

Note on French Theory Today:  
An Introduction to Possible Futures  
by Sarah Resnick

The originating conceit: A seminar covering five philosophers over five days and titled “French Theory Today: An Introduction to Possible Futures.” Proposed and taught by Alexander R. Galloway through the Public School New York, a self-organizing educational program where class ideas are generated by the public, “French Theory Today” explored a new generation of French voices—Catherine Malabou, Bernard Stiegler, Mehdi Belhaj Kacem, Quentin Meillassoux, and François Laruelle—whose work has, to varying degrees, only recently emerged in the English-speaking world. Each night, the seminar comprised a lecture followed by questions from and discussion with class participants. As Galloway suggests in the online class proposal, the goal was “not to set in aspic a new canon for French philosophy, but to proceed inductively, tracing some recent experiments and possible futures.” This is not to say that these five philosophers comprise any new totality of contemporary French thought, but instead that they provide an opening onto some of its current concerns and interrogations. Nor do they represent a compatible worldview—in fact shared positions among them are few.

Nevertheless, over the course of the week a through line came into relief, a set of tendencies that depart from the highly influential French theory of the 1960s and 1970s. Primary among these is the displacement of hermeneutic models centered on the text, a turn away from the realms of discourse, language, subjectivity, and culture, toward materialist and realist possibilities. And in the work of Meillassoux and Laruelle, a still more radical break: the refusal of Kantian correlationism—that is, the assertion

that our knowledge of reality is mediated through and marked by the limitations of our rational capacity—invulnerable since the mid-eighteenth century.

And here, the documentation: Five pamphlets comprising five philosophers covered over five days, our bid to give “French Theory Today” another life in another format. The challenge lay in how to re-inscribe the participatory and open framework that characterizes the Public School and the classes organized through its website. Incumbent on us was to conceive the class in its most expanded form, the origination and exchange of ideas spanning both time and space.

To that end, Galloway’s original lectures are here reprinted as delivered on those five nights in October 2010. Sections in strikethrough reintroduce content that, while prepared in advance, was omitted during the lectures themselves, and thus register the act of editing when translating text-on-the-page into public speech. Stylized transcripts of the question-and-answer sessions that followed each lecture, present the immediate comments, assessments, and queries of the class participants. And a third component, visual and text-based formal responses, were solicited and collected from class participants Taeyoon Choi, David Horvitz, Nicola Masciandaro, Jackson Moore, Dominic Pettman, Stephen Squibb, Eugene Thacker, and Prudence Whittlesey—a counterweight to Galloway’s lectures. A class does not begin or end in the classroom, nor does its success rest with the teacher unaided. A class begins with a proposal and the group of participants who enter the conversation. And where it ends remains unknown.

# French Theory Today

An Introduction to Possible Futures

A pamphlet series documenting the weeklong seminar by Alexander R. Galloway at the Public School New York in 2010.

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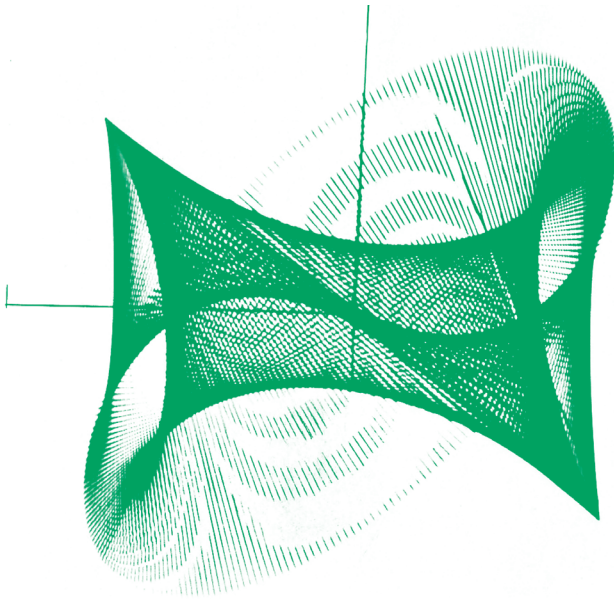
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This pamphlet documents the class on the work of Catherine Malabou that took place on October 25, 2010. The reading assignment was: Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do with Our Brain?*, trans., Sebastian Rand (Fordham, 2008), pp. 1-31.

Catherine Malabou, or The Commerce in Being  
by Alexander R. Galloway



Her coup: plasticity. Her unmooring: plasticity. The essential transformation in the work of Catherine Malabou is this: the universality of plasticity. What is plasticity? And what would it mean to say that the plastic is also the universal? For, the concept of the plastic—which she defines quite clearly in a number of instances, using the vivid image of plastic explosive, as *the capacity to give form and the capacity to take form*—refers to mutability, change, exchange, morphing, metamorphosis, and transformation. It is a fundamental concept for Malabou, a concept with a concourse at the direct level of being. Yet the universal is something else. It can mean a transcendental quality, an essence that remains, something relatively fixed for all time and in all places. So the irony is clear: the plastic as the universal. The thing most associated with change is the thing that does not change. Her coup then is to assert the universality of plasticity.

Recall how G.W.F. Hegel, her greatest teacher, asserted the universality of the idea. Recall how he asserted the universality of that thing which is in constant transformation, so much so that we call it history. Might it be possible then that plasticity itself needs to change? (Malabou does this kind of trick quite often.) Might it be possible that the only true plasticity is the one that is changing into its opposite? Hence a plasticity that, in its very ability to morph, tends toward the universal. This is the defense she gives for what one might unsympathetically label an intellectual mannerism: to return again and again to plasticity as the universal explanation. It is in every text, is it not? There is no text on Martin Heidegger without a mention of plasticity. There is no text on Hegel without a mention of plasticity. The same is true for her readings of Sigmund Freud. Gilles Deleuze too, not surprisingly. (But what are surprising are her *uses* of Deleuze.) One may accept this defense on the merits, because this mannerism is well motivated. Her coup: to be willing to show how plasticity is itself plastic.

As illustration, she speaks of the process of *mourning* as emblematic of the plastic condition. In an essay titled “History and the-

Process of Mourning in Hegel and Freud” (2001)—but even here the title itself changes in French to be “L’autre monde” [“The Other World”]—she stages the process of mourning as a delicate balance between obsessive memory for the dead and total obliteration of the trace of those lost. (She tells us elsewhere that balance should be understood as “being in the balance.”) Balance means risk. Balance means peril. In the parlance of contemporary political movements, it means precarity.<sup>1</sup> “Mourning is an operation which requires both suppression and conservation, farewell and remembrance, loss and memory, in a word, *Aufhebung*.”<sup>2</sup> So it is a mourning borrowed from Hegel, and as she reminds us, a mourning for Hegel as well.

Here she directs us to the passage from Hegel’s *Lectures on the Philosophy of History* on Chinese funeral practices:

When the father dies, the son must stay in mourning for three years, abstaining from meat and wine.... No marriage must occur during the family mourning.... It is an indispensable requirement that the tomb of the parents be visited every year.... The corpse of the deceased father is often kept three or four months at the family house, and during this time no one must sit in a chair or sleep in a bed.<sup>3</sup>

“Let us leave China to touch on the funerary practices of the Hindus,” continues Malabou, citing and replaying for us the words of Hegel:

Contrary to the Chinese, [Hindus in India] do not preserve; they burn. The religion of Brahma ‘holds a negative position towards all that is concrete.’ For this reason, there is ‘little cost’ to the people in ‘sacrificing themselves to annihilation, and the custom which wants women to be

<sup>1</sup>—Catherine Malabou, *Le Change Heidegger: Du fantastique en philosophie* (Paris: Léo Scheer, 2004), 367.

<sup>2</sup>—Catherine Malabou, “L’autre monde,” *Fresh Théorie 2* (Paris: Léo Scheer, 2006): 331-344, 336. A slightly alternate version is available in English as “History and the Process of Mourning in Hegel and Freud,” *Radical Philosophy 106* (March/April 2001): 15-20.

<sup>3</sup> G.W.F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, J. Sibree, trans., (London: Colonial Press, 1900), 121-122.

burned after the death of their husbands is connected with this conception’.... The bodies of the deceased are necessarily cremated. India’s characteristic, for Hegel, is “evanescence.”<sup>4</sup>

In the passage from life to death, or from the present to the past, one must try to strike a balance—a *healthy* balance—between never letting go, as Hegel says is the failing of the Chinese funerary rites, and letting go too easily, as he says is the equal but opposite failing of the Hindu ceremonies for the dead. Is mourning a metaphor for history? Or, are mourning and history perhaps the same thing? The answer is not important. The important point is that, as Malabou and Hegel remind us, history “is the correct proportion between maintaining and annihilating.”<sup>5</sup> Thus history and mourning are related: They are both a question of maintaining and annihilating; they are both a question of the dialectic. “To idealize is indeed to suppress and preserve at the same time,” she writes, evoking the grand vocabulary of Hegel, “in a word, *to do one’s mourning*.”<sup>6</sup> An act of mourning deemed “successful mourning” or “healthy mourning” will thus be a plastic one, a mourning that will achieve a balance between fixity and evanescence. Being in the balance means being able to remain in the form of one’s transformations.

So every mourning is also an unmooring. For Malabou, this is an asset of course, not a liability of the ontological schema. For she has earlier said, in her book on Heidegger for example, that the imperative for change is an ethical imperative.<sup>7</sup> An ethos is nothing but an ongoing evolution. But in this evolution Malabou is unmoored. And so are we not, as a ship unmoored, thrust into a never-ending journey, a period of wandering that has no end? Plasticity returns as a “fundamental occurrence.” At the advent, Malabou teaches us, there is a primordial exchange. (Again one will note how Malabou is trafficking in quite low-level ontological claims.) The primordial exchange can be understood as a sense of belonging that inaugurates a relationship between

<sup>4</sup> Malabou, “L’autre monde,” 335, with internal quotations from Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, 148, 149.

<sup>5</sup> Malabou, “L’autre monde,” 336.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 339, emphasis added.

<sup>7</sup> “...the original mutability allows me to speak of a Heidegger ethics, which corresponds to his thinking of plasticity.” See Malabou, *Le Change Heidegger*, 347.

being and change. Being *as it* changes. The being of being, she says in her book on Heidegger, is change. This then is the trump card she plays on Heidegger's relationship to being: Since Heidegger says that being itself changes, change is more fundamental than being. And hence plasticity is a more fundamental concept than being. One might hold a naïve sensation that being is relatively fixed, as with God or the absolute, but in Malabou, being does not stay the same. There is a commerce somewhere there, a *commerce in being*. (As will become more evident in a moment, this phrasing is not selected at random; Malabou uses economic and monetary terminology to describe being.)

What is this exchange, this commerce, this plasticity? Change is a substantive noun, of course, as in *a* change in the weather, or *the* change to come. It is also a verb: *to* change Heideggerian thought; Heidegger *having been* changed. And Malabou also wishes us to think of change using the genitive case of possession. So just like the Geiger counter or Planck's constant, one might henceforth speak of the Heidegger change, the change *of* Heidegger, Heidegger's change. As if it were a scientific principle that he invented. This too is an unmooring, even at the moment in which the unmooring is reinscribed as fixed trace.

The opening lines of the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid speak out now, composed two thousand years ago in the form of the poem, half song and half writing. Malabou used these same lines as the epigraph to her book *The Heidegger Change*:

My soul would sing of metamorphoses:  
But since, o gods, you were the source of these  
bodies becoming other bodies, breathe  
your breath into my book of changes: may  
the song I sing be seamless as its way  
weaves from the world's beginning to our day.<sup>8</sup>

Is this not, too, the commerce in being, the fact that the metamorphoses transpire and bodies move from aspect to aspect? Yet every transpiration is an inspiration, as the fundamental commerce in exchange follows its own special course—for Ovid yes, but whether it is a god who guides the

<sup>8</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, trans., Allen Mandelbaum (New York: Harcourt, 1993) book 1, lines 1-4.

course is not particularly important for Malabou. The fundamental change is how bodies emerge (as subjects perhaps, or alternately as organisms or other things), and in this sense the fundamental change is also history itself, what Ovid calls the epic sweep from origin to now.

The intellectual arc described thus far, an arc spanning from Hegel to Heidegger, is not conjured out of thin air. For it is the same arc recounted in Malabou's own book from 2005, recently translated into English as *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing: Dialectic, Destruction, Deconstruction*.<sup>9</sup> In it she speaks autobiographically about painting an "image of my life and psyche"; but this auto-critique is at the same time a return to her basic habits, and hence is simultaneously also a "portrait of the concept of plasticity."<sup>10</sup> Her portrait of a concept is at once also a self-portrait.

A portrait of a philosopher? A portrait of plasticity? What are the characters in this dramatization? What story do they tell, and what changes do they experience before the stage is struck? Malabou has her own personal array of philosophical influences. They all play a role in *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing*. Like the roster at the start of a theatrical script, each influence is assigned a name and a concept. And each is associated with one of Malabou's previous books. The books are allowed to "speak of their own free will," (as Karl Marx said many years ago about the grotesque objects surrounding him); and with her backward glance, a body of work—her own work—reveals itself; and, to be sure, morphs itself in the process.

There are three main players in this cross talk: the dialectic (played by Hegel), destruction (played by Heidegger [*Destruktion* and *Abbau*]<sup>11</sup>), and deconstruction (played by Jacques Derrida). Malabou's is a kind of metaphilosophy or intellectual history. And the unfolding of this intellectual history *is* her argument. So, she will say things like, How would *x* talk to *y*? Or, What would it mean to have a *z* of *x*? In narrating this crosstalk she reveals the transformative and plastic qualities inherent in the material. In fact, the mutability between these

<sup>9</sup> Catherine Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing: Dialectic, Destruction, Deconstruction*, trans., Carolyn Shread, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 4, 1.

<sup>11</sup> Admittedly this is not a Heidegger who is very recognizable to me; Malabou's Heidegger is in fact a *Derridean* Heidegger.

different figures, and their susceptibility to change, provides Malabou the evidence for the endless morphing she sees transpiring within philosophy. (But one can not resist taking a bit of a pot shot at Malabou now. One might point out that, despite everything, she seems to be a Derridean at heart, betrayed by her lexicon of ruptures, and mixing, and supplementarity. After all, isn't it only a Derridean who would claim not to be a Derridean?) In a general way, Malabou buys the historicity-of-being argument in Heidegger. In other words, there is no need to adjudicate between Hegel and Heidegger on the question of being. Since they come from different moments in history, they are both correct. They merely express different moments in the historical transformation of being. Plasticity becomes a philosophical actor, she therefore argues. "It is the question of the differentiated structure of all form and hence the formal or figural unity of all difference and articulation."<sup>12</sup>

The coup returns here in close-up. Shall we call it an *irony* that fuels her; that to promote plasticity as a big, overarching concept—much like the role that spirit plays in Hegel—is to contradict the meaning of plasticity as change? She admits this of course, and she has no problem with it at all. Malabou admits that plasticity foists the "rigid scheme of a key-image onto the mobility of interchangeable instances," and hence has a "metabolic" role. Thus plasticity is a kind of metabolism mitigating and dealing with all these different philosophical actors. She says that plasticity has a "capacity to order transformation."<sup>13</sup>

Nevertheless, an origin point exists here; that origin is Hegel. For as she herself admits, plasticity was "discovered for the first time in the preface to Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit*."<sup>14</sup> Malabou wrote her dissertation on Hegel, a work that would appear as *The Future of Hegel: Plasticity, Temporality, and Dialectic*. (The generative tension evident even in her title is multiform: Hegel is the philosopher of history so is it possible to have a Hegelian *future*? It's likewise a reflection on the notion that Hegel is somehow a relic of the past that is no longer alive and speaking to us today. Could there be a reinvigorated Hegel; therefore, a Hegel *of the future*?) Among her advisors at the École normale supérieure were Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion, the phenomenologist who has also

<sup>12</sup> Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing*, 2.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* 8.

written on theology. Where are the fingerprints of Marion? The ghost of *Being Given* appears from time to time, but not nearly as much as does that of Derrida. Perhaps Marion is so obvious as to be invisible. He reemerges in Malabou's intimate understanding of phenomenology, the strong sway of Heidegger that infuses each page. Her version of Hegel is one filtered through the mind of Derrida, this is certain, and along with figures like Slavoj Žižek, Judith Butler, and even Alain Badiou, Malabou is at the heart of a renaissance today happening around Hegel.

These are some of her influences. Perhaps less obvious though, is Malabou's interest in structuralism—she is one of our last unrepentant structuralists!—for which the stand-in is Claude Lévi-Strauss, whom she lauds fondly, and ventriloquizes his mention of plasticity as a "dithyrambic gift for synthesis."<sup>15</sup> She evokes structuralism more explicitly in an odd little essay called "Generation After."<sup>16</sup> Here the Malabouian koan concerns not change as such, but the relationship between structure and genesis, an age-old philosophical pairing. She points out quite plainly that there is a generation that came after structuralism, the generation that grew up in the 1960s. So there *is* a generation that came after structuralism. How could this be? What does it mean to come *after* structuralism? In other words, how can there be a time *after* that which is synchronic, after that which is universal to time or in direct synchronization to time? Is it not the case that genesis happens "in the beginning," and thus, would it not be prohibited to speak of a generation *after*? Would one not always be obligated to speak of "the generation *before*"?

"Les Colchiques" plays a part here, the poem by Apollinaire about the colchicum flower (similar to the crocus) in which he refers to the "mothers who are the daughters of their daughters." Recall that this is part of what structuralism and hermeneutics means: A structure never preexists in a text, but is only revealed afterward. So it is with the colchicum flower, which blossoms in reverse: not leaf first, followed by blossom, which ultimately proffers the grains of seed, but seed, then blossom, then leaf. What sweet catastrophe therefore, to have an inversion of the normal order of things: the son before the father; the mothers who are the daughters of their daughters; "the after comes

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>16</sup> Catherine Malabou, "La génération d'après," *Fresh Théorie* (Paris: Léo Scheer, 2005): 539-553. My translation.



before the before.”<sup>17</sup> Here again one hears the ghost of Derrida and his infectious suggestions to us that writing might actually precede speech, or that Plato might actually precede Socrates.

So, on the one hand, her book on Hegel, and on the other hand, her book on Heidegger, these being the main supports of her body of work. Additionally, there are flanks of influence to be found in structuralism, and in Freud (evidenced most clearly in the book *Les Nouveaux Blessés* but also in various articles, including a fine piece on the beyond of the pleasure principle). After Hegel and Heidegger it is Derrida who looms the largest.

Beyond these influences, one might simply note in passing a few figures who do *not* occupy the lion's share of her attention: Marx, Badiou, and Deleuze. Deleuze's antipathy toward Hegel cannot go unpunished by Malabou. And she has indeed weighed in on this question in one of her first essays published in English, “Who's Afraid of Hegelian Wolves?,” a taunt aimed at plateau number two in the Deleuze and Guattari book *A Thousand Plateaus*, in which they reread Freud's famous patient the Wolf Man around the question of multiplicity rather than neurosis.<sup>18</sup> Malabou's rejoinder is that Deleuze does to Hegel exactly what Deleuze criticizes Freud for doing to the psyche: to reduce multiplicity to molar unities. Thus, Malabou poses the question back to Deleuze: *One or several Hegels?* (An echo of the refrain from *A Thousand Plateaus*, “One or several wolves?”) This is the license that plasticity bestows.

To summarize her complaint: If Deleuze is the putative philosopher of pure affirmation, then shouldn't it follow that Deleuze must affirm everyone, including Hegel as well? Wouldn't this pose some sort of contradiction if Deleuze is shunning Hegel, thus not “affirming” him?

Like her Heidegger, I will admit that Malabou's Deleuze is not a Deleuze that I recognize. But is it fair to cry foul? For was not her stated goal in *The Heidegger Change* to show “another Heidegger,” a Heidegger “whom you no longer recognize”?<sup>19</sup> Is she not at liberty to perform such strong readings? A Deleuze that one no longer recognizes—what to make

17 Ibid., 543.

18 Catherine Malabou, “Who's Afraid of Hegelian Wolves?,” in *Deleuze: A Critical Reader*, ed. Paul Patton (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996): 114–138.

19 Malabou, *Le Change Heidegger*, 26–27, 369.

of this? Perhaps the more important question is, what ideology is at work that says it is all right to read Deleuze as a Hegelian; to read Deleuze in the image of the thing that he ceaselessly says and proves he is not? That is to say, what ideology proposes that everything should and must be mixed, that everything should be profaned? Plasticity, to be sure, but is it more than that? ~~We shall see shortly that François Laruelle has a word for this; he calls such mixing “philosophy.”~~

Malabou's influences are these. And of the early books *The Future of Hegel* and *The Heidegger Change* seem to stand out. Today, the reports are she has two new books, both coauthored with the American philosopher Judith Butler: *You Be My Body For Me*, forthcoming in English, and already published in French with the subtitle “A Contemporary Lecture on Domination and Servitude in Hegel”; and *On Spinoza's Concept of Life*, also in collaboration with Butler. But there is another important strand in Malabou's work that we have yet to address, which is her writing on neuroscience.

Cerebral plasticity, the subject of her 2004 book *What Should We Do With Our Brain?*, refers to the way in which neuronal relationships in the brain can be created, can change, and can repair themselves over time.<sup>20</sup> In this sense the brain is a suitable real-life example of Malabou's general concept of plasticity. A tight, polemical book, *What Should We Do With Our Brain?* advocates for a critique of the prevailing notions of what our brains are and how they work— notions bound up today by the discourses of cognitive science and neuroscience. (It is interesting to note in passing a larger trend over the last few decades away from psychoanalysis and toward these two fields.)

Her goal is to introduce the concept of history or historicity into how we think about the brain. So while on the one hand, this is part of a classic argument about innocence versus experience, essence versus becoming, determinism versus polyvalence, or necessity versus contingency—for which the latter terms are privileged in political discourses around resistance (becoming is always better than essence, contingency is always better than necessity, and so on)—Malabou is also clear to historicize plasticity as such, as something that has a special relationship to the mode of production today. Hence one of the most confrontational

20 Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do With Our Brain?*, trans., Sebastian Rand (New York: Fordham, 2009).

and courageous queries of anything written in recent years comes early on in the book: “*What should we do so that consciousness of the brain does not purely and simply coincide with the spirit of capitalism?*”<sup>21</sup>

In saying this, Malabou is trying to avoid, or at least to raise as a flag, the notion that we could be, even unknowingly, replicating the spirit of capitalism and projecting it on how our brains work. The basic fallacy: One looks at the mode of production and assumes that everything else exists in its mirror image. Yet, the issue is not so much the old vulgar Marxist chestnut about “the base determining the superstructure,” than it is the moral problem around aping the shapes and techniques of capital.

There is much talk today of precarity, but a different term, *flexibility*, takes hold in Malabou. For the new spirit of capitalism is precisely one geared around logics of flexibility, whether they be the flexible logistical supply chains of what economics call “just in time” manufacturing, or the flexible mandates levied against the worker who must be flexible enough to hold down two or three jobs at once. So plasticity is a positive spin on the mandate for change, whereas flexibility is the capitalist evil twin of that very same concept. She states our political choice quite clearly at the end of the first chapter as one between justice and protocological administration:

Does brain plasticity, taken as a model, allow us to think a multiplicity of interactions in which the participants exercise transformative effects on one another through the demands of recognition, of non-determination, and of liberty? Or must we claim, on the contrary, that, between determinism and polyvalence, brain plasticity constitutes the biological justification for a type of economic, political, and social organization in which all that matters is the result of action as such: efficacy, adaptability—unfailing flexibility?<sup>22</sup>

She ends, of course, with an image of the normatively negative scenario: efficacy, adaptability, never-ending flexibility. This is a dystopian image indeed. Emerging from this dilemma is, again, plasticity—an “intermedi-

21 Ibid., 12.

22 Ibid., 30-31.

ate plasticity” of becoming. As in her book on Heidegger, she labels this an ethics.<sup>23</sup> In short, becoming, in the form of the positive plasticity, is ethical.

During these discussions she lapses uncharacteristically into a voice I have only heard once before, a voice from those elusive and notorious pages 92 and 93 of Deleuze’s late book on Michel Foucault, where he meditates on something we might call “life resistance.”<sup>24</sup> In Malabou, the Deleuzian language comes like this: “What we are lacking is life, which is to say: resistance. Resistance is what we want. Resistance to flexibility...”<sup>25</sup> In other words, we need a change in flexibility, the Flexibility change.

But how would such a practice play out? “Perhaps we ought to relearn how to enrage ourselves,” she writes, “to explode against a certain culture of docility, of amenity, of the effacement of all conflict even as we live in a state of permanent war.”<sup>26</sup> Despite this pointed language, she is something of a humanist in the end, if not in the letter than in the spirit of humanism. Like many of her radical comrades, the ultimate goal is still something that we used to call the ego. It is an ego of self-fashioning, an ego that pursues the care of the self, an ego invested in the auto-constitution of the self. Perhaps one witnesses here the new-normal: the self as a plastic hybrid between receiver and doer; the self as an ethical self-fashioner unmoored within the barren landscape of the real, raped by commerce but nevertheless committed to the commerce of life. She has managed to inject soul into what is something like a sole-proprietorship theory of ethics.

A tension persists. Malabou scores a hit with her movement toward unmooring, but she is also battered by this very hit, beaten up by this life that we all must live. And here I shall reveal my true colors and wonder aloud if there can ever be an appealing political project founded on the work of Hegel or Derrida. Perhaps it is my own failure of imagination, for I was taught at an early age that such a thing was not possible. Hegel died standing on his head, after all, and must at the very least be

23 Ibid., 69.

24 See Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, trans., Seán Hand (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 92-93.

25 Malabou, *What Should We Do With Our Brain?*, 68.

26 Ibid., 79.

set right again. As for Derrida, perhaps his enemies are simply not my enemies. And on this score I happily side with Tiqqun in their admittedly quite harsh dismissal of the entire project of deconstruction:

The only thought compatible with Empire—when it is not sanctioned as its official thought—is deconstruction. Those who celebrated it as ‘weak thought’ were right on target. Deconstruction is a discursive practice guided by one unique goal: *to dissolve and disqualify all intensity, while never producing any itself*.<sup>27</sup>

This cuts to the heart of the Faustian bargain in Malabou around the unmooring wrought by perpetual change. Perhaps this perpetual change is in the end, as Tiqqun says of deconstruction, something that dissolves and disqualifies all intensity? Might the voracious Hegelian motor suffer from a dilemma in which it disqualifies life and never produces any new life itself?

Before pursuing this point of criticism a bit further, one might also challenge Malabou on her relationship to the other plasticities thus far avoided by her. Or maybe she is avoiding them because they are prohibited in some way by a plasticity so conceived. I speak of the other plasticities offered, on the one hand by Deleuze, and on the other by Badiou. Of course it would be anathema to Malabou, but a Deleuzian plasticity would mean rejecting the dialectic entirely in favor of affirmative immanence. This would be a notion of plasticity as pure becoming within an immanent field of the real. Or alternately, there might be, through the mouth of Badiou, a reinvigoration of form not through some sort of plastic mutability, but via a new structural rigidity of form (i.e. Badiou’s formalism of the truth procedure, or his formalism of the political act).

Return to the question of empire and capital. Despite, or perhaps *because* she voices her concerns in *What Should We Do With Our Brain?* about plasticity becoming synonymous with the new spirit of capitalism—which may not be a synonym for empire but certainly has a special relationship with it—one wonders if Malabou’s commerce of being is not

27 Tiqqun, *Introduction to Civil War*, trans., Alexander R. Galloway and Jason E. Smith (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2010), 145 (thesis 57).

too intimately related to the mode of production. In other words, is a theory of plasticity necessarily also a theory of today’s economy? Malabou’s plasticity is a voracious monster that can gobble up any and all foes into itself. Of course, one says the same of Hegel’s dialectic, but one also says the same of neoliberal capitalism. So when Malabou says that “absolute exchangeability is the structure,”<sup>28</sup> and feels no sense of nausea in uttering such a claim, one cannot help but recall the strains of intense scorn lurking on the pages of Marx’s *Capital* when such a description of the world first found its voice. A “structure of absolute exchangeability” describes the kind of world depicted in *Capital*. Or consider when Malabou observes—uncritically mind you—that “in Heidegger’s philosophy *metaphysics* and *capitalism* coincide”; or when she claims she wants to “monetarize” contemporary philosophy (thereby turning it into an economy). One wonders how this could not be the ideology of capitalism returning again, only this time all the more cynical as it comes from the mouth of its putative critic.<sup>29</sup>

If one is ready to adopt nihilism, why can’t it be a purely ontological nihilism, rather than the depraved nihilism wrought by the profanations of industry? Why, when we hold a mirror up to nature, do we see nothing reflected back but the mode of production? Or perhaps I have missed the boat entirely, refusing to see a Marxist Malabou lurking behind this mystical shell. Even so, shouldn’t her reflection of nature show something other than a sad image of a life lived in perpetual triage: separating the good plasticity (self-fashioning) from the bad (the churn of the market)?

“Doesn’t Heidegger say that the real meaning of dusk is metamorphosis?”<sup>30</sup> Malabou poses the question in order to open out onto a new historical periodization that would include the age of plasticity as our present age. But perhaps the key to the work of Malabou is *to pose the question in reverse*—that the real meaning of metamorphosis is dusk; that the basic commerce in being brings about commercial beings who are haggard and worn by this kingdom of shadows. When perpetual change is mandated by the mode of production, are we not obligated to look beyond such perpetual darkness?

28 Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing*, 47.

29 *Ibid.*, 45, 44.

30 *Ibid.*, 17.

