in both academia and industry: “It is the success of Bogost’s arguments not only across the academic body,” Sicart writes, “but also in the games industry what makes proceduralism a popular way of conducting computer games scholarship.”<sup>39</sup> Sicart continues:

What proceduralism...[argues is] that computer games present a technological and cultural exception that deserves to be analyzed through the ontological particularities that make computer

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35 Ibid., 37.

36 Ibid., 2.

37 Ibid., 13.

38 Miguel Sicart, “Against Proceduralism,” *Game Studies* 11 (2011), game.itu.dk/index.php/Against\_Proceduralism.

39 Ibid.

games unique, in this case, the fact that they have a “procedural nature.” The proceduralists take their starting point in [the]<sup>40</sup> statement that digital games are unique, among other things, because of their procedural nature...that is, because they are processes that operate in [a] way that is akin to how computers operate.<sup>41</sup>

With *Endgame*, the conceit of proceduralism is carried to an extreme. The text itself embodies a diegetic value in its design, however, one which proceeds without intention like the cellular automaton. The demonstration at play is a text that proceeds without semantic value. Value here is the status of meanings in relation to one another: value is the intentionally structured hierarchical merit of one term in semantic exchange with others. *Endgame* expresses its value as a procedure by signifying its semantic valuelessness. Hamm asks what is happening, but he must already know (if knowledge is constituted and programmable) since he is moved by unseen forces. We do not “play” the players in the text, rather they are played by the valueless process, the design, of the play itself: “Me – (*he yawns*) – to play,” Hamm notes, his yawn expressing inevitable compliance and agential disjunction more than ennui. The disjunction being between “me” and “to play;” that is, rather than indicating that he “plays” and therefore “is,” Hamm’s yawn signifies a vocalized gap that separates agency from procedure. Hamm, though without diegetic agency, is not without an acute sense of anxiety. There is embedded in *Endgame* the sense that the game itself hesitatingly wishes to transcend its own process. The desire to exceed what Ruby Cohn calls the “claustrophobic boundaries”<sup>42</sup> of the room’s walls that both constitute and signify the architecture of proceduralism is the straining to escape the valueless processes. This, however, seems impossible.

The limits of proceduralism unsettle not only the status of nar-

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40 See Janet H. Murray’s *Hamlet on the Holodeck: The Future of Narrative in Cyberspace* (1998).

41 Ibid.

42 Ruby Cohn, *Just Play: Beckett’s Theatre*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1980).

rative but also the status of language in *Endgame*. In his discussion on *Endgame*, Benjamin H. Ogden suggests that Beckett's language is one that forgoes any attempt at an ideal abstract language of the kind Wittgenstein proposed in *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* in favor of a language that is understood to be explicitly concerned with, following Stanley Cavell, natural concretisms. Ogden suggests that "in order to speak a language properly, then, one cannot just know the dictionary or formal definitions of words (its 'ideal' generative grammar), but must understand the 'natural environment' in which phrases and words are logical or appropriate."<sup>43</sup> The act of reading literature, Cavell suggests, is a process of "naturalizing ourselves to a new form of life, a new world" and that in doing so it is essential to focus upon the inhabitants of the fictional world.<sup>44</sup> Ogden, however, seems to be gesturing more towards the sort of reading position with which proceduralists would agree. He finds Cavell "too eager to 'hear' things in the text, to discover the cleverest readings rather than to permit the text to yield its unique, multiform logic" and, so, Ogden opts to "allow *Endgame* to speak for itself."<sup>45</sup> The wording of the play must not speak *to* but rather speak *for itself*, to proceed without intention. The wording of Hamm's request for his dog is, then, worth noting for its indeterminacy: "Is my dog ready?"<sup>46</sup> Clov's responses, that the dog "lacks a leg" and that he is "a *kind* of Pomeranian,"<sup>47</sup> are equally telling; the animal is, after all, a "black toy dog" with "three legs."<sup>48</sup> Here we cannot read *Endgame* literally because we assume the pose that the text proceeds on its own; the zero-player games moves itself and speaks itself. So, not only is the dog a simulation, but it is one that reveals itself as an imperfect simulation demonstrative of a debilitating mutation of the appendages of agential mobility. Indeed, the lifeless dog becomes metonymical of both the status of

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43 Benjamin H. Ogden, "What Philosophy Can't Say about Literature: Stanley Cavell and *Endgame*" in *Philosophy and Literature* 33.1 (2009), 127.

44 Ibid, 127.

45 Ibid. 136.

46 Beckett, *Endgame* 39.

47 Ibid., 39, emphasis added.

48 Ibid., 39.

language and the text itself:

CLOV:

Your dogs are here.

*(He hands the dog to Hamm who feels it, fondles it.)*

HAMM:

He's white, isn't he?

CLOV:

Nearly.

HAMM:

What do you mean, nearly? Is he white or isn't he?

CLOV:

He isn't.

*(Pause.)*

HAMM:

You've forgotten the sex.

CLOV *(vexed)*:

But he isn't finished. The sex goes on at the end.

*(Pause.)*

HAMM:

You haven't put on his ribbon.

CLOV *(angrily)*:

But he isn't finished, I tell you! First you finish your dog and then you put on his ribbon!

*(Pause.)*

HAMM:

Can he stand?

...

CLOV:

Wait!

*(He squats down and tries to get the dog to stand on its three legs, fails, lets it go. The dog falls on its side.)*

HAMM *(impatiently)*:

Well?

CLOV:

He's standing.

HAMM (*groping for the dog*):

Where? Where is he?

(*Clov holds up the dog in a standing position.*)

CLOV:

There.

(*He takes Hamm's hand and guides it towards the dog's head.*)

HAMM (*his hand on the dog's head*):

Is he gazing at me?

CLOV:

Yes.

HAMM (*proudly*):

As if he were asking me to take him for a walk?

CLOV:

If you like.

HAMM (*as before*):

Or as if he were begging me for a bone.

(*He withdraws his hand.*)

Leave him like that, standing there imploring me.

(*Clov straightens up. The dog falls on its side.*)<sup>49</sup>

While Clov is only partly committed to the farce – he refers to the dog in the plural, concedes that the black dog is “nearly” white, only to, upon interrogation, admit that the dog, in fact, “isn’t” – he does seem to demonstrate a recognition of the proceduralism of the narrative as metonymically expressed by the dog. His response to Hamm’s accusation that the maker has forgotten the dog’s reproductive organs is indicative of the diegesis itself as an iterative procedure that is at once static and sterile. The dog “isn’t finished” and, until the end, the dog will be without genitalia. However, there is no end to *Endgame*; the procedure forbids it. *Endgame* is,

49 Ibid., 40-41.

rather, taking its course, and will continually do so *ad infinitum*. The dog cannot stand and therefore cannot – like Hamm, Nagg, Nell, and the narrative itself in our thought experiment – have or be engaged by any agential mobility. The text, like the dog, can only demonstrate the *as if* it were being asked to be taken for a walk; or, *as if* the intervention of agency and intentionally could provide alternatives to the strict design. That the narrative can “go on” differently from the procedural patterns determined by the text’s design is impossible: an attempt at intentional intervention will, like the dog, fall flat. Indeed, while both Hamm and Clov indicate awareness of the proceduralism that governs the course of the text, here it is Clov who euphemistically expresses that the text is “not a real dog, he can’t go.”<sup>50</sup> Indeed, the diegesis of the play, like the dog, is a simulation: it is “not even a real dog!”<sup>51</sup> It is not a real diegetic environment; it is not a game with a player; it “can’t go”; it simply takes its course.

### **Simulation Fever: *Endgame* as Zero-Player Simulation**

That *Endgame* is not a real diegetic environment suggests its status not only as a zero-player game but also as a simulation. Keller identifies simulation as follows: “simulo *v.* 1. *To make a thing like another; to imitate, copy...* 2. *To represent a thing as being which has no existence, to feign a thing to be what it is not.*”<sup>52</sup> So, simulation is simultaneously openly mimetic and artificial. Ian Bogost, in *Unit Operations* (2006), employs the concept of “simulation fever” as a means of discussing the implications of procedurality on the relation between the system and its player. “Working through simulation fever means learning how to express what simulations choose to embed and to exclude,” he writes.<sup>53</sup> The player thus becomes integrated in his or her relation to the processes determined by the

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50 Ibid., 56.

51 Ibid., 69.

52 Keller, 203.

53 Ian Bogost, *Unit Operations: An Approach to Videogame Criticism*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2006), 109.

game. Working through simulation fever involves the recognition of how one is embedded within and how one is excluded from the procedurality of the game. This mode thus permits flexibility in the player's agency in understanding the game while simultaneously remaining implicated in and determined by the game processes. Bogost suggests that certain kinds of interpretation may achieve a point through which one may understand the system from within and without:

This would encourage player-critics to work through the simulation anxiety a simulation generates. Part of this process takes place within the gameplay, as the player goes through cycles of configuring the game by engaging its unit operations. Another process of configuration has to do with working through the play's subjective response to the game, the internalizations of its cybernetic feedback loops.<sup>54</sup>

What Bogost identifies as the working through of a simulation anxiety is, in fact, a kind of anxiety itself. That is, the anxiety of undergoing an experience with simulation is that which discloses anxiety to itself. The experience cannot be one governed by anxiety, that causing anxiety, but instead anxiety is that disposition which reveals anxiety. Anxiety is that which helps the player both recognize how he or she is embedded within the systemic procedure of *Endgame*. Yet it also forces the indifference of the system to that recognition by unveiling how one's intentionality is ultimately, and paradoxically, excluded from the operation. The concept of simulation fever, then, is a means of making meaningful the constitutive system while at the same time attempting to express how the player or reader experiences the system.

The player is, then, both embedded and excluded. Yet, this balance is, unlike almost every other element in Beckett's text, hardly symmetrical. Hamm and Clov are ultimately forced into this paradoxical stance. They seem largely aware of the procedurality of the text – of the parody that mocks the possibility for them

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54 Ibid., 108-109.

to live authentically or make meaningful and meditative choice – and, yet, are unable to have an effect on the very procedural-ity that determines the reiterative narrative. So, when Hamm, for example, remarks that “nature has forgotten us,”<sup>55</sup> and Clov responds that “there’s no more nature,”<sup>56</sup> the two are simultaneously recognizing the text itself as a kind of simulation as well as that constitutive environment, nature itself, being excluded from the artificial system in which they take their course. “No more nature! You exaggerate,”<sup>57</sup> Hamm repudiates suggesting that there is at least something that resembles nature – the artifact, the text as simulation – but Clov is steadfast: there is no more nature “in the vicinity.”<sup>58</sup> That is, simulation is an approximation but not a spatial proximity; Hamm and Clov are, as a result, both embedded and excluded from the system. Again, Hamm and Clov do not fully correspond with Bogost’s player; instead, it is the reader of *Endgame* who is most intimately embedded, and yet taking the conceit of the text as a case of radical procedural-ity – the zero-player game – the reader is, paradoxically, excluded from the text by being embedded in the text. While simulation fever allows, Sicart writes, for games to “convey messages and create aesthetic and cultural experiences by making players think and reflect about the very nature of the rules,”<sup>59</sup> this reflexivity is one that gestures more intensely to that which is excluded rather than that which is embedded. If Hamm and Clov were fully embedded in the text, one could suppose some degree of agency from them. Because they are not, one sees that they often do think and reflect about the nature of the rules, but the nature of the rules is not natural, such rules are artificial, simulated, and programmed. The procedural-ity here does not establish a delicate balance between agency and absence; rather, the text is one that gestures more towards that which expresses diminution of choice to the point of absence, nothingness, exclusion: zero. “Both mental modeling and cognitive mapping

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55 Beckett, *Endgame*, 11.