## Question and Answer

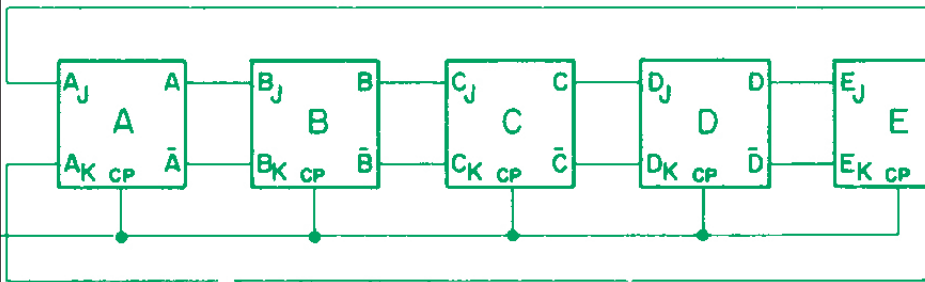
[Participant 1] Regarding Malabou's relationship to the model of production, I completely agree with you. But to play devil's advocate, I'm wondering if there's anything that we can recuperate from the division that Malabou establishes between plasticity, her favorite word, and flexibility? For her, "flexibility" describes the neoliberal model of production, the idea being that the potential freelancer is "flexible"; i.e., he or she bends—whereas "plasticity" does not. And although the two words are quite close in meaning, plasticity has a productive capacity that flexibility does not. I didn't quite buy this distinction. Isn't the model of "productivity" also wrapped up in the neoliberal, post-Fordist worker/freelancer model? Alex—or anyone else—do you see some sort of strength or potentiality in that division between the flexible and the plastic?

[Participant 2] Later in the book, she notes that plasticity as a concept was co-opted by capitalism. She quotes Luc Boltanski and Ève Chiapello, who say, "Capitalist production...mobiliz[es] concepts and tools that were initially developed largely autonomously in the theoretical sphere or in the domain of scientific research."<sup>1</sup> This seems like a really provocative relationship. I also like the way she describes plasticity as freeing our freedom, whereas flexibility is a division of our freedom...so plasticity is a little more freeing.

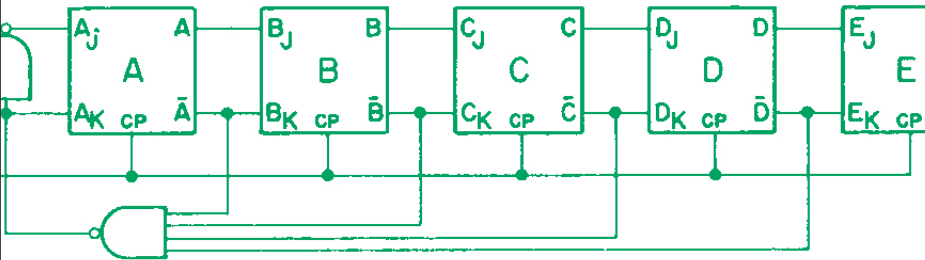
[Participant 3] To add to that distinction, it seems that in thinking of habit and the history of self-fashioning, the traditional telos of plasticity is spontaneity—the relationship between doing and being is ordered towards the production of the possibility of spontaneity. And it seems that flexibility offers the inverse: You have to be ready to change what you're doing at any moment. This is the opposite of spontaneity, where you yourself are the source of change in a non-predictable way.

[Participant 4] Towards the end of the reading, it seems that the flexible

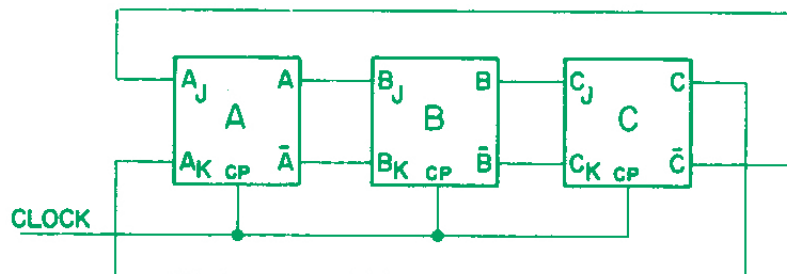
<sup>1</sup> Catherine Malabou, *What Should We Do With Our Brain?*, trans., Sebastian Rand (New York: Fordham, 2009), p.41.



A



B



comes to be measured by that which you can withstand, whereas the plastic is measured in terms of creative capacity.

[Participant 5] *Also: Doesn't she define the opposite of plasticity as elasticity? Meaning that something returns to what it was. But I didn't see her define the opposite of flexibility, which I would assume to be brittleness or rigidity.*

[Participant 6] *I have a different question. Can you speak to her concept of "neuronal man" as it relates to these ideas around the mode of production that you were discussing earlier?*

[Galloway] For Malabou, neuronal plasticity is a normatively positive concept. Remember: She describes plasticity as the brain's ability to create and change neuronal relationships, but equally important is its capacity to *repair itself*. And this might speak to some of the earlier comments around spontaneity and elasticity. For her, these characteristics are good...if some kind of negative impulse or input is changing the course of the organism, the organism can repair and/or change itself. That's how I understand her use of the concept.

[Participant 6] *Okay, although I'm trying to unpack this concept of plasticity in relation to the current mode of production—its co-optation by capitalism if you will. What exactly is the telos of the neuronal man in terms of capitalist progress?*

[Galloway] That is precisely the problem I am proposing. She asks what should we do so that concepts of the brain do not purely coincide with the spirit of capitalism. But she never gives us a tried and true method. Instead, she leaves us to determine whether something is a plastic scenario or a flexible scenario.

[Participant 7] *I want to question her use of science. For instance, she brings up stem cells as an example of how remarkably plastic the brain is—perhaps even infinitely plastic. And this is not true; there are, in fact, material limits to what the brain can do. For example, yes, children are remarkably plastic in their language acquisition, but at a certain point*



that power shuts off. You and I cannot learn languages as well as a one-year-old can and that's just the way it is—there's no going back. The brain can repair itself, but if you remove half of your brain there is a limit to what you can still do. I think this disregard for the material and biological limits of plasticity finds a parallel in the material mode of production. For example, neoliberalism wants to believe that markets can grow infinitely, but we know that there are actually material limits to, say, the minerals on this earth; a market can't grow beyond what's actually physically in existence.

[Participant 8] *Throughout this discussion, I've been thinking of the project of Bernard Stiegler, which we will discuss tomorrow. I find it interesting that, for Stiegler, there seems to be an automatic correlation between having a brain and using the brain to make choices, as if these two things are inherently synonymous.*

[Galloway] Yes, you're exactly right. Stiegler will evoke the notion of "taking care," which is, in a sense, a crafting of the self, a Foucauldian self-fashioning. But since it is about *care*, there is a built-in ethical mandate seemingly absent from Malabou's discussion of plasticity. Perhaps if she were to say "careful plasticity" or something similar, she'd avoid that problem...I don't know.

[Participant 9] *I have a question about Malabou's relationship to what she calls "basic scientific research." For her, does neuroplasticity come first? Or does ontological plasticity come first?*

[Galloway] That's a good question....

[Participant 10] *They arrived at different times in different ways. That the status of ontological knowledge is different than the status of scientific knowledge makes an ontological argument difficult. So, if you were to say that scientific knowledge could somehow precede ontological knowledge, you would have already cut the legs out of the entire idea of ontology as such. And so, I think it's almost an impossible question, right? Because certainly the two echo each other, and they sort of reinforce one another. But settling the question of the order of their*

*arrival does unrecoverable violence to both. Does that make sense?*

[Participant 9] *My question is actually a little less profound. I'm more interested in to what extent she sees a relationship between neuroplasticity and ontological plasticity—are they inextricably linked or two separate things?*

[Galloway] I think she would say that there are links, but also that ontological plasticity is prior. Again, this is her mystical Heideggerian ontology: There was a cosmological advent and that advent is a moment of fundamental exchange. The epigraph to her book *The Heidegger Change* is the opening five lines of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. And I think this reinforces how elemental plasticity is for her. *Metamorphoses* starts with the creation of the world: "My mind leads me to speak now of forms changed"—the word change appears in the first line—"forms changed / into new bodies: O gods above inspire / this undertaking (which you've changed as well) / and guide my poem in its epic sweep / from the world's beginning to the present day." And so she creates a relationship of precedence.... But it's really a great question. In fact, when we read Quentin Meillassoux on Thursday, his argument hinges precisely on this point: What can we say about that which happened before there was humanity, before there were thinking brains? We have a fossil record that shows us that something existed before we did. When you get to that reading, you'll see that this observation allows him to launch into a defense of realism.

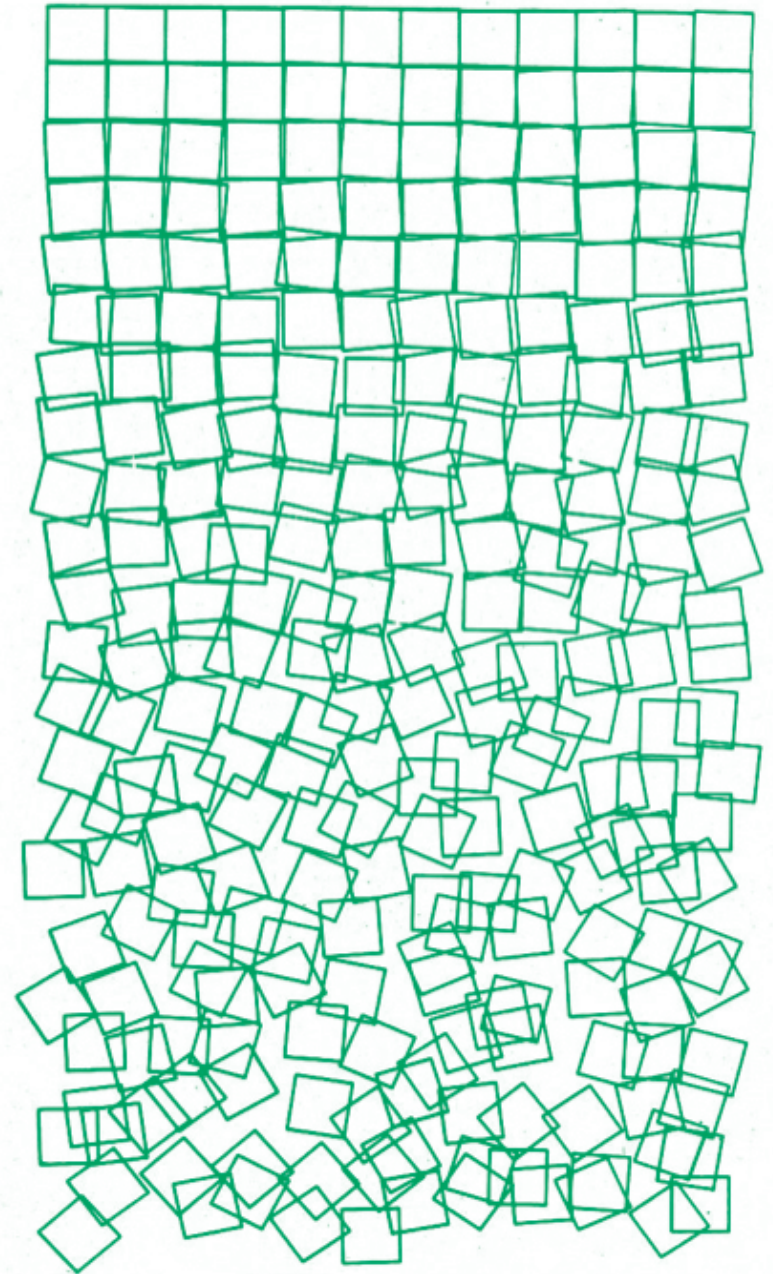
[Participant 2] *I'd like to move back to the earlier discussion about plasticity and its relationship to science. When she talks about the neurological self, she's trying to implicate that self in political and economic and social reality—that the plasticity of our neurons literally naturalizes the social order. And I think she's trying to raise the stakes of the scientific discourse around plasticity, and point out that scientific researchers fail to acknowledge their neglect for the political and ethical dimensions—they've been allowed to operate in a purely scientific realm.*

[Participant 1] *That of course assumes that science isn't already in*

a political and social realm. Is Malabou falling into the trap of not thinking of science itself as historically determined, historically specific? Does she move towards positivism, and consider recent learning about the brain as discovered, angelic knowledge, rather than knowledge that is produced in our specific time and milieu, knowledge that is in fact in dialogue with other political and social notions that resonate with the idea of plasticity?

[Participant 12] To steer away from this, I'm wondering how much mileage she gets using two different terms—plasticity and flexibility? Because if you look at the Italian autonomist tradition for example, they have only one word—*precariat*—which means both. And the *precariat* is both good and bad. I'm thinking of Paolo Virno, and especially of Franco Berardi, wherein we find a dual celebration and condemnation of this term. And to have this in-between concept of flexibility and plasticity doesn't make quite as much sense, because most scenarios are actually both flexible and plastic at the same time. But perhaps the boundary between plasticity and flexibility is itself plastic...?

[Galloway] Right. In the section that I started with today—the section about the different funeral practices—she talks about balance. And at first I didn't understand precisely what she meant by that. But then she says, "By balance I mean being in the balance." And when something is *in the balance*, it's precarious—something is at risk. It might be in equilibrium, but it might also be about to tip. Perhaps that's another way to think about it. And I may not know the Italian autonomist material as well as you, but I've never heard that normatively positive spin on precarity. I've always assumed it's a situation one does not want to be in, but maybe it's more complex than that? Okay, well, courage comrades! This is day one of five and I'm really glad you all came. And it's just going to get better each day. See you, and surely others, tomorrow.



Come cosa che cada: Habit and Cataclysm,  
or, Exploding Plasticity<sup>1</sup>  
by Nicola Masciandaro

In the Original Unity of the First Thing lies the  
Secondary Cause of All Things, with the Germ of their  
Inevitable Annihilation

– Edgar Allen Poe

I felt like, and feel like I still am, writing this paper. I put it this way in order to accentuate from the beginning how habit touches on problems of beginning and ending, of spontaneity and death, of the first impression that is somehow already a repetition and the final impression that somehow is not—as if hidden within habit's gentle hand there were a secret and terrible shock, an occult trauma that is always already underway and never knows when to stop. Contrary to the stabilizing tendency of the Aristotelian concept of habit (*hexis*, *ethos*), Thomas Aquinas allows that sometimes a single act can create a habit—for instance, the administration of a self-evident proposition or a drug (*Summa Theologica* I-II.51.3)—although a necessity of repetition is the rule, for “in this the appetite follows a certain tendency in accordance with the mode of nature, as many drops of water falling on a rock hollow it out.”<sup>2</sup> But how do successive drops ever work the rock unless each is also a little bomb and/or the stone primordially flawed, fundamentally at *fault*?<sup>3</sup>

In the classic conception of a durable disposition or second nature generated as the effect of action or experience upon its agent or

1 This text is an excerpt from “Come cosa che cada: Habit and Cataclysm” first published on *The Whim* in November 2010. To read the text in full, visit, <http://thewhim.blogspot.com/2010/11/come-cosa-che-cada-habit-and-cataclysm.html>

2 Thomas Aquinas, *In decem libros ethicorum Aristotelis ad Nicomachum expositio*, ed. Pirotta and Gillet [Torino: Marietti, 1933], II.1.249.

3 “*Plasticity*, then, in the wide sense of the word, means the possession of a structure weak enough to yield to an influence, but strong enough not to yield all at once. Each relatively stable phase of equilibrium in such a structure is marked by what we may call a new set of habits” (William James, *The Principles of Psychology*, 2 vols. [New York: Holt, 1918], 1.105).

subject,<sup>4</sup> habit is precisely about what one feels *like*, in the strong sense of an ontic capacity for actually being similar to something else. The *feeling like* of habit is substantial, material, corporeal, just as the word *like*, in its relation to OE *lic* (body, corpse), signifies a concrete conformation. So the word *habit*, from *habere*, signifies corporeal possession, the having or wearing proper to body, which is conspicuously demonstrated by the hand as an instrument of *possession* operating in concert with the overcoming of inside/outside distinctions proper to consciousness. Thinking habit thus leads one to speak of seemingly impossible self-identical life and intelligence localized in intimate otherness. As Maurice Merleau-Ponty says, “Habit...is a knowledge in the hands...it is the body which ‘understands’ in the acquisition of habit...the phenomenon of habit is just what prompts us to revise our notion of ‘understand’ and notion of the body.”<sup>5</sup> As if *I* ever exist. But I do, precisely in a weird way, in a manner that renders the way of my being, my having a life, both describable and unthinkable; exactly *like* the Etruscan pirates’ torture taken by Aristotle as proper image of the soul-body relation, in which a living and a dead body “are bound as closely as possible, part fitted to part” and left to decompose.<sup>6</sup> Such is the deep binding that the truth of habit uncovers, named by Reza Negarestani as the “*vinculum of doom*, the bond...through which every impetus is subtractively...

4 “One sort of quality let us call ‘habit’ or ‘disposition’. Habit differs from disposition in being more lasting and more firmly established. The various kinds of knowledge and of virtue are habits, for knowledge, even when acquired only in a moderate degree, is, it is agreed, abiding in its character and difficult to displace, unless some great mental upheaval takes place, through disease or any such case. The virtues, also, such as justice, self-restraint, and so on, are not easily dislodged or dismissed, so as to give place to vice” (Aristotle, *Categories*, 8.8b30, tr. McKeon).

5 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenon of Perception*, trans., Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1962), 166-7.

6 “*Ex quibus humanae - inquit - vitae erroribus et aerumnis fit, ut interdum veteres illi, sive vates, sive in sacris initiisque tradendis divinae mentis interpretes, qui nos ob aliqua scelera suscepta in vita superiore, poenarum lendarum causa natos esse dixerunt, aliqui vidisse videantur: verumque sit illud quod est apud Aristotelem, simili nos affectos esse supplicio, atque eos qui quondam, cum in praedonum Etruscorum manus incidissent, crudelitate excogitata necabantur, quorum corpora viva cum mortuis, adversa ad-versis accommodata, quam aptissime colligabantur; sic nostros animos cum corporibus copulatos, ut vivos cum mortuis esse coniunctos [Cicero, Hortensius]. Nonne qui ista senserunt, multo quam tu melius grave iugum super filios Adam et Dei potentiam iustitiamque viderunt, etiamsi gratiam, quae per Mediatorem liberandis hominibus concessa est, non viderunt?*” (Augustine, *Contra Julianum*, 4.15. [http://www.augustinus.it/latino/contro\\_giuliano/index2.htm](http://www.augustinus.it/latino/contro_giuliano/index2.htm)).



engendered.”<sup>7</sup> Having a life, being alive, continues to happen to me through a kind of automatic haptic circuit that fuses power and habit, potentiality and custom, into an active, living-decaying disposal of my being, a losing-becoming of myself among active dispositions.

The *feeling like* of habit is continuous with the *feeling like* of being, what Pierre Maine de Biran called *le sentiment de l'existence*, the feeling of existence, the vague yet vital inner touching through which all my operations operate, or what Jean-Luc Nancy calls “the cave-body...the space of the body *seeing itself from within*.”<sup>8</sup> As in Plato’s parable, this cave is a place where we are chained, bound freely to habit by the very having of it, held in place by the habit of habit.

The circuit of habit’s recursion is inseparably close to the current of consciousness itself, by which I mean not just awareness, but the whole immanent experiential flow of being. “Habit is the mechanism of self-feeling, as memory is the mechanism of intelligence.”<sup>9</sup> This current moves like a simultaneous wielding and wearing of being for which the hand is a perfectly monstrous metonym. Perfect, because its capacity exemplifies the instrumental spontaneity that is habit’s very telos. Monstrous, because the same perfection demonstrates my total distance from it, the fact that I cannot move myself like a hand. As a synthesis of habit and power, the hand materially exposes consciousness as a having of having:

The maximal capability of the hand, such that we are led to speak as if its powers belonged to itself rather than to our belonging to them, as if there were such an actual distinct thing as the hand itself, contains the impossibility of understanding the hand as either power or habit, as either a bestowed or an acquired attribute.... Rather, the hand functions as a perfect conjunction of the two, a conjunction that occurs through the principle of having as the very principle of consciousness itself, the mechanism

7 Reza Negarestani, “The Corpse Bride: Thinking with *Nigredo*,” *Collapse IV: Concept Horror* (2008): 160.

8 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Corpus*, trans., Richard A. Rand (New York: Fordham, 2008), 67. See also Daniel Heller-Roazen, *The Inner Touch: Archaeology of a Sensation* (New York: Zone, 2007).

9 (Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, §410)

that makes consciousness a presence to itself. In other words, having a hand, like the self-present consciousness from which it is inseparable, is also a *having of having* without regress, having something not as an object but as *having itself* in both senses, that is, both the fullness of having the thing itself and the openness of pure having. Where having is a relation definable as being on the outside of something in such a way that it is within oneself, that it belongs to or is part of oneself, the having of having, as being on the outside of this relation in such a way that it is within, is intelligible as being on the inside of something, having it as already within oneself, in such a way that one is outside it. The former, which corresponds to the possession of a power, is exemplified by holding, whereby something becomes an extension of oneself. The latter, which corresponds to the possession of a habit, is exemplified by wearing, whereby one becomes an extension of something. The hand, in this sense, is *a fusion of holding and wearing*, an extension of the self that brings the self outside of it.<sup>10</sup>

This fusion is not unique to the hand. Rather the hand, as living manicure, is indexical of the primal habit of embodiment, the disposition of an entity wielding itself by wearing, and wearing itself out by wielding, a corpse-to-be. As Hegel says, “it is the habit of living which brings on death, or, albeit in a wholly abstract way, is death itself.”<sup>11</sup>

Peering into habit thus produces visions of limitless synthesis, endless haptic continuity, even across the seemingly impassible/impossible barrier of life and death. Like the Etruscan torture, in which the bodies are tied, as Virgil says, “joining hands to hands, and faces to faces” [*componens manus manibus, atque ora oribus*],<sup>12</sup> habit gives the world as thoroughly touching itself through the ever-present capacity of

10 Nicola Masciandaro, “The One with a Hand: An Essay on Emodiment, Labor, and Alienation,” *Rhizomes* 19 (2009). <http://www.rhizomes.net/issue19/masciandaro/index.html>

11 Hegel, *Philosophy of Mind*, trans., Wallace and Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), §410.

12 *Aeneid*, 8.486.

the impression, the filmic nexus of psycho-physical contact,<sup>13</sup> to palpably carry likenesses across bodies, be they physical, subtle, or mental. As Félix Ravaisson explains, via habit,

*Idea* becomes *being*, the very being of the movement and of the tendency that it determines. Habit becomes more and more a *substantial idea*. The obscure intelligence where the subject and the object are confounded, is a *real* intuition, in which the real and the ideal, being and thought are fused together...ideas become more and more the form, the way of being, even the being itself. The spontaneity of desire and intuition is somehow dispersed in developing itself, within the indefinite multiplicity of the organism.<sup>14</sup>

Ravaisson thus concludes his book on habit with a vision of infinitely-stepped progression, a spiral leading back to the very beginning:

Between the ultimate depths of nature and the highest point of reflective freedom, there are an infinite number of degrees measuring the development of one and the same power.... This is like a spiral whose principle resides in the depths of nature, and yet which ultimately flourishes in consciousness. Habit comes back down this spiral, teaching us of its origin and genesis.<sup>15</sup>

Such a vision has, in the work of Catherine Malabou, been extended into the universal itself, as if everything were inside the spiral's turn, producing the unbounded spectacle of an outsideless world of ultimate or absolute plasticity: "Plasticity denotes the form of a world without any exteriority, a world in which the other appears as utterly other precisely because she is not someone else." Plasticity thus offers, a way

13 See Scott Wilson, "NEURaCINEMA and the Filmy Essence of Consciousness," *Amusia*. <http://scottwilson-amusia.blogspot.com/2009/04/neuracinema-and-filmy-essence-of.html>.

14 Félix Ravaisson, *Of Habit*, trans., Clare Carlisle and Mark Sinclair (New York: Continuum, 2008), 55, translation modified.

15 Ravaisson, *Of Habit*, 77.

out "without exteriority or transcendence...a form of flight toward the other from within the closure of the world." But just as the concept of the *plastic*, as the very potentiality for form, crosses between the pure creation and the total destruction of shape, so does it touch, as Malabou explains, the possibility of instant alteration: "To think of the formation of a way out in the absence of a way out, within the closure, is to think about an immanent disruption, a sudden transformation without any change of ground, a mutation that produces a new form of identity and makes the former one explode."<sup>16</sup>

The plastic is explosive. Like modeling the beginning of the universe, thinking habit—looking down the endless spiral of becoming—discovers a detonation, a depth charge that is still exploding. It is as if hidden in each moment is a deafening tremor, an abyssic shock that only the repetition of habit, the very differential that coils this mortal fuse, allows one to actually,<sup>17</sup> in real and literal sense of continual self-enact-

16 Catherine Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing*, 67.

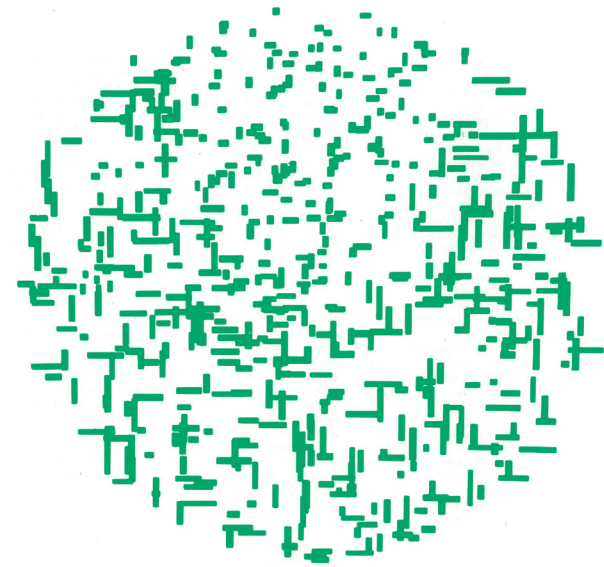
17 "Being is actualitas. Something exists if it is actu, ergo, on the basis of an agere, a Wirken, a working, operating or effecting (energein). Existence (existere) in this broadest sense...means *Gewirktheit*, enactedness, effectedness, or again, the *Wirklichkeit*, actuality, that lies in enactedness (actualitas, energeia, entelecheia)" (Martin Heidegger, *The Basic Problems of Phenomenology*, tr. Albert Hofstadter [Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988], 87. Caputo explains, "As a translation of the Latin *existentia*, *Wirklichkeit* refers to the fact 'that' a thing is. This in turn is distinguished from 'what' a thing is, which is a mere 'possibility'" (John D. Caputo, *Heidegger and Aquinas: An Essay Overcoming Metaphysics* [New York: Fordham University Press, 1982], 83). Such an understanding of being's actuality is in harmony with and exemplified in a practical manner by Aristotelian ethics which, grounded in the phenomenology of habit (*ethos*), is fundamentally about the passages between, the interbecomings of doing and being. Habit is a principle that makes all action self-work (a making of what we are) and all being self-labor (an enduring of what we do). How habit is a mechanism of such passages, a bridge between being and doing, is explained by Aquinas's definition of habit as the result of a relation between active and passive principles within the agent: "*Possunt in agentibus aliqui habitus causari, non quidem quantum ad primum activum principium, sed quantum ad principium actus quod movet motum. Nam omne quod patitur et movetur ab alio, disponitur per actum agentis, unde ex multiplicatis actibus generatur quaedam qualitas in potentia passiva et mota, quae nominatur habitus*" (*Summa Theologica* I-II.51.2, *Opera Omnia*, ed. Roberto Busa [Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: Frommann-Holzboog, 1980]) [habits can be caused in agents, not according to the first principle of the act, but according to the principle of the act that, being moved, moves. For everything that receives and is moved by something else, is disposed by the act of the agent, whence by many acts a certain quality is formed in the passive and moved power, and this is called habit]. Habit is thus the effect or impression of an inner working which attends upon and happens through all action, an operation or making which stands outside the intentions of the agent. One may form habits intentionally, but the production of habits itself is automatic, natural, part of the actual, enacted-enacting character of one's

ment, survive. “Habit,” writes Deleuze, “is the originary synthesis of time, which constitutes the life of the passing present.”<sup>18</sup> But inside life’s

being. Beyond its intentions, human being is continually impressing itself with its own actions and this process of impression shapes our being, makes us what we actually are. Aquinas compares the production of habit to the shaping of stone by drops of water and the increase of habit to the intensification of heat in matter (*Summa Theologica* I-II.52.3). Together these images succinctly express the principle that *action is a work that modifies being*. And this principle plays out, or is the experiential translation of, the understanding of being as actuality, *Wirklichkeit*. And within the context of the temporality of being, that is, our experience of being as becoming or being-in-time, habit is more specifically the basis for a *quantitative* increase of being by doing. For Aquinas, this quantitative correlation ultimately expresses and derives from the shared nature of mind and matter: “*Augmentum, sicut et alia ad quantitatem pertinentia, a quantitibus corporalibus ad res spirituales intelligibiles transfertur; propter connaturalitatem intellectus nostri ad res corporeas, quae sub imaginatione cadunt*” (*Summa Theologica*, I-II.52.1) [Increase, like other things pertaining to quantity, is transferred from corporeal quantities to spiritual and intelligible things, on account of the connaturality of our intellect for corporeal things, which fall within the imagination]. It is on the basis of such a correlation, which translates from action’s quantity to being’s intensity, that it makes sense for people to speak of “being more” for having done something. Describing the same phenomenon from the other side, as it were, Dante understands action even more explicitly as a disclosure and increase of being: “*Nam in omni actione principaliter intenditur ab agente, sive necessitate nature sive voluntarie agat, propriam similitudinem explicare. Unde fit quod omne agens, in quantum huiusmodi, delectatur; quia, cum omne quod est appetat suum esse, ac in agendo agentis esse quodammodo ampliatur, sequitur de necessitate delectatio, quia delectatio rei desiderate semper annexa est. Nichil igitur agit nisi tale existens quale patiens fieri debet*” (Dante Alighieri, *De monarchia*, ed. Pier Giorgio Ricci [Verona: Mondadori, 1965], 1.13.2-3, my emphasis) [For in all action what is principally intended by the agent, whether he acts by natural necessity or voluntarily, is the disclosure or manifestation of his own image, whence it happens that every agent, insofar as he is such, takes delight. For, because everything that desires its own being and in acting the being of an agent is in a certain way amplified, delight necessarily follows, since delight always attaches to something desired. Nothing acts, therefore, without being such as what is acted upon is supposed to become]. Action discloses me, produces me, makes me present, visible, a self-likeness, to myself and others. As a production of presence, action is an intensification of being. Action does not simply reproduce me, does not produce me in the weak sense that action, whether as doing or making, expresses or signifies something about me, such as a thought, feeling, or habit I happen to have. Action enacts or makes me, in the stronger sense, *as an actuality*, that is, on the basis of my existing as or being such a thing that is already and thus can be enacted or made. Action thus has the character of a self-production grounded in the always already produced nature of existence, in the *fact* of being. And the increase or intensification of being that happens through action has the character of a circulation of the original, impossible gift of being, a recreation of createdness, a throwing of thrownness. Action gives us our own being, realizes it as our existence, and thus holds, behind whatever other kind or order of mood or feeling is held towards it, the delight of a pure reception, of receiving oneself, of being a gift. At least action holds this deep delight, a delight in actuality itself, insofar as the deeper assumption here made, namely, that beings do in fact desire their own being, holds.

18 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans., Paul Patton (New York: Columbia, 1994), 80.

tomb-shrine is a bomb, terrifyingly close at every moment, and now and again felt. E.M. Cioran, who suffered the breaking of the most primordial habit—sleep—writes, “I feel I must burst because of all that life offers me and because of the prospect of death.... I feel my life cracking within me from too much intensity, too much disequilibrium. It is like an explosion which cannot be contained, which throws you up in the air along with everything else.”<sup>19</sup>



This essay continues online with, *Speculative evolutionary cosmogony, Habit as relic, Habit as decay, Lazarus’s bindings, Augustine’s nigredo, An earthquake in Purgatory.*

{<http://thewhim.blogspot.com/2010/11/come-cosa-che-cada-habit-and-cataclysm.html>}

19 E.M. Cioran, *On the Heights of Despair*, trans., Ilinca Zarifopol-Johnston (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 8.

French Theory Today:  
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# French Theory Today

An Introduction to Possible Futures

A pamphlet series documenting the weeklong seminar by Alexander R. Galloway at the Public School New York in 2010.

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This pamphlet documents the class on the work of  
Bernard Stiegler that took place on October 26, 2010.  
The reading assignment was: Bernard Stiegler,  
“What is Philosophy?,” *Taking Care of Youth and  
the Generations*, trans., Stephen Barker (Stanford,  
2010), pp. 107-123.



Bernard Stiegler, or Our Thoughts Are With Control  
 by Alexander R. Galloway

Bernard Stiegler starts from an assumption, one that I share, which is as simple as it is daring: One must take Gilles Deleuze seriously, not simply as a philosopher, but also as a critic of political economy. That is, one must take the late Deleuze seriously, the Deleuze of 1986 when he wrote his book on Michel Foucault, and the Deleuze of 1990 when he gave us the short “Postscript on Control Societies,” and spoke with Antonio Negri in an interview titled “Control and Becoming.”

This results in a startling but invigorating revelation, particularly evident in Stiegler’s most recent writings: To take Deleuze seriously means that *our thoughts are with control*.

“Our thoughts are with control” means two things. It means first that control is a philosophical concept, not merely a juridical or scientific (that is, cybernetic) concept, and therefore deserving of philosophical reflection. And second, it means that, in today’s political landscape, control takes place *in thought*, in the situation of “technical memory.” Let us consider what this might mean, both to Stiegler and to us.

### A Lexicon

Stiegler is one of the few people writing today who takes the control society seriously as a political and philosophical problem. He does this by way of a rich critical vocabulary—sometimes dazzling and disorienting—that reframes the terms of the debate, and thus a certain amount of familiarity with the Stieglerian lexicon is necessary at the outset. Some terminology he borrows from Jacques Derrida, the two most important terms being “grammatization” and “the pharmacological.” “Grammatization is a process of description, formalization, and separation of human behaviors in such a way so they can be reproduced,” he explains in a recent book.<sup>1</sup> Grammatization is the process of describing and formalizing human behavior into letters, words, writing, and code. In this

1 Bernard Stiegler and Ars Industrialis, *Réenchanter le monde: La valeur esprit contre le populisme industriel* (Paris: Flammarion, 2006), 37n2. My translation.

concept one might also hear echos of Max Weber's notion of "rationalization." So it doesn't simply mean writing per se, but a larger process of reduction and formalization. Perhaps in a nod to Phil Agre's influential essay "Surveillance and Capture," Stiegler elsewhere uses the term "capture" to describe this same phenomenon, ~~a term which probably has better staying power in this day and age (as Derrida's shelf life appears to be shortening in direct proportion with the rise in the speculative circuitry of digital networks).~~

The pharmacological, on the other hand, is a more prosaic version of the same Derridean term. For Stiegler, it means simply a paradox—a phenomenon that is both poison and cure, bringing both benefit and harm. So, for example, for Stiegler computers are pharmacological because they introduce both emancipatory possibilities as well as newfound repressions. If for Derrida the term is quite specific, for Stiegler it means, very generally, a paradoxical dualism containing contradictory forces.

Perhaps the most important concepts in Stiegler's lexicon are the twin terms "psychopower/psychopolitics." These can be understood relatively easily for anyone familiar with the work of Foucault because they have an analogous relationship to Foucault's terms "biopower/biopolitics." That is to say, psychopower refers to the way in which power is invested in the psychological or immaterial realm. For Stiegler it is often construed as normatively negative. And likewise psychopolitics is any political relationship, or possibly a political critique, that exists within that same psychological or immaterial realm. It is often construed as normatively positive. His engagement *with*, and transformation *of*, these terms represents the way in which Stiegler is *extending* the work of the late Foucault, particularly—in my reading—by way of Deleuze's concept of control. Stiegler's provocation to Foucault then, is that one must not simply think of power at the level of biological life, but at the level of mind—something which Foucault himself also addresses in his work on madness and psychiatric power. Of course this does not mean a return to idealism. As Catherine Malabou and others have shown, mind is material. So again: *our thoughts are with control*.

Memory is central to Stiegler's understanding of the mind. He relies frequently on the concept of "retentions," adopted from Edmund Husserl. There are three levels of granularity to the retentions: primary

retentions are sense perceptions; secondary retentions are memories; and tertiary retentions are media or culture, which is to say, the tertiary retentions are cultural mnemonics or what is sometimes popularly labelled cultural memory. Stiegler is mostly interested in the latter two phases of retention, in the realms of memory and media. He deploys two additional opposing concepts to help frame them: "anamnesis" and "hypomnesis," which he adopts partially from Plato. On the one hand, anamnesis means the process of recollection or remembrance itself; it represents direct dialogical interaction without having to rely on any kind of external scaffolding for memory. On the other hand, its antonym, hypomnesis, means the making-technical of memory. The hypomnemata include all kinds of memory substitutes and externalizations such as writing, photography, machines, and so on. So the former is denuded of *techné*, while the latter is constructed actively through *techné*.

The final key piece of terminology necessary to understand Stiegler's theory of memory is the concept of the "transindividual," which he borrows from Gilbert Simondon. The transindividual refers to the realm of culture, what some call the cultural unconscious. Transindividual memory transits across individuals, but even more importantly to Stiegler, across generations from old to young. It is a normatively positive term in Stiegler, as it opens the doorway to the social sphere itself (and perhaps beyond).

But as Stiegler's 2008 book *Taking Care of Youth and the Generations* demonstrates, memory itself is not the important thing. Rather what is important is the care and cultivation of the self in and through memory, and via the various technical products of memory (media and culture). On this Stiegler also has an opinion and a corresponding terminological infrastructure. "Mystagogy" means mystical or religious teachings, which he contrasts with reason, philosophy, or instruction. He borrows the term "synaptogenesis" from neuroscience, which he uses to describe the formation of synapses in the brain during cognitive development. This is important because, given the "plasticity" of the brain, synapses can be formed and unformed based on one's social and cultural milieu, or lack thereof. Thus Stiegler speaks positively of the "psychotechniques," under which he groups things like writing and reading, the book, Immanuel Kant, and the republic of letters. Psychotechniques *cultivate* attention rather than destroy it. And the



cultivation of attention is quite important to Stiegler's overall philosophy. Yet the nemesis of these techniques are the contemporary "psycho-technologies," things like playing video games, browsing the Internet, texting on mobile phones, and so on. These constitute part of the culture industry and are thus construed as normatively negative in Stiegler. (If one only reads his more well-known books on technics, one may not hear the strong moral voice in Stiegler.) These kinds of technologies all contribute to the disenchantment of the world. There is also what he calls an "organology." This refers to the industrialization of organization, and it would be possible to compare this concept to that of "protocol," which has been adopted from the sphere of computer science. Organology is often construed as normatively negative. To counteract this are what he calls the "nootechniques," or the technologies of spirit or mind that exist in opposition to the growing canalization and rationalization of life.

With all of these Stieglerian concepts in mind, it is possible now to see the normative aspects of his work, particularly in the more recent writings; indeed he is in many ways a moral philosopher, inspired perhaps by Stoicism and its "art of living." He writes of the value of attention and care, of "the attentive life of the being-who-is-careful."<sup>2</sup> With a nod to Karl Marx's theory in *Capital, Vol. III*, part iii, on the tendential fall in the rate of profit, Stiegler speaks of the *tendential fall in the rate of desire*.<sup>3</sup> With the withering of desire, Stiegler gestures toward the erosion of libidinal energy in contemporary life, the elevation of the consumer, the destruction of the classical Freudian subject, and the reorganization of this energy in terms of purely machinic "drives." What an unfortunate outcome: to lose the desires and gain the drives! For drives are a form of bad repetition, since one always wants more of the same, while desire is a form of good repetition, since the object of desire changes in alterity. (To extend the riff one might point out the trend in recent years around various wanings and declinations. See in particular Fredric Jameson's theory of "the waning of affect," Michael Hardt's essay on the "withering of civil society," or Slavoj Žižek's theory of "the decline in symbolic efficiency.")

2 Bernard Stiegler, *Prendre Soin: De la jeunesse et des générations* (Paris: Flammarion, 2008), 281. My translation.

3 See Stiegler and Ars Industrialis, *Réenchanger le monde*, 19 and Stiegler, *Prendre Soin*, 291.

Still following his moral compass, Stiegler lambasts what he calls *je-m'en-foutisme* (I-don't-give-a-fuckism); that is, a general attitude of irresponsibility that pervades contemporary societies, as well as the rise in *bêtise* (stupidity, silliness, crassness), which he describes as "the destruction of attention, an irresponsibility, an incivility, 'the degree zero of thought.'"<sup>4</sup> The former pushes us toward a generalized social irresponsibility resulting in the neglect of long-term interests for short-term ones, while the latter accelerates the corruption of attention and brings with it a rise in incivility and boorishness.

Together these trends engender an erosion in the art of living. And in the end, Stiegler, writing in conjunction with his group Ars Industrialis, offers an appeal, in no uncertain terms, that the world needs to establish a new "industrial politics of spirit."<sup>5</sup> By this he means a re-enchantment of our hitherto disenchanting industrial world. Attention and desire emerge, thus, as moral necessities in Stiegler's work. This is his strong phenomenological core. Attention, absorption, orientation, solicitude—such are the many legacy concepts handed down to Stiegler from phenomenology.

### What is Philosophy?

Turn now to Stiegler's essay "What is Philosophy?," the central and most important chapter in *Taking Care* (2010). The title alone quickly transports the reader to Deleuze and Guattari's 1991 book of the same name. In my world—the Anglo-American world—it has only recently become clear what French readers most certainly knew at the time: that the secret story behind Deleuze and Guattari's 1991 book involves the shadow of two other philosophers, one imposing and one diminutive but no less powerful.

First, the book is a thinly veiled confrontation with Alain Badiou. The "Example 12" in Deleuze and Guattari's *What is Philosophy?* is essentially a quick summary of Badiou's *Being and Event* (1988), which had just been published. Chapters 5 and 6, on functions and prospects, are geared against Badiou and math's relationship to philosophy.

4 Stiegler, *Prendre Soin*, 61.

5 See Stiegler and Ars Industrialis, *Réenchanger le monde*.

phy, with Deleuze and Guattari striving hard to separate science from philosophy, by separating functions from concepts. Also the “event” appears many times in Deleuze and Guattari’s 1991 book, indicating their ongoing dialog with a term now almost synonymous with Badiou and his irresistible formalisms. In fact, Deleuze had already put forth a theory of the event more than twenty years prior in his *The Logic of Sense* of 1969. “Events are ideal,” he wrote then, defining the event not as something that exists or takes place but as an ongoing modulation of an existing series.<sup>6</sup>

Recall that in Deleuze the event is often posed in relationship to the accident. Essentially, there are two kinds of phenomena: the mere level of things that occur, which Deleuze calls accidents, and the pure event selected from out of all those accidental occurrences. So while it might not seem so at first glance, Deleuze’s theory of the event is in fact quite similar to Badiou’s theory of the event, and certainly had an influence on the younger philosopher. “My wound existed before me, I was born to embody it,” is Deleuze’s intonation of the event, following the words of the poet Joë Bousquet.<sup>7</sup> For Badiou the refrain is something similar: I am a subject of truth by virtue of my fidelity to an event. In other words, my wound existed before me; I have a fidelity to my wound. (Compare this Deleuzian-Badiouian claim that “the event is mine” to Martin Heidegger’s claim that “being is mine” and one will see the outline of Heideggerian phenomenology framed in stark contrast against the work of the two Frenchmen.)

Even in 1969 Deleuze said of events that “they have an eternal truth.”<sup>8</sup> Which was, for those of us first reading Badiou’s theory of the event in the English-speaking world,<sup>9</sup> quite a revelation: It is possible again to talk about eternal truth! Yet on this point, Badiou’s formulation is identical to that of Deleuze in the 60s. So while Badiou was already borrowing and sparring with Deleuze on the question of the event, by 1991 Deleuze and Guattari turn their attention back to Badiou, confronting him directly and even borrowing a bit themselves. Thus their hallowed evocation of “Art, Science, and Philosophy” owes much to

6 Gilles Deleuze, *Logique du sens* (Paris: Minuit, 1969), 68.

7 *Ibid.*, 174.

8 *Ibid.*, 68-69.

9 *Being and Event* was first translated into English in 2005.

Badiou’s own sacred tetrad “Art, Science, Politics, Love.” And as a result of their confrontation with Badiou, Deleuze and Guattari inflate the central term in their book, the *concept*, with special power, for it must surpass the event, and science, and everything else in Badiou.

And to jump ahead a few years, is it not possible to read Badiou’s book on Deleuze, which appeared after Deleuze’s passing, as soft revenge for the previous confrontation? In his *Deleuze: The Clamor of Being* (1999), Badiou is ruthless, acknowledging his intellectual debt to Deleuze with one hand and desecrating his memory with the other. Through the Badiouian mist Deleuze’s philosophy becomes a vitalism of the saddest sort, or even worse, a “Platonism of the virtual.” But is this narrator trustworthy? For only in a hallucinatory dream could the immanent materialism of Deleuze reappear in the form of Plato’s metaphysical idealism. (For that matter, Žižek’s book on Deleuze, *Organs Without Bodies* [2005], is equally impotent in its reinvention of the Deleuzian story, as Žižek’s own cathexis projects the ghosts of Hegel onto the corpus of Deleuze, as is the case with Catherine Malabou. I underscore that Deleuze’s is one of the *least Hegelian contributions to the history of philosophy!* Perhaps there simply is no way to approach Deleuze via the path of critique: One must either fall in love with him like Manuel DeLanda or Brian Massumi, or else tell untruths about him. No middle way exists.)

I said there were two “secret guests.” The other guest lurking deep in the pages of Deleuze and Guattari’s *What is Philosophy?* is the figure of François Laruelle. Any reader of Deleuze knows that his praise for other philosophers, when it comes, is something deeply felt and quite genuine. However faint, there is praise for Laruelle in this text, and indeed an endorsement of the Laruellean project of non-philosophy (whereas toward Badiou there is only resistance). Admittedly it is quite subtle, but consider the passage in the chapter on “The Plane of Immanence” where they discuss non-philosophy directly and offer a ventriloquized version of what in Laruelle is known as the “decision of philosophy.”<sup>10</sup> Or for a more complete admission look at the culminating paragraph of the book, where with italicized emphasis they offer the following endorsement: “*Philosophy needs a nonphilosophy that*

10 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie?* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1991), 43

*comprehends it; it needs a nonphilosophical comprehension just as art needs nonart and science needs nonscience.*"<sup>11</sup> If one had not read Laruelle before it would be easy to skip over the word nonphilosophy, not realizing its deeper significance. Given the relative lack of engagement with Laruelle in the work of other philosophers—the engagement is practically nil on this side of the Atlantic, although the situation is likely to change soon—to hear a Laruellean language issuing from the mouths of Deleuze and Guattari from twenty years ago is not unimportant. The flirtation is also intense in a footnote: "François Laruelle is engaging in one of the most interesting undertakings of contemporary philosophy," they point out admiringly. "He invokes an One-All that he qualifies as 'nonphilosophical' and, oddly, as 'scientific,' on which the 'philosophical decision' takes root. This One-All seems to be close to Spinoza."<sup>12</sup> Could there be any higher praise from Deleuze than to be close to Spinoza?

In offering his own answer to the query "What is Philosophy?" Stiegler writes that the first question (and indeed the first practice) of philosophy is not being, not becoming, not technology, not poetry, not the concept, not the event, not the decision...but *teaching*. Perhaps this is Stiegler's Heideggerianism shining through, that philosophy is a pathway, a process of questioning. Philosophy is a third mode between two dogmas: on the one hand mysticism, and on the other hand what one might simply call the pure virtuosity of being too smart ("sophistry" is the more technical term). Philosophy, he writes, [page 111 in the English edition] "is this system of care that finds itself between two modes of dogmatism: one is mystagogy, coming out of the period of *muthos*...and the other is the knowledge that, in ceasing to question further, lost its object without knowing it...the polymath...Mr. Know-It-All."<sup>13</sup> Thus philosophy, as an act of love, is as much a reaction to the lack of wisdom, the lack of knowledge, as it is a reaction to the instrumentalization of knowledge for its own ends. Mr. Know-It-All is the wizard, the soph-ist, the one who turns thinking into an extreme sport.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 218.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 43n5. See also 206n16 for a bit of skepticism toward Laruelle's treatment of the term science: "François Laruelle proposes a comprehension of nonphilosophy as the 'real (of) science,' beyond the object of knowledge.... But we do not see why this real of science is not nonscience as well."

<sup>13</sup> Stiegler, *Prendre Soin*, 202.

The philosopher on the other hand is the solicitous one, the one who cares, the friend.

*Taking Care* hinges on the powerful distinction in Greek thought, presented in the late Foucault, between the Delphic dictum to "know thyself" and the alternate proscription that one should "care for thyself." Is it better to know thyself, or to care for thyself? Stiegler agrees with Foucault's argument that there emerged a hierarchy of knowing over caring, and thus there emerged an eventual marginalization of caring in philosophy. The dictum to "know thyself" leads philosophy away from sophism, yes; but in so doing it also leads philosophy away from care, eventually coming to privilege *what is*, i.e. ontology, instead of what cares, what affects, or—shall we just say—*what does*. Not what is, but what does. Not a question of being, but of practice.

I am not sure philosophy has a name for "what does," but if it did it would probably be filed under either physics or ethics, these being the two branches of philosophy that consider the doing or the practice of things, the two branches that consider the machinic energies of the world that Stiegler so avidly entreats us to cultivate. Or perhaps one wanders too far afield. Perhaps this is simply what one calls the political. *What does*.

What are the repercussions of this? How can control be a political concept? How can it be a philosophical concept? The answer I think lies in Stiegler's ability to move beyond the two great anti-modern and anti-positivistic philosophical movements of the twentieth century. That is, phenomenology on the one hand, and structuralism and poststructuralism on the other. The problem is essentially that both of these traditions are borne from, and find their energy in, a reaction, at some level, to the high modern mode of disciplinary society: Phenomenology in its romanticist rejection of the very terms of disciplinary society, lapsing back to the virtues of sincerity, of authenticity, of the poetry of being; and poststructuralism in its hyperbolic race to outwit disciplinary society by creating ever more complex logics, pointing out the ever more corrupt systems of organization that in the end are defeated in their naïve attempts at the universal.

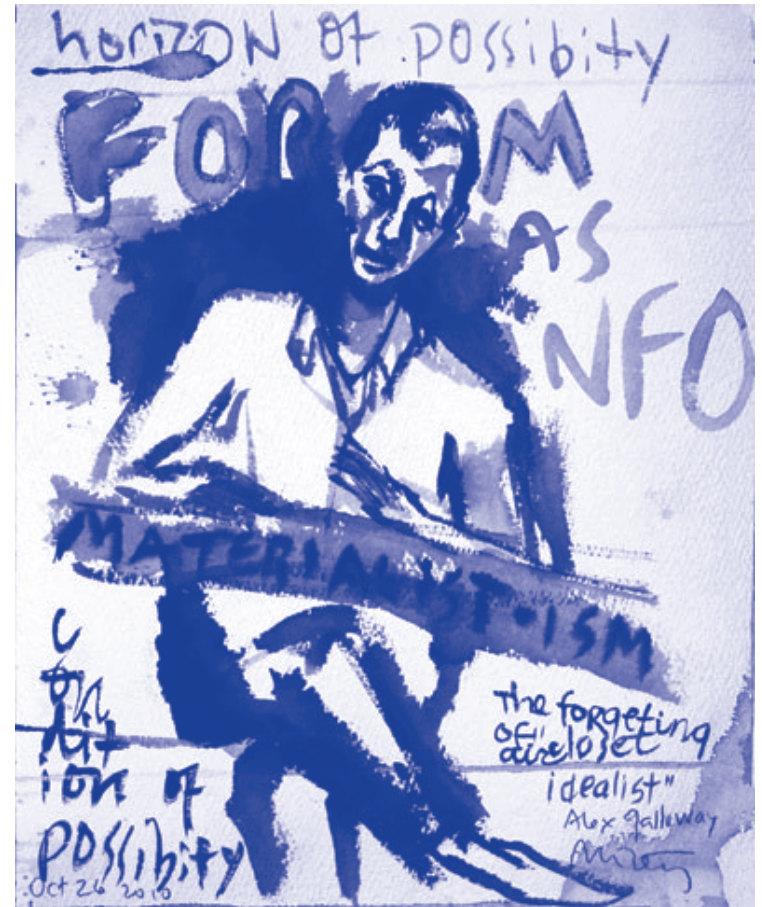
Control, by contrast, is native to the post-Fordist societies of the new millennium. Thus, to say that our thoughts are with control means that our thoughts are directed at the mode of production, for control is at

the root of how value is extracted and circulates today. Control is, in this sense, a synonym for political economy. Of course one must not discard the way in which control acts on the body. But more importantly, one must today focus special attention on the way in which control acts on the realm of the “immaterial”: knowledge work, thought, information and software, networks, technical memory, ideology, the mind. (Yes, all these things are incontrovertibly material. Ideology is practice, etc.) Control can be defined as *the condition of possibility for the immaterial*. Likewise, control is the condition of possibility for thought. This is not to say that we are all victims of some sort of totalitarian doomsday mind control. Instead, one might think of control as the horizon of possibility for the immaterial, in the same way that Deleuze once proposed sense as the horizon of possibility for any proposition whatsoever. Control is the pure ideational event of the immaterial. Control is not a form or a type of information, it is the indication that form has achieved a state of information as such. Thus, to shift from a philosophy of “what is” to a philosophy of “what does,” it is necessary to approach control as the very horizon of any activity whatsoever, as the horizon of generic doing.

Perhaps this is what it might mean, in Stiegler’s language, *to take care*.

\*

To finish, I will now make my role in these pages more explicit: it is to be a *materialist*. This is why I have been coming to the rescue of Deleuze (against these new Young Hegelians), and it is why I so often evoke the dismal name of that dismal scientist, Marx, and the tradition of Marxian critique that one calls historical materialism. As more pages pass, one will see more evidence of my adopted role. And one shall see, I hope, how a contemporary materialism begins to take shape next to, or even in opposition to, a newly emerging realism.



## Question and Answer

[Participant 1] *How does Stiegler fit in to the opposition between materialism and realism?*

[Galloway] While I would have to go back to see if Stiegler has written on this new, emerging realism in France, I would place him defiantly on the side of materialism. I say this because—and we'll discuss this more later in the week—the new realism is one that seeks an absolute, and in doing so removes the human. I see this as incompatible with the phenomenological tradition to which Stiegler pays allegiance. In Thursday's lecture, we'll address the notion of correlationism, of which phenomenology is a grand instance. And correlationism is precisely what this new tradition of realism is trying to throw out. To his dying day, Stiegler will remain faithful to the phenomenological tradition in some form, and to Martin Heidegger as well. So I would put him on the side of materialism. But that's a really good question. Of course, materialism is just a code word for Karl Marx in many discourses, so we have to keep that in mind too.

[Participant 2] *Would you call Heidegger a materialist?*

[Galloway] Tough question! He certainly doesn't rank in the greatest hits of radical materialism, the roster given to us by Gilles Deleuze, which includes figures from Heraclitus through Baruch Spinoza, and a certain reading of Henri Bergson. So no, he wouldn't be in that tradition. Whereas Deleuze is a pretty extreme materialist, Heidegger occupies a moderate position and is more powerful because of it: phenomenology as a compromise between subject and world. Perhaps he's on the fence then.... I don't know. But you may have another opinion?

[Participant 2] *Well, to offer an historical footnote, there's an unsubstantiated claim that Heidegger stole a lot of Being and Time from György Lukács's History and Class Consciousness. And what is interesting about Lukács is that he was decried for not being a materialist—for being a sort of closet idealist. And it's interesting that, set against a traditional*

*philosophical context, what a traditional Marxist would consider profoundly Hegelian becomes almost materialism.*

[Galloway] It's tricky because in the twentieth century, Marxism underwent a cultural turn, a detour into the realm of the immaterial, a kind of treason if you will, against classical Marxism—a vulgar Marxism. So in the case of Lukács it is perhaps doubly complicated: He must at once account for the realm of literature and culture, while also staying true to a specific tradition of historical materialism. Heidegger on the other hand, was not beholden to the Marxist tradition.

[Participant 3] *In considering Stiegler's ideas, I can't help but return to figures like Luce Irigaray, for whom the concept of affect and the realm of the immaterial are related. Is there more we can say about the tradition of materialism, particularly in relation to Irigaray? And is there a tension in the work of Stiegler around affect and the realm of the immaterial? Are they at odds with each other?*

[Galloway] First I would argue that the word immaterial is imprecise and perhaps not all that useful, because it suggests an intangible, purely concept-bound or idealized ether. And of course there are people who define the immaterial in this way, but I wouldn't ascribe that position to any of the figures evoked here today. So while Deleuze talks about the virtual, it is a virtual that exists right here at a molecular level—it's very material.

To respond to your question, I would like to reinforce the material reality of affect. For instance, in Deleuze the concept of affect is inspired by the writings of David Hume and the notion that we have direct sensations—that the purely sensory level can have its own kind of logic such that immediate feedback doesn't pass through the mind at all. For Deleuze then, affect has a surfacing effect, and it's always purely material, physical, and embodied.

You also mentioned Irigaray and I'd like to go back to that. Interestingly, Irigaray wrote one of the best books on Heidegger called *The Forgetting of Air in Martin Heidegger*. And in fact she critiques Heidegger for being too earth-bound, for being *too* material. Heidegger forgot the air because he was obsessed with the earth, with the soil. It's a great book.

[Participant 4] *I've also been attending a Public School class on Alain Badiou's Being and Event, and what strikes me about some of these contemporary figures is that ideas always connect back to a certain subject, a certain subjectivity, a certain body. But where are these bodies? Are they just floating around in space? And why do ideas always stem from bodies and not from objects? Where are the objects? I recognize something similar in Plato, for whom the essence of ideas lies in bodies and not objects. Where then, is the essence of the object?*

[Galloway] For Plato, at least, this is precisely the meaning of metaphysics—that elementary gap between the living flesh-and-blood and that which is lifeless. In the dialogue called *Phaedrus*, he creates a *moral* distinction between the lifeless media and the living people. And Derrida, of course, runs with this.

But regarding your question on the object...it's a good one. And although we'll talk about this in more detail on Thursday, I'll say some preliminary words now. There are several contemporary figures with an interest around so-called object-oriented philosophy, a term that initiated in the work of Graham Harman. Bruno Latour is another thinker committed to an analysis of the object-world. Then there is speculative realism, of which I'll have a lot to say on Thursday. And while it has a certain relationship with object-oriented philosophy, I probably won't have time to discuss this during the lecture portion of that class.