56 Ibid.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

59 Sicart, “Against Procedural-ity.”

show how the interpretation of a game relies as much or more on what the simulation excludes or leaves ambiguous than on what it includes” writes Bogost.<sup>60</sup> In a strange turn for this logic, our zero-player game embeds the reader by readerly exclusion. Like Björk’s and Juul’s examination of what the player means to gaming in zero-player games, *Endgame* raises the question of what a reader means with a text *as* zero-player game. The simulation generated for the reader is that which intensifies self-awareness only towards the recognition of exclusion and conditionality of the reader.

As a demonstration of exclusion, the text’s diegesis cannot signify, it calls forth, encourages, and summons the reader to identify with that which minifies beyond the elemental: an identification with the abyss, to encourage a narrative that proceeds on its own. Dramatizing the exclusion of the reader, the text operates in such a way as to make the narrative appear before itself as narrative. It does this by suggesting the absence of the extra-diegetic: an audience or reader. This procedure discloses itself most tellingly in the short episode where Clov turns a telescope, first on a window, and then on the auditorium. This move operates in two ways when considering the text as a kind of zero-player game. First, it reveals its diegetic level as something distinguished from, though somehow connected to and dependent upon, that which is *without* the text. Second, by emphasizing the misplacement of the extra-diegetic, Clov unveils that the link which establishes readerly agency has been severed:

CLOV:

*(He gets down, picks up the telescope, turns it on auditorium.)*

I see... a multitude... in transports... of joy.

*(Pause. He lowers telescope, looks at it.)*

That’s what I call a magnifier.

*(He turns toward Hamm.)*

Well? Don’t we laugh?

HAMM *(after reflection)*:

I don’t.

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60 Bogost, *Unit Operations*, 105.

CLOV (*after reflection*):

Nor I.

(*He gets up on ladder, turns the telescope on the without.*)

Let's see.

(*He looks, moving the telescope.*)

Zero...

(*he looks*)

...zero...

(*he looks*)

...and zero.

HAMM:

Nothing stirs. All is—

CLOV:

Zer—<sup>61</sup>

The “zero” to which Clov refers is not simply the enigmatic nothingness that lies beyond the room. There is, at once, a reader beyond; however, the conceit demands the reader amounts to zero. The hiddenness of the reader, that is, announces itself via its exclusion from the automaton at hand. The reader is, in a word, zero. And yet, as Heidegger suggests, this kind of formulation deprives itself of its own object. A little later, at what seems to be a moment of intense anxiety in the text, Hamm attempts to initiate an intervention into the unfolding procedure, to bring something unthought, unknown, or unprogrammed into being: “Think of something,”<sup>62</sup> he requests.

### **Thinking in the Void: *Endgame*, Vilém Flusser, and Information Illiteracy**

This formulation, of course, is all very strange for the reader. After all, the reader is to take the pose, or submit to the conceit, of exclusion. How then, if the characters of the play are incapable

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61 Beckett, *Endgame*, 29.

62 *Ibid.*, 46.

of action or thinking, is the reader to undergo experience while accepting the position of that which negates experience? This is perhaps our paradoxical intimacy with a text that resists intimacy. If we are to learn, we must dispose of everything we do so that we may be open to the essentials of the text that are given to us at any given moment. We learn to think by giving over our minds to nothingness: to give our minds over to the demonstration of nothingness, that which there is yet to think about and that which there is to think through. Like our idealized text, we must allow something to take its course, to surrender to a poetic (or should we say *programmed*) procedure. “We never come to thoughts,” writes Heidegger, “they come to us.”<sup>63</sup> Thoughts here, in a traditional sense, however, cannot truly arrive. Events are “the same as usual,”<sup>64</sup> remarks Clov, while Hamm concurs: “there’s no reason for it to change”<sup>65</sup> because *telos* in our thought experiment is impossible. There is no end-point, only a suspended endgame, a still life. Hamm wishes for a terminus, “old endgame lost of old,” he muses, “play and lose and have done with losing,”<sup>66</sup> but he cannot escape the patterns which oscillate and shiver forever. Clov, perhaps hopefully, remarks that “it may end. (*Pause.*),” yet remains partially practical: “all life long the same questions, the same answers.”<sup>67</sup> Yet, each knows that the latter bit of Clov’s remark is accurate and his hopefulness is procedural and without opportunity. “That’s always the way at the end of the day, isn’t it, Clov?,” Hamm remarks, and Clov, astutely: “Always.”<sup>68</sup> And this is, in itself, the revelation – a revelation – of infinite iterations: “it’s the end of the day like any other day, isn’t it, Clov?”<sup>69</sup> The infinite repetitiveness that constitutes them is not only temporal, it is also potential and conceptual: it is a procedure that proceeds without value. Hamm and Clov ex-

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63 Martin Heidegger, “The Thinker As Poet” in *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter, (New York: Harper Perennial, 2001), 6.

64 Beckett, *Endgame*, 4.

65 Ibid., 5.

66 Ibid., 82.

67 Ibid., 5.

68 Ibid., 13.

69 Ibid., 13.

perience that which is both strange and intimate to the reader: the disappearing influence of alphanumeric language and narrative replaced by automation, digitization, and proceduralism.

What proves significant with undergoing this paradoxical experience with *Endgame* is the manner through which this undertaking proves remarkable. “To undergo an experience with something means that this something befalls us, strikes us, comes over us, overwhelms and transforms us.” Heidegger continues:

When we talk of “undergoing” an experience, we mean specifically that the experience is not of our own making; to undergo here means that we endure it, suffer it, receive it as it strikes us and submit to it. It is this something itself that comes about, comes to pass, happens.<sup>70</sup>

And yet, here, with each pass, something takes its course. *Endgame* does not permit an experience beyond what appears as the text itself. Clov and Hamm experience what comes about, what comes to pass, and what happens: they experience proceduralism. But this, for them, is what must always constitute experience. For the reader, however, *Endgame* establishes a textual conundrum through which he or she succumbs to the twofold nature of undergoing an experience. The narrative delimits experience to something confined and defined: that is, the narrative of *Endgame* is a procedural gesture. The experience of the reader, however – as a witness to a zero-player game – thus undergoes an experience that is not his or her own making. One must endure it, suffer it, and receive as it strikes us. *Endgame* is a text to which we must submit if we wish to learn, confront, and think in new ways in an era that increasingly relies on code that proceeds on its own and is indifferent to the liberal subject.

Experience is and has been for the liberal subject textual, linguistic, and agential; however, future experience suggests something governed by the programmatic and procedural. “To un-

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70 Martin Heidegger, “The Nature of Language” in *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz, (New York: Harper One, 1971), 57.

dergo an experience with language...means to let ourselves be properly concerned by the claim of language by entering into and submitting to it,"<sup>71</sup> writes Heidegger. He continues, "man finds the proper abode of his existence in language"<sup>72</sup> and therefore any "experience we undergo with language will touch the innermost nexus of our existence. We who speak language may thereupon become transformed."<sup>73</sup> If language is indeed the "house of being," then the architecture of digital code anticipates very alien dwellings. That Clov is "doing his best to create a little order,"<sup>74</sup> is indicative of his struggle with this procedure. What is more, this struggle against the constitutive process shows that Clov's behavior is futile. He cannot submit and allow the experience to come and pass because he is bound to the procedure by a different, unrelenting logic. "A *program* is to be understood as writing directed not toward human beings but toward apparatuses," writes Flusser.<sup>75</sup> "Here no human beings require instruction," he continues, "instructions can instead be issued to apparatuses. In this way, it becomes clear that the goal of instruction," that is, proceduralism, causes subjects – or simulations of subjects – to "behave as they should automatically."<sup>76</sup> Heidegger's gesture towards the authenticity of an experience with language is indeed that which makes more striking the impossibility for thinking or experience on the level of *Endgame* as conceived in our thought experiment. Indeed, the manner in which we experience alphanumeric language differs radically from the way we experience programs.

"Scientific and philosophical information about language is one thing; and experience we undergo with language is another," Heidegger suggests, "whether the attempt to bring us face to face with the possibility of such an experience will succeed, and if it does, how far that possible success will go for each one of us – that

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71 Ibid.

72 Ibid.

73 Ibid.

74 Beckett, *Endgame*, 57.

75 Vilém Flusser, *Does Writing Have a Future?* trans. Nancy Ann Roth, (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press, 2011), 56.

76 Ibid.

is not up to any of us.”<sup>77</sup> And while the possibility of any experience is something that proceeds outside agency, the possibility and value of experience in *Endgame*’s proceduralist simulation are strikingly demoted. Indeed, for Heidegger information about language – a text as simulation – thus produces something radically altered from an experience with language.

Does *Endgame* – as a text that simulates the effects of our information illiteracy – become a space or gesture of cruelty? Hamm’s constant physical discomfort and his addiction to pain killers suggest a kind of simulation whereby this discomfort proceeds pitilessly as if inflicted by the something that is taking its course, that a constitutive narrative unfolds then repeats relentlessly and indifferently. The demonstration at play is a text that proceeds without intention. What is uncomfortable for the humanities is that we, as readers and theorists of narrative, are left out of the equation. On six occasions Hamm asks for his pain killer.<sup>78</sup> Hamm, with his programmed addiction, expects that there should be relief. “There’s no more pain-killer,”<sup>79</sup> Clov finally responds, therefore assuming that, at this final yet endless recursive iteration, there never was and never will be pain-killers for Hamm. Hamm’s response, “Good...!,”<sup>80</sup> is not so much one of reserve or coming-to-terms as it is an approval that, as always, something is taking its course as it should. That is, he responds not to the nonexistence of the pain-killer so much as to the functional accuracy of the diegetic actant proceeding recursively and unintentionally as it *must*. Indeed, “in logically constructed computer programs,” writes Flusser, “there is no symbol for *should*”.<sup>81</sup> The textual simulation, the procedural actant, is another thing entirely from an experience with language. There is no symbol for *should* and, resultantly, to assume *Endgame* as a cruel simulation is to approach the situation before us with misleading criteria. The zero-reader text does not invite intimacy: instead, it excludes. Digital narrative is something very alien,

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77 Heidegger “The Nature of Language,” 59.

78 Beckett, *Endgame*, 7, 12, 24, 35, 48, 71.

79 Ibid., 71.

80 Ibid.

81 Flusser, *Does Writing Have a Future?*, 57.

something that proceeds with indifference. We can talk *about* it with critical biases, but we cannot fully engage *with it* in traditional ways because there is a fundamental change in the predominant code underlying knowledge (which is embedded in knowledge production and knowledge mobilization) currently taking place.

On the level of the reader, then, the procedural indifference plays out in a slightly different way: it is not painful as much as anxious and uncomfortable. Though the conceit of our thought experiment is that *Endgame* is a zero-player game, the text is nevertheless expressed through language. Oddly enough, though, for our thought experiment we must imagine that the language negates itself by posing as something like programmed code. “When the issue is to put into language something which has never yet been spoken, then everything depends on whether language gives or withholds the appropriate word” writes Heidegger.<sup>82</sup> That which has never been spoken, in the case of *Endgame*, is the use of language for the conceit of absolute procedural narrative motion: digital code is not fully informed by our thinking yet there is evidence that it may gradually constitute our thinking. So *Endgame*, like the reader, proceeds to put into motion that which is already in motion, to endure the diegesis but also submit to its absence from its very proceduralism. The experience of *Endgame* is, then, where experience breaks off just as, for those of us who are not code literate, our experience with the coming dominant cultural code breaks off. “Where something breaks off, a breach, a diminution has occurred. To diminish means to take away, to cause a lack,” Heidegger notes.<sup>83</sup> He goes on: “no thing is where the word is lacking.”<sup>84</sup> That is, no thing – simulation – is where code determines. Furthermore, the reader, being where the word is lacking, poses as an absence. This absence, though, is not a renunciation; indeed, it would be absurd to push the conceit so far. Instead, the sense and ability to think about no-sense and unthinking opens the possibility for the simultaneity of experience and non-experience:

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82 Heidegger, “The Nature of Language,” 59.