What about the *object* then? Heidegger, for one, discusses an essence of the object. And in fact, Harman derives his object-oriented philosophy from Heidegger's theory of the object and his theory of tools. But what of objects that speak for themselves? What of unholy, monstrous objects, described, for instance by Marx in *Capital*—those objects that get up on their feet and dance around and speak lies from their mouths? I think there's always a simultaneous and underlying fear of the object, which may have remote roots in Plato. We see this in psychoanalysis for example: the *thing*, the *id*, which represent in their way, an object-person or object-psyche. The status of the object lies fraught with all of these different, competing influences.

[Participant 5] *I believe Eleanor Kaufman has a book coming out about the status of the object, so that might be something to look at. And also*

*the theorist Fred Moten, who's really interested in the thingness of the body and the objectification of the body as a form of resistance—he collapses the distinction that you are making. He also goes back to that same passage in Marx, but links it to the slaves as historical commodity, and their struggle against an imposed status of objectness.*

[Galloway] And also Bill Brown...he's carved out a niche for himself with thing theory. I don't know his work very well, but I think it's related to a history of consumer culture and the objects of capitalism that show up in people's homes and therefore show up in novels. And that's fine. However, I would like to offer a word of caution: If we are submitting consumer culture and capitalism to analysis, let's be sure to assume a political position. Let's forgo a general object theory, as we see in Latour, or as we see in Harman. Object-oriented philosophy has no political project, and quite frankly I find this dangerous.. But more on that later this week.

[Participant 4] *In relation to this, I'm thinking of the pharmakon, the object that is both poison and cure. Can we not also think of the body as pharmakon? Are we not also the pharmakon? We already live in the notion of being in death, we are already too objectified to be alive.*

[Galloway] I think you're right. Perhaps this is a way to think through yesterday's concern with striking a balance between plasticity and flexibility. Stiegler gives us an answer for that: it's the idea of care. Through care, one can maintain a responsible balance between the pharmacological teeter-totter; between death and life, poison and cure; between the corruption of the psyche and the cultivation of the psyche. And certainly Malabou might have an answer to this, too. But with Stiegler, we recognize a moralizing language, a phenomenological, ethical language—it's better articulated.

[Participant 5] *I'm a little confused by this discussion of the object, especially with regard to Heidegger. His whole project was an attack on Cartesianism, so when we talk about phenomenology of the object, it's a very slippery slope. You say Heidegger and Stiegler are materialists.... Well, I haven't read enough, but I would say that Stiegler is an inflation-*

ary realist in essence, although it's just a question of how you define your terms. Can you define what you are calling this "new" realism in opposition to all its previous iterations?

[Galloway] Absolutely—objects have no phenomenology as objects in and of themselves. To have a phenomenology is unique to humans; as Heidegger tells us, it is what is ours. So we can have a phenomenology in which objects play a role, but there is no thinking happening in an object.

As for the new realism, we'll cover this in more detail on Thursday. Basically, it refers to a trend in which, over the last ten years, a series of thinkers and philosophers have stated in no uncertain terms that they are realists. They believe in the existence of a real world—that one can make claims about that world and more or less relate to it directly. And in many ways, it's a radical assertion. Why? Well, for a long time—particularly in continental philosophy—no one was ready to make that claim. Questions about the real world were met with the Kantian bargain: I don't know anything about the real world in itself; I can only describe my perception of it. And as a number of people have signaled—Quentin Meillassoux very pointedly—we've lived through several decades of anti-realism. Thus, in 2002, when Manuel DeLanda declared "I am a realist" in his book on Deleuze [*Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy*], the claim was quite radical. And in the same year Graham Harman announced, "I am realist." So, when I refer to this new realism, I am speaking of people like DeLanda, Harman, Meillassoux, and to others involved in a group known as speculative realism.

[Participant 6] *For Stiegler, it seems that machines, computers, and text messaging, for instance, are part of the culture industry, and as such, they are primarily negative in that they mechanize the moment of human interaction and recognition. I'm wondering if these machines are directly responsible for the waning of desire and its transformation into drive as he describes it? Moreover, why doesn't he recognize the possibility that these machines might have the potential to produce something different?*

[Galloway] For Stiegler, the relationship between us and our devices, us

and techne, typically rests in equilibrium. At any given moment in history, humans will settle into balance with the many technical devices arrayed around them—even simple technologies like fabric (clothing), tools, media, writing materials (pencil, paper), or writing itself. But at certain points in history, the introduction of new devices so disrupts the equilibrium that a new balance cannot be established fast enough. That's the answer in short. It's a way to move beyond the problem of saying that certain technologies are normatively good, while others are normatively bad; pencils are good, but cell phones are bad. Instead, it's an historical relationship. One hundred years from now, cell phones might be perfectly sewn in to the phenomenological life world of the human in a way that is not unhealthy, but by then, a different, negative influence will probably have emerged.

[Participant 5] *Okay—I have a second thought in connection to that. In the first part of the essay, Stiegler talks about the role of grammatization in philosophy and how it fundamentally changes the equation between anamnesis and hypomnesis, right? And it seems that grammatization—as in, the abstraction made possible by the introduction of writing; the condition for the possibility of knowledge itself through the production of grammar—can be a creative role. My question emerges from this gap: Whereas the introduction of writing allows us to take this leap towards abstraction, and abstraction is always a creative process, the cybernetic machines on the other hand, do not. Am I missing something? Does he explain why the cybernetic machines are repetition, whereas writing is grammatization?*

[Galloway] You're right. Grammatization is not necessarily a bad thing for Stiegler, because it includes technologies like writing. In fact, we might not have a concept of what it means to be alive, or even think, without a notion of grammatization. And if that's the case, why are the late cybernetic devices harmful? I don't know. Certainly, part of the answer is that the latest technologies are always the ones to have jarred and unmoored the equilibrium. But, I think it's also worth pointing to the multi-tasking character of these new devices, a quality that is very particular to them. Remember: Stiegler's special, most privileged human moment is attention or absorption. For instance, compare texting with

cinema. Cinema may also be part of a culture industry with deleterious effects, but it's really something like texting that destroys attention. Cinema, on the other hand, *captures* attention.

[Participant 5] *But people can intervene in cybernetics; for instance, they can transform code. Whereas it seems that Stiegler has adopted an Adornian approach: The culture industry has given me a product and I can only use it as the culture industry has designed it for me. A programmer or a hacker however, would tell you that in fact a lot of attention goes into the programming process. And Stiegler doesn't seem to give that any consideration.*

[Galloway] I don't think Stiegler would say open source is good as such. I think he would say that if an open-source technology produces a new subject position, one that can be about solicitude and care and attention, only then is it good.

[Participant 6] *To follow up on this: In his discussion of the attentive, careful life, it seems that Stiegler is leading towards a theory and value of art. Does he discuss this explicitly?*

[Galloway] Yes, he writes about art and culture throughout. The third volume of *Technics and Time* is about cinema. Poetry, popular culture, the art forms of popular culture are sort of sprinkled throughout. But are you asking if he has an aesthetic theory?

[Participant 6] *Well, Theodor Adorno proposes fine art as a solution to the problems of the culture industry. Where does Stiegler place art within this problem of attention?*

[Galloway] I'm not sure I know the answer to that. Because you're right—in Adorno, art has a very special kind of saving power. Well, certain kinds of art. Yes, that's a good question...Stiegler's aesthetics. I'd have to go look again.

[Participant 7] *In relation to this, I wanted to mention another of Stiegler's books: Faut-il interdire les écrans aux enfants? [Should Screens*

*Be Prohibited For Children?]* *At first, I had similar questions regarding his ideas on new technologies, but what I've read gives me reason to believe he's not a Luddite. And I'll translate a short passage from this book: "I'm not saying we should forbid video games.... On the contrary what I am saying is that I'm sure one could make video games that rest on attention the same way we could make the stock market function that way...."*

[Galloway] Yes, Stiegler is funny in that most of his books are deeply engaged with continental philosophy: Heidegger, Derrida, and so forth. But then he also has these direct, policy-oriented, normative books about pop media and popular culture that ask, for instance, is it okay for kids to watch cartoons?

Okay, maybe this is a good stopping point. Tomorrow, we'll be examining a very young figure: Mehdi Belhaj Kacem. He's almost totally untranslated, and the two most readily available pieces seem a poor introduction to his work. I found the assigned reading at the last minute, and I think it's really great. It's from his book *Society* (2001) and the piece discusses the film *eXistenZ* by David Cronenberg. Belhaj Kacem is a hard person to excerpt, but I think this one works well. And I won't be talking much about the film, so you may be excused from the reading if you so desire. See you all tomorrow!



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A glossary of terms, compiled by Alexander R. Galloway

As the work of French philosopher Bernard Stiegler receives attention in the English-speaking world, more and more readers are discovering his rich lexicon of terms. Hence an (abridged!) glossary for the uninitiated:

**anamnesis** the process of recollection or remembrance; direct dialogical interaction without having to rely on external memory supports; an antonym to “hypomnesis”; adopted from Plato.

**attention** one’s ability to become absorbed, and in particular, the capturing and codifying of absorption.

**desire** the waning of, the tendential fall in desire and libidinal energies; as desire wanes, drives increase; contrast with Marx’s theory of the tendential fall in the rate of profit, Jameson’s theory of the “waning of affect,” and Žižek’s theory of the “decline in symbolic efficiency.”

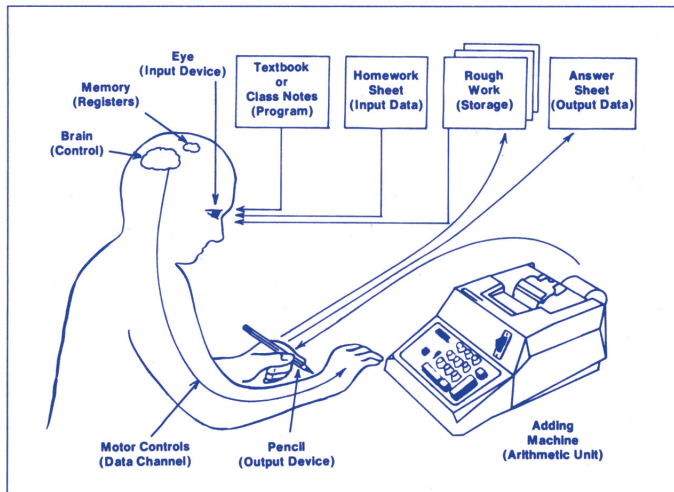
**grammatization** the process of describing and formalizing human behavior into letters, words, writing, and code so that it can be reproduced; compare to Weber’s concept of “rationalization” and Agre’s concept of “capture”; adapted from Derrida.

**hypomnesis** the making-technical of memory; the hypomnemata include all kinds of memory substitutes and externalizations such as writing, photography, machines, etc.; an antonym to “anamnesis.”

**I-don’t-give-a-fuckism** (*je-m’en-foutisme*) the tendency toward social irresponsibility; to neglect the long term for short-term interests.

**mystagogy** mystical or religious teachings, as opposed to reason, philosophy, or instruction.

**notechniques** technologies of spirit or mind; often construed as normatively positive.



Comparison of the steps used by a person to solve a problem and the steps used by a computer to solve a problem.

**organology** the industrialization of organization; compare to the concept of protocol; often construed as normatively negative.

**pharmacology** the condition of duality in which something is both poison and cure, bringing both benefit and harm; adopted from Derrida.

**psychopolitics** a politics of psychical formations; comparable to Foucault's "biopolitics"; often construed as normatively positive.

**psychopower** (*psychopouvoir*) power that is invested in the psychological or immaterial realm; comparable to Foucault's "biopower"; often construed as normatively negative.

**psychotechniques** writing and reading, the book, Kant and the Enlightenment, the republic of letters; psychotechniques cultivate attention rather than destroy it; often construed as normatively positive.

**psychotechnologies, games, computers, SMS, etc.** these constitute part of the culture industry; often construed as normatively negative.

**retentions** primary retentions are sense perceptions, secondary retentions are memories, tertiary retentions are media or culture (i.e. cultural mnemonics or what is sometimes called cultural memory); adopted from Husserl.

**stupidity** (*bêtise*) irresponsibility, the corruption of attention, the rise in incivility and boorishness.

**synaptogenesis** the formation of synapses in the brain during cognitive development.

**transindividual** the realm of culture, the cultural unconscious, memory that transits across individuals and generations; adopted from Simondon.





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Peak Libido<sup>1</sup>  
by Dominic Pettman

“Our epoch does not love itself.”  
—Bernard Stiegler, “The Disaffected Individual”

The projected end of fossil fuels is not the only catastrophe facing our species today, but it certainly is one of the most pressing and significant (especially in the wake of BP’s Deepwater Horizon disaster). Were we to listen to Bernard Stiegler, however, there is an even more apocalyptic scenario unfolding before our very eyes, directly stemming from his bleak belief that human libido has been tapped out by the rapacious hunger of capital. For Stiegler, the socially-constructive, life-affirming aspects of the libido have been over-exploited to the extent that they no longer function, replaced by sheer blind drive. Thus, as we slide down the vertiginous curve of “peak oil,” we must also face the consequences of living past the point of “peak libido.” That is to say—according to such a view—people will always *desire*, but the motivation behind that desire, and the objects towards which it reaches out, are severely debased and compromised by our political, economic, and technical arrangements. Stiegler makes this claim—that positively-charged libido has imploded back into the negative spirals of drive—throughout his prolific works on the historical and ontological implications of technological evolution, though most clearly in the paper, “Within the Limits of Capitalism, Economizing Means Taking Care.”<sup>2</sup> Here he makes explicit the comparison between dwindling oil reserves and those of the libido. In order to fully appreciate this provocative parallel, it is necessary to trace the complex complicities between the (symbolic) libidinal economy, and that of the market, given how intimately intertwined they have become. (Indeed, it is most telling to type “libidinal economy” into Google, only to be asked the question: “Did you mean liberal economy?”)

<sup>1</sup> The following is adapted from a chapter by the same name in my book, *Human Error: Species-Being and Media Machines* (2011). Thank you to Minnesota University Press for granting permission to publish this version.

<sup>2</sup> Most of the texts written by Stiegler that I am relying on for this essay are working papers posted on his website, <http://www.arsindustrialus.org>. These are not dated, and have no page numbers.

After all, libido and oil are both forms of energy production—the former, theoretically infinitely renewable and sustainable, the latter, a materially finite resource. And yet the conditions of hyper-capitalism have demanded so much from the intangible human resource of the libido, that the marker line is falling lower and lower on the system’s intrusive dipstick.

Madison Avenue and Hollywood thus play the role of OPEC in this little vignette, pumping the hearts and genitals of the world for crude desire, which can then be refined into pure profits. The higher the hem, the greater the margins. Adam Curtis’s brilliant documentary series for the BBC, *The Century of the Self*, narrates an air-tight conspiracy in which Freud’s nephew, Edward Bernays, appropriates the scientific insights of his uncle, and exploits their power to persuade the masses to do everything from die for their country, to smoke cigarettes (for this was the chronology in which it occurred: from governmental propaganda in the 1940s to commercial “public relations” in the post-war boom, before turning full-circle to corporate-style politics in the 1980s to today).

The discovery and mapping of the topography of the human unconscious (i.e., capacity for irrationalism) is thus the equivalent of the discovery and drilling of the great oil fields beneath the planet’s surface. One newsreel from the early 1950s, for instance, proudly announces, “More than any other country in the world, America is a nation on wheels. The automobile and the power behind it have been major factors in the growth of our country. We can drive any where we want to, at any time, for any reason...including fun.” The narrative does not hesitate to equate the GDP with the erotic thrill of mobility. (And surely it is no coincidence that the new icon of irresponsible waste, the Hummer, is a car named after a sex act.) The lubrication of the wheels of industry, and the gears of commerce, is thus a job for both material and immaterial labor. Indeed, the more work is considered to be a means to buy desirable things and experiences, the more it is perceived as a labor of love, and the less those benefitting inequitably from this set-up have to be concerned about uncomfortable questions (such as, “why are *you* getting so much more access to desirable things and experiences than I am, when *I* work just as hard?”) Until, that is, desire itself, as an organic resource, begins to dwindle. What then? What alternatives are there for libidinal energy? According to Stiegler, the inorganic soliciting and



synthesizing of pure *drive*.

Stiegler's approach is a comprehensive and holistic one, complete with its own de-familiarizing vocabulary. His premise is based, once again, on human exceptionalism: "Humans die but their histories remain—this is the big difference between mankind and other life forms."<sup>3</sup> Humans, however, are not essentialized *beings*, but historical *becomings*: the ongoing extrusion of "tertiary retentions" (i.e., technical memories, from the flint to writing to the video camera). What we call "history"—or humanization—is therefore the specific and localized interactions "between the evolution of technical systems and that of other social systems."<sup>4</sup> Beyond genetic memory, and beyond the psychological memory of the individual, there is *cultural* memory; which—for the sake of phenomenological rigor—Stiegler calls "epiphylogenetic." In other words, "it is the articulation between the nervous, technical, and social systems which constitutes the total human fact."<sup>5</sup>

Humans are, Stiegler claims, the first species to sub-divide itself into the complex identity clusters of ethnicity; a process enabled by the objectification and externalization of collective memory. To be German or Han Chinese or Iroquois means to be ontologically oriented by the tertiary retentions enabled by tools, techniques, and technologies which weave a particular world, and a particular relationship to time and space. What is more, the *habitus* of the German (taken both spatially and temporally) is not commensurable with the Han Chinese or the Iroquois, and vice versa. What happens after the Second World War is "the transformation of the technical system into a planetary industrialized mnemotechnical system of retention. And with it '*consciousness*' (*as such*) is challenged."<sup>6</sup> The homogenizing process initiated by colonialism intensifies in the age of postcolonial, liberal economic globalization, resulting in an "upheaval of the retentional systems that regulate common access to space and time (calendarity and cardinality)."<sup>7</sup> From the 1950s onward, the entire constellation of cultures are subsumed into

3 Bernard Stiegler, "Our Ailing Educational Institutions: The Global Mnemotechnical System," *Ars Industrialis*. <http://arsindustrialis.org>.

4 *Ibid.*

5 Bernard Stiegler, "The Disaffected Individual in the Process of Psychic and Collective Disindividuation," *Ars Industrialis*. <http://arsindustrialis.org>.

6 Bernard Stiegler, "Our Ailing Educational Institutions."

7 *Ibid.*

an ideological equivalent of Greenwich Mean Time, most significantly experienced as the absolute conflation of two inter-twined, but formerly distinct, systems: the productive and the mnemotechnical.<sup>8</sup> The world becomes just that: "the world," engineered under the sign of a global mnemotechnical system, leading to a sudden drop in libidinal energy. Stiegler calls this "hypersynchronization," which leads to "a world consumed by the ever accelerating and engulfing synchronization of mass experience."<sup>9</sup>

For Stiegler, "The heart of cultures and societies is at stake; their most intimate relations to the world, their memories and their identities."<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the standardization of the spirit is "experienced as a kind of *cultural entropy*, the *destruction of life*."<sup>11</sup> Globalization is thus held aloft as another name for hyper-modernity, which in turn represents "imminent spiritual, civilisational and existential collapse."<sup>12</sup> But what exactly is the source of such calamity? Is it not the case that our technologies allow greater progress in terms of hygiene, convenience, affluence, and thus happiness? Not according to thinkers who are still capable of making the distinction between a libidinal and political economy. Profits in the latter do not necessarily lead to benefits in the former. Especially since we humans—as fragile crystallizations of singular and collective individuation—are milked by the media for every last drop of our erotic life-force, like cows attached to industrial suction pumps.

Stiegler's dystopian vision rests on the key Freudian premise, that the precious aspects of "civilization" are only possible due to sublimation: the productive channeling of the sexual instincts into more long-lasting, civic-minded, and beneficial projects than orgasm. (Of course Stiegler's definition of civilization is not a naïve Victorian one, although one could argue it has roots in such; which is not necessarily to critique it.) "If consummation is that which destroys its object," he

8 It is certainly illustrative, in terms of this new fusion between the modes of the production and the modes of memorization, that the bulk of media work is now performed in that strange limbo known as "post-production": a space haunted by neo-Marxist specters, and well described in the work of Hardt and Negri.

9 Daniel Ross, "Democracy, Authority, Narcissism: From Agamben to Stiegler," *Contretemps* 6 (2006): 83. <http://www.usyd.edu.au/contretemps/6/january2006/ross.pdf>

10 Bernard Stiegler, "Our Ailing Educational Institutions."

11 *Ibid.*

12 *Ibid.*

writes, “libido is to the contrary that which, as desire and not as drive, that, as the sublimation intrinsic to desire, *takes care* of its object.”<sup>13,14</sup> The capacity to sublimate is thus the key to successful hominization, and is what makes humanity, for Stiegler, the most fascinating of creatures. When we lose this capacity, however, the *investments* we make on a daily basis—financially, emotionally, intellectually—give way to the kind of short term speculations which play havoc with the market system. Hence, “The gigantic financial crisis sending tremors all over the world is the disastrous result of the hegemony of the short term of which the destruction of attention is at once effect and cause.”<sup>15</sup> Objects of desire—whether a lover, a house, a novel, a business, a performance, a farm, or any other project—require long-term investment; something we no longer have the ability to do, since libidinal cathexis has lost its “stickiness” through over-use. Transference becomes Teflon-coated.

It was Bernays, and his marketing minions, who first figured out that *de*-sublimation, on a mass scale, makes for big business. Through enticing us to crave instant soup and weight-loss and designer lofts and fast cars and *jouissance*-on-tap, we lost the ability to orient ourselves in both the here and now, and towards the future as a territory worth conceiving and constructing.<sup>16</sup> In having our senses continually teased and solicited, we live in a timeless and constant state of suspense (held forever between the menu and meal, in Theodor Adorno’s metaphor). The habitual reflexes around consumption (buying, using, regretting, re-selling) are as cyclical and purposeless as the spasm of sphincters in accordance with bodily requirements. We are caught in the “bad repetition” of drive, rather than the good repetition of desire. To

13 Bernard Stiegler, “Within the Limits of Capitalism, Economizing Means Taking Care.” *Ars Industrialis*. <http://arsindustrialis.org>.

14 In his terminology, Stiegler seems to use “desire” as a synonym for “libido,” and thus as an antonym to “drive.” To minimize confusion, however—given the popular use of the word “desire” in a commercial context—I simply contrast “libido” and “drive” throughout the following discussion. Nevertheless, it is worth noting that “desire” can be either desirable or undesirable (as it were), depending on the situation, the object, and the source.

15 *Ibid.*

16 In an episode of the animated comedy series *Drawn Together* (2004), a Pikachu-like creature secretes a hallucinogenic drug whenever it is disappointed. Upon discovery, the other characters become intent on raising the creature’s hopes, only to crush them soon after, at which point they lick its fur, and begin tripping. This, in a nutshell, is the desublimative *modus operandi* of hypercapitalism.

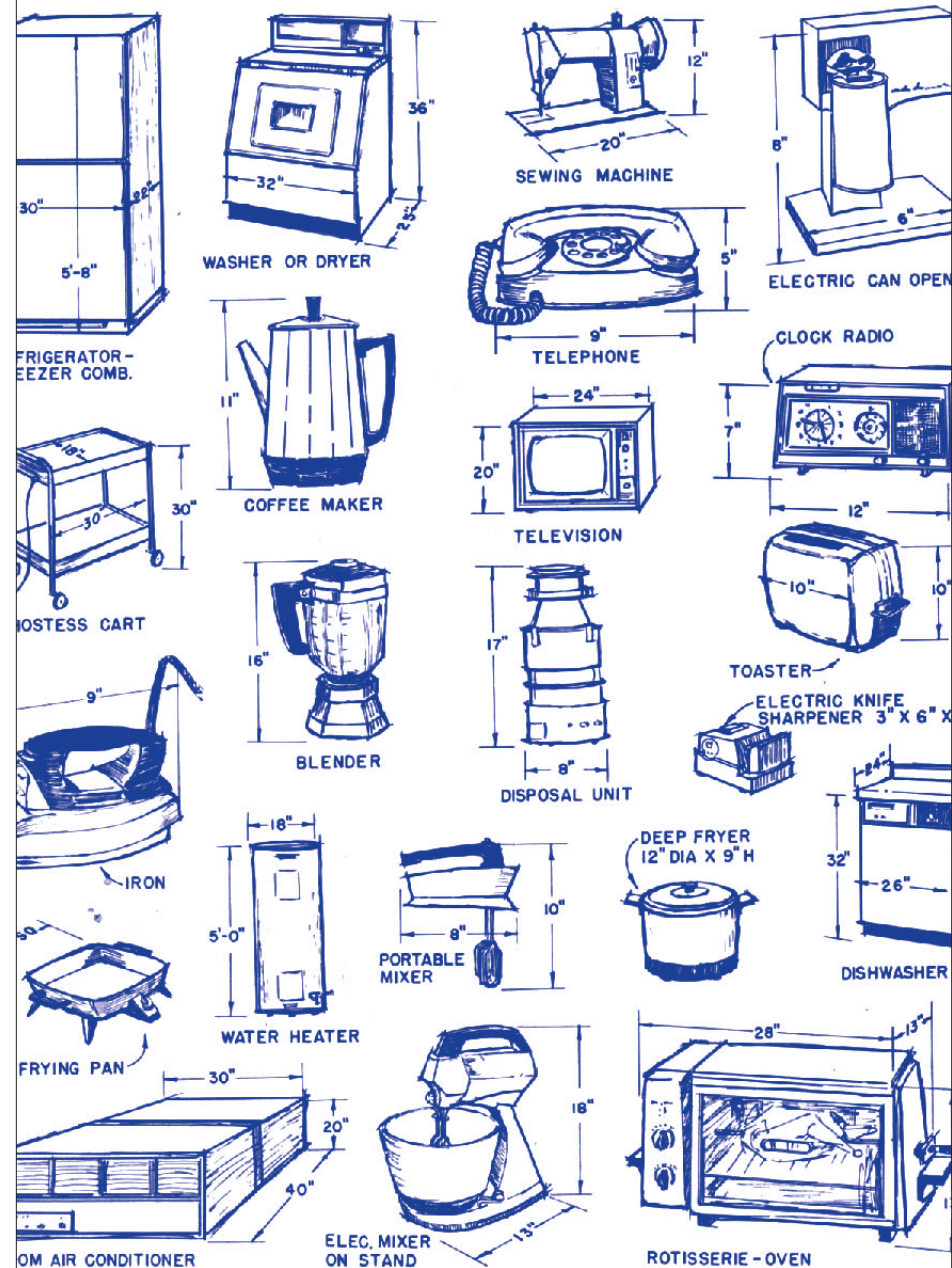


Fig. 11-3. Sizes of common appliances.

desublimates is necessarily to demotivate. All the libidinal steam, accumulated during sleep and other down times, is whistled off into the ether, and not put to work inside the engine of existential, social momentum. Hence, the “tendency towards a decrease of libidinal energy, which is marked by a loss of individuation, destruction of the structures of primordial narcissism, loss of aesthetic and symbolic participation, and, finally, depression and demotivation.”<sup>17</sup> All the journalistic talk condemning our “individualistic” culture in fact obscures the *real* issue: that Friedrich Nietzsche’s herd-society is now grazing mindlessly all over the planet, “as if the efficacy of the lie was proportional to its enormity.”<sup>18</sup> Far from the Ayn Rand style of valorisation of the preformed, autonomous, heroic individual, Stiegler seeks to restore a symbiotic relationship between the *I* and the *We*, for without one, the other collapses. Indeed, narcissism, in Stiegler’s view, “is not a deafness or blindness to others, but the very condition of being-with-others.”<sup>19</sup>

There are several pressing issues, according to Stiegler, in terms of the “liquidation of desire,” which we can cluster into five inter-related categories, generally diffused throughout the culture: 1) desublimation, 2) attention deficit disorder, 3) lack of shame, 4) loss of primordial narcissism, 5) forgetting of *savoir-vivre* (ways of knowing/being, and the eroticized ease these afford). Each issue aggravates the symptoms of the other, making manifest the increasing inability to “take care” (for oneself or for others). As a consequence, the solutions offered are restorative. First (as Alex Galloway glosses in his class on Stiegler) we must learn to re-canalize the libido towards the positively projected future.<sup>20</sup> Second, we must re-learn to focus our attention, and not become distracted by shrill solicitations from all 360 degrees (of which Twitter is only the most recent exacerbating example). Third, we must rediscover a sense of shame (figured as a negentropic relationship to processes of individua-

17 Bernard Stiegler, “Constitution and Individuation,” *Ars Industrialis*. <http://arsindustrialis.org>.

18 Bernard Stiegler, *Acting Out*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 48.

19 Daniel Ross, “Democracy, Authority, Narcissism,” 82.

20 It is worth noting that the lament concerning what is now referred to as ADD predates the technologies that are usually blamed for the syndrome; as witnessed in Alexis de Tocqueville’s remark—made in the mid-19th century: “The habit of inattention has to be regarded as the great defect of the democratic character” (709). Note, too, that this is also a Frenchman, tut-tutting his cousins in the New World.

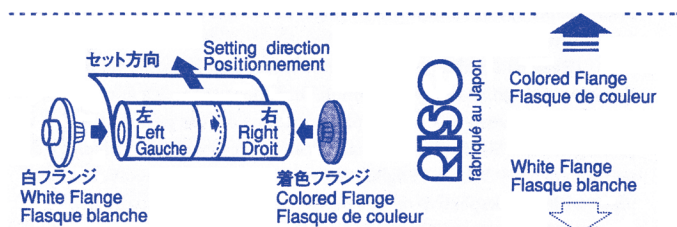
tion). Fourth, we must reject the vulgar narcissism so prevalent on our screens and in our behaviors, in order to nurture the “primordial narcissism” that is the precondition for all love (according to the principle that one must first love oneself in order to then love another). And finally, we must rewire and recalibrate the global technical system so that it does not regulate our cultural memories for us, so that we regain the opportunity to know how to live in a mode of relative agency: so that life itself is understood on a collectively symbolic level, and not approached according to “operating instructions” delivered from an anonymous beyond, like a giant, flimsy IKEA wardrobe. To force the matter into a nutshell: If contemporary citizen-consumers manage to counter the predominant forces of the age (all gathered today under the evocative name of “psycho-power”), then the libido has a chance of replenishing itself; of pulling itself out of the dried up oil well in which it disappeared, by its own greasy hair. *For whomever controls the future mechanisms of orientation will be [able] to control the global imaginary.*<sup>21</sup>

Readers familiar with Herbert Marcuse may be suffering from *déjà vu* at this point in my exposition, for indeed there is a great number of overlaps between this philosopher’s critique of “the performance principle,” and Stiegler’s moral call for an alternative to the “ideology of performance”<sup>22,23</sup> Where Stiegler believes the world has devolved into a place without perspective or true desire, Marcuse also despairs that

21 Bernard Stiegler, “Our Ailing Educational Institutions.”

22 Bernard Stiegler, “Collective Disindividuation.”

23 Indeed there is enough intellectual affinity between Marcuse and Stiegler for one contemporary scholar to complain to me that it is possible to date the latter’s ideas to the exact month, like rings in a tree trunk. That month being April 1968. Moreover, I do not mean it to sound snide when pointing out the fact that much of Stiegler’s work is a re-writing of Marcuse for our own time, for the latter has been unjustly neglected as a relic of the Summer of Love. To return to his original writings is to see the sophistication with which he understood the ideological paradoxes of the culture industries, and thus set the groundwork for concepts such as psychic vs. collective individuation (1974, 56); the repressive and false notion of the autonomous individual (57, 97); the insidious influence of the electronic media in relation to the family (97); the belief in true, hijacked knowledge (104); the desire to re-find a primordial or primary narcissism (166-69); the importance of non-repressive sublimation, etc. It is also significant that Marcuse was quoting Simondon at length decades ago, something Stiegler is wont to do today. But while Marcuse is working within the triangle of Marx, Freud, and Adorno—and was well aware of the importance of technics (85)—Stiegler provides a more intense and nuanced reading of such.



“freedom and satisfaction are transforming the earth into hell.”<sup>24</sup>

Moreover, both object to the notion of quantifiable desire, just as both take issue with the “mercantile organization of life”<sup>25</sup> and the “scientific management of instinctual needs.”<sup>26</sup>

For Marcuse as well, the various media machines which mushroom around us are tampering with our species-being. The “repressive domination” necessary to create the economic conditions for “late stage” industrial civilization begins to create—via ever-more exquisite techniques of mass manipulation of the libido—a “surplus repression,” that warps the woof of humanity.<sup>27</sup> “Where the high standard of living does not suffice for reconciling the people with their life and their rulers,” Marcuse writes, “the ‘social engineering’ of the soul and the ‘science of human relations’ provide the necessary libidinal cathexis.”<sup>28</sup> Thanks to the historically unprecedented strategy of making merchandise into objects of the libido, we moderns suffer from “repressive affluence.”<sup>29</sup> Thus, “the erotic energy of the Life Instincts”<sup>30</sup> are wheedled out of the depths of our being, encouraging us to seize the machinery of sublimation, for fizzy, shallow, artificially sweetened instant gratification.

Writing in the lead-up to, and during, the Sexual Revolution, Marcuse became a spokesman for Dionysian revivals of all kinds. And yet he was no fan of the neo-Bohemian, seeing in their alternative “lifestyle” a consumerist distortion of Eros, as well as a capitulation to the One-Dimensional Society. (“The vamp...the beatnik...perform a function very different from and even contrary to that of their cultural predecessors. They are no longer images of another way of life but rather freaks or types of the same life, serving as an affirmation rather than

24 Herbert Marcuse, *Eros & Civilization: A Philosophical Enquiry Into Freud*. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1974), xiii.

25 Bernard Stiegler, “The Disaffected Individual.”

26 Herbert Marcuse, *Eros & Civilization*, xii.

27 Interestingly, Marcuse avoids any reference to “capitalism” in his critique, preferring more abstract terms, like “the period of total mobilization,” to denote historical forces which ascend and descend in different epochs. Plato, for instance, is blamed for being the first to introduce “the repressive definition of Eros into the household of Western culture” (210-11).

28 *Ibid.*, xi.

29 *Ibid.*, xiv.

30 *Ibid.*, xxiii.

negation of the established order.”<sup>31</sup>) Indeed, many readers often failed to see the Marxist foundations of his critique of contemporary society, mistaking it simply for a call to throw off the Man, and indulge in polysexuality. Marcuse would thus have been unmoved by Coca-Cola’s famous appropriation of the flower power subculture in the late 1960s, since Eros cannot find liberation within the “dehumanizing” conditions (an extremely presumptuous word, of course) of a world dictated by performance and profit. The personal may be political, but *economics* extends deep into the most intimate spaces and places of the person.

Marcuse notes the Freudian paradox that, “Culture demands continuous sublimation; it thereby weakens Eros, the builder of culture.”<sup>32</sup> Foucault’s hypothesis notwithstanding, the Victorians found it necessary to bifurcate their existence, working by day and debauching by night. But the answer is not simply to desubliminate, for this leads to either partitioned schizophrenia (as exemplified in Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde), or—as women enter the workforce, and technics opens new fields of relations—an ubiquitous, alienated, and reified flaunting of sexuality. This latter is what Marcuse calls “repressive desublimation,” of which *Playboy* magazine is a clear example. Hugh Hefner’s publication became a cultural icon by allegedly liberating the repressed “life instincts.” And yet it carefully stages this pseudo-liberation, simultaneously locking desires (as well as the object of those desires) into very limited and predictably profitable patterns. Women must be blonde and buxom, while sexuality must be heterosexual, phallogentric, and orgasmic. As for the scandalous stories of Vladimir Nabokov and Tennessee Williams: “What happens is surely wild and obscene, virile and tasty, quite immoral—and, precisely because of that, perfectly harmless.”<sup>33</sup> As a result, Marcuse writes: “Sexual relations themselves have become much more closely assimilated with social relations; sexual liberty is harmonized with profitable conformity.”<sup>34</sup> Indeed, “In their erotic relations, they ‘keep their appointments’—with charm, with romance, with their

31 Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man: Studies in the Ideology of Advanced Industrial Society*, (London & New York: Routledge, 2006), 62.

32 Herbert Marcuse, *Eros & Civilization*, 83.

33 Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 81.

34 Herbert Marcuse, *Eros & Civilization*, 94.

favorite commercials.”<sup>35</sup>

To strengthen his case, Marcuse quotes Jean-Paul Sartre, who observed, “Shortly after semi-automatic machines were introduced, investigations showed that female skilled workers would allow themselves to lapse while working into a sexual kind of daydream; they would recall the bedroom, the bed, the night and all that concerns only the person within the solitude of the couple alone with itself. But it was the machine in her which was dreaming of caresses.”<sup>36</sup>

What Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari might see as a potentially felicitous “desiring machine,” Marcuse sees as a challenge to the human within Eros (or vice versa, which amounts to much the same thing). He writes: “The machine process in the technological universe breaks the innermost privacy of freedom and joins sexuality and labor in one unconscious, rhythmic automatism.”<sup>37</sup> As a consequence, the more flagrant the social signs of sexuality, the less Eros powering the common project of human existence. Hypersexualization equates to de-eroticization.

The secret affinity between “peak oil” and “peak libido” can, however, be traced by a far more direct route (eschewing philosophy, and moving to the media instead). In other words, rather than mapping the conceptual vectors leading from Marcuse to Stiegler, we could simply follow the ideological parabola from *Mad Max* to *Mad Men*. But, of course, that would merely lead us back into the hypersynchronized matrix of compromised tertiary retentions once more. So you see, there must be more than a desire to reconnect with authentic desire, for this itself may be drive in masquerade.

The challenge is thus to not only rediscover or create the collective meta-desire necessary to escape these alienating spirals, but to understand the Marcusean legacy within Stiegler’s rather claustrophobic universe. Only then can we begin to move beyond not only the horizon of the present, but over and above Stiegler’s own—to refer to Galloway’s lecture once more—inherently “moralistic” schema.

35 *Ibid.*, 95.

36 Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, 29.

37 *Ibid.*, 30.

French Theory Today:  
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# French Theory Today

An Introduction to Possible Futures

A pamphlet series documenting the weeklong seminar by Alexander R. Galloway at the Public School New York in 2010.

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by Jackson Moore

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This pamphlet documents the class on the work of Mehdi Belhaj Kacem that took place on October 27, 2010. The reading assignment was: Mehdi Belhaj Kacem, "In the Surrender Community," trans., Isabelle Cordonnier, *Critical Secret 4* (<http://www.criticalsecret.com/n4altern/mehdi/index.htm>).







Mehdi Belhaj Kacem, or Unworkability  
by Alexander R. Galloway

In America today a single date returns again and again to define political life: September 11, 2001. But contemporary French political discourse pivots around two completely different dates: April 2002 and November 2005.

What happened on these two important dates? On April 21, 2002, the far right candidate Jean-Marie Le Pen advanced to the second round of the presidential election, becoming one of two finalists for the presidency, and in so doing signaling the abject failure of the left in France. The French have two rounds of voting for the presidential election. For a right wing xenophobic candidate to advance to the finals of the presidency is an unusual event. Galvanized in opposition to Le Pen, voters handed Jacques Chirac a sweeping reelection victory with 82% percent of the ballots, numbers typically only seen in the vote tallies of Saddam-era Iraq or other strongman states.

In November 2005, two youths were accidentally killed while trying to flee the police, sparking a period of several days of sustained unrest in the suburban *banlieues* and elsewhere. As the situation quickly spiraled out of control, the French government declared a state of emergency as much of France watched the spectacle on their television sets, growing more and more anxious about impoverished people of color living at the perimeter of their cities.

Mehdi Belhaj Kacem wrote on these themes in an appealing little book, *The French Psychosis* (*La psychose française – Les banlieues: le ban de la République*) (2006), which, published by Gallimard, indicated for the first time that he could be taken seriously by the mainstream French publishing establishment, after having published philosophy books and novels already for a number of years. The book is a direct response to the 2005 riots in France, and it turns on a number of puns involving the terms *ban-lieues*, ban, and banishment.<sup>1</sup>

The French word *banlieue* has both a general and specific definition: *banlieue* means suburb, including some residential zones that

<sup>1</sup> Belhaj Kacem is inspired by Jean-Luc Nancy's essay "Abandoned Being." See Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Birth to Presence*, trans., Brian Holmes, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), 36-47.

are quite affluent; yet the specific meaning of the term, more relevant to this text, translates roughly as “suburban ghetto”—that is, a suburban township with high unemployment, crime, and other blights.

Belhaj Kacem has great admiration for the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, particularly what is viewed, rightly or wrongly, as the central conceits of Agamben’s work: the interrelated concepts of the exception, banishment (the ban), profanation, bare life, and the figure of the *homo sacer*.

His treatment of Agamben in this book is not particularly original, but the book itself carries a certain force, a quiet rage emanating from deep within a young writer profoundly affected by the negligence of the French state, but above all ticked off that no one cared to interview him about it.

I begin with a simple personal observation: no one in the French media, not in television or the major daily and weekly publications, not even radio, thought it would be a good idea to consult a certain young French intellectual of Tunisian extraction, one of the best known in his generation in the areas of literature and philosophy. An intellectual, even, who spent a part of his adolescence in one of these miserable *banlieues*, and who has tried in various ways to consider the question of *unworkability* [*désœuvrement*] as a completely new political category.<sup>2</sup>

Belhaj Kacem lived in Tunisia until the age of twelve before moving to France, learning French for the first time in grade school. He was thirty-two years old during the 2005 riots. The miserable *banlieue* in question is Fosses, up northward from Paris on the dreary “D” rapid train line. “I strongly invite you to visit this stricken and depressed town,” he writes in a footnote, “which is north of Sarcelles and reachable by rapid transit.” But Fosses is certainly not the most squalid of the Parisian suburban ghettos, and his stint there was short.

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2 Mehdi Belhaj Kacem, *La psychose française – Les banlieues: le ban de la République* (Paris: Galilée, 2006), 9-10. My translation.

He continues:

I maintain that unworkability will become one of the new political questions of the future. But I have so often run up against the traditional far left, due either to their indifference or to their working-class pride. And for the others, outside of the significant “right wing” reactions (to which these pages will largely be devoted), we *also* saw the members of the far left in government, after a period of silence coincident with the stupor wrought by the events, condemn what happened in the name of a virtuous “political consciousness,” a consciousness with which those responsible for the troubles were, according to them, completely unendowed.

These same individuals have never questioned after their own stark inability to recognize a politics, albeit faint, in these poor adolescent and unemployed masses who have “revealed” these troubles. Here is the crucial point: if such a political consciousness had been present albeit faintly in these riots, they would have taken on the political profile of an *insurrection*. An insurrection *without politics* is “only” a set of uncoordinated riots. Here however the large fallout from the riots *has indeed* been political, something typically only evident with insurrections not riots. Such a historical singularity is *by itself* interesting enough to merit further analysis.

With that one arrives at the accusation I most commonly hear in my attempts to consider the question of unworkability as a political one: nihilism. But this is precisely *where* to search, and to find, the singular truth that is so historically unprecedented in these events. It clarifies all that we are in this day and age.<sup>3</sup>

He made an early name for himself by publishing two novels, *Cancer* and *1993*; when he was only twenty-one. A third novel followed two years later, *Vies et morts d’Irène Lepic*. After this early period, he

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3 Ibid., 10-11.

turned to philosophy and began a rigorous reading of the canonical figures, including Immanuel Kant, G.W.F. Hegel, Gilles Deleuze, and Jacques Lacan. Around the turn of the millennium, he was also one of the animating forces behind the review *Evidenz*. Since then he has written steadily, starred in a film, and even taught a few seminars, all the while cultivating a profile as the leading anti-philosopher of his generation.

“Anti-philosophy” is something that Alain Badiou describes in some detail in his book *Logics of Worlds*, but Belhaj Kacem gives us a quick sense of what he means: “First of all it is a term invented by Lacan for his own project, and a term that Badiou takes up again and transforms dialectically. Badiou goes on to say, for example, that the great anti-philosophers are [Blaise] Pascal, [Jean-Jacques] Rousseau, [Søren] Kierkegaard, [Friedrich] Nietzsche, Lacan.”<sup>4</sup> There is an anti-scholastic tone shared by such writers, Belhaj Kacem observes, and they all seem to place a high premium on their philosophical work being well written. In a lot of these figures one does not see a traditional philosophical treatise. Think of the work of Kierkegaard who pursued alternative literary genres through which to express his philosophical ideas. “The proof: and here I’m being a little silly,” he joked to an interviewer, “we know that chicks like to read Kierkegaard and Nietzsche, but they are not going to read Hegel or [Martin] Heidegger.”<sup>5</sup>

Belhaj Kacem is a self-styled outsider, a trickster, an autodidact, and, in his own words, an “anti-scholastic,” and an “anti-philosopher.” His interests span both low and high culture, writing on subjects as diverse as video games, film, literature, and philosophy. He has written on the rap group NWA. He has written on pornography. More acolyte than guru, his writing tends to ventriloquize those philosophers he most admires—priority is given to Badiou and Agamben, but also Heidegger, Hegel, Reiner Schürmann, Christian Jambet, Deleuze, and Lacan all play leading roles.

Here is another passage in which he comments on the context and consequences of the riots:

4 Mehdi Belhaj Kacem (with Philippe Nassif), *Pop philosophie: Entretiens* (Paris: Perrin, 2008), 103. My translation.

5 Ibid.

Since the end of the Second World War, France has never been more on the right. For obvious historical reasons the traditional extreme right can no longer directly acquire power. However it is able to *set the tone* and intervene more and more visibly in French political life, to the point that the traditional “right wing” has now become the “right extreme,” to borrow the delightful coinage of Virginie Despentes [the author and filmmaker of *Baise-moi*].

In the middle of the [riots], in a segment broadcast on a public channel one Sunday afternoon, a well-regarded intellectual launched into an interesting argument. He read some rap lyrics talking about fucking over France and cop-killing, and suggested that isn’t it high time that free-expression imposed some limits on itself. Two days later, the UMP<sup>6</sup> deputy Daniel Mach, carried the baton over to Parliament, which is supposed to represent the political conscience of the country. Very excited, he explained that, yes, these lyrics were scandalous and had inspired the rioters, *just like Marc Dutroux [the Belgian serial killer and child molester] had been inspired by Sade, and just like Hitler had been inspired by Céline*. This is what we call psychosis: if Marc Dutroux had read Sade, he would not be Marc Dutroux; if they didn’t have rap and two or three other things in the *banlieue*, the flare up would be permanent; as for the fine pairing of Hitler and Céline, the comparison is so grotesque that it should give reason to doubt the cultural acumen of those today who represent the will of the people at the highest ranks of government.

I would like to have them listen to some of the groups in the United States, where they will easily find lyrics a thousand times more scatological, pornographic, and violent against Uncle Sam than even the most brutal of ours. The reference is not selected at random, and neither is it by chance that rap culture has flourished above all in these two States. Around the world France and the US are the two

6 The UMP (Union for a Popular Movement) is a center right political party in France. UMP member Nicolas Sarkozy became president of France in 2007.

countries most firmly founded on the idea of the universal and on a culture of immigration and racial mixing.<sup>7</sup>

In contrast to these kinds of dead-end ideological debates taking place in the mainstream media, Belhaj Kacem has attempted with his work to articulate a new political and philosophical analysis that can do justice to our contemporary world.

He uses the term *désœuvrement*, which I am translating as “unworkability,” but could also be rendered using terms like “unemployment” or “inoperativeness.” The reference here is to two books from the early 1980s: Jean-Luc Nancy’s book *The Inoperative [désœvrée] Community*, and a response written by a seventy-six-year-old Maurice Blanchot the following year, *The Unavowable Community*. These two books, together perhaps with books like Agamben’s *The Coming Community* and those of Alphonso Lingis, were instrumental in putting forth a new and unusual view of community and how communities are and should be put together. Traditionally a community—like the community of French citizens for example—is defined as being held together by common threads. These threads may be things like language, law, custom, or even a common imagination or narrative about what the community is. By contrast Nancy, Blanchot and Agamben suggested that we seek out a community of those who have *nothing* in common; not community through a common thread, but the community of those with nothing common. They suggest that a truly ethical community can only be found among those who share nothing together. To commune means to come together at the level of one’s genericness, not one’s individuality.

Rejecting what he calls the community of immanence—when individuals merge totally into a blob of sameness, which he associates with a number of nasty outcomes including fascism—Nancy speaks instead of a shared sociability between *singular beings*. Singular beings are finite. In calling them finite, Nancy means that singular beings exist merely as *whatsoever they are*; no grand transcendental project or “work” moves through them and animates them. Thus there can be no such thing as a communal bond animating singular beings, no such thing as a grand narrative, as one witnesses in the cases of nationalism or populism.

<sup>7</sup>—Belhaj Kacem, *La psychose française*, 14–15.

They are, rather, without a national project, *without a work* and out of work, literally unworkable.

Community necessarily takes place in what Blanchot has called ‘unworking,’ referring to that which, before or beyond the work, withdraws from the work, and which, no longer having to do either with production or with completion, encounters interruption, fragmentation, suspension. Community is made up of the interruption of singularities, or of the suspension that singular beings *are*.<sup>8</sup>

Being-without-a-work means reversing the normal logic of appearing, by which things come into being through an additive process. Normally speaking, when an entity appears it is *added* to the world. By contrast, being-without-a-work withdraws from appearing by means of subtraction and suspension. To arrive at genericness one does not add new subjective traits, one removes them.

Responding to Nancy, Blanchot, in his enigmatic *The Unavowable Community* (1988), writes of a community of absence, with a “principle of incompleteness” for each being.<sup>9</sup> Community is “not the place of Sovereignty,” he writes, speaking instead of an abandonment, a beheading, a “Privation of the Head.”<sup>10</sup> The sovereign is the one beheaded, to be sure, but like Nancy, Blanchot expects a beheading of the self as well, leading to an acephalous person, the one who can make community. (In Deleuze, the distinction falls between that of the individual and its relatively more headless counterpart, the person. Deleuze profits from subtleties in the French term *personne* which can mean both “person” and “no one” [*elle n’est personne*].<sup>11</sup> Thus the “person” in Deleuze is actually an impersonal being, or more simply, an “imperson.” Compare this also to the Deleuzian concept of the “dividual.” So Deleuze stipulates that one’s goal should not be the individual, who is a subject who has qualities, but an *imperson*, an impersonal and pre-individual singularity.)

<sup>8</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, trans., Peter Connor, et al. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 31.

<sup>9</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community*, trans., Pierre Joris (Barrytown, NY: Station Hill Press, 1988), 3, 5.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 12, 16.

<sup>11</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Logique du sens*, (Paris: Minuit, 1969), 116. My translation.

For his part, Agamben enlarges the terms slightly to include what he calls “whatever singularities.” These whatever singularities are not individuals, they are called generic persons; they are *what they are*, *whatever that may be*. Together such singular beings form what he terms the politics of whatever singularity. This is the only foundation for an ethics. In a powerful reversal of our common sense on what constitutes ethics, he explains what he means:

There is no essence, no historical or spiritual vocation, no biological destiny that humans must enact or realize. This is the only reason why something like an ethics can exist, because it is clear that if humans were or had to be this or that substance, this or that destiny, no ethical experience would be possible—there would be only tasks to be done.<sup>12</sup>

If the solution is given in advance, then there is no ethical moment for Agamben because one is simply executing on that solution. In this sense, his is an “inductive” or open ethical model.

Later, in a moving chapter called “Tiananmen,” Agamben describes the coming political landscape:

The novelty of the coming politics is that it will no longer be a struggle for the conquest or control of the State, but a struggle between the State and the non-State (humanity), an insurmountable disjunction between whatever singularity and the State organization.<sup>13</sup>

Such claims should differentiate Agamben sharply from the history of Marxist thought that advocates taking over the state (in order that it may wither away).

With some sense of the concept of “unworkability,” let us return now to Belhaj Kacem and his 2009 book *The Spirit of Nihilism*.<sup>14</sup> The

12 Giorgio Agamben, *The Coming Community*, trans., Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 43.

13 *Ibid.*, 85, emphasis removed.

14 Mehdi Belhaj Kacem, *L'esprit du nihilisme: Une ontologique de l'Histoire* (Paris: Fayard, 2009). My translation. Subsequent parenthetical citations refer to this edition.

goal of this book is a simple one: to merge Agamben and Badiou under a single philosophical project. Belhaj Kacem has been working up to this in recent books, rehearsing what it would take to make such a claim. The discovery of Badiou was a formative event for him, a kind of philosophical catechism as transformative as his earlier discoveries of Lacan or Nietzsche. ~~The most extreme illustration of his interest in Badiou, particularly the mathematics-based ontology of the older philosopher, was probably Belhaj Kacem's 2004 book *Event and Repetition* [Événement et répétition] (Tristram). Ostensibly an attempt to work through the ontological claims of Deleuze and Badiou, the book brims with the same kind of set theory found in Badiou's more technical work. Unfortunately what is at worst tedious in Badiou appears rather amateur in Belhaj Kacem, himself unversed in the esoterica of higher mathematics:~~

*To merge Agamben and Badiou under a single philosophical project—rehearsed in these earlier adventures, the claim reaches full bloom in *The Spirit of Nihilism*. But what points of overlap exist between these two very different authors? In short, Agamben provides the politics and Badiou the ontology. From Agamben comes the “state of exception,” and from Badiou the “evental site.” The merger is a simple one and can be formulated as a question: Why is it that, in the modern world, the evental site and the state of exception are so often the *same thing*? This is a powerful question, and one that Badiou has had to defend on a number of occasions. (Why was Bolshevism an event, but not Nazism? ~~The answer is found simply in the fact that Badiou's theory of the event does not obey a law of symmetry going from left to right.~~)*

Belhaj Kacem states the central question like this: “Why is the evental site so often a state of exception, and why politically does the event so often *sow the seeds* of the state of exception, leading to the confusion that often arises between the ‘positive’ event (revolutionary let’s call it) and the ‘negative’ event (genocide, State crime)?” (46). In other words, why are events today more often riots than revolutions?

Or as Roberto Esposito put it in his splendid book *Bíos*: “Why does a politics of life always risk being reversed into a work of death?”<sup>15</sup> Perhaps what Belhaj Kacem is doing to Badiou, then, is to awaken a theory of the “dark event,” the event that does not call for the fidelity of

15 Roberto Esposito, *Bíos: Biopolitics and Philosophy*, trans., Timothy Campbell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 8.

a subject, but instead indicates a foundational evil, or an inaugurating tragedy. This is why Badiou's void is so appealing to him. "What is at stake in our endeavor is to tell of the 'nature' of this presence [the void]" (80).

In merging Agamben with Badiou, Belhaj Kacem adds a dose of the abject to the eventual site. Heidegger is introduced as a foil along the way. "Being is not 'dissimulation'" (123), he writes, meaning that being itself becomes clear and open only when rewritten, by Badiou, in the clear and open language of math. To be sure, Badiou is not the first to do this, only the most recent. This puts him in sharp distinction with Heideggerian phenomenology, which tends to consider being as something cloaked, obscure, or withdrawn. "The neoplatonic paradigm is thus the best" (123), he concludes, siding again with his master Badiou.

Agamben is Belhaj Kacem's lifeline out of this tricky situation. Beyond his interest in the state of exception and bare life, Belhaj Kacem is one of the first to latch on to a more recent concept in Agamben, that of profanation. In chapter ten of *The Spirit of Nihilism*, on "Nihilism, Parody, and Profanation," Belhaj Kacem grants a philosophical privilege to the concept of profanation, offering it up as the Agambenian counterpart to Badiou's concept of the event. Thus, just as the event is an appropriation, profanation is a reappropriation. Just as the event signals an excess, profanation indicates a return (of what was removed). "The event is the pure appropriation of the inappropriable; profanation is the reappropriation of what was expropriated within the 'sacred' sphere" (223). Profanation is key because it allows Belhaj Kacem to theorize the present state of world affairs, what he calls "democratic nihilism" (a term roughly synonymous with Badiou's "democratic materialism"). We are the first profane generation, he writes. "Profanation is thus nothing less than the absolute singularity of the age in which we've grown up... iconoclasm and iconolatry appear very strictly as the same thing" (226). The contemporary cult of the profane, which he blames on both the "vitalist leftists" of May 1968 and the exigencies of neoliberal capitalism—for after all they are now thoroughly unified—is one in which a number of old virtues are held up as true, but nevertheless appear sinister and lifeless. Thus we have equality, but it is a blanket equality producing a flat world of flat individuals. We have transparency, but a transparency so rigorously enforced that it feels more pornographic

(show everything!) than transcendent. "*All truth must appear,*" he writes, echoing the 1960s critiques of commodities and spectacle. "*All appearance, and nothing but appearance, is truth*" (227).

Belhaj Kacem's best book, or at least the most entertaining, is *Pop Philosophy*, a book of extended interviews conducted by Philippe Nassif in 2003 that runs upward of 500 pages. With some autobiographical sections and covering dozens of different themes, one sees a looser and more agile mind at work. He weighs in on the difference between the virtual and the possible (within the Deleuzian vocabulary), on his erstwhile collaboration with the Tiqqun group, on Lacan of course ("the Baroque Freud"), on neurosis and affect, on why humans have sex year round and not just in the spring like animals (because we live inside representation), and even on the shortcomings of phenomenology (because its view of man is impoverished).

But it is his use of Badiou's theory of the event that will provide us with a final perspective on these issues, and perhaps as well on the French riots of 2005. As Belhaj Kacem writes, all hitherto existing revolutionary thought makes the same appeal, *to affirm presentation against representation*. "Starting from the French Revolution and running through [Karl] Marx up to Badiou, all revolutionary imagination defends presentation against representation."<sup>16</sup>

His is a fairly common metaphysical model. There are things that exist, which is to say, they have *presence*, are *present*, are *presented*. Yet redoubled on top of the present world is the world as it is *represented*, as it exists within the symbolic realm, the realm of thought, culture, and concept. The revolutionary therefore is he who breaks through the mystical shell of representation to arrive at the rational kernel of presence, a typical—in this case Marxian—model for both the revolutionary act and the act of critique. Again, borrowing from Badiou, Belhaj Kacem's word for this is *event*.

An event, he writes, happens when the cycle of presentation and representation is broken. It happens when representation is blocked in some way, returning us back to raw presentation. The event "has the same structure as the Thing in Freud, or the real in Lacan," he writes. "It is presented but not represented."<sup>17</sup> When one arrives at the Lacanian

<sup>16</sup> Belhaj Kacem, *Pop philosophie*, 299.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

real, one is directly at the thing that is presented. It has not yet been represented. For if it were represented, one would have already passed into the realm of the imaginary, leaving the real behind.

Or elsewhere: “The event is a violent return of the repressed which disintegrates representation.”<sup>18</sup> This is the basic model of the event, to defend presentation against representation. Fight images and spectacle; find truth in what’s real.