83 Ibid., 60.

84 Ibid., 60.

code, simulation, and proxy are the best sites for this procedure. Not only is the text a demonstration of meaninglessness, its effects operate to dramatize the diminution of the self. It provides the analgesia that is forbidden to Hamm; if we submit, it reveals the threshold of experience.

In the years since Beckett's death in 1989, developments in the instruction of digital code have rapidly taken root. Ultimately, the pose the reader must assume when reading *Endgame* interrogates a fundamental conundrum at the centre of reading today, a conundrum that goes beyond Beckett. Jonathan Boulter writes that one of the fundamental themes of Beckett's work is “the agonizing fact of being in a language that endlessly composes and decomposes the subject. Being in Beckett means existing, finally and forever, in a language.”<sup>85</sup> For Heidegger, Being is *Dasein*; more specifically, Being is an openness and submission to linguistic and poetic experience. The language of *Endgame* is that which asks the reader to assume the submission to its proceduralism: our thought experiment asks of us how *Endgame* also makes manifest the agonizing fact of being in a world increasingly organized, mobilized, and run by digital code. Ogden suggests that the language of *Endgame* “might justly be considered a dialect, a language that shares an alphabet and lexicon but that differs grammatically and syntactically to such a degree that communication can effectively break down between those speaking the dialect and those speaking the language from which it derives.”<sup>86</sup> But Beckett goes even further than this. He establishes a textual logic in which the text *must* speak itself. Flusser suggests that the transition from alphanumeric language to digital code will have a radical impact on the very nature of critique. With this transition, “critique becomes a synthesized practice, based on knowledge that is interdisciplinary and part of a network of knowledges.”<sup>87</sup> The transition to learning digital code,

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85 Jonathan Boulter, “‘Speak no more’: The Hermeneutical Function of Narrative in Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*,” in *Samuel Beckett: A Casebook*, edited by Jennifer M. Jeffers, (New York: Garland Pub, 1998), 133.

86 Ogden, 135.

87 Anke Finger, Rainer Guldin, and Gustavo Bernardo, *Vilém Flusser: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 74.

for Flusser, is a way to relearn thought:

For us, thinking was, and still is, a process that moves forwards, that frees itself from images, from representations, that criticizes them, thereby becoming increasingly conceptual. We have the alphabet to thank for this understanding of thought and this understanding of thought to thank for the alphabet (feedback). The new digital codes arose from the new understanding of thought, and feedback is making us think in quanta and images more clearly the more we use the new codes.<sup>88</sup>

Assuming a more intense degree of intentionality than Heidegger's openness, Beckett's negation, or Bogost's proceduralism, Flusser does, however, anticipate a kind of productivity to this shift. Perhaps the endgame is alphanumeric language itself. That which will ultimately be lost of old will indeed play and lose and have done with losing. The alternative in this instance is digital code; while it offers alternatives, it nevertheless also attracts the alternatives of the zero-player game, of a different order of proceduralism, a new kind of poetic submission. While Murphy suggests that, in Beckett, "expression necessarily precedes existence,"<sup>89</sup> here we suggest that being submits to procedure and precedes the codification of existence. The engagement with digital code for most readers, however, is of a different order of reader negation: information illiteracy. The reader's proof of existence is made manifest via the pose of absence: the anxiety here is the intense non-self awareness or intense self non-awareness. We are not compelled to repeat so much as we are compelled to recognize that repetition, oscillation, and still life are apt metaphors for how closely we are able to truly identify with the stories – and the technical means upon which they are made possible – that we rely upon. The reader's inability to identify on an intimate level with the text is an expression of

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88 Flusser, *Does Writing have a Future?*, trans. Nancy Ann Roth (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 145.

89 P.J. Murphy, "Beckett and the Philosophers" in *The Cambridge Companion to Beckett*, edited by John Pilling, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 222.

the inability to engage with the zero-player automaton; moreover, though, our exclusion is an experiment for the traditionally literate to experience the coming information illiteracy. Not only does the effect of *Endgame* allow us to imagine a zero-player/reader text in the sense that it calls for the clearing for thinking, it is the zero-player game whose central conceit is bringing to light our absence from the coming thought of a new competence via a new language: the processes of code.

So, it is appropriate to recognize the ontological puzzle that Beckett expresses as one that is in itself linguistic, poetic, and procedural. Yet, *Endgame*, in our thought experiment in particular, expresses most intensely the poetic procedure: that which calls for surrender and proves a demonstration of meaninglessness. Without meaning, the semantic force of language, we experience anxiety. The removal of self in this thought experiment demands of the reader to assume the role of thinker. To think of nothingness is to dedicate a concept or referent to *nothing* thus negating its very status as that which it is, which is the *is not*. We must assume nothingness as a means of being open to its valuelessness, to submit and surrender to its procedure. In this way – though difficult and in many ways at the parameters of articulation – *Endgame* discloses a remarkable opening for thought. By deconstructing the biases of perception, *Endgame* projects, to borrow a phrase from Paul Éluard, a “vision beyond this crass, insensible reality which we are expected to accept with resignation, [and] conducts us into a liberated world where we consent to everything, where nothing is incomprehensible”<sup>90</sup> Our thought experiment demands that we must take seriously the idea that the text takes its course and that our identification with nothingness is the very path to considering how we may go on when we can no longer go on. Topsfield is correct to remark that, despite the relentless logic of diminution and negation in Beckett, “the ‘message’ of *Endgame* is positive.”<sup>91</sup> Our non-engagement is our path to engagement with the procedure

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90 Paul Éluard, “Beyond Painting,” *Beyond Painting*, (Solar Books, 2008), 158-159.

91 Valerie Topsfield, *The Humour of Samuel Beckett*, (Houndmills: Macmillan, 1998), 112.

and “since that’s the way we’re playing it,” Hamm determines, “let’s play it that way and speak no more about it.”<sup>92</sup> With this inability to speak and think from nothingness, whether our illiteracy is linguistic or digital, *Endgame* becomes the path for a potential revelation through the surrender and submission to new and unconventional procedures of perception. Like Hamm’s experience, the effects of *Endgame* ask us to acknowledge the procedures that surrender without intention: the effects ask us to be nothing, to urgently *think of something*.

Ultimately, what these effects offer us is an instructional unfolding of the minimizing of the self, the recognition that radically different narratives are on the horizon, and that something unarticulated is always innate. If digital code has something of a narrative embedded in it, it will be alien indeed.

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92 Beckett, *Endgame*, 84.

# WARMING THE ALGORITHM

*And Possibilities for the Future*

FRANCO 'BIFO' BERARDI – INTERVIEWED BY  
DILLON DOUGLAS & THOMAS SZWEDSKA

*Franco “Bifo” Berardi’s is a renowned Italian political theorist and leading figure of the Italian Autonomia Movement, an anti-authoritarian form of Marxism. Until recently, he was a professor at the Accademia di Brera, Milan where he taught the Social History of the Media. As an activist, he was involved with Radio Alice, a pirate radio station in Italy during the mid to late 1970’s that aligned itself with the autonomist movement before Berardi fled to Paris in the 1980’s. “Bifo” has been involved with many artistic collaborations and journals: he is a co-founder of the Italian e-zine rekombinat.org which focuses on culture jamming, radical philosophy and media activism; and is also involved in telestreet movement, founding the channel Orfeo Tv. His theoretical work brings together conflicting and conjunctive voices, operating within a creative theoretical matrix that emphasizes French Post-structuralism and Italian Autonomist Marxism. His oeuvre, which includes more than two dozen books and many more essays, has emphasized motifs such as exhaustion, depression, withdrawal, and cancelling the future. Recently, “Bifo” has incorporated a robust phenomenological dimension to his writings in order to address the relationship between technology and subjectivity in the current global horizon of capitalism. This entails a reinvigoration of the concepts of potency, possibility, and power as a means to reactivate a future for the social body. These issues are taken up in Berardi’s new book, *Futurability: The Age of Impotence and the Horizon of Possibility* (Verso, 2017).*

*This interview was conducted during Berardi's visit to London, Ontario in March 2017 where he delivered a keynote lecture at "New Italian Thought," a conference hosted by The Centre for Advanced Research in European Philosophy at King's University College and The Centre for the Study of Theory and Criticism at Western University. We wish to express our sincere thanks and gratitude to Dr. Antonio Calcagno, who made the interview a possibility, and of course to Professor Berardi for the generosity of his time, spirited engagement with us, and above all else assistance in organizing this interview.*

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**Dillon Douglas and Thomas Szwedzka:** Let's begin by talking about the theoretical matrix that you develop between Deleuze, Guattari, Baudrillard and the Autonomist strain of Italian Marxism. What is so impressive and tantalizing about your synthesis is the persistent antagonism between Deleuze and Guattari's theory of desire and Baudrillard's theory of simulacra that you reconfigure as a means to diagnosis semiocapitalism. It seems that for you Baudrillard is more prescient for contemporary problems than Deleuze and Guattari. However, you also redeploy Tronti's strategy of refusal to undermine Baudrillard's cynicism about liberation tactics. Then, moreover, you also raise a polemic against Deleuze, Guattari and Baudrillard to supplement the "phenomenological deficit" in their work, which seems to jettison the corporeal referent of the body—a central part of your own amorous schizoanalysis. Can you tell us what you were thinking about when you put all this together?

**Franco "Bifo" Berardi:** First of all, I disagree when you speak of Baudrillard's cynicism about liberation tactics. I will start from this point because this question is complicated, but the central point is about, let's say, our assessment of the possibilities of liberation today. Why I refuse the definition of cynicism when you speak of Baudrillard is because I think the word cynicism implies

an ethical complicity, I can say, with the existing reality. This is not Baudrillard’s stance. You may accuse Baudrillard of pessimism or also of nihilism, in a sense, but not of cynicism. On the contrary, Baudrillard is ethically very sensible and absolutely opposed to the present reality. But at the same time he recognizes that a process of liberation is not impossible, but distant from the present constitution of society and of subjectivity. I would say that far from being cynical his position can rather be defined as ironical.

I use the word irony in a very precise sense. When I say irony I mean the ability to distinguish between the sphere of language and the sphere of reality; the understanding that in the sphere of language and also in the sphere of ethical language that we can develop forms of consciousness, of imagination, of reality construction which are incompatible with the reality existing in the world. So I found an idea of autonomy on a concept of irony: irony being the ability to distinguish a sphere which is autonomous from the existing reality, a sphere which is not purely symbolic but deals with reality. I mean, we can decide reality is the dimension of reality that happens around this table – this is reality for us. But actually reality is the dimension of mutual understanding among humans. There is no reality before the creation of a common, Deleuze may say, *plan de consistance*...

**TS:** A plane of consistency.

**Bifo:** Yes, a plane of consistency. Language is creating a plane of consistency and the only plane of consistency is that we work together. This is our sphere of reality. The problem is, says Baudrillard, is that our plane of consistency (he does not use this language) our level of linguistic and ethical understanding cannot become the prevailing form of social life. In a sense, Baudrillard is creating a form of autonomy that is based on the withdrawal of reality. That is absolutely far from the definition of cynicism. Although I know that the word cynicism has different meanings – you can refer to the cynical Greek philosophy, for example – but we know what we are talking about when we use this word, or that when we

refer to a cynical person we are not referring to these other ideas of cynicism.