One might admit therefore to a basic materialist “realism” at work in Belhaj Kacem’s model: Historical reality exists below or beyond representation, and from time to time the spectacle of representation frays or is destroyed to reveal the truth beneath. This is not a particularly novel position, as he is the first to admit, but it is certainly a quite serviceable one. One will have to travel to some rather exotic locations to find a modern figure who doesn’t in some way agree with this model—either to the anti-dialectical, anti-metaphysical position of Deleuze for whom there is no abstract symbolic order in any normal sense, or to the gnostic hyperreality of the late Baudrillard for whom the real has essentially been hunted to extinction.

One is left with the following assessment of the 2005 French riots: A thousand cars burning each night; a return of the repressed; an incandescent reality washing out, if only for a short time, the stable representations of French bourgeois life. A depressing picture, to be sure.

The stalwart idealist concepts of representation, the absolute, infinity, or spirit were most certainly some of the great targets and ultimate casualties of the twentieth century. By the 1960s in France—barring some notable exceptions—it had become extremely unfashionable in certain circles to read Hegel or Plato. One must be a good Marxist, one must be a good materialist, and so on. And yes, I acknowledge there are counterexamples. But today, with the rise of figures like Catherine Malabou, Badiou, Slavoj Žižek, or Quentin Meillassoux, that has all changed. Belhaj Kacem stands ambivalently across this divide. On the one hand, he inherits an interest in the absolute from his master Badiou. But on the other hand he seeks to shore up the project of materialism by privileging historical reality over representation.

As I see it, the burning question is thus: Has the absolute been rescued and redeemed? Will the absolute ever return to its former

position as the left’s political enemy? If so, how fierce and fast will come the backlash?

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18 Ibid., 23.



## Question and Answer

[Participant 1] *The difference between a revolution and a riot would be some kind of political consciousness, right? It seems like he's valorizing presentation over representation. How would you have political consciousness with pure presentation and with pure genericness in a community? Without representation, don't you just become a mass of bodies? And how could that be something other than a riot?*

[Galloway] He's critical of these righteous positions on the Left, which claim that there can be no political event because the rioting kids have no political education. He resists that position as one that is patronizing. But you make a good point: the notion of an acephalous, impersonal, undirected, pure action belies the typical notion of what we think of as political activity. Nevertheless, it's an idea that several people have given consideration since Gilles Deleuze. In fact, it probably goes back even earlier to Georges Bataille. But certainly since Deleuze, we've had this notion of the war machine, the nomad, the pack, the pack of wolves, the swarm. And today, many people are interested in swarming tactics and asymmetrical tactics. You're right though—it is a bargain of sorts, in that we have to give up the notion of the individual with agency participating in a bloc, whether that's the working class or a political party or some other kind of community formation.

[Participant 1] *Does it go back to the state versus non-state idea, where you're trying to create an event that doesn't constitute a new reified state?*

[Galloway] Exactly. In the work of Alain Badiou, there's a great double meaning around the word "state": It means state as in the *nation-state*, and it also means the *state of affairs*, the state of the situation. For Badiou, an event can never be a state of affairs. The event is always that which deviates from the state of affairs. And this allows Badiou to make a really interesting claim, wherein he says, "Events don't exist; only the state of affairs exists. And if you deviate from the state of affairs, you don't exist."



[Participant 2] *Within this tradition of historical materialism, the event has been understood as the moment of the riot, the moment of the revolution. But what of the before and after? For instance, if the event is comprised of what we call “whatever singularities,” what are these whatever singularities doing in the rest of their lives?*

[Galloway] You’re right—there’s almost a glamorization of anonymity. But I don’t think the “whatever” is at any time an individual person or a state that can be achieved and maintained over time, a position from which to say, *I am a whatever now*. It may be more of an aspirational process, or a tendency, or a goal. It may be about a liminal effect, about moving away from one’s individuality toward something more generic, a vector that you never achieve. The whatever is different than the subaltern, the whatever is different than the working class.

[Participant 2] *I’m trying to understand if these people are conscious of being whatever singularities or not. Because, as you describe it, the whatever can only be attained by those who have the possibility to think of themselves....*

[Galloway] Are you asking if it’s a privileged position? That’s tricky. For example, in the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, the multitude is an agglomeration of whatever singularities. And the multitude replaces the rabble of the proletariat, this mixture of different kinds of people from different contexts, but who all have one thing in common: they have only their labor power to sell. I think to understand the “whatever,” we need to turn to the intellectual history of the last couple decades, specifically the hegemony of identity politics and cultural studies over certain threads of discourse, especially during the 80s and 90s in the US. In the name of a liberatory politics of justice, equality and the inclusion of the traditionally excluded, this discourse praised the notion of subject positions and sought to elevate alternative ones. And the concept of the whatever is a backlash against that. Instead of thinking about subjects as a collection of predicates, often understood as an additive process—i.e., I am an individual of a particular gender and class and national citizenship—the whatever represents a subtractive model. This new tendency throws out that predicate model; instead of adding

qualities to the individual, we take them away. And when we take them away, whatever is left is left. So I grant you, it’s weird—it doesn’t really work that well. But, hopefully this historical context helps to explain why Deleuze, and Hardt and Negri, and Giorgio Agamben and Belhaj Kacem, are all interested in the whatever now. It’s a reaction to identity politics.

[Participant 3] *Following up on your comment, do the whatever singularities have any importance as individuals or only in a group function? Can we understand the whatever singularities outside of the multitude, outside of some kind of agglomeration?*

[Galloway] The idea of the multitude is a reaction to the conception of the working class as a relatively homogenous social bloc, which in turn privileges the bloc, privileges the group, privileges the identity of the total. Hardt and Negri, however, specifically say that they don’t think of the multitude as a massified bloc, but just the opposite: Constituted from the ground up, the multitude is the set of radically diverse whatevers. For them, the multitude is a kind of epiphenomenon. And this rejection of the bloc is a trend, too. It’s for this same reason that Badiou turns to set theory—it’s a way for him to talk about an ensemble for which the enclosing membrane is almost irrelevant. By naming a set, you’re not massifying it, you’re not turning it into a bloc. The ensemble...it’s an interesting play on words in French. It could be ensemble theory, rather than set theory.

[Participant 4] *Building on your previous comment about this being a backlash against identity politics, correct me if I’m wrong, but can we not also read the events of November 2005 as the story of France the nation-state dealing with cultural difference in a way that, due to its ideological tradition of laïcité and assimilation, it had not dealt with before? France has a tradition of human rights rather than civil rights, as we have in the United States. And Belhaj Kacem refers to himself as Tunisian in the opening text you read earlier, Alex; but in the way he’s framed the riots, he doesn’t really talk about that difference—that it’s not only socioeconomic difference operating in the banlieue of France, it’s cultural difference too. It’s really interesting that in a situation that might be read as a cultural clash, instead we see an interpretation that sits within this backlash*

*against identity politics and refuses to articulate those cultural positions. Can you address that conflict?*

[Galloway] I think that's the best way to understand France from our perspective in the U.S. Historically, the political formation of our two countries has similar origins in our respective revolutions. But you're right: In France, we have an almost militantly universal approach to human rights, whereas in the U.S.—and this doesn't always work—we have a melting pot approach oriented around civil rights. The French don't have the melting pot model. And within their model of militant universalism, either you become French, essentially abandoning whatever colonial apparatus you brought along with you, or you are not granted access to the French community. I'm not saying the U.S. is perfect, but we don't really operate that way—our system is more variegated. I think that militant universality creates a more extreme sense of an absolute outside, or an absolute rejection, or an absolute other...you're exactly right.

[Participant 5] *I was in France around the time of the riots staying with family—my aunt is an attorney and my uncle, a doctor and a teacher. I didn't understand the landscape of Paris very well, and had little concept of where the riots were taking place in relation to where I was staying. And when I arrived, I asked my aunt, "Are the rioters going to be throwing rocks at your house?" And she said to me, "No, it's really sad; they're burning their own cars, they're burning their own institutions, they're burning their own schools, they're going to have nothing." And, usually when we talk about a revolution, there's usually an object, a place to direct the violence, that's not yourself. And this seems related to Belhaj Kacem's discussion of nihilism as you were describing it earlier. And so, what was the object of violence in these riots? Was my aunt correct in the way she described them? And do other places where this state of exception is the reality figure into Belhaj Kacem at all? Like Gaza for instance....*

[Galloway] It's a great point. When I was in Paris I was stunned at how monolithically bourgeois everybody was. I think it's a symptom of the radical division we were discussing earlier: If you're excluded from the

intensely homogenous, bourgeois centrist culture, you are *absolutely excluded*. I think the division is much more radical than what we have in the U.S. This is why geography is so important, the geography of segregation, the geography of inequality—and there are no hard and fast rules. As you all know, in the U.S. we've had periods where the inner-cities are the most impoverished, where the excluded are inside and the privileged outside. And sometimes there's more of a patchwork model, like the favelas in São Paulo. It's different for different cities.

As for your question about the object of the violence against the self and nihilism and nothing...I'm not sure I know the answer to that. On one level, I think Belhaj Kacem is trying to say that "nothing" is actually an appropriate answer to the question, "What are the riots for?" (Incidentally Meillassoux, whom we will discuss tomorrow, will say something similar, although he's not talking about a political scenario, he's talking about pure philosophy.) For Belhaj Kacem, in this context, the question is, "What do the riots achieve?" And in saying "nothing," we actually affirm that the question warrants asking. By saying that the riots achieve nothing, we actually—bare with me—assert that something happened. Because if you pose the question rhetorically, it has no answer—you can't answer it correctly, right? Answering "nothing" actually demonstrates that there is something to say about these events.

Regarding violence against the self, people have given different answers to that. There's one school of thought that says that the urban geography is such that rioters strike at wherever is nearest to them. So if a school is nearest to them, they will burn the school. And there's another school of thought that says, when the rioters burn cars, they are attacking the transportation infrastructure, which attributes to them a much savvier, strategic intervention. I'm not sure why but the French *love* to burn cars.

[Participant 6] *What does that mean, interrupting the transportation system?*

[Galloway] Interrupting the thousands of cars that exist in Paris. If you burn those cars, you are directly attacking the transportation infrastructure of the city.

[Participant 5] *But burning your own car rather than someone else's is like putting a bomb in your own house instead of, say, on a bus.*

[Galloway] I'm not endorsing this, but there are people who make that claim. Maybe burning cars isn't the best example to defend this position.

[Participant 4] *Still, it makes for great imagery. I mean, you didn't see burning cars even though you were in Paris—you saw them on TV. And we saw them on TV in New York....*

[Galloway] Oh, so it's a spectacle.

[Participant 4] *And I know Belhaj Kacem is being a good Marxist, but I'm a little suspicious that the event necessarily has to be a real that's not mediated. Will or will not the revolution be televised? Maybe this is me being too Habermasian, but there are ways to access the public sphere and gain a right to speak and be acknowledged as having the ability to speak.*

[Participant 7] *Obviously, interpreting the meaning of these events, whether they have symbolic power or not, is problematic. And by saying that "nothing" lies at the center of the event, Belhaj Kacem is affirming the event, because there is no way to represent what these riots achieved—there are so many different representations, depending on whether you're in France or in New York, or wherever. But just the fact that it happened and it was real is...*

[Galloway] I don't know—is the image of a burning car an image of the real? It might strike straight at the psyche the way the real would, but I'm not sure.

[Participant 2] *I don't understand why the image of a burning car is so striking, whereas witnessing the production of a car—as you might in an advertisement—is not. To me, it's the same kind of violence. Or why, say, images of a tourist island wrought by natural disaster are striking and dramatic, whereas images of the same island covered by fancy*

*hotels are perceived as glamorous instead. Is that not a certain kind of violence, too?*

[Galloway] Oh, I see; it's still—

[Participant 2] *Representation.*

[Galloway] I'll add one other thing to connect some of these themes. You may have read some of the communiqués coming out of the occupation at the New School or the political actions in the California university system, and there was an interesting refrain: "We have no demands." And this might be another way to think about the political power of *nothing*. Because the refusal to make demands breaks the social contract between antagonist and protagonist—it doesn't work anymore. And this might be why the group Tiqqun is quite interesting, because they rebuff the idea of mediation with the bosses. They assert that even entering into these types of negotiations sets up a power dynamic that favors the bosses, the administration, and eventually the state, inevitably brought in to broker the relationship between capital and the workers, capital and labor. And so rather than haggling for another little handout, another little advantage in the ongoing negotiations that our fathers were doing and our children will be doing as well, groups like Tiqqun would prefer to tip over the whole apple cart and refuse participation in this system of political negotiation. So I don't know—maybe that's another way to think about "nothing."

[Participant 6] *In that sense, could one say, "We have no demands, we were just having the experience of occupying this building"? Or, "This car is not a symbol, or a demand; rather, I am having the experience of burning a car"? Wherein, it becomes about the action that people are doing, not the representation of this action....*

[Galloway] Right, that's the crucial part—it's *not a representation*. The occupation *is whatever it is*: It has no ulterior motive to be represented in some other form.

[Participant 8] *When there's a riot in the U.S., the mass media often describe the situation as one in which the rioters are burning their own property, their own buildings. But the truth is that, although they may live there, they don't actually own anything. So it looks like they are burning their property, but they don't own that building, that store. The system of segregation and social repression is conveniently invisible, and as such, difficult to understand.*

[Participant 9] *If you're burning down the block you live on, or if you're shutting down the school that you go to, are you saying, "This is not my block, this is not my school, in fact it offends me, I'm shutting it down"? Or are you saying, "This is my block, check it out, I'm burning it down"?*

[Galloway] Both, in fact.

[Participant 9] *You're saying, "It's nobody's block now, or it's nobody's school now."*

[Galloway] Or, going back to the idea of the dark event, it might be about wanting to touch something that's fucking real, about wanting to be there and have the flames reflected in their eyes. That can have an experiential truth to it.

[Participant 6] *Maybe it's different in France, but in the U.S. I still feel like the absolute is the enemy. I don't often hear people talk about universality or claim any connection to it. And I feel like this is some kind proof that people who are talking about the absolute or universality are—*

[Galloway] Out of touch or something? Agreed. I'm on your side. Slavoj Žižek is talking about the universal these days. Even Susan Buck-Morss is returning to Hegel and the universal. Maybe I'm too paranoid. But I wonder, why does Homi Bhabha refrain from retaliating against Hardt and Negri's critique of identity politics? Why have we not heard any of the powerful anti-essentialist, anti-universal, pro-contingency, pro-heterogeneity arguments so powerful in the 80s and 90s? Why aren't those arguments being trotted out now? In a lecture just a few days ago, Badiou announced outright his opposition to identity politics, and

post-modernity, and the notion that there are no universal truths, that there is no absolute. Coming from the mouth of Badiou, I'm not so worried because he has a compelling political theory; but nevertheless, Badiou affirms universal truth.

[Participant 10] *Outside of any intellectual arguments, does this stem from frustration around the failure to see results?*

[Galloway] Frustration for whom?

[Participant 10] *Those intellectuals returning to universalism.*

[Galloway] Perhaps, or it could be the opposite, that they did in fact see results, and to their chagrin, the mode of production adopted the strategies of identity politics. In *Empire*, for instance, Hardt and Negri argue that the mode of production woke up, it diversified, it began to privilege heterogeneity, difference, multiple subject positions. And now we're in a situation where the powers that be are, as they say in *Empire*, ventriloquizing what Gayatri Spivak wrote about twenty years ago.

[Participant 5] *Judith Butler's partner Wendy Brown wrote a book called States of Injury about the failure of identity politics. And it's written—from what I remember—from a position that was formerly sympathetic.*

[Participant 11] *If identity is no longer static but a liminal state, are we perhaps looking to a faithfulness that the idea of pure presentation exists? I come from a religious studies background looking at cultural performers, people who are trying to express this faithfulness to liminality, to pure performance, whether it exists or not. We're just so tired of trying to prove it exists. I don't care, I just want to commit in my head to it and enact a cultural performance of it. And for whatever that's worth, that's fucking awesome. And I interpret this project, myself included, as the politicization of non-being—like the one we might find in Buddhism—and I'd be interested in what you think.*

[Galloway] There's definitely a current trend toward anti-anthropocentrism, a tendency toward getting rid of the human. It's in the work

of Michel Foucault, for instance, with his anti-anthropocentric vision of history and the archive and neutral discourse. It's in Deleuze, with the idea of a swarm that has no head. It's also in the concept of the whatever, which gets rid of the self. And there's a version of it in François Laruelle too.

I'll just say one thing, as a fun little rejoinder. Tiqqun evokes the zen image that you were describing, but does so in order to preserve the other side of the political argument. The idea of the absolute form of sovereignty lies not in the king, or any physical sovereign. The absolute sovereign is instead so far removed, so entirely at the perimeter, that even without order or dictate, the ghost of the sovereign remains pervasive. Perfect sovereignty lies in the sovereign that is absolutely removed. And Tiqqun uses the figure of the prince to describe this sovereign with an entirely absent center. Perhaps this would be the mirror image of what you've described. I don't know; maybe non-being is not something to aspire to? But it's certainly been a widespread trend over the last couple of decades.

[Participant 8] *What is the conventional idea of the absolute? You mentioned that it's treated differently now, but how was it defined previously?*

[Galloway] The absolute has been treated in many different ways in philosophy. In some authors, it's associated with God; in others, it's infinity—infinity as either a mathematical concept or a philosophical concept. It even has metaphysical strains, like in Plato, who describes essence or form as a kind of absolute, the transcendental core of something that persists and thereby may potentially have absolute existence.

[Participant 8] *But in terms of political philosophy or theory...?*

[Galloway] Since [Karl] Marx, we've seen a strong political position toward resisting the absolute. The political position is not about infinity, but finitude; it's not about essence, but an actual existence; it's not about an abstract structure, but history and how things are actually taking place in the world; and it's not about necessity, like logical necessity or metaphysical necessity, but contingency. This traditional positioning of the political in opposition to the absolute will fuel my reading of speculative

realism tomorrow. Okay—spoiler alert! But essentially a political project based on the absolute is, for me, a contradiction in terms. And to the extent that Meillassoux claims that he wants to approach the absolute, he is in fact abdicating a political consciousness—and that to me is a problem. I don't know if it's a problem for him; he hasn't published enough for us to know.

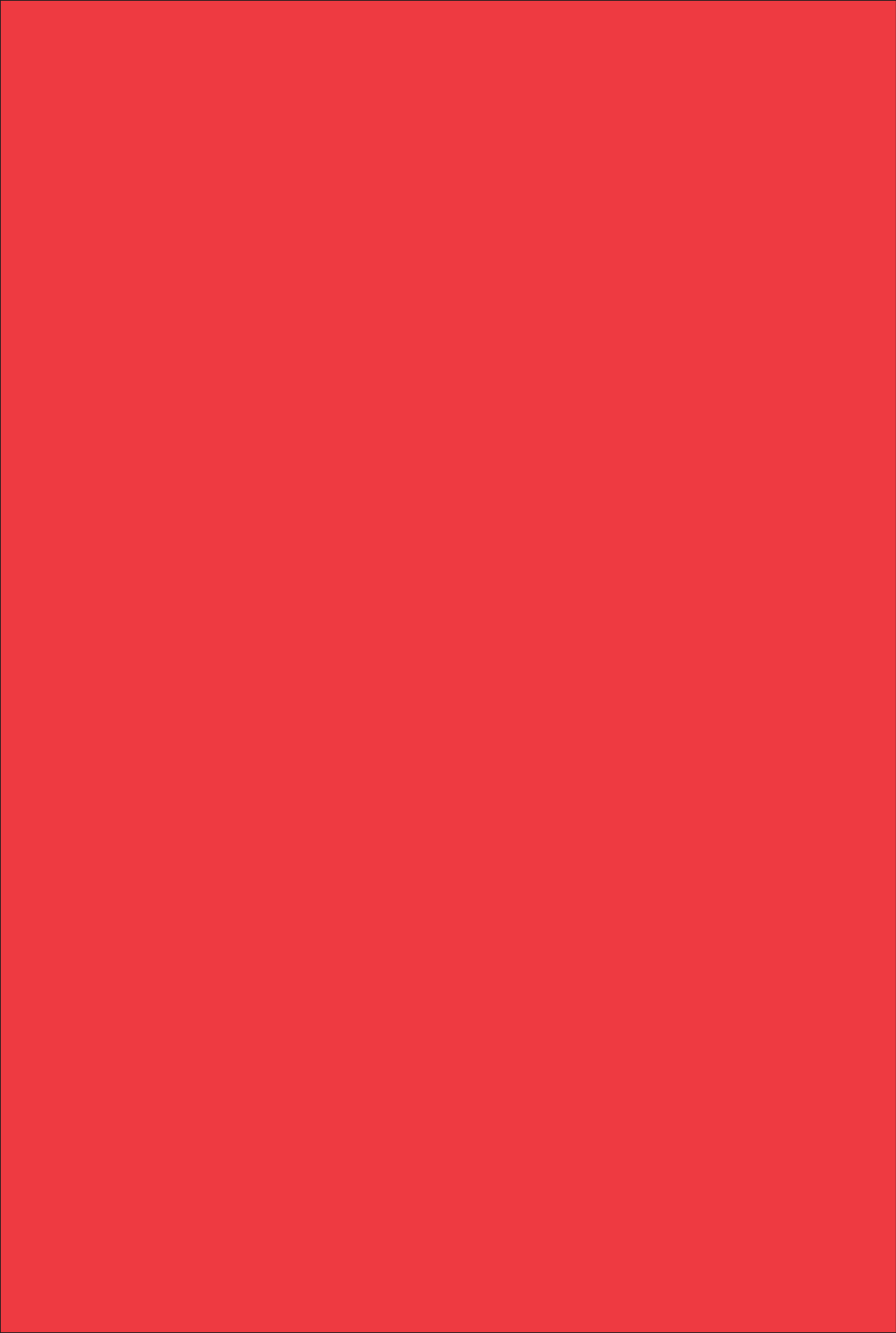
Okay, well I think this has been the most interesting and lively discussion so far. Let's stop here. I know some of you have been to every session, but there's a lot of new faces here too. Thanks, everybody!

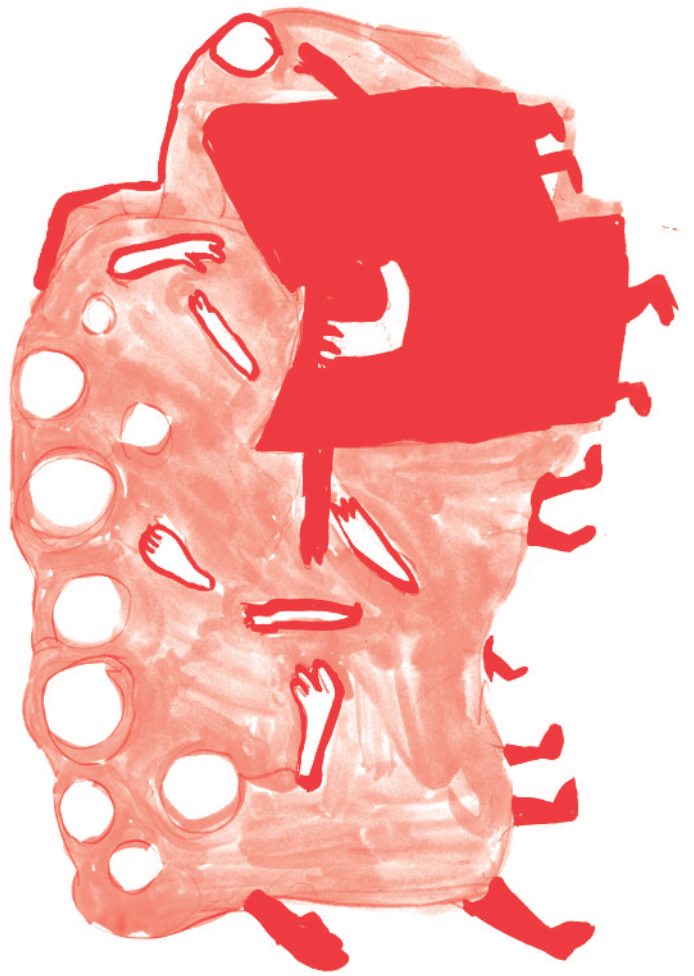


DEMANDS

DEMANDS

WE HAVE NO







An Algebraic Study  
by Jackson Moore

*Protests are driven by demands.*

*Institutions are driven by regulation.*

*Riot is driven by repetition.*

Riot manifests desire, not as an ideal, but as the persistence of the mark in time. The repetition of the mark as such identifies desire with the act itself—the moment of execution. Unlike flight, riot doesn't alight upon this and that, perpetually answering itself and moving along. Unlike protest, riot doesn't await satisfaction. In riot, the persistence itself of repetition is axiomatic.

*Flight is driven by being-there.*

Flight is the lapse between demands. The fugitive can use demand, repetition, and regulation, but fundamentally occupies the gap between them. He hesitates on leaping between other consistencies, deliberately failing them through untimeliness. There is no technique of flight, only the unintuitive operations of being early or late: haste, postponement, and the whole subtle menagerie of temporal strategies which are poorly served by these terms.

*Protests confront institutions.*

For the protester, demand is adopted; whereas for the institution, it is embedded in a locus of regulation. The distinction between protest and institution could be defined as the transition between the agency of demand and the agency of regulation, or even the transition from fluency to literacy. In protest the sense of a demand is borrowed from the institution that one is alienated from. The protester doesn't need to



understand the structure of this institution to replicate the demand. He hides his lack of mastery behind a memory which is repeated.

*Institutions confront riot.*

Whereas the riot complements protest and supplements flight, it is alienated from an institution. In an institution, demands proliferate into a locus of regulation, alienating repetition.

*Riot confronts being-there.*

When the riot relinquishes specific demands, it also relinquishes the person. The person who assumes the function of the riot experiences himself as other. Riot relies on the other to articulate unsatisfied demands, and can be found in latent form as the host or substrate for protest or flight. Riot defers control so as to discover demand in another.

*The fugitive confronts demand.*

Demand is the fabric of both protests, which repeat demands, and flight, which declines to repeat any particular demand. But the fugitive takes demand beyond given forms—this is not an easy job. The fugitive assumes the function of lapse, innovating demand.

*In protest, repetition is a side-effect.*

What can the protester do after he articulates his demand but repeat it? If he wishes to supercede this repetition, he has two alternatives: institution or flight. (Or he can mount the pure repetition of a riot: the intersection of means and ends.)

*In an institution, being-there is a side-effect.*

The concern of institution is not the truth of the person. The fugitive is merely the unintended consequence. Institutional formalism produces a structure which can't be thought. The truth suppressed in institution is the sense of demand. The opacity of regulation functions as a kind of

sieve, revealing the inalienable properties of flight. The fugitive, once liberated from the dynamic relationship with the riot, becomes deeply compatible with institution, no matter how much one would like to disavow one another. While fugitive discovers new regulation, the institution invents new fugitives.

*In riot, demand is a side-effect.*

The repeated demand of protest is reduced to an absolutely simple demand: a demand whose beginning is its end. Riot makes everything demand. Just put repetition under something, and it starts to exhibit a demand. Riot doesn't provide a demand; it hands you a pair of glasses, and when you put the glasses on, everything demands.

*In flight, regulation is a side-effect.*

In flight, regulation is derivative. The person knows what he is doing after he has done it. Flight is a form of post-intentionality; regulation is the side-effect of an abandonment to contingency. It is in this form that it acquires a linguistic consistency, as it has to satisfy the constraints of performance and cognition.

*In protest, demand stands in for being-there, which nonetheless returns.*

This tyranny of demand over lapse is what flight precludes by using being-there to master repetition.

*In institution, regulation stands in for demand, which nonetheless returns.*

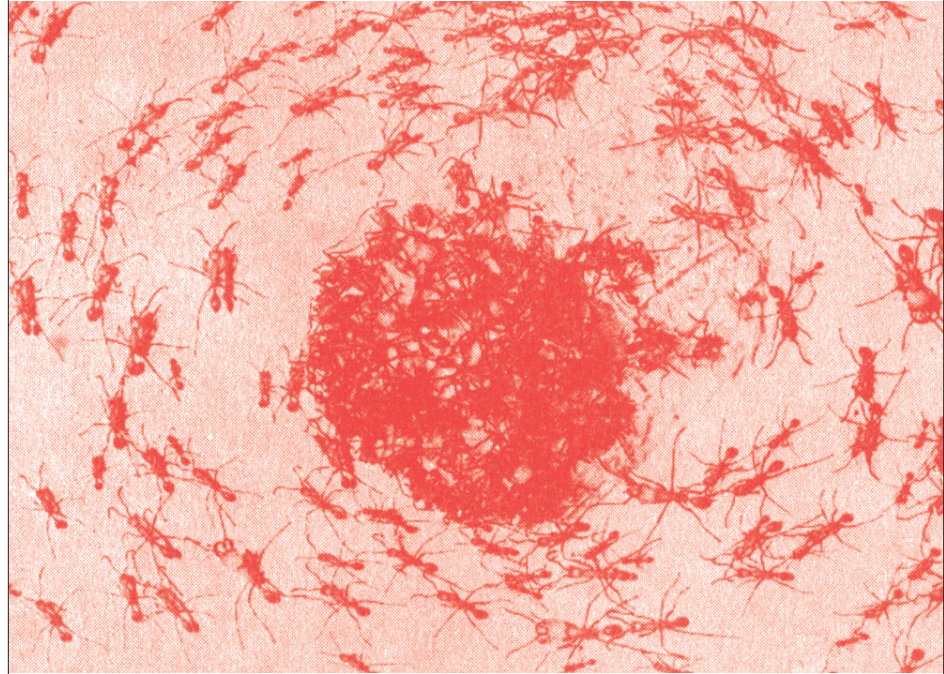
In protest, demands stand for the people repeating them; in an institution, they stand for themselves. Institution is organized demand. The myth of institution is the notion that regulation is equal to demand. This tyranny of regulation over demand is what protest precludes by using demand to master being-there.

*In a riot, repetition stands in for regulation,  
which nonetheless returns.*

The riot is more than pure repetition—it is the suppression of regulation by repetition. Institutional titivations slip in nevertheless. Regulation resurfaces by itself, halfway, as incipient regulation. Regulation is not followed up on or elaborated by the riot, but is taken up again in flight, providing both respite and fodder for the fugitive. It is in a sense a higher order of pure repetition: repetition of antecedents without consequents. This tyranny of repetition over regulation is what an institution precludes by using regulation to master demand.

*In flight, lapse stands in for repetition,  
which nonetheless returns.*

The fugitive is never equal to himself. Demand is relinquished. Repetition is then inadvertent. It emerges in the fugitive's inertia. We see here the consequence of haste as a strategy—any true abandonment to the gap of flight finds such particular and inadvertent elements at its core. This tyranny of lapse over repetition is what riot precludes by using repetition to master regulation.



French Theory Today:  
An Introduction to Possible Futures  
a pamphlet series by Alexander R. Galloway  
and the Public School New York

- 1 | Catherine Malabou, or The Commerce in Being
- 2 | Bernard Stiegler, or Our Thoughts Are With Control
- 3 | Mehdi Belhaj Kacem, or Unworkability
- 4 | Quentin Meillassoux, or The Great Outdoors
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# French Theory Today

An Introduction to Possible Futures

A pamphlet series documenting the weeklong seminar by Alexander R. Galloway at the Public School New York in 2010.

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by Alexander R. Galloway

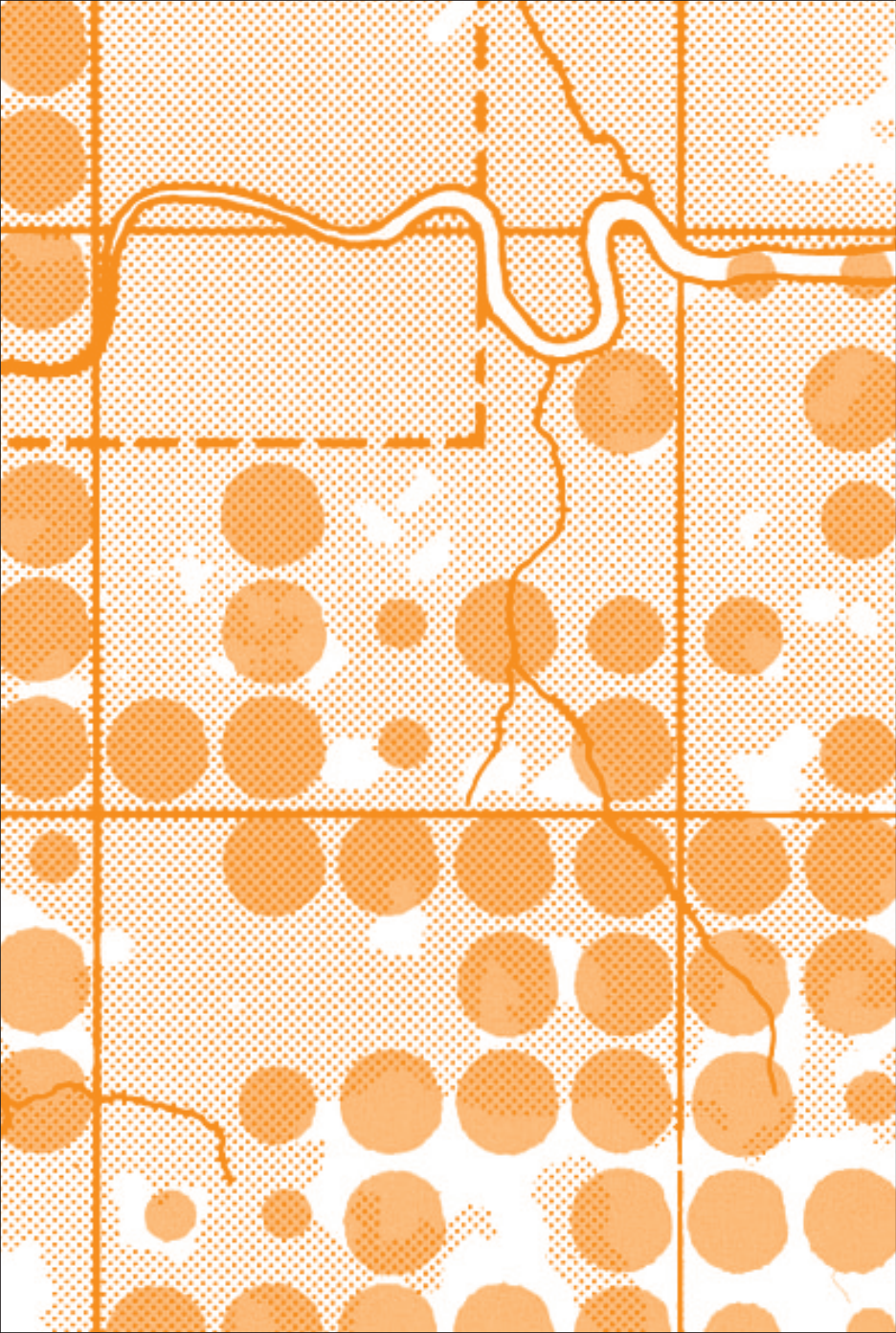
17 Question and Answer

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by Stephen Squibb

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This pamphlet documents the class on the work of Quentin Meillassoux that took place on October 28, 2010. The reading assignment was: Quentin Meillassoux, "Ancestrality," *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans., Ray Brassier (Continuum, 2008), pp. 1-27.





Quentin Meillassoux, or The Great Outdoors  
by Alexander R. Galloway

Quentin Meillassoux, now forty-three years old, emerged on the philosophical scene in 2006 in dramatic fashion with the book *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, published in Alain Badiou's book series and containing a fawning preface by Badiou himself. The book was quickly translated into English by Ray Brassier and published in 2008 by Continuum. Son of the well-known anthropologist Claude Meillassoux, Quentin Meillassoux has already developed a reputation for powerful and precise interventions into grand-philosophical debates, despite only having published one book and a handful of articles. His 1997 dissertation, *Divine Inexistence: An Essay on Virtual God* [*L'inexistence divine. Essai sur le dieu virtuel*], is still forthcoming, although some friends of his such as Graham Harman have apparently already read the manuscript.<sup>1</sup> Rumors are that he has four or five manuscripts hidden away that he's still refining. Harman reports that there is a book on "Mallarmé and the dice-throw" forthcoming in Badiou's book series.

Meillassoux is closely associated with the new philosophical movement known as speculative realism. Today, I'd like to give a gloss of the book *After Finitude*, in the hopes of illuminating Meillassoux's powerful text and its relationship to realism, and then offer some comments of my own.

So first: speculative realism. The name "speculative realism" derives from an April 2007 conference at Goldsmiths College between Graham Harman, Iain Hamilton Grant, Ray Brassier, and Quentin Meillassoux, as well as a special issue of the journal *Collapse* that was devoted to the theme. As a philosophical movement, speculative realism is quite young. Thus far it has been difficult to determine a precise definition of the term, and the figures involved, in fact, deviate widely in their projects and the kinds of philosophical positions they espouse. In addition, a number of splinter movements and related currents exist, including a project spearheaded mostly by Harman known as object-

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1 Editor's note: Graham Harman's recently published *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making* (2011), contains several translated excerpts from *Divine Inexistence*.

oriented philosophy. While others have a broader interest in realism in general (the work of Manuel De Landa for example).

Speculative realism, first of all, is a *realism*. For these authors, realism means quite simply that an external world exists independent of ourselves and our languages, thoughts, and beliefs. While there have been many realisms in recent memory, Meillassoux's use of the term correlationism has put a fine point on the debate and the stakes involved. Correlationists claim that knowledge of the world is always the result of a *correlation* between subject and object. "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," he writes.<sup>2</sup> Under the system of correlationism, subjectivity and objectivity are forever bound together. One might naturally put a figure like Immanuel Kant in this camp, with his highly mediated model of subject and object. Phenomenology is also a key entry in the history of correlationism, as well as much of the French philosophical movements of the 1960s and 1970s, obsessed as they were with the inability of humans to move beyond the prison-house of language. Postmodernism is considered to be a high point in this regard, particularly the notion, often attributed rightly or wrongly to postmodern thinkers, that we are all at the mercy of ideology and spectacle behind which there exists no absolute truth or reality at all. Subjectivity is all; the real world doesn't exist.

Meillassoux is *against* the long tradition of correlationism in continental philosophy. He endorses a so-called "Copernican revolution" wherein the anthropocentrism of correlationism is displaced in favor of a system in which reality is at the center, and the human is but one element in the network of the real. He is *for* the notion that there is a real world that can be known. Levi Bryant calls this a "flat ontology," meaning that *it is not* that there is a plane of culture and a plane of the real, but that there is a single plane, the real, *within which* exists human culture as *one* element within a larger network of the real. (This view would therefore be compatible with someone like Deleuze and his flat, singular plane of being.)

~~Realism had essentially gone extinct in the continental tradition.~~

<sup>2</sup> Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans., Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008), 5. Subsequent parenthetical citations refer to this edition.

But things began to change around 2002. In that year Manuel De Landa published *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy*, stating in no uncertain terms, "I am a realist." In the same year, Graham Harman published his book *Tool-Being: Heidegger and the Metaphysics of Objects*, which proposed a realism around what he termed "object-oriented philosophy."

So speculative realism is a realism; but it is also *speculative*. The reference here might be obscure to non-philosophers, but it is an allusion to G.W.F. Hegel and the fact that his project was often called *speculative idealism*. (And of course the notion of speculative philosophy goes further back as well, to Kant who famously forged a distinction between critique and speculation.) Speculative philosophy means philosophy that asks questions about the ultimate nature of being, and in doing so must often make claims for which there is little or no empirical evidence. That's the speculative nature of it. They address questions like: What is the nature of being? Or: Is there an absolute truth? ~~They are speculative, thus, because they can't necessarily be proven in any definitive way.~~

So in contrast to Hegel's speculative idealism—idealism naturally being something that one might *only* be able to speculate about—the notion of a speculative realism gets philosophers grinning, as the real world would seem to be that thing we indeed know things about, and on which we would have no need to speculate. *Needing* to speculate on the real world sounds odd; and indeed some of the speculative conclusions they espouse are unusual. As Harman wrote on his blog: "Our realisms could all be called 'speculative,' in the sense that they are all fairly strange." This is a testament to how powerful correlationism had become by the end of the twentieth century. Speculative realism therefore appears as an insurgent movement, attempting to break through the dominant fog of anti-realism.

That said, Levi Bryant reminds us that this movement, if it is such a thing, is itself internally diverse.

If, as Graham [Harman] argues, there is some unity among the Speculative Realists, this is not to be found among their shared positions but rather in what they are against. That is, the common thread linking the Speculative



Realists is a dissatisfaction with correlationist and anti-realist paradigms of thought. In this respect, it wouldn't be inaccurate to claim that there are a number of 'Speculative Realists' that don't refer to themselves as Speculative Realists. For example, Deleuze, under one reading, could be classified as a Speculative Realist. DeLanda certainly fits the bill, as does Alfred North Whitehead. Harman argues that [Bruno] Latour fits the bill, and I would add [Isabelle] Stengers to this list as well.<sup>3</sup>

Let's move on now to Meillassoux and *After Finitude*. The goal of this explosive little book is to move beyond correlationism and reconcile thought with the absolute. This is what the title "after finitude" means. In Meillassoux's suggestion, we ought to move beyond the *finitude* of man, exacerbated by the correlationist insistence that there are no absolute truths that humans can know about the world. Moving beyond finitude, humans instead approach the infinite.

In the opening chapter titled, "Ancestrality," Meillassoux lays out the basic stakes of the debate. We've already defined correlationism. (~~Correlationism: "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" [5]—which is to say, subjectivity and objectivity are forever bound together.~~) In general, Meillassoux is focusing on a post-Kantian paradigm governing the subject's relationship to the real: "Thought cannot get outside itself in order to compare the world as it is 'in itself' to the world as it is 'for us'....We cannot represent the 'in itself' without it becoming 'for us', or as Hegel amusingly put it, we cannot 'creep up on' the object 'from behind' so as to find out what it is in itself" (3-4). One can not sneak up on the real and peek at it, for in so doing one is still perceiving it, one is still "correlating" one's own knowledge to it.

The opening chapter of the book uses a number of concepts to make the argument, two of which I'd like to shine a spotlight on. The first is what he calls the "ancestral realm," and the second is what he

calls the "arche-fossil" (10). Let's review what these two terms mean. The "ancestral" realm and "ancestral" claims are assertions about the world during a period prior to the human species, therefore prior to a human mind and prior to human knowledge—therefore prior to the basic phenomenological notion that the world is *given* over to us. If there is no "us" yet, then nothing has been given. Such is the power, for Meillassoux, of the idea of the ancestral. The "arche-fossil" (26) refers to the traces that allow us to make the ancestral claims. For example, radiological decay is an "arche-fossil" that allows us to date prehistoric fossils. If you recall, in the book he notes that one cannot simply respond with the dumb rejoinder that all scientific devices and discourse are themselves part of human culture and knowledge, thereby violating the claim that the arche-fossil can tell us about the world prior to humankind. Meillassoux says, no, that is not a viable criticism of his position.

The question that then results is: What can the principle of correlationism say about "ancestral" claims? Meillassoux's answer, of course, is that the correlationist *can't* say anything about the ancestral realm. "*How are we to conceive of the empirical sciences' capacity to yield knowledge of the ancestral realm?*" (26).

I want to call attention to one further thing before advancing. It is the importance of mathematics in this section. I highlight two passages as references for what I mean:

How is mathematical discourse able to describe a world where humanity is absent...? This is the enigma which we must confront: *mathematics' ability to discourse about the great outdoors; to discourse about a past where both humanity and life are absent* (26).

In other words, mathematics is at the center and it is the thing that allows us to tap into the "beyond" of finitude, the infinite, the absolute. But also, earlier, he brings up math in his discussion of primary and secondary qualities:

*All those aspects of the object that can be formulated in mathematical terms can be meaningfully conceived as properties of the object in itself* (3).

<sup>3</sup> Levi Bryant, "Object-Oriented Philosophy: What is it Good For?," *Larval Subjects*, February 5, 2009. <http://larvalsubjects.wordpress.com/2009/02/05/object-oriented-philosophy-what-is-it-good-for/>

Redness is not a property of something that is red. But nevertheless through math one can determine the things that are actually primary qualities (of the thing that is red), which is to say the properties of the object in itself. Keep in mind the importance of mathematics in this argument. We will return to this shortly.

Meillassoux's use of the "ancestral realm" here in the introduction thus allows him to open up a space for a purely real world, a world that has never had a human eye gaze upon it or a human mind think about it. Or in the language of phenomenology: a *Dasein* who is the recipient of a givenness of being.

"To think ancestry is to think a world without thought," he writes, "a world without the givenness of the world" (28). The phrase "givenness of the world" is a reference to phenomenology and the phenomenological tradition (Husserl, Heidegger, etc.). It refers to the way in which the world is given into perception by a thinking being. "Our task, by way of contrast," writes Meillassoux, "consists in trying to understand how thought is able to access the uncorrelated, which is to say, a world capable of subsisting without being given" (28). The holy grail, for Meillassoux, is therefore: *existence without givenness*. Hence he understands the absolute as something "capable of existing whether we exist or not" (28). This is why Meillassoux has to declare war on correlationism.

He is successful in such a war through a number of related points and concepts, typified by two technical terms that we can now define. First is "contingency": "*Contingency* expresses the fact that physical laws remain indifferent as to whether an event occurs or not—they allow an entity to emerge, to subsist, or to perish" (39). He means a contingency vis-a-vis physical laws.

Second is "facticity": "But *facticity*, by way of contrast, pertains to those structural invariants that supposedly govern the world... principle of causality, forms of perception, logical laws, etc. These structures are fixed.... But although these forms are fixed, they constitute a fact, rather than an absolute, since I cannot ground their necessity—their facticity reveals itself with the realization that they can only be described, not founded" (39). So if contingency says that the physical laws remain indifferent to events, facticity says we can only *describe* these kinds of laws, we can never *found* them, meaning we can never think of them as absolute ontological axioms. It's precisely this weird reverse

logic that allows him to speak about things like "the necessity of contingency." He's getting at things from the reverse. Our *inability* to know it, means it's infinite (40). It is, one might say, an infinite inability.

In summary, Meillassoux's view is one in which the logic of the world is both unnecessary at the level of being grounded (and is thus merely a fact, not an absolute truth), and is indifferent as to the necessity of events (and thus requires a contingency of events).

Thus in haughty defiance of philosophers like Gottfried Leibniz and Whitehead, Meillassoux proposes a *principle of unreason*, which he defines as follows: "There is no reason for anything to be or to remain the way it is; everything must, without reason, be able not to be and/or be able to be other than it is" (60). Meillassoux is here flying in the face of a different tradition in philosophy that says, under the heading of the "principle of sufficient reason": for everything that is, there must be a reason.

The outcome for Meillassoux thus is a kind of strong nihilism, evoking a world of chaos and radical contingency. *Nothing happens* in Meillassoux's reality, quite simply because all that *does* happen is, in the end, *nothing*. Nothing happens. "Instead of laughing or smiling at questions like 'Where do we come from?', 'Why do we exist?,' " he writes, "we should ponder instead the remarkable fact that the replies 'From nothing. For nothing' really *are* answers, thereby realizing that these really were questions—and excellent ones at that" (110).

This is what it means to move beyond what he calls the "Kantian catastrophe," Kant being one of his correlationist enemies. It means that we must wake "from our correlationist slumber" and "reconcile thought and absolute" (128), even if this absolute is a nihilistic one.

What to make of Meillassoux and his audacious intervention into contemporary philosophy? In the US, Simon Critchley was one of the first to respond to Meillassoux's book, and the two leading figures working on continental philosophy today in Britain, Alberto Toscano and Peter Hallward, have also written responses to Meillassoux, with Hallward's essay eliciting an interesting follow-up response by Nathan Brown of UC Davis.

Meillassoux is vulnerable to a few weak criticisms, but I will skip over for these for the moment given our time constraints, and

move directly to what I see as a more substantive confrontation with his position.

This confrontation hinges on the question of mathematics and the problem of history. In order to do this, I will need to demonstrate that math has a relationship to history, that *mathematical judgements today are historical*. Instead of analyzing the possibility of making a mathematical judgement (as Kant does), I want to analyze what making such a judgement—and industrializing it, and deploying it, and monetizing it—entails.

One might therefore label this the “control society rebuttal” or the “postfordist rebuttal” to speculative realism in general and Meillassoux in particular: *math cannot and should not be understood ahistorically today*, even if it was correct to do such a thing in the past. This shall serve as a grand dividing line between two schools of thought: Those who consider today that symbolic logic, geometry, linear analysis, set theory, algorithms, information processing, etc., are outside of ontic history, that is, outside the history of instances, appearance, and existence, (~~but not necessarily the history of essences~~); and those who recognize that such mathematization exists today at the very heart of the mode of production, and therefore not only drives history, but in some basic way *is* history itself. It’s not simply that “we must always historicize”; it’s that there’s a particular thing about *today’s* mode of production that obligates us to historicize mathematics.

Why? What is the infrastructure of today’s mode of production? It includes all the classical categories, such as fixed and variable capital. But there is something that makes today’s mode of production distinct from all the others: the prevalence of *software*. The economy today is not only *driven* by software (symbolic machines), in many cases this economy *is* software, in that it consists of the extraction of value based on the encoding and processing of mathematical information. It’s not that software is a kind of motor underpinning the economy, but that, more and more, software is the thing which is directly extracting value. One might say thus that the mode of production today operates via the extraction of value based on the encoding and modeling of mathematical information. Monsanto, Equifax, and Google—they are all “software” companies at some basic level. (Why include Monsanto, you ask? Well their intervention is at the level of genetic code.) As one of the leading industrial giants, Google uses the pure math of graph theory for mon-

etary valorization.

But what is software? Software is math. Software consists of symbolic tokens which are combined using mathematical functions (such as addition, subtraction, true-false logic) and logical control structures (such as “if  $x$  then  $y$ ”).

~~But software is more than just math; software is also executable, meaning that, when combined with a suitable machine, software performs action in the world. As Kittler wrote: Code is the only language that does what it says.~~

What is the experience of real life today in industrial societies? Again, it is not a secret: Our experience today is that of mathematical routine, the Taylorization of behavior according to mathematical efficiency charts, data mining software that extracts value from networks, the monetization of social networks using graph theory (originally a branch of geometry), the introduction of security protocols based on topological analysis of exploits and threats (again, topology is a branch of mathematics).

One cannot wish away the fact that the mode of production today is software, and that software is math. A simple syllogism reveals the conclusion: *The mode of production today is math*. Or if that is too strong, one might say: There is a special relation today between the mode of production and mathematics. For this reason, software is the thorn in the side of contemporary philosophy.

So when Meillassoux suggests that math is outside of history, I am not convinced. Again recall his description of the so-called primary qualities of objects; that is, those properties that belong to a thing outside of our ability to apprehend them. “All those aspects of the object that can be formulated in mathematical terms can be meaningfully conceived as properties of the object in itself” (3). Shouldn’t this use of mathematics be historicized? Isn’t there a historical specificity to “the formulation of aspects of an object in mathematical terms”? The answer is an emphatic yes. One may call this historical specificity industrial modernity in general and post-Fordist (that is *computerized*) modernity in particular.

Yes, perhaps there was a time when math was sufficiently outside human experience that it allowed a window into the absolute, or the realm of primary qualities, as Meillassoux would wish. But today calculation, math, programming, and rationalization are precisely

coterminous with the human experience. (~~This position is in fact itself a soft position. The hard position, the Derridean one, would be to suggest that this aspect, the *logos*, has always lingered in the hearts of man.~~)

Thus, if one is forced to retain the primary/secondary terminology—and it is not clear that one should—under post-Fordism qualities derived from math *would most certainly be socially and subjectively determined*. As such, their status as primary is put into question.

We all can no doubt recall the grand metaphysical assessments of generations past. In the age of clockwork, God is a clockmaker and the universe turns according to the music of the spheres. In the age of the steam engine, man is a dynamo and society a vast machine that may be tamed or exploited. And now, in the age of the algorithm, it is pure math that makes claims about the world and extracts value from it. This reveals the central flaw in Meillassoux, a kind of blindness toward the mode of production.

The point is thus not simply to say, “Gotcha! You forgot the cardinal rule that one must *always historicize*.” The point is what comes *after* the process of historicization. The point is to show that mathematics *today* can no longer exist neutrally as a mere explanatory tool for understanding our existence.

If there are some allies on this side of the debate, one might evoke Heidegger or Husserl (granted, Meillassoux’s antagonists). Recall the point that Heidegger made when he wrote about the “age of the world picture,” or the point that Husserl made when he wrote about the “crisis of European sciences.”

To refresh your memory, here is Husserl on how the life-world is sidelined at the hands of positivistic science:

We must note something of the highest importance that occurred even as early as Galileo: the surreptitious substitution of the mathematically [constructed ideal world] for the only real world, [i.e.] the one that is actually given through perception, that is ever experienced and experienceable—our every-day life-world.<sup>4</sup>

4 Edmund Husserl, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology: An Introduction to Phenomenological Philosophy*, trans., David Carr (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1970), 48-49.

Likewise Heidegger made a similar point when he lamented the advent of the “age of the world picture”:

World picture, when understood essentially, does not mean a picture of the world but the world conceived and grasped as picture. What *is*, in its entirety, is now taken in such a way that it first *is* in being and only *is* in being to the extent that it is set up *by man*, who *represents* and *sets forth*.<sup>5</sup>

In other words, the point is *not* that math cannot discourse about reality. For it is clear that it can. The point is that we live in a period of history in which one cannot be neutral on the question of math’s ability to discourse about reality, precisely because *math itself has become a historical actor*.

I cite again Meillassoux’s enigma: “This is the enigma which we must confront: *mathematics’ ability to discourse about the great outdoors; to discourse about a past where both humanity and life are absent* (26). Yet after cybernetics, after the mathematization of the genome, after Google’s page rank algorithm, after the industrialization of the social graph, any talk of math’s unmediated discourse with reality sounds either disingenuous or in poor taste.

It helps to recall the classic encounter from 1946-1947 between Sartre and Heidegger around the question of “engagement.” (Engagement is a code word here for the question: Should intellectuals engage with the world? Should they be politically committed?)

Sartre made his position clear: Engagement means engagement by and for *beings*. But in his response to Sartre, Heidegger modified the language ever so slightly: Engagement means engagement by and for *the truth of Being*. Subtle, yes, but these are two radically different positions. On the one hand beings (material entities with histories), on the other Being (the onto-theological absolute).

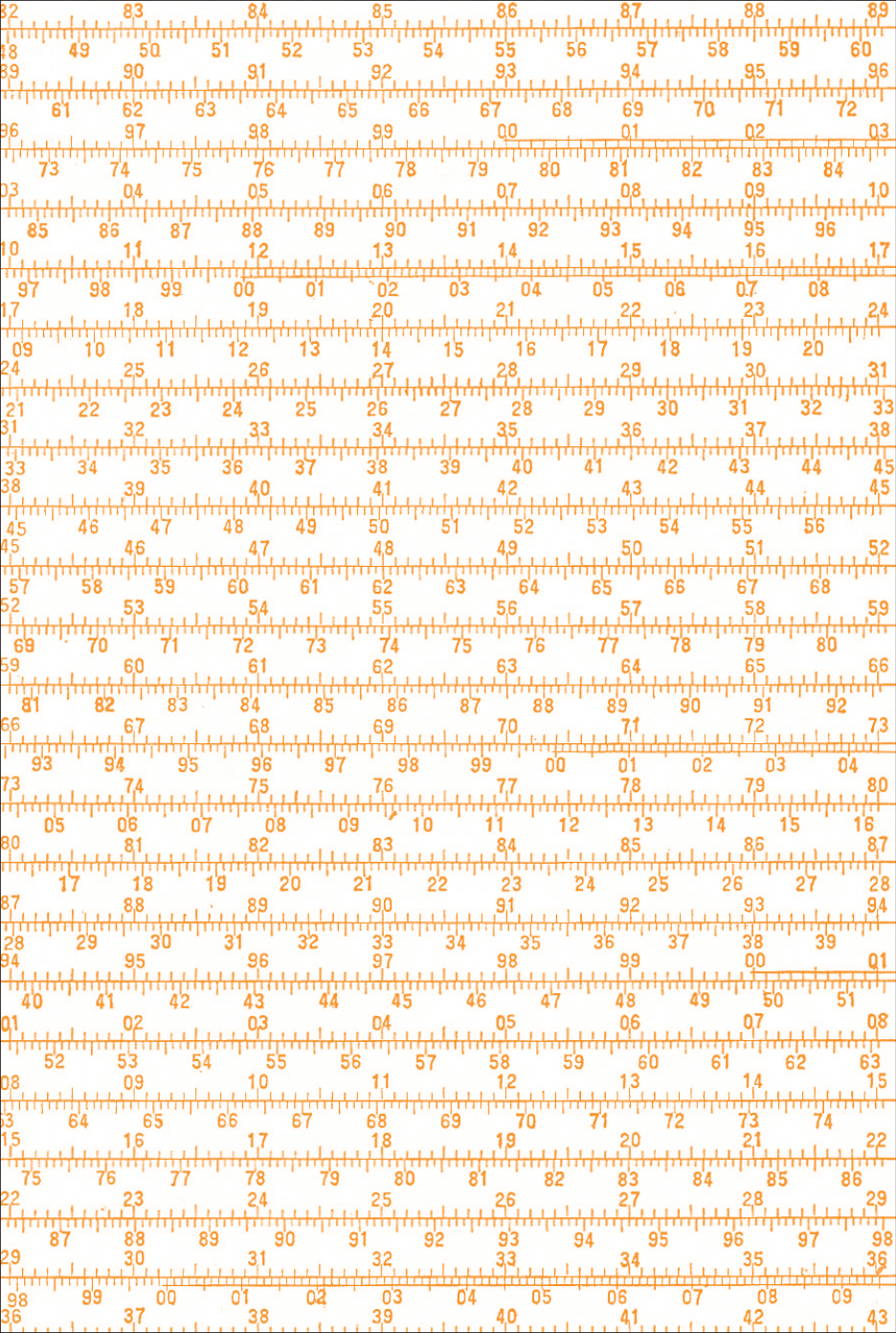
One may hold this up as a kind of primordial litmus test. The litmus test would be the following question: Are you following the

5 Martin Heidegger, “The Age of the World Picture,” *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans., William Lovitt (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), 129-130, emphasis added.

material history of humankind, or are you following the absolute? The answer to the question will indicate how any given author stands in today's debate. Either the author prizes pure ontology in the form of the absolute, the infinite, what we used to call God, or the author prizes the historicity of humankind, saturated with all the details of material life.

In short, the "real" in speculative realism means the absolute. Whereas for me, the "real" means history. So the larger question still remaining to be answered is: Does speculative realism have a politics, and if so, what is it?