So from this point of view we could say I am not against Deleuze and Guattari. I think that Deleuze and Guattari have created a methodology, a rhizomatic methodology that has opened a way to a possibility and then Baudrillard comes along who says this is not a possibility for a political project. It is possible only in the ironic dimension of a mutual understanding. Frankly speaking, I think that Deleuze and Guattari and Baudrillard were in a conflicting position for reasons that belong much more to their personal biography than to their philosophy. You know, in 1974 Baudrillard published a book called *Oublier Foucault* [*Forget Foucault*]. After this point Foucault asked his friends to ignore the existence of Baudrillard. And this is the beginning of a conflict which was understandable at the personal or political level but not philosophically speaking. I want to dedicate my actions to a reconciliation between their work—they are all dead so I can be free, but I can also beg their pardon! [laughs]

**DD/TS:** This is what is so fascinating about your work, not many people are trying to do this! Moving on now, readers of your work seem to have questions about the theoretical and political valence that your notion of the body takes. It is not just “*res extensa*” or the phenomenological and christological “substance” of finitude. Is it? Or is it an “existential territory” of corporeality, familiarity, community that Guattari takes up, that is, a body *qua* its pathic relationality? It often flickers between these two determinations in your work.

**Bifo:** Well, in Italian, jokingly we say “*la seconda è buona*,” “the second one is good!” [laughs] Actually, I understand the perplexity, I understand that there is a possible ambiguity in the use of the word “body”. For instance, in *The Soul at Work*, I try to be clear about this point. I am not speaking about the soul in the spiritual sense as something disembodied. On the contrary, when I say the “soul” I mean the body in a sense, I mean the animated body. So,

obviously we can speak of the body in the sense of *res extensa*, but that is not my point. What is interesting for me is the existential dimension in which the physical consistency, the narrow physiological consistency of the body, gets a soul and becomes capable of emotional interaction and also of rational thought. So you see, the body is in this sense indissociable from the soul. And in this sense, I cannot...if you wanted to speak of the body in the narrow physiological dimension I needed to explicitly signal this dimension. If I say body I mean the animated body which implies an existential dimension, which also implies the complex of consciousness and the unconscious.

**DD/TS:** So is this related, or what you mean by a rhizomatic phenomenology: what gives a body animus or allows it to act in a social situation or condition?

**Bifo:** Well, the term rhizomatic phenomenology comes from the methodology of *Mille Plateaux* [*A Thousand Plateaus*]. This is the way we can define social life and the social process without referring to a political fixation or ideological fixation. Rhizomatic phenomenology is the dimension of the Husserlian *Lebenswelt*...

**TS:** A “lifeworld”...

**Bifo:** Ya! Absolutely, a life as the world of life! The dimension in which social life is creating its own environment and world. Politics, or ideology, fixates in one sense or another social life. And obviously this is legitimate but I wanted to move beyond or come beside this ideological and political fixation, and I wanted to see what happens at the level of the social unconscious or the social imaginary, and so on.

**DD/TS:** In your critique of political economy’s cult of productivity, you aim to reconfigure desire as a *field* (a “psychosphere,” which flirts conceptually with Guattari’s and Bateson’s “mental ecology”) rather than desire as a *force*—specifically, rather than a

neo-Spinozist causal productive force. Here, you quite brilliantly, twist Guattari and Baudrillard into a double helix against the “relentless Spinozism” of Deleuze and Negri.

**Bifo:** Thank you very much for this definition!

**DD/TS:** You’re welcome! Now to quote you from *The Soul at Work*, the “schizo vision thinks that the proliferation of desire can endlessly erode all structures of control. The implosive vision sees proliferation as the diffusion of a de-realizing virus.”<sup>1</sup> Do you think that in some respect this neo-Spinozism has internalized the metaphysical principle of political economy—that is, its reality principle of infinite production, energy, force?

**Bifo:** Congratulations! [laughs] No, this is a very interesting question, and it is also the object of my next book which is coming out in May entitled *Futurability*.<sup>2</sup> Futurability is a way to reactivate an imaginal future. You know, I have been repeating many times “no future,” “after the future,” and so on...

**TS:** Now it is time for a future!

**Bifo:** Yes...you know, “keep calm, and...” [laughs] look for one! But I also say there is relation between possibility – which is the content inscribed in the present constitution of reality, and particularly of our collective brain – potency and power. So I try to distinguish between these three levels and their relationship to the future because they are a way to imagine a tendency to imagine an intention, in the Husserlian way, towards the future. Possibilities are a plural, multifaceted dimension. Possibility is not one, it is not infinite, because it is not possible that I will live forever, for instance. It is not possible that this table is a cucumber! But in this

1 Franco “Bifo” Berardi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy*, trans. Francesca Cadel and Giuseppina Mecchia (Cambridge, Massachusetts: semiotext(e), 2009) 160

2 Franco “Bifo” Berardi, *Futurability: The Age of Impotence and the Horizon of Possibility*, (New York: Verso Books, 2017)

sphere of possibility we find much more than in the dimension of actualization. So the relation between possibility and actualization is a relation of vibration. And in this vibration something happens that makes possible the shift from possible to actual. But what happens exactly? I try to understand how this selection happens, a selection among, not infinite, but many possibilities. And my answer is, first of all, power.

Power is a negative selection, a reductive selection, which allows one actualization against all the other possible selections. It is like a *gestalt*, an entangling gestalt! So then I also ask myself, how can we extract [ourselves] from the present possibilities which are forbidden from the present constitution of power and my answer is potency.

Potency is the transformation of the multiplicity of possibilities into a possible multiplicity of actualization. So I try to better understand what potency means. And I am obliged to refer to Negri. Negri, in his works, particularly in his works on Spinoza, I do not remember their titles in English...not the “Anomaly”...

**DD:** He wrote *The Savage Anomaly, Subversive Spinoza...*

**Bifo:** Yes that one! Here, he expresses himself in very theological terms. So I tried to deal with this idea of an infinity of potency and criticize Negri’s definition of potency for the first time in an explicit way.

So, you see, I think that the problem of desire very much has to do with this relationship between possibility and actualization. In the Italian interpretation of the concept of desire, I mean, *Anti-Oedipe* [*Anti-Oedipus*] was published in 1975 or 1976 [in Italian], and in 1977 we all discovered Deleuze and Guattari. And for us this was a sort of discovery of the infinity of desire. That turn was dangerous and wrong. The idea that desire is a force of infinite potency, this was a mistake and the wrong interpretation – and frankly speaking Deleuze and Guattari opened the door for this interpretation. At a certain point, dealing with the problem of depression, which has become an important problem at the politi-

cal and psychological level in the 1980s, 90s, and today more and more, so in trying to come to terms with the problem of depression there is a separate problem in the definition of desire as an infinite force and infinite potency.

First, potency is not infinite, and this is proved by the social history of our time but it is also proven by the personal experience of Guattari and Deleuze! In their last work, *What is Philosophy?*, they never use the “d” word – depression, they never say it, but they are talking about it! In “Chaos and the Brain,” the beautiful conclusion of the book, when they speak of “too fast, too fast, my brain is unable to interpret, to learn, to contain,” they are speaking of depression, and they are speaking of aging. They explicitly say, “what is growing old, what does it mean?” I like this text very much, first, because I am discovering the problem myself but also because I see they are problematizing desire in a non-explicit way. They are criticizing or self-criticizing the idea that desire is an infinite force. Desire is not a force, desire is a field. Potency is a force that acts on the field of desire. This has been important in the political history of the [Italian Autonomist] movement, because since a certain moment, after Deleuze and Guattari, we understood that politics is not about ideas, ideology, projects, and agendas and so on. These are important but they are epiphenomena in a sense. The real field in which the political history of humankind happens is desire. You have to act at that level if you want to win. Trump wins because he is able to manipulate desire while Clinton is unable to do the same! That is the point.

So you see: first, potency is not infinite; second, desire is not a force but a field, and we have to act on and in the field of desire in such a way that our potency becomes able to extract and actualize the possibility that the present constitution of the world, the capitalist constitution of the world, is repressing, compressing and making *invisible*, not impossible but invisible!

**DD/TS:** We have a question, actually, about the invisibilization of the world and a certain impotence of worlds as you describe them in your recent book *And: Phenomenology of the End*. What do

you mean when you invoke concepts of “world”? In this book, you tend to emphasize *the* world of semiocapitalism as a process of invisibilization relying on immaterial signifiers. But you also make reference to numerous cultural worlds, and the manner in which we typically, and mistakenly, take up our surrounding environment as the world as such, the Real world. How do worlds, in their cultural, national dimension, and the world relate to each other? And how does the process of the invisibilization of the world under semiocapitalism figure into this relationship between the world and worlds?

**Bifo:** Well, I see possible plans for my answer to this question. First, the most immediate, banal and phenomenological is that the history of late capitalism of financial capitalism *is* a process of invisibilization.

**DD:** It is a good word, much better than impossible because it already starts to instill the idea of possibility within the lexiconal shift in the concept of invisibilization.

**Bifo:** Absolutely. Secondly, I want to define power exactly as a process of invisibilization of possibilities. I try to explain [in this book] that the possibility of the general intellect and of the present constitution of technology and knowledge, and so on, is inscribed in our contemporary life. But what does this mean concretely? It means we can work less, enjoy more, and so on. The potency of knowledge and technology is giving us this possibility but we do not see this as possible. Why is this so? Because the capitalist organization is not working as a form of repression. Sometimes it works this way, but essentially it acts as an invisibilization of the possibilities of the world. Think about what salary is, and salary work. The very form of salary is the creation of a social perception, a social vision, in which you don't see that salary is an inessential, historical, and determinate form of relations between survival, labour, and social life. We are lead to think that if we want to survive we must work. Obviously, I admit, in some periods of human history

it has been necessary and probably in a marginal way it is still necessary. But this is not a natural given! In political discourse you cannot even say that basic income can replace the form of salary. Some very rare politicians are able to admit that sometimes, when many people are unemployed, we can give them a small amount of money for a short period of time in which they do not work. But as soon as they find work, they have to accept it! Otherwise you will not have your income anymore.

This is a total misunderstanding of the essential concept of basic income. I prefer to say “*salario di esistenza*” or “revenue of existence”. You have to think of the revenue of existence as a possibility of making visible what is made invisible by the gestalt of salary. Salary is a gestalt in the proper sense. You know what a gestalt is? A gestalt, according to gestalt theory, is a form that is generating forms. I mean, here, what do you see? I see a chair. True, there is a chair! But I do not see many other things that are here...I do not see the physical constitution of the chair, I do not see that it is also a hammer if I need a hammer, I do not see that it is a weapon for killing you if I want to kill you. You see how many things I can discover in reality but that are covered by the prevailing form of invisibilization. And actually you know, there are some types of figures, the vase for example. You see, this is a vase... [draws “vase” and laughs]. Okay, well anyway this is supposed to be a vase. In psychology they used to say “you see this is a vase, but from another point of view this is a nose!”

So the point is that you are accustomed to see things according to the prevailing gestalt. And if you want to disentangle the other forms of possibility you need to forget about the gestalt, you have to *cancel* the gestalt in your brain. Well, salary is a gestalt, an entangling gestalt which forbids the possibility of seeing the possibility inscribed in the general intellect which is producing the possibility of, call it a basic income but I call it the revenue of existence. That does not mean that people can live without doing anything, because people do not want to do nothing. People want to act, want to be active, and want to be helpful; they want to be creative and so on! So you have to disentangle the potency of hu-

man activity from the limitation of salaried work. Socially speaking, what we need more now is not the creation of fake forms of employment. We need to give people the possibility of healing, of dealing with the psycho-pathological problem of our time, which is to be healed not in a salaried way. The healing happens when you give people the possibility of living outside the blackmail, the entangled salaried form of activity.

**DD/TS:** Can we tie this back to when you speak of the reduction of the erotic domain and our ability to conjunct with people? I think there is an interesting congruity here with Peter Sloterdijk in his “archeology of intimacy” or *Spheres* project, when he claims that modernity is a historical machinery that specializes in the production of lonely individuals or monads who take as their metaphysical starting point the notion of “the one,” a historical machinery that “begins the history of the human who wants, and is meant to have, the ability to *be alone*.”<sup>3</sup> You give a much more needed political inflection to what you see as the reduction of the erotic domain than Sloterdijk does, especially as “workers” are being swapped out for “floating atoms of time” due to capitalism’s recombinant ability. I suppose the question is how to overcome this historical production of loneliness. It is not simply “I feel lonely”, but it is a social production that capitalism has developed and that you can see in the architecture of apartment buildings as lonely cells, in the cubicalization of the work place or the dissipation of the work place altogether.

**Bifo:** Did you see Roman Polansky’s film *Carnage*? It is a film about two couples that meet in a small apartment, it is a very claustrophobic film. They continue talking about their children...but at a certain point, at the end, one of the husbands from the couple of visitors, one of which is Kate Winslet...the husband I do not remember, he does not deserve to be remembered [laughs]. But he is on his phone all of the time, he is a lawyer so he has to deal with

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3 Peter Sloterdijk, *Bubbles: Spheres I*, trans. Wieland Hoban (Cambridge, Massachusetts: semiotext(e), 2011) 203.

something. But at a certain point Kate Winslet takes his phone and launches it into the bowl of water. She kills his smartphone, and then she says a beautiful sentence: “what is far is always more interesting than what is close.” This is a beautiful sentence, because this is the real point.

The real point is that the investment of desire, or the desiring-investment, is displaced from the dimension of the lived experience of the body of the other, of their presence, to the promise of a possible coming experience. I mean, I know, you know what we are talking about because it also happens to me. Think of Facebook. Tinder is in between, because it is a promise but it is a promise that is going to be fulfilled soon, maybe, maybe because it is not for sure. Facebook is perfect, because it is a permanent promise that experience will happen. And we start a “jump” with Facebook that never happens. But this is not the repression of desire.

Desire was repressed in the industrial age, in the age of Sigmund

Freud. In a sense, it is the contrary to repression, it is a sort of obligation to expression. An expression which continuously creates the promise of something that never happens. But desire is really invested in it. You see the capture of desire, contrary to what I thought when I was a young reader of *Anti-Oedipe* [*Anti-Oedipus*]: desire is not a good guy. Desire sometimes is cheating, sometimes it is taking you into a dimension of continuous frustration, a dimension of continuous postponement. My problem is not the invitation to people to throw your smartphone into a bowl of water. And I understand that in the game of postponing there is something happy, if you want. But if you transform erotic life into this permanent process of postponement, the effect is quite simply the valorization of capital and the dissolution of the possibility of happiness.

**DD/TS:** Since you mentioned that your answer to the problem of socially produced loneliness is not simply to throw away your smartphone, perhaps we should turn to one critique of your work by accelerationist theorists who accuse you of technophobia, humanism, and to ventriloquize Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, a

“folk politics” (a politics that fetishizes the immediate, tangible, hypokinetic and tries to reduce the hypercomplex, abstract and uncannily asubjective features of contemporary capitalism into a concrete package).<sup>4</sup> How would you respond to this?

**Bifo:** I have already responded to them in an article on *e-flux* and in a small book on accelerationism, and my answer is in many ways still the same.<sup>5</sup> I mean, accelerationism is very interesting when this philosophy or theory opens the way to understanding that in the machine a possibility of freedom is implied, but more, that only in the acceleration is there implied a possibility for liberation. However, this consideration becomes a form of simplistic progressivism.

**DD:** They have a sort of Hegelian optimism: in the end, everything will be good, the machine will take care of us, luxury-automated communism. They have these sorts of fantasies.

**Bifo:** Ya, absolutely! You know, I have always considered the “Fragment on Machine” the most important text about the possibility of liberation. But I know it is a possibility and I strongly emphasize the word possibility. Because, Marx’s Fragment is the starting point of Nick Land and accelerationist theory, explicitly or implicitly. So I agree when they say that the possibility is *in* the acceleration but only the possibility! At the same time, you have to acknowledge that if the body is captured in the dimension of acceleration without the possibility of autonomization or detachment, of de-multiplication, the possibility will never become actual. We will stay as an anguished possibility and it will never become true.

I do not reject that theory, but it is only part of the story. The other part of the story is not about acceleration or about de-

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4 See Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, *Inventing the Future: Postcapitalism and a World without Work*, (New York: Verso, 2015).

5 See, for example, Franco “Bifo” Berardi, “Accelerationism Questioned from the Point of View of the Body” in *e-flux*, Journal #46 (June 2013): <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/46/60080/accelerationism-questioned-from-the-point-of-view-of-the-body/>

celeration. I am not proposing a sort of nostalgic going back to a pre-technological dimension...

**TS:** It is not a retreat for you.

**Bifo:** Not at all, not a retreat from the technological dimension. I refuse any definition of technophobia as strongly as I refuse the definition of technophilia. The relation with technology cannot be a relation of passive acceptance or nostalgic refusal. It has to be a relation based on the creation of “chaoids”, the multipliers of chaos. I mean, good political action consists in the ability of creating the multipliers that gives you all the potency that is inside the acceleration, but also gives you the possibility – slow or fast I do not care – of being inside your body. A body is slow sometimes, why not? I like the slow body as I like the amphetamines, I have nothing against it. My relationship to acceleration is exactly this: half of the story is there, but what is lacking is important.

**DD/TS:** So can we talk more about this idea of refusal you mentioned before. There are a number of motifs of refusal that are emerging within contemporary Marxist discourse—“exodus” (Virno), “desertion” (Raunig), “separation” (Negri), even “subtraction” (Badiou). There is the attempt to subtract from the spatio-temporal dimensions of real subsumption or the “social factory” that seems to simultaneously require the creation of a new form of communistic life. You deploy the concept of withdrawal. Can you explain more precisely what this concept means for you? Is it akin to what Deleuze and Guattari call escape or “courage” in *Anti-Oedipus*?—that is, when they ask quoting Maurice Blanchot “What is this escape? The word is poorly chosen to please. Courage consists, however, in agreeing to flee rather than live tranquilly and hypocritically in false refuges.”<sup>6</sup>

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6 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane (New York: Penguin Books, 2009) 341.

**Bifo:** You see, you have listed many good references. The line of escape [*ligne de fuite*] is much more about the possibility of avoiding bad conflict at unavoidable costs. You cannot cancel reality but you can escape. Then you have the concept of exodus, Paolo Virno for instance, which implies that you have social force, like for instance the general intellect or the community, and this social force cannot act in a form of negation but can “exodate”, transfer to another dimension. All of this has to do with the concept of withdrawal. After 1977 I began to speak of the process of withdrawal as a process of social action. But the most interesting way interesting way to approach the subject in my opinion is Gregory Bateson. Bateson, in *Steps to an Ecology of Mind* speaks of a *schismogenesis*. Schismogenesis is perfect because everything is in that concept. One, schism, is an escape, exodus and so on. But it also speaks of genesis. Somewhere Deleuze says when you are escaping you are not only escaping, you are looking for a weapon. Bateson says more. He says when you escape you are creating another form of social life. Inside the escaping community you have a concept of sanctuary. Sanctuary is simultaneously a way to escape and of protecting the legacy of a past social civilization, and of creating the conditions of a new form. So it is a genesis, not only a schism. All of this, is I think, the beginning of a reflection that goes beyond Leninist dialectics that goes beyond thinking in dialectical terms. We are looking for a methodology for the revolution of tomorrow.

Actually, probably the term revolution has to be dismissed. Revolution actually refers to the idea that this is the territory, and we have to subvert it, revolve it. It is not a good methodology, probably. The idea now is that this is the territory, but the territory is making something invisible. We have to escape, withdraw, to find a good perspective in order to see what is invisible.

**TS:** So it is not simply a dialectical shift, or rotation –

**Bifo:** It is a displacement.

**DD:** In this sense, it is almost a cubist tactic where you have one

object and you are trying to look at it from a hundred different perspectives at once.

**Bifo:** Yes, exactly!

**DD/TS:** We would like to ask a naïve question about your hypothesis regarding cognitariat recomposition: namely, how does this differ from the connective sensibility you outlined as belonging to semicapitalism? I am curious because in an article published in *Multitudes*, “Décomposition et recombinaison à l’âge de la précarité,” you claim that the cognitariat cannot form a social class because their material social proximity is no longer perceived as “being part of a living community.”<sup>7</sup> Would it be fair to say, then, that what you call cognitariat recomposition, or auto-identification in the conclusion of this essay, is an “immaterial” collective subjectivity, or an immaterial living community?

**Bifo:** Well, immaterial living community is a strange expression. The immaterial community already exists in a certain sense, the problem is that it needs to be embodied. Actually, the process of recomposition for me is absolutely fundamental, especially in the Workerist (Operaismo) Thought but also in finding a strategy. The strategy has to be a strategy of recomposition. Strategy in the industrial age used to be based on the physical proximity of workers. But physical proximity does not necessarily imply a social alliance.

**TS:** We need to distinguish between mass and class, in this regard.

**Bifo:** Absolutely, of course, the mass is not immediately a social class. You need strategies of recomposition also for people who are being together, who hate each other sometimes. So with the history of the unions, of historical communism and the history of social recomposition of that form of social labour, we first have to elabo-

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7 Franco “Bifo” Berardi, “Décomposition et recombinaison à l’âge de la précarité,” *Multitudes* 62, no. 1 (2016): 78, doi: 10.3917/mult.062.0077. Translation is ours.

rate a strategy of recomposition for a social body, or a social class, or a social combinatory system which is not yet a class, which is deprived of all physical proximity. Second, that takes into account the condition of permanent competition. Precarious labor first, is physically deterritorialized, and secondly is put in a condition of permanent competition, which is essential to understand what precarity means.

**TS:** The system is always presents itself as being-full in a sense, and contradictorily this scarcity of work makes labor even more desirable.

**Bifo:** Yes, and every day you have to fight against others to have your job and your salary. So we have two obstacles in the process of recomposition. And I attempt to better understand this problem by saying that “the general intellect is looking for its body.” What is the body of the general intellect?

Actually I do not have the answer to this problem as it is a problem of the upcoming years. But, first, we need to clearly define the problem. Second, we need to phenomenologically define the suffering of these workers. The body exists in a sense, but it exists only in the form of suffering. In the experience of industrial workers the body was always joking together, going to have a beer, sabotage, it was a sense of complicity. Complicity was essential for industrial workers. How can we find a ground for complicity among cognitive workers? Again, I do not have the answer but I see that the problem is there.

For instance, Tinder is an interesting example. You know what Tinder is of course? These kinds of apps are interesting because it is an attempt towards the possibility of a provisional recomposition of the cognitive body. Actually, this is true up to a certain point. First, because as far as I know, I do not know much because I only read about it or speak to friends, but as far as I know it is a very provisional experience. It is not transforming into a persistent and permanent form of socialization. But it is going in the right direction. I think, the accelerationist in me thinks, that we

need to work towards a platform that works for the erotic socialization of the cognitive body. I don't know exactly what it means, what is the right form, the right form of ecstasy, the ecstatic form for cognitive labor. It is a political problem but it is also a technological problem.

**DD/TS:** As a final inquiry, we have a couple of curious passages here that we just found by Deleuze. In *Cinema 1: The Movement Image*, Deleuze writes that we “hardly believe any longer that a global situation can give rise to an action which is capable of modifying it – no more than we believe that action can force a situation to disclose itself, even partially. The most “healthy” illusions fall.”<sup>8</sup> Then in *Cinema 2: The Time-Image* he says, at his most uncharacteristically Kierkegaardian, “Whether we are Christians or atheists, in our universal schizophrenia, *we need reason to believe in this world. It is a whole transformation of belief*” where “belief” translates into the fact that we must again “believe in the body, but as the germ of life, the seed which splits open the paving-stones.”<sup>9</sup> These passages give life to your ideas about cognitariat recomposition, and to your mantra “the general intellect is looking for a body”. Many readers of your work consider you purely as a thinker of doom, of catastrophe – exhaustion, depression, and suicide. But if we read your work we see a process of autonomy unfolding, a miracle disentangles where action becomes possible again. Perhaps this is a kind of rejuvenated belief. Perhaps it is more than this, perhaps you provide us with “chaosmotic” texts (a book that brings us beyond the book, as Nietzsche says) where we can, to use your words, begin to form a cosmos elaborating chaos.

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8 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema I: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1986) 206

9 Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema II: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1989) 172-173

**Bifo:** This is more an answer than a question, but it is useful for me because I read the books on cinema over 25 years ago and in hearing these passages I remind myself I have to reread these books. Here, when Deleuze says “whether we are Christian or atheists we need reasons to believe in this world.” *We need reasons to believe in this world...* Actually, it is not a problem of belief but a problem of evocation. We need reasons for the evocation of the world. The problem of evocation is a long story. I mean, since Mallarmé, the Symbolists were reasoning about the problem of evocation. Words are not denotative things, they may be more-than-denotative things and they may have the ability to evoke the world. And actually a hundred years after this, virtual reality tools are in a sense giving technical reality to the possibility of evoking worlds starting from signs, from semiotic combinations and so on. So politics, in the good sense, is about finding reasons and constructing reasons that make it possible to believe in the world. But also to trust the world, also believing in a world that may be trusted, that might be expected as a source of pleasure and not only of danger.

How can we go in this direction? This is the political problem of our time, and actually you answer the question when you say that this is directly linked with the problem of transforming the chaos into a cosmos. Guattari speaks in *Chaosmosis* of chaotic spasm. This is the only place he uses the expression chaotic spasm. So what is a spasm? A spasm is a painful acceleration of the muscle, of the physical matter of the body. It is an acceleration but it is painful, it is a spasm. So what should you do when you live in the condition of spasm? You cannot go back to the pre-spasmic dimension – I am not a technophobe. But you cannot accept the existing situation of mere acceleration.

You have to find a new harmony, if I can use this expression, or a new chaosmos. A cosmos that transforms chaos into something that is not painful, but – but what? But able to unfold the possibility inscribed in the chaos. Deleuze and Guattari say in “Chaos and The Brain”, that chaos is a foe and a friend. It is an enemy because it is painful. But it is a friend, also. Why is it a friend? Because only starting from chaos you cannot go back. When you

are entering a situation of chaos you cannot go back, you need to be able to find another rhythm. It is all a problem of rhythm. The concept of rhythm should also be elaborated. The process of acceleration is the creation of a rhythm which is painful. But what should we do? We have to interact with the accelerating rhythm with an autonomous rhythm which is able to de-multiply the acceleration.

Let's find a final metaphor to describe what you are speaking of. Let's say that in the biorhythm an algorithm has entered. And you know that the etymology of algorithm seems to be from an Arab mathematician named Abū Ja'far Muhammad ibn Mūsa...

**DD:** Ya, I think I have heard of this...

**Bifo:** Well I reject this etymology. [Laughs] You know, etymology is not a science, it is an art. Algorithm comes from the Greek *algos*. *Algos* means pain, as in nostalgia, neuralgia, or melalgic. But also from the word *algid*, which means cold. The English language has this word as well; it is an old word. So, the algorithm in my parlance is a rhythm producing pain and producing cold. And the algorithm has intersected the biorhythm: we cannot come out of the algorithm. We have to warm the algid-rhythm, we have to find ways to bio-litize the algorithm. Poetry is all about this problem. Poetry is a form of warming, of giving warmth to the coldness of daily words. The solution lies in the relation between algorithm and biorhythm. And this solution is not given as the accelerationists think. It is not enough to wait until the acceleration makes its course. The course of acceleration is bad. We have to accept acceleration but also we have to poetically deal with it. This is the political problem of our time.

## ⚡ REVIEWS

# DARWINISM AS RELIGION: WHAT LITERATURE TELLS US ABOUT EVOLUTION

*By Michael Ruse. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016*

JENNIFER KOMOROWSKI

In his book *Darwinism as Religion: What Literature Tells Us About Evolution* Michael Ruse presents an argument for viewing Darwinism as a form of secular religion. He adopts an intersectional approach for viewing Darwinism so that we understand it is not only a scientific concept but that it also holds an important place in mainstream culture due to its close associations with Christian religion and British literature. The argument Ruse presents is based on the polythetic definition of religion, which places importance on a number of features, but does not solely rely on a single one of them.<sup>1</sup> The discussion of these different features – God, origins, humans, race and class, morality, sex, sin, and redemption – comprise Ruse’s discussion of the supplanting of Christianity by Darwinism beginning in the nineteenth century. By tracing the evolution of thought from the eighteenth century onwards through a discussion of canonical writers, such as Lord Byron, George Eliot, and Thomas Hardy, Ruse makes the concept of evolution more accessible to those in the humanities.

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Ruse, *Darwinism as Religion: What Literature Tells us about Evolution* (New York: Oxford UP, 2016), 82.

Through his use of the work of writers who make up the Western canon, and with whom we as readers are familiar, Ruse is able to trace the direction of mainstream thought on ideas of progress and evolution from the eighteenth century through to the twenty-first century. He begins with a discussion of the idea of progress in the eighteenth century, outlining the concept of progress as the theoretical “straw that broke the camel’s back” and allowed eighteenth century thinkers to begin to move away from a creationist understanding of the origin of life and a movement toward evolution. He begins with a discussion of William Godwin, who was involved in writing both theoretical texts and novels, and his novel *Things as They Are; or, The Adventures of Caleb Williams* is perceived as a vehicle for disseminating his ideas on philosophy and psychology to the masses. Using the example of Godwin, Ruse accentuates his theory that the idea of progress which would give way to evolutionary thinking was established during the latter half of the eighteenth century and establishes his technique for the rest of the book.

Into the nineteenth century the concept of progress, and therefore evolution, was pitted against religion. Although the political climate of the early nineteenth century in Britain was tense Ruse is still able to provide several literary examples of progress in the work of writers such as visionary poet William Blake, Jane Austen, and Charles Dickens. Blake was considered a radical, but issues of progress are also presented in the work of conservatives like Austen who understood that “things cannot stand still.”<sup>2</sup> The most interesting part of Ruse’s discussion comes when he shows the direct correlation between a piece of literature and the scientific theories contemporary to it. An example of this parallel is found in the work of Georges Cuvier, who opposed social progress, but nevertheless began work on a progressive fossil record, which Lord Byron reflects in *Don Juan*. The interaction between literature and the scientific world illustrates the prominence of the ideas of progress and evolution in Britain during the first half of the nineteenth century.

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2 Ibid., 20.

With the publication of *Origin of Species* (1859) and *Descent of Man* (1871) Darwin attempted to establish evolution as a professional scientific enterprise. He was not entirely successful in this endeavour, but he was successful in making evolution a popular science of the “public domain.”<sup>3</sup> Ruse makes a strong case for the importance of the role that novelists and poets played in interpreting and disseminating Darwin’s ideas. The idea that thinking within a Darwinian framework became a ubiquitous feature of the public sphere in the late nineteenth century is well established by Ruse, but he also brings attention to the fact that the community of professional scientists was the foremost critic of Darwin’s theories. Thus, evolution existed as popular science, but less so professionally, in the late nineteenth century and this widespread popularity helped to cement Darwinism in our collective consciousness.

Ruse goes on to juxtapose Darwinism against Christianity on the areas of God, origins, humans, race and class, morality, sex, sin, and redemption, which he identifies as the important features of a polythetic religion. Christianity was already in a state of decline when evolution gained popularity and Ruse examines the new approach which Darwinism provided to each area of religious life. It is interesting to note that the discussion of Darwinism as popular science was widespread throughout literary circles, even amongst dedicated Christians, who were quick to recognise the sauropod in the room. This active discussion of Darwinism as a secular form of religion in popular culture is reviewed in each chapter using pieces of literature which take either side of the argument, or in some cases contrasting the debate within a single piece of literature. Many of the ideas which Darwinism helped to spread were already being considered in literary circles prior to *Origin of Species* being published in 1859, with poets such as Walt Whitman contemplating the “nigh inconceivability of history.”<sup>4</sup> Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and Lewis Carroll filled Victorian imaginations with images of fantastic creatures like the Jabberwocky, which readers could then experience in person in museums around the world.

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3 Ibid., 58.

4 Ibid., 103.

For Carroll, who was an Anglican Minister, and Conan Doyle, raised as a Catholic and remained spiritual throughout his life,<sup>5</sup> this interaction with the questions raised by progress and Darwinism illustrates the level of engagement and complicates the idea of reducing the debate to one of Christianity versus Darwinism. In the chapter “Sin and Redemption” the opposing viewpoints of evil are in discussion in Robert Louis Stevenson’s *The Strange Case of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) and Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (1897). The double reading, of original sin and “evolutionary parable”<sup>6</sup> show us the “different reflections of the same reality”<sup>7</sup> which were at odds in the late nineteenth century. This possibility of a double reading is reflective of not only the ongoing debate within popular culture, but also an internal debate taking place within the individual about the coexistence of religion and progress in one’s life.

Ruse contends that by the 1930s Darwinism and the theory of evolution have fully saturated Western society, while simultaneously receiving scientific accreditation through neo-Darwinian advances in science. This neo-Darwinian explosion, supported by molecular genetics, led to numerous areas of science that were fully professionalised—behaviour, paleontology biogeology, classification, anatomy, and embryology.<sup>8</sup> As knowledge of Darwinism and evolution became widespread the debate between religion and Darwinism lessened, but the ideas always remained in the background. As evidence of this Ruse presents us with a wide variety of mid-twentieth-century Anglo-American literature, ranging from William Faulkner to Kurt Vonnegut. As the twentieth century advanced, literature itself took as its point of departure Darwinian notions of progress, carrying over the intellectual controversies and polemics from the nineteenth century. Ruse shows us that these philosophical speculations were responsible for keeping Darwinism as popular science flourishing and at the forefront of popular culture.

The continued popularity of Darwinism sparked a reli-

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5 Ibid., 109.

6 Ibid., 194.

7 Ibid., 195.

8 Ibid., 222.

gious backlash from evangelical Christians and with the backlash “the rise of Creationism and related beliefs.”<sup>9</sup> To prove his thesis Ruse once again provides interesting literature from both sides of the debate, but the writers he cites from the late twentieth century also tend to increasingly come from the world of academia. On one side of the debate is the poetry of Philip Appleman, a professor and former editor of *Darwin: Norton Critical Edition* and on the other side the work of the Inklings, particularly C.S. Lewis, also an academic, but who was a devout Christian and “did not much care for science.”<sup>10</sup> The transition of the debate between Darwinism and religion into the classroom is an interesting point in the discussion which could serve to be investigated further. As an end to the discussion of the literary debate of the late-twentieth century Ruse situates the Christian viewpoint, saying, “Darwinism does not vanquish Christianity. Christianity absorbs Darwinism and thereby grows.”<sup>11</sup> This sentiment seems to be granting a degree of acceptance to the ideas of progress (to be used in support of religion) which have been influencing the religious and non-religious alike in Western culture for 300 years.

The final chapter in Ruse’s book, “Conflicting Visions,” continues to place the focus on the divide between Darwinism and Christianity, but through a post-9/11 lens. Here Ruse contends that this catastrophic event has caused an even greater divide between Darwinism and Christianity. Tracing the idea of progress and Darwinism over 300 years reveals to readers that as a society we have made little progress in coming to a consensus on the discussion. For Ian McEwan his writing in a post-9/11 world has turned more toward science than ever before and for Marilyn Robinson her work does the opposite—it attempts to ground us within ideas of Providence. It would appear that Anglo-American literature has become more partisan since the destruction of the twin towers, and Robinson sees Neo-Darwinism itself as a threat to the humanities,<sup>12</sup> due to the focus it places on science. On oppo-

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9 Ibid., 252.

10 Ibid., 258.

11 Ibid., 265.

12 Ibid., 280.

site ends of the spectrum, Robinson sees progress as “false hope,”<sup>13</sup> while McEwan sees “progress as everything” claiming that “Providence is a dated superstition.”<sup>14</sup> With this continued disagreement in mind Ruse ends the book in our current post-Darwinian world, realizing that we have still not reached the end of this debate, and we must continue in this ambiguous state.

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13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.

# THE LOST THREAD: THE DEMOCRACY OF MODERN FICTION

*By Jacques Rancière, London: Bloomsbury, 2017*

ANTHONY CHRISTOPHER COUGHLIN

The first impression one gets on reading French political and aesthetic philosopher Jacques Rancière's *The Lost Thread: The Democracy of Modern Fiction* is that it functions as a series of outtakes to his previous volume, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*. All one would have to do is append the necessary extracts that were so critical to that previous volume's success, and then redistribute the essays in chronological structure. Instead, *The Lost Thread* is framed as an attempt to integrate works of what now would be called classical realism into the philosopher's notion of aesthetic modernism. Objecting to both the then-contemporary criticism of a variety of literary and theatrical works and structuralist (namely Barthes') readings of realist techniques, Rancière seeks to find a place for these works (and several already ingrained in other interpretations of modernism) into his uniquely democratic approach to modern aesthetics.

Of course, Rancière's "modernism" does not follow from conventional definitions, but rather aligns with what he calls the "Aesthetic Regime of Art," which has been his regular focus for the past seventeen years of his career. In his previous work, *Aisthesis*, Rancière's perspective sees modern art and modernism as less concerned with "the conquest of autonomy by each art, which is expressed in exemplary works that break with the course of history, separating themselves both from the art of the past and the

‘aesthetic’ forms of prosaic life” but rather with “the movement belonging to the aesthetic regime, which supported the dream of artistic novelty and fusion between art and life” that “tends to erase the specificities of the arts and to blur the boundaries that separate them from each other and from ordinary experience”<sup>1</sup>. Here, as in *Aisthesis*, Rancière thus seeks to forge a counter-history to the already established approaches to works of writers such as Baudelaire, Balzac, Conrad, Flaubert, Keats, and Woolf, among others. Rancière finds in these writers the shared emergence of a particularly democratic way of crafting aesthetics, of finding ways in which the viewpoint of the lower classes is brought into the same sensible fabric as those of the upper classes, or “a destruction of the hierarchical model subjecting parts to the whole and dividing humanity between an elite of active beings and multitude of passive ones” signalling a change in both the hierarchies of art as well as those of society.<sup>2</sup> However, Rancière is quick to point out that this new approach to aesthetics does not itself inaugurate a new regime of politics, but rather serves as the complement to the potential of a democratic spirit, which can be helped to realization when “disturbances of the fictional order make it possible to think through new relations” such as those between words and things, dreams and actions, etc. from “which forms of social experience and political subjectivation are woven.”<sup>3</sup>

The two most interesting of the book are those in which Rancière presents counter-readings to established theoretical models of interpretation, i.e. the reading of Flaubert against Barthes, and the reading of Baudelaire against Benjamin, and with Balzac. This work continues Rancière’s ongoing negotiations with Barthes, which in English translation, can also be observed in the late Phillip Watts’ fascinating, and unfortunately unfinished volume *Roland Barthes’ Cinema*<sup>4</sup>. Here, as in Watt’s work, Rancière primarily takes

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1 Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes from the Aesthetic Regime of Art*, trans. Zakir Paul. (New York: Verso, 2013), xii.

2 *The Lost Thread*, xxxiii.

3 *Ibid.*, xxxiv.

4 Phillip Watts, *Roland Barthes’ Cinema*, ed. Dudley Andrew et al. (New York: Oxford University Press. 2016).

issue with the readings of the structuralist Barthes, setting his reading of Flaubert against Barthes' "reality effect." In Rancière's summary, which begins by singling out the detail of Madame Aubain's barometer in *Un coeur simple*, this effect asserts that the object's "usefulness lies precisely in its being useless. If an element is found in a tale without there being any reason for its presence, it is because this presence is unconditional; it is there simply because it is there" and that it "proves its reality by the very fact that it serves no purpose, and therefore that no one had any reason to invent it."<sup>5</sup> Rancière describes this observation, for Barthes, as being "akin to denouncing the way in which a social order is given in the evidence of what is simply there, natural and inviolable."<sup>6</sup> It is thus fundamentally no different from the critiques of Flaubert offered by his contemporary critics such as Barbey d'Aurevilly, who dismissed *L'Éducation sentimentale* as being nothing but a superfluous collection of details.<sup>7</sup> While both are obviously operating within quite opposed political paradigms, they both object to the unorganized procession of details. Rancière finds a much more interesting potential in this simple barometer, which marks "an upheaval in the distribution of capacities of sensible experience in which life doomed to utility is separated from existences destined for grandeurs of action and passion."<sup>8</sup> This ensures that even the "pitiable" heroine of *Un coeur simple* can experience "the grand intensities of the world" and can "transform the routine of everyday existence into an abyss of passion."<sup>9</sup> Therefore, for Rancière, "the purported 'reality effect' is much rather an equality effect."<sup>10</sup> Rancière's criticism of Barthes then focuses on the relationship between parts in the function of some determined whole, which for Rancière is no longer essential in modern fiction. For him "literature as a modern form of the art of writing is exactly the contrary. It is the abolition of the border

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5 Ibid.

6 Ibid., 6.

7 Ibid., 7-8.

8 Ibid., 13.

9 Ibid., 13-14.

10 Ibid., 14.

that had delimited the space of fictional purity.”<sup>11</sup> It is under this rubric of criticism directed towards both d’Aureville and Barthes that Rancière introduces the *kath’ hekaston*, the succession of facts as they arrive, in opposition to causal models of sensations. It is in Flaubert’s rendering of the *kath’ hekaston* [“a particular” Ed.] that for Rancière, he inaugurates the situation of the modern novel.

As mentioned, the other section to provoke the most interest is Rancière’s attempt to reframe Baudelaire’s poetry as following more from the work of Balzac and his conspiratorial characters (notably in the *History of the Thirteen*<sup>12</sup>) than following from the shock of modernism or the work of Edgar Allen Poe. Rancière sees in the traditional Benjaminian reading of Baudelaire a far too radical move that paves over the intricacies in the poet’s range of observation. He writes that Benjamin’s version of Baudelaire “swings over to the viewpoint of a ‘destruction of experience’ something that is much rather a modification in the system of relations between elements defining a form of experience: ways of being and doing, seeing, thinking and saying”.<sup>13</sup> In order to turn away from this impeding destruction of the sensible, Rancière finds an affinity between the work of Baudelaire and Balzac, whom Rancière posits as the proper predecessor to Baudelaire’s observations. Rancière explains that it was,

Balzac, who, far more than Poe, forged the Baudelairian gaze on the city and the crowd, provided the most brilliant illustration of it. The minutely detailed and hallucinatory description that begins *The Girl with the Golden Eyes* of the five circles of Parisian hell emerged as the masterwork of a new novelistic ethology.<sup>14</sup>

Immediately, we can notice a shift here from an emphasis on the shock of the experience of the city to a gaze that remains am-

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11 Ibid., 18.

12 Honoré de Balzac, *History of the Thirteen.*, trans. Herbert J. Hunt, (London: Penguin Publishing, 1975).

13 Ibid., 97.

14 Ibid., 100.

bivalent from it. We can also see, in the above observations, hints of a reoccurrence of the short-circuit between being and action that forms much of the basis of the book. This emerges again as Rancière attempts to remove Baudelaire from the experience of the man of the crowd, also separating him further from Poe, as Rancière explains that he wants “to limit the importance given to Edgar Poe and his ‘man of the crowd’, which the Benjaminian reading privileges because this man’s journey ends up at sites of the commodity and crime.”<sup>15</sup> Rather, Rancière pushes Baudelaire towards the “Balzac who experienced the inanity of that physiological or physiognomic knowledge and fictionalized the very gap between knowledge about society and the success of action.”<sup>16</sup> What emerges from this reading then is not Baudelaire as a man of the crowd, struggling against a changing and overwhelming society, but a voyeur whose gaze penetrates through the rampage of the masses to see the details that lurk underneath. This is a figure at a remove, not being compressed in the mixer of society, this “Baudelairian voyeur is the man who looks at the crowd from afar and on high, in a gaze that renders the latter indistinct” and can see the luminous existence of life that blooms in this space.<sup>17</sup> Baudelaire thus is able to locate distinct moments within the rush of the modern world and fold them into a universal sensible fabric, thus demonstrating that “modern beauty is not the ‘always the same’ Benjamin that obsessed over after his reading of Blanqui and that he saw emblemized in the phantasmagoria of Baudelaire’s *Sept vieillards*.”<sup>18</sup> The greatest hesitation when confronted with Rancière’s analysis of Baudelaire is whether he has salvaged from the poet the potential for a democratic reading or simply just re-inscribed him in a more Franco-centric discourse. Rancière’s refusal to engage with the cultural vicissitudes of his objects of analysis renders his observations somewhat homogenous despite the strength of his central premises.

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15 Ibid., 106.

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid., 108.

18 Ibid., 109.

His analyses of Conrad's *Lord Jim*, and the novels of Virginia Woolf, follow from the concept of the *kath hekaston* and its coincidence with another term that Rancière, following Woolf by way of Conrad, labels the "luminous halo."<sup>19</sup> The "halo" is the decentering effect of modern fiction in which the content, the plot of the story, "which one seeks always on the inside, is to be found outside, 'around' the story. The luminous halo is not a diffusion of light from a centre. The central light is there, on the contrary, only to reveal the sensible power of the atmosphere amid which it is plunged."<sup>20</sup> This decentred subject, who no longer acts upon the atmosphere around him, but is merely the vessel for its sensible display, also resurfaces in the book's sixth chapter on "the theatre of thoughts," in which modern theatre is prescribed "to be fashioned by its relation to the invisible dimension surrounding it, through the partitions, doors and windows across which the unknown takes effect"<sup>21</sup>. These analyses are effective, even though they mostly seem to be a re-staging of the standard poststructuralist philosophical notions of the relationship between the inside and the outside reframed as an affirmation of the possibilities of sensible experience rather than as an irresolvable aporia. The section on Conrad, for example, can be viewed as either invigorating or problematic depending on one's point of view. While Rancière returns to the author an awareness of sensation that may have been previously overlooked, he spends little time examining the characters and contexts to whom those sensations belong, and thus his grand democratic aims perhaps end up allied to a colonizing discourse. While Rancière overlooks this representational discourse intentionally, it nonetheless ends up haunting his discussion of *Lord Jim*, and unsurprisingly, *Heart of Darkness*. His analysis of theatre, which returns to his criticism of Barthes and Brecht (from *The Emancipated Spectator*),<sup>22</sup> takes them to task for,

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19 Ibid., 29-30.

20 Ibid., 30.

21 Ibid., 131.

22 Jacques Rancière, *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliot, (New York: Verso, 2006).

forgetting that the supposed theatre of identification was an internally divided theatre, one that already bore its own effects of estrangement, effects tied to the tensions between several plots and several manners of feeling its effect.<sup>23</sup>

As effectively as this rejoinder to the logic of passivity and action is, Rancière's conclusions regarding the relationship between "what is dream and what is true life"<sup>24</sup> – that replace the question of exiting the dream<sup>25</sup> – lack the clarity of his other writings throughout the book. The question of how to evade this simple logic, particularly in the theatrical space, is not sufficiently addressed.

The section on Keats that gives the collection its title is interesting, but far too bound up in the discussions of Schiller and his aesthetic program that has been discussed elsewhere in Rancière's work, particularly in *Aesthetics and its Discontents*.<sup>26</sup> The thread metaphor that emerges here is that of the spider who spins a web not to ensnare but to enchant. Rancière explains that "to spin the web is not to weave sensations into an embroidery likely to ensnare the reader" but to function as a "poetic disinterestedness" that "is the work of an imagination that continually takes from and gives to the common fabric."<sup>27</sup> While this is conceived as the poetic form of Schiller's "free play of appearances," the ideas here feel partially developed, and move away from both the concepts of the "luminous halo" as it is discussed in relation to Woolf and Conrad, and also the collision between dream and action as found in his discussions of theatre.<sup>28</sup>

*The Lost Thread* offers some interesting new examples of Rancière applying his observations on aesthetics and attempting to redeem or re-appropriate works that have been typically dismissed

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23 Ibid., 140.

24 Ibid., 141.

25 Ibid.

26 Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, trans. Steve Corcoran, (New York: Polity Press, 2009).

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

by left-leaning structuralist modes of criticism. Nonetheless, Rancière's focus on the modes of seeing engaged by the texts, rather than the cultural context from which they have emerged or into which he is putting them, renders his analyses somewhat homogenous – particularly in relation to his previous volume, *Aisthesis*. *The Lost Thread* is thus not a major work, but a continued demonstration of both the effectiveness and weakness of Rancière's presentation of aesthetics.

# MATERIALISM

by Terry Eagleton, *New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016*

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Endless discussions on the state of theory tend to tire the modern reader. The fine-tuning of the characterization of what, exactly, constitutes “theory” as a distinct discipline never fails to elicit an exasperated yawn. In recent decades, conversations regarding theory’s potential, history, and future have almost filled more pages than its supposed areas of inquiry. The age of high theory, so says Terry Eagleton, departed with the likes of Foucault, Derrida, Lacan, Deleuze, et al.<sup>1</sup> The vigor of the age of the giants of French post-structuralist thought has cast a long shadow, to be sure. Here in the early parts of 2017, Terry Eagleton, like many practicing theorists, finds himself in a difficult position: a choice in practice between the consolidation and advancement of theory long-past, or the commitment to the creation of new, vibrant speculative gestures. *Materialism*, Eagleton’s latest, opts for the former option. More attuned to the history of thought than perhaps interested in theory’s erstwhile development of concepts, Eagleton’s text marks yet another entry into the blasé collection emerging of late. To call it lazy would be disingenuous. Eagleton moves seamlessly and with vigor between disparate thinkers: Nietzsche and Wittgenstein, for example. What lacks in *Materialism* is not a full-blooded development of a snapshot of intellectual history, but a sense of real and urgent *purpose*. Expecting a vigorous challenge to some of the

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1 See Terry Eagleton, *After Theory*, (London: Allen Lane, 2003).

latent questions currently puzzling the academy, one cannot help but feel somewhat disappointed in Eagleton's approach. Some explanation may be found within Eagleton's intellectual history. A foremost literary scholar, Eagleton appears to prefer a style of characterization and comparison over sustained development of individual concepts. In its finest form, this mode of inquiry has produced breath-taking results, but perhaps Eagleton is correct that those days are behind us.

The sometimes careful, sometimes slipshod practical application of high theory to cultural artefacts makes for some fun, but given the breadth and depth of modern intellectual production, not to mention careful consideration of classical texts, one cannot help but feel there might be a better use of our limited time. It is here that Eagleton finds his niche: caught between a renaissance of high theory and its somewhat mundane recent applications to myriad capital-o-genic offspring, Eagleton adopts the role of the cartographer. Less rigorous than the average historian, but more serious than Wikipedia, Eagleton here inhabits that carefully cultivated literary space of the career academic. A graduate student of the liberal arts likes to think of their work as rending open the old stitches of a festering wound, creating a new and exciting world in the process. The tenured professor tends toward a different approach. Lacking urgency makes for more careful development at times, and Eagleton's subtlety is perhaps his greatest strength. Readers seeking jaw-dropping theoretical development will leave *Materialism* disappointed, but Eagleton's sure-footed prose does manage to leave an impression. One will not leave *Materialism* proclaiming themselves a *materialist*, an *idealist*, a *Nietzschean*, or otherwise, and this is to Eagleton's credit. Rather than staking his claim, calling for *grand alliances between science and philosophy*, etc., Eagleton maturely outlines a very brief introduction to a variety of theory of the material. His affinity for *historical materialism* is clear, and as such, remains the most esoteric of the categories on offer. The usual suspects emerge: Meillassoux and the arche-materialists, Marx, and two thinkers one might not expect: Wittgenstein and Nietzsche. *Materialism* is not a book about the debates which raged

between the new materialists and post-Kantian idealists a few years ago. Eagleton is concerned more with the dynamic between reason, rationality, and materialism than pursuing any fundamental ontic understanding. On page one he characterizes his concerns as follows:

My interest is not in certain highly technical questions of monism, dualism, eliminativism, or the mind-body problem in general, but in forms of materialism that are in some broad sense social or political, and about which the neuroscientists have had for the most part nothing very exciting to say.<sup>2</sup>

Hence, *Materialism* reads as something of a primer for the concept of historical materialism, which Eagleton relates to somatic (bodily) or even anthropological materialism. What proceeds is the usual mystic / spiritual ground split. Eagleton is quick to delimit the possibilities of pure reason, seeking instead, as countless others before, to imagine the ground of thought as subsisting within matter as such. Differentiating between *dumb* and *conscious* matter is a tricky business, and Eagleton uses some well-worn rhetoric to help nullify an ontological split:

The truth is that men and women are neither set apart from the material world (as for idealist humanism), or mere pieces of matter (as for mechanical materialism). They are indeed pieces of matter, but pieces of matter of peculiar kind.<sup>3</sup>

One might expect *Dasein* to make an appearance, but Martin Heidegger is conspicuously absent from the discussion. Indeed, some of Eagleton's language echoes the late German phenomenologist: "...we are unfinished creatures perpetually in process and out ahead of ourselves."<sup>4</sup> Alas, *Materialism* is a text on *material*. The reader is thus spared considerable stickiness in thinking *Being* or ground in any significantly developed way. Instead, Eagleton re-

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2 Terry Eagleton, *Materialism*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016).

3 Ibid., 12

4 Ibid., 23

turns us to more classical conceptions of soul and body, haughtily drawing Nietzschean battle lines between sense-experience and reason and rationality. In a brief chapter on Marx the usual move of privileging the apparent primordial quality of material appears: “Terms like ‘sense data’ and ‘sense impression’, not to speak of the quaint notion of concepts as images in one’s head, betray a reified view of what it is to be flesh and blood.”<sup>5</sup> This sort of skepticism toward thought is often refreshing, but here it is all too apparent Egleton has adopted some of the more caustic diagnoses of Friedrich Nietzsche, who, in Egleton’s own words, was a “sworn enemy of pace, compassion, democracy, effeminacy, independent women and proletarian rabble... in love with everything cruel, severe, wicked, manly, malicious and domineering.”<sup>6</sup>

It is difficult to criticize Egleton’s *Materialism*, except perhaps on stylistic grounds. At times Egleton adopts a defensive posture (as with historical materialism), while at others he plays the role of the mediator, bringing together similarities in disparate thinkers. Wittgenstein makes an unanticipated appearance in the later chapters, where Egleton blends a mix of his political outlook (based primarily on accounts of friends) with some light work on the man’s theories of language. Finding Egleton developing the political outlook of his cast struck this reader as something of an oddity in a text on materialism, but he provides a somewhat compelling justification in his conception of historical materialism.

Special attention is given to the notion that philosophers, despite their clamoring for the universal, are ultimately merely interpreters of their present. It is easy to imagine a metaphysics tinged with the ontic concerns of an era, but to fully dispose of what appear to be, at least, the perennial concerns of philosophy is to demonstrate a romantic inclination toward a form of temporality which is radically contingent. A fine position, but even the stalwarts of nothingness, once they have done away with any existent meaning from the world, are forced to contend with repetition / eternal return. It is an oddity, too, for us to encounter

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5 Ibid., 62

6 Ibid., 102

Eagleton’s *Marxism* adulating the universal while simultaneously raising the radically contingent temporal quality of philosophy to a primary position.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps here we encounter a premiere problem of materialist thought: how does one distinguish between matter as ground and thought as materially derived yet lacking substance? Where does the body end and the “mind” begin? Eagleton provides something of an answer through Nietzsche and Marxism: “Marxism is among other things an account of how the human body, through those prostheses known as culture and technology, comes to ensnare itself in its own power and overreach itself.”<sup>8</sup> And on Nietzsche: “Reason is interwoven with our practical projects, but those projects are not themselves purely rational affairs.”<sup>9</sup> Language seems to be ahead of the body, perpetually speculating on the possible while the corporeal goes through the regular, grounded motions of the day-to-day. As with most material schemes the question of just what exactly is doing the apprehending of material is avoided, a dynamic of which Eagleton is very much aware. Speculative materialism, he remarks, “holds that there is no reason for the cosmos, and that to imagine otherwise is to fall prey to theism.”<sup>10</sup> The time-worn trope of the social sciences makes its usual appearance: i.e.: that any speculative theory must be free from metaphysical possibility, lest the theory not be taken seriously.

Much of modern theory neglects its origins in Kant’s Copernican revolution—read as the rigorous questioning of the universal structures which give rise to thought, speculations on the various faculties of cognition, and the attempted placement of indeterminacy within the epistemological order. No doubt much of modern materialist thought causes post-Kantian philosophers to squirm, not for threatening their historically privileged position, but rather because very few speculative material systems have proven compelling enough to displace Kant and his lineage. A quick perusal through the literature of modern neuroscience shows a de-

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7 cf. *Ibid.*, viii-ix.

8 *Ibid.*, 81

9 *Ibid.*, 56

10 *Ibid.*, 30

finitively Kantian quality. This, combined with dismissive readings of more speculative idealist philosophy have given much modern materialist theory an amateurish veneer. Eagleton, for his part, adopts the somewhat regressive position of the sometimes bullyish Nietzsche. To his credit, the later chapters on Wittgenstein demonstrate a more fluid understanding, but Eagleton is quick to move toward an explication of the philosopher's politics over a sustained meditation on the relation of language to material. It is in these later sections where Eagleton demonstrates an adequate ability to contribute to ongoing scholarly conversations, but one cannot help but yearn for the high-flying and exciting speculative philosophy of years past.