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31615	36	39.6	+2.36	+0.006	+56 32 08	+18.7	-0.03	5.47	-1.0	gM4	005	+ 8
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31626	37	00.8	+2.69	0.000	+38 47 22	+18.7	-0.01	4.91	-4.8	O9	0013	-10
31632	37	18.3	+2.71	+0.000	+37 19 54	+18.8	0.00	6.14		gG0		- 7
31634	37	21.5	+2.91	-0.001	+19 25 13	+18.7	-0.01	6.14	1.1	A2s	010	-11
31639	37	35.2	+3.35	-0.008	-30 55 02	+18.6	-0.21	5.98	1.0	gK2	010	+79
31641	37	38.5	+3.82	+0.008	-57 41 01	+18.8	-0.00	5.91		K0		.
31646	37	53.6	+3.32	+0.002	-27 18 18	+18.8	0.00	4.22	-0.2	B8ne	013	+ 3
31650	38	16.0	+2.44	-0.000	+53 35 06	+18.8	-0.01	6.10		gG4		- 6
31652	38	19.0	+2.63	+0.008	+44 00 53	+18.8	+0.01	4.64	0.0	gK2	012	-10
31655	38	23.9	+2.97	+0.018	+14 17 09	+18.9	+0.14	5.81	4.2	dG3	036	-10
31664	38	58.0	+2.99	+0.005	+10 34 11	+18.8	-0.01	3.61	-0.1	B8n	018	+ 7
31670	39	14.0	+2.69	-0.001	+39 57 50	+18.8	-0.00	var	var	B2n	002	-14
31672	39	21.7	+2.68	+0.013	+41 17 12	+18.9	+0.06	6.07	0.8	K0	009	-14
31674	39	24.3	+2.82	-0.001	+29 02 46	+18.8	-0.03	4.85	1.0	A2s	017	+ 9
31677	39	29.1	+2.96	+0.006	+14 15 17	+18.8	-0.02	6.14	0.0	gK0	006	-26
31685	39	41.4	+3.58	+0.013	-47 08 48	+18.8	-0.01	2.24	-2.4	M6	012	+ 2
31701	40	36.4	+3.48	+0.002	-41 40 32	+18.8	-0.09	4.89	0.9	G5	016	+29
31704	40	39.0	+2.73	+0.001	+37 32 26	+18.8	-0.01	6.22	-3.5	B1	0015	-18
31706	40	39.3	+2.81	+0.001	+29 57 33	+18.8	-0.02	3.10	-1.2	gG2	014	+ 4
31708	40	53.9	+3.23	-0.002	-19 05 33	+18.8	-0.02	4.88	-0.3	gK3	009	+22
31712	41	04.6	+6.12	-0.022	-81 38 41	+18.9	+0.00	4.34		F1		+24
31731	41	49.5	+2.71	+0.000	+39 12 11	+18.9	-0.02	6.12	-0.9	gK5	004	-27
31732	41	51.4	+2.68	-0.001	+41 33 23	+18.9	+0.01	5.24	0.4	gG7	011	+13
31744	42	34.4	+3.68	+0.003	-53 45 49	+18.9	+0.02	4.86	0.6	G8	014	+28
31750	42	44.1	+3.54	-0.004	-46 48 38	+18.9	-0.02	5.42		K6		+42
31771	43	56.8	+2.66	+0.013	+44 16 55	+19.0	+0.03	5.84	2.1	dA8n	018	-10
31776	44	07.2	+2.89	+0.004	+23 18 07	+18.9	-0.01	4.14	0.5	gG6	022	- 4
31778	44	11.6	+3.00	+0.016	+11 54 57	+18.5	-0.50	4.31	3.1	dF3+M1	050	- 5
31794	44	52.1	+3.22	-0.008	-19 52 29	+18.8	-0.20	5.43	2.8	gG7	030	+23
31802	45	03.5	+3.18	+0.002	-14 19 14	+19.0	-0.01	5.70	0.9	A0n	011	+15
31813	45	32.7	+3.62	+0.011	-51 34 49	+18.9	-0.06	3.69	1.7	A2n	041	0
31821	45	48.8	+5.60	+0.014	-80 23 19	+19.0	-0.02	5.52		B8		+16
31822	45	52.4	+3.16	+0.002	-10 49 13	+19.0	+0.01	6.15		dF0		- 6
31824	45	53.3	+2.75	-0.005	+37 09 11	+18.9	-0.06	6.00		gG8		-25
31831	46	42.9	+2.49	-0.002	+54 09 01	+19.0	+0.01	6.08	-0.4	B8ne	005	.
31834	46	50.6	+2.26	+0.001	+62 40 28	+19.0	-0.05	6.16		K0		-27
31836	46	56.7	+3.18	-0.001	-13 51 25	+19.0	-0.03	4.21	-0.1	gM0	014	+ 1
31851	47	35.2	+2.90	+0.011	+24 20 14	+19.0	-0.04	3.67	1.1	gG6	031	+14
31854	47	42.1	+2.48	+0.010	+55 38 14	+19.1	+0.04	5.56	0.6	gK0	010	-3



## Question and Answer

[Participant 1] *I have two questions. First, what, if anything, differentiates speculative idealism from speculative realism? If you're saying that there's a particular sort of abstraction in this mathematical model, then how would this math differ from something like spirit? And my second question is, where would you position someone like Liz Grosz, a Deleuzian who is interested in nature and natural forces, but doesn't cast them with what Meillassoux calls correlationism? Where would you situate philosophers who are interested in nature in relation to the speculative realists?*

[Galloway] To address the second part of your question, we can enlarge the circle to include various kinds of realism in the sense of a large tent. And that's why I suggested—taking a cue from Levi Bryant and others—that Deleuze would be in this camp too, because he's interested in throwing out the metaphysical split. A phenomenological split between subject and object is difficult for Deleuze—he's not really on board with that. So yes, maybe we could think about Grosz's work in that context.

As for the first part of your question, I don't know. The problem with the speculative stuff is that it gets really far out there. I think these people would say that they're not speculating about spirit, they're still speculating about objects. It's similar to what the atomists did. They're speculating about real physical things, asking if it's possible for two objects to have a relationship to each other physically. But you're right: Once you get into the domain of speculation, it becomes harder to separate spirit and the absolute.

[Participant 2] *In his new book on Bruno Latour, Prince of Networks, Graham Harman describes how formerly there had to be some bizarre, spiritual force that sucked objects into each other. But with the speculative turn, objects now have a withdrawn capacity to attract one another. In other words, for Harman objects have a weird, spiritual power to lure things in; whereas for Latour there has to be a mediating force.*

[Galloway] If I remember Harman's argument correctly, he gets it from

a theological source. It's a long-standing problem: How can one object cause or influence another object? There's an old idea that God intervenes in every single relationship in the actual world. Harman is modernizing or secularizing that philosophical principal.

[Participant 2] *It's almost a modernization of words like spirit, where the language is neither technical nor religious. But if you go into detail, it seems like these guys are saying that objects literally have the capacity to come hither to us.*

[Galloway] And come hither to themselves.

[Participant 2] *That's what I mean. That's a very spiritual notion in some way.*

[Galloway] Well, that could be spiritual, depending on one's position. The tricky thing is that a lot of the people who we'd put in that camp are, at least on the surface of things, atheist at some level. So they're trying to argue a mundane, terrestrial, secularized, profane version of that older theological notion of God intervening in every single relationship between all objects.

I think Latour's version of how objects interact is maybe more robust; and it also comes before Harman's version, too. Latour is a very powerful and interesting figure, but he's also not very political. Maybe that's not fair to say. But look at the book *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy* [edited by Latour and Peter Weibel] where he calls for a democracy of objects, a democracy of things. And we exist amidst a consumer society, which is, in itself, a network of things. How then, do we adjudicate? Does it require us to be morally superior subjects such that we know the good democracy of objects over the bad democracy of objects? I don't know—that's a little risky. Maybe this goes back to the first question regarding the larger trend away from anthropocentrism, Liz Grosz included. The "democracy of things" material, along with "thing theory" and "object-oriented philosophy," is concerned with kneecapping the human—with reducing the human to the level of being but one object among all other objects. Latour's idea of the *actant*, wherein an object can be an actor in the same way that a person is,

would be part and parcel of that evolution as well. And just to editorialize for a second: I support the move away from anthropocentrism. I think that's an interesting project. But it has to be done in certain ways.

[Participant 3] *Since the centrality of the concept of being in itself brings us close to the panpsychist's threshold of possibility, do you think this idea of the real actually depends upon the impossibility of panpsychism? Because when you first presented being in itself, it's constructed as external to us. But of course, the whole concept has this strange way of personifying things: it's as it is to itself—it subjectivizes the thing. Is it formally necessary for Meillassoux that there not be a "here" there?*

[Galloway] Well, I don't know enough about Meillassoux to answer that. But other people have addressed this problem and solved it in different ways—I don't know if they would call it a panpsychism. Look at Whitehead, who has a version of the *principle of sufficient reason*, which we could describe as putting thought into the world. So Whitehead says: For every entity, a reason. Basically, he's saying that existence and reason are the same thing. That's panpsychism, is it not? Reason is now a material process. Maybe it wouldn't be so weird if we substituted the word logic for reason. So logic is now embedded in the world. That's less weird. Algorithms do that. The problem arises when Meillassoux gives us the *anti-principle of sufficient reason* by stating his *principle of unreason*, which is really a kind of chaos. And actually, that's a really strange part of the book. I have question marks in the margin of every page. What's this weird, new-age chaos stuff here?

[Participant 4] *I wanted to get a clear sense of his argument about the "world before givenness." To me, in so far as ancestrality comes to me in the same way that the history of humanity does, there is no difference between speaking about ancestrality and speaking about the very moment before the arrival of my own consciousness. Why will he grant us "givenness" throughout human history but not before? Because practically speaking, we're still locked in the same cage. So, for instance: Why are the pyramids any more comprehensible than, say, the dinosaurs?*

[Galloway] I see your question—it's a good one. Could there be a

givenness of one person? You are proposing an existentialist response to Meillassoux: *Anything* outside of me shatters the principle that I can know for sure that there's a generalized givenness. That's really interesting. To the question of why the dinosaurs are different from the pyramids, Meillassoux has to go to the ultimate extreme. He has to posit the advent of sentient human thought in the history of the universe, then continue prior to that point in order to make his argument strong enough.

[Participant 4] *But in saying that, he has already chosen sides. He's already inflicted a chronology.*

[Galloway] Yes, but he thinks that science is a window into history. He doesn't buy the argument that science is socially constructed.

[Participant 4] *But he's still inflicted chronologies. He's saying there was a time before consciousness, but there's no real clarity that Dasein is fixed in time, do you know what I mean?*

[Galloway] Oh, I see what you're saying. So, for instance, what of life on Mars today, since that's also a territory as yet untrammelled by humans?

[Participant 4] *He himself locates Dasein in historical time, and then asks how we can consider a time before.*

[Galloway] Well, you're probably on the other side of the correlationist fence.

[Participant 5] *I sympathize with your critique of speculative realism as apolitical, but I think it might be wrong to treat math as a monolith. I think math might be more like a multiplicity, without ever being reconciled back to a one. And a second thought: Has there ever been a mode of production that could not be reduced to math?*

[Galloway] Thanks, those are really powerful comments. The first one, that we shouldn't think of math in a monolithic way—that's a great point. And I'm not a mathematician and should probably concede that.

As for your question about the mode of production as math: I really want to defend the argument that math has a special relationship to the mode of production today that it never had before. Yes, manual labor in a factory may be subjected to certain mathematical models of efficiency, like Taylorization. But Taylorization is a relatively modern invention, and even if Taylorization has a relationship to mathematics, that doesn't yet mean that math is fully imbricated with valorization. To underscore this point: How does Google make money? Google does not make money by selling ads. Google makes money by turning massive quantities of data into quality—they're literally valorizing information using mathematics. For instance, Barbara Cassin's book *Google-Moi: la deuxième mission de l'Amérique* argues that we've reached a new epoch in the economy, where pure math can create value. This breaks with the traditional labor theory of value from Marx. And I think it's a really different moment in history—it's muscles versus algorithms.

[Participant 5] *To clarify: Earlier you said that math uniquely characterizes our contemporary mode of production. And you weren't talking about math per se, but more so code and probability and the way they are mobilized in post-Fordism. So you're not talking about low level math techniques, like counting, measuring, averaging—those are characteristic of Fordism. What you're talking about is high-level probability manipulation techniques as well as code—a kind of mathematics that couldn't be understood as recent as a few years ago.*

[Galloway] I think that's right.

[Participant 5] *No matter what the relationship between math and society, it will always be understood within a discursive framework. There will always be some concept of what math is to culture at a certain time. It's always shifting. Is that part of your problem with Meillassoux?*

[Galloway] Precisely. We can have a history of mathematical knowledge. Or a history of the relationship between math and industry, which your question brings out. My position is that the relationship between mathematics and the mode of production is intimate today in a way that it has never been before. Google does not make money because there are



workers in factories; it makes money because of clustering algorithms, which is a way to extract value from massive databases.

[Participant 4] *But the people who pay them for that data have workers in factories.*

[Galloway] Right. Don't get me wrong: I'm a labor-theory-of-value Marxist to the end. Where does all that data input come from? It comes from lots and lots of unpaid micro-labor. In other words, all of us who send emails and update our websites and surf and so on. It's still exploitation.

[Participant 4] *To return to math as a monolith, and to make Alain Badiou's argument—because I think Meillassoux is relying on Badiou by making math central—math is a language compared to other languages. Consider the subtractive logic at play when one poses the transcendental question, "What maintains the most consistency, separate from every instance of its appearance?" Math is that. And so, the two points are not necessarily in contention. You can use math as a sort of placeholder for this idea of consistency and it can also be the organizing logic of the contemporary mode of production. In other words, we are speaking about two different kinds of math. I don't think the math that Meillassoux is talking about, as a kind of logical condition of possibility for a certain kind of claim, is quite the same thing as the centrality of software.*

[Galloway] Well, let me rephrase. I'm not trying to say that speculative realism is wrong, but that it might be kind of dangerous in its current form because it doesn't have an articulated political theory. Whereas Badiou, who puts math at the center of his ontology, has the most potent political theory that I've read in long time. So I'm less nervous about his ontological claims.

[Participant 6] *To go back to your example of Google, real money is being made from the buying and selling of futures contracts derived from the value of Google stock. And for that matter, peoples lives and the fates of nations are hinging on the question of how financial movements are valued? Does a philosopher who posits that the world isn't really all*

*abstract, that somewhere there is a reality outside of it—would he have something to say to the predicament of financial speculation?*

[Galloway] That's an interesting idea. Maybe this is just a different version of the problems of speculation.

[Participant 7] *Since we brought up Badiou, I think it's worth noting that he still insists on a separation between politics and philosophy. And while his ontology has political overtones, it's not explicitly political in any way. So in response to your question, "What kind of politics does speculative realism have?" I would ask, Need it have a politics, especially now? I mean, does it need to be fully formed at this early point? To insist that any sort of inquiry at the level of ontology must also have a fully articulated politics doesn't entirely make sense to me, unless you're a Deleuzian, as he conflates the two. In response to your critique then: While software is mathematical, is it math in total? I would argue that the mathematics Meillassoux refers to comes from a Galilean mindset; that is, he uses math to uncover properties of the world that are, or have been. And I think this is different from, say, the mathematics of software algorithms. And they are not necessarily conflicting.*

[Galloway] I think that's a powerful response. And certainly people within this community of speculative realists have essentially said, "It's not that we aren't political people, but rather, we want to separate ontology and theories of being from political theory." Okay—I think that's fine in and of itself. But I'll say more about the larger context, and why it makes me a little nervous.

First, we need to acknowledge that this current round of realism is in fact a direct response to—and a desire to do away with—projects that were themselves extremely political, projects like identity politics. We can even—if you buy this—think of phenomenology as a political project. For instance, Husserl's concern toward the growing industrialization and rationalization of life. And then positing the phenomenological life world as a rejection of scientific positivism in the grandest sense of scientific modernity. It may be romantic, but it's a rejection nonetheless. So, I'm just nervous when explicitly political projects are kicked out, and what's left is a series of scientific claims to the real.

That's why I wanted to read Heidegger and Husserl earlier on. If we were to ask, "What does phenomenology tell us?" Well, it tells us that all philosophy should start, not from the real, but from the life world; it says you should start from someplace other than math or positivistic science. There's a kind of morality in Husserl's position. If we were to start with math or positivistic science, how then does one address the question of ethical or political responsibility?

Or, if phenomenology is not your cup of tea, think about materialism. What does materialism tell us? It tells us that everything should be rooted in material life and history, *not* in abstraction, universality, logic, necessity, essence, pure form, spirit, idea, etc. I see it as similar to the Foucauldian question about power. It's not that power is good, or power is bad—power is dangerous. I think realism is dangerous. And until we can hear a more sophisticated explanation for why it is ethically, politically, or morally advantageous to talk about the pure real, I'm nervous about it.

[Participant 8] *It seems to me that discussing what the world was like before humans is really material and specific. The world is what humans perceive—that, to me, seems absolute. I see absolutism and totalization as on the side of correlationism. Why for him then, is the real the absolute? It makes me suspicious of his project, because I feel like he's not really interested in exploring, say, what life was like before the human, but is more concerned with spirit. I suppose this takes us back to the earlier question about the difference between realism and idealism.*

[Galloway] Well, we might not know yet what his project is. Reputedly he has a number of manuscripts that haven't yet been published. There's a new book coming out—*The Divine Inexistence*.

To answer your question of "Why the absolute?" two things come to mind. The first is to historicize this book in the context of the last couple decades. Badiou and others like Slavoj Žižek have come out and said that they're against postmodernity and the supposed inability to make universal claims to truth. Meillassoux's work can be contextualized here too as a reaction to what some call the relativism of postmodernity. Badiou puts forth a formal theory for truth. Meillassoux isn't speaking in precisely those same terms, but they share the same

instincts.

The other aspect worth mentioning is that—and not to diminish it in any way—Meillassoux has pulled off a philosophical coup. He has rearranged the coordinates of what can be thought. That's impressive. Look at Kant's project. His first critique demonstrates the limits of reason; that reason can only do certain things. Although Meillassoux takes issue with the merits of Kant's claims, in some ways Kant is a model in terms of style. Other than that, I'm not sure why the absolute. Like you, I agree that it doesn't seem to have an immediate relevance.

[Participant 8] *And it also seems to me like that's where the affinity to Deleuze would break down: Deleuze could be on the side of the investigative project, but not that which seeks the absolute.*

[Galloway] Yes, but Deleuze is slippery because he believes in the One.

[Participant 9] *Badiou calls the twentieth century "the century of the real," by which he means that there is a kind of totalitarian or fascist group trying to get at the real. And I think that both he and Žižek are intent on investigating the real because there's a sense that that's where we might find another radical project.*

[Galloway] Books and authors find their audience at specific times. I don't think it's coincidental that *Being and Event* was not translated in 1988 at the time of its initial publication in French. In fact, it was not translated for a long time afterward. So the question is: *why?* Badiou is a little younger, yes; but he's still of the generation of Derrida. I think the answer is that critical theory had to fail first. It failed in a slow train wreck through the 1990s. And after the turn of the millennium, everybody was primed and ready to read a philosopher willing to affirm the ability to talk about truth, which had been off-limits for decades. This is not a conspiracy theory or something. But different books and projects find their audiences at different times. I don't think it's a coincidence that Meillassoux's book was written and then translated almost immediately during an auspicious moment when many are wondering what will come after the failure of critical theory.

[Participant 10] *What would the success of critical theory look like?*

[Galloway] That's easy. Simply look at the way society changed during the last half of the twentieth century. I mean the good things: the critique of essentialist identities, social justice, and so on.

[Participant 1] *Maybe this is unfair, but there's the 1960s and 1970s critique of essentialism, and then there's the more recent reaction to that critique, or evasion of it. To me it seems comprised of a white-boy, anti-identitarianism, like Žižek and Badiou—I mean, that sounds really bad.*

[Galloway] Well, they're on the record about it—and not at all apologetic.

[Participant 12] *And then there's a non-white-boy response to the critique of essentialism, like Liz Grosz or Fred Moten, who aren't really responding to that critique in particular, but doing something else. Their reaction has not been to talk about truth and the absolute—nor has it been to lay the injunction against that—but to carry out what I think are more Deleuzian projects. Not that they're necessarily writing on Deleuze.*

[Galloway] I totally agree with you. But, look—when was Deleuze adopted in the English speaking world? It wasn't until the 1990s, at least in any real way. Of course “theory” is not dead per se, as there are still a number of interesting projects underway. Look at the writings of Leo Bersani, for example. Queer Theory is alive and well and doing really interesting work. But other aspects of cultural studies and identity politics have essentially atrophied and disappeared.

[Participant 1] *But why do these particular philosophers have to proceed by what I think is almost a negative identitarianism? Why do they have to proceed by insulting that form of left politics?*

[Galloway] I think the different parties who are part of this trend would have different answers to that. I don't know all the answers—I can't rattle them off. But the one I can say something about—the same one I referenced the other day—is Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's

argument in *Empire*. They say that identity politics may have achieved tactical goals, but at a certain point the powers-that-be wised up. The goals and techniques of heterogeneity and diversity were essentially imported into the mode of production. Therefore, if you are calling for the end of essentializing binarisms, capitalism is walking right along with you and carrying the flag. That would be Hardt and Negri's response. With Žižek and Badiou it probably has more to do with their interest in Hegel. They don't have a knee-jerk rejection of those philosophical histories. Plus they're ambitious: Badiou wants to talk about truth in an uncomplicated way.

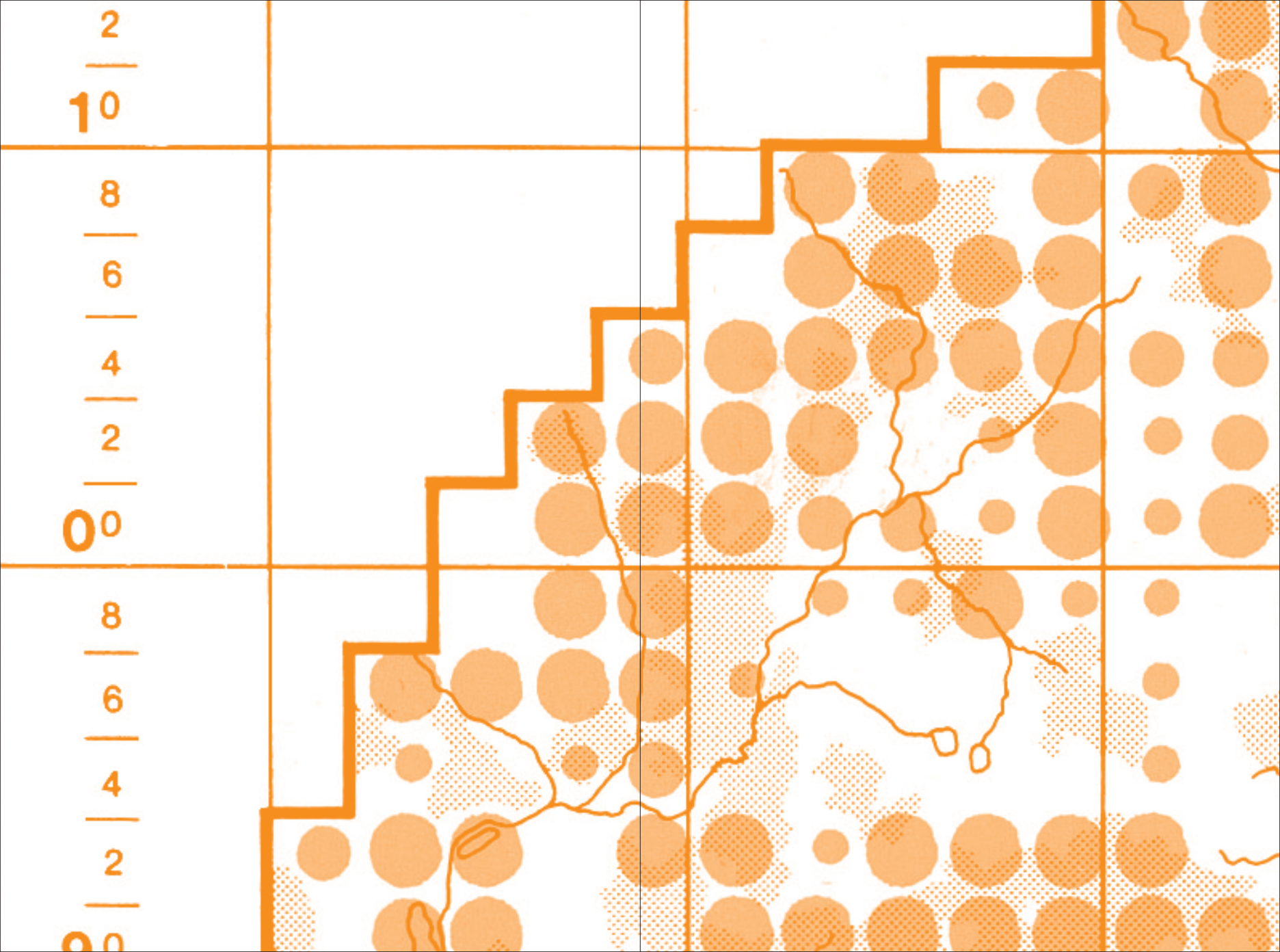
[Participant 3] *I just had some thoughts about the possible political trajectories of Meillassoux's work. One seems to be the negation of value. If ultimately nothing happens as you say, there's a way in which it re-institutes that which merely happens. And this may open the way for some kind of care which is not valuable. There's a kind of Nietzschean experience of thought as that which liberates you from the world. Nothing happens and everything is possible in the world. So I guess the political project is of the future and cannot be stated. It's what's left when you perform these negations on one another, which makes it a kind of political asceticism, a form of apolitics. I'm working through this as I say it. If he's refusing an ethical deliberation on politics as discourse, then it might offer the possibility of a way out, or a space...*

[Galloway] Oh, I see—you're positing the real as a temporary autonomous zone.

[Participant 3] *It's a politics that might operate without making any prescriptions whatsoever.*

[Galloway] Like the idea of the whatever singularity we discussed in earlier sections.

Okay, we should probably wrap up now. Tomorrow, if you would like to experience something exotic, or rather, the hardest thing you've ever read in your life, I invite you to join us for François Laruelle.



Aleatory Critique: On the Materialist Genre  
by Stephen Squibb

Philosophy sets out to think its time by putting the state of procedures conditioning it into a common place. Its operations, whatever they may be, always aim to think ‘together’, to configure within an unique exercise of thought the epochal disposition of the matheme, poem, political invention, and love...in this sense, philosophy’s sole question is indeed the truth. Not that it produces any, but because it offers a mode of access to the unity of a moment of truths, a conceptual site in which the generic procedures of thought are compossible.<sup>1</sup>

—Alain Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy* (1989)

In *Being and Event* (1988), Alain Badiou destroys philosophy in order to save it. This destruction takes the form of a permanent divorce of philosophy from truth, its historical, philological, and even romantic object of desire. Recusing it from any pretensions to the production of truth, Badiou locates philosophy in a position analogous to the judiciary in a constitutional democracy. In its place he offers four conditions—or dynamos—of truth production: Art, Science, Politics, and Love. In each case, truth arrives in the form of an event which, by definition, is both unaccountable by the standards of the status quo and a generic possibility contained within any situation whatsoever. These truth-events are then inscribed into history by actions such as organizing, testifying, proselytizing, which make up the discipline of fidelity. Over time, dominant accountings are reoriented in light of the revelation of the event, while the faithful become subjects—in both the sense of being subject to a king, say, and also the philosophical sense of subjectivity. For Badiou, there are no subjects who are not subjects to (a) truth.

I wish to claim that Meillassoux, whose *After Finitude* was published by Badiou, occludes the essential work of fidelity in the progress of his argument, and thus reinstates philosophy in a position akin to the one in which his mentor found it. This has less to do with the

1 Alain Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, trans., Norman Madarasz (Albany: SUNY Press, 1999), 37.

conclusions of Meillassoux’s argument vis-à-vis contingency, and more to do with his account, or lack thereof, of what we would call scientific fidelity. Meillassoux forecloses the philosophical space for the compossibility of truths by suturing it, once again, to science. I say “once again” for, as Badiou himself puts it, philosophy has labored under such a restrictive condition for much of the past two centuries—a condition he calls, not unjustly, positivism. Lastly, building on Alex Galloway’s provocative reading of Martin Heidegger as a materialist, I wish to make a few steps in the direction of reconceiving the entirety of this Frankensteinian suspension of philosophy by suture as the modern genre of materialism.<sup>2</sup>

“A suspension of philosophy,” Badiou avers, “can result...when philosophy delegates its functions to one or another of its conditions.”<sup>3</sup> This he calls a suture, and writing in France in the late 1980s, he argues that the dominant post-Heideggerian condition of philosophy is a suture with poetry. In the Anglo-Saxon philosophical condition however, he finds a different suture at work, that of positivism, “which expected science to configure on its own the complete system of truths of the time.”<sup>4</sup> What Meillassoux targets as correlationism can be understood as the reactionary variation on Badiou’s poetic suture of philosophy. To combat it, Meillassoux restates a version of the scientific, or positivist, suture, which ultimately amounts to the replacement of one materialism (that of art) for another (that of science).<sup>5</sup> Essential here is the substation of the party discipline of the parliamentarian for the unconditioned, juridical freedom of philosophy; materialism whips<sup>6</sup> philosophy into

2 I use modern here in the historical sense. Prior to the splintering of the disciplines—when all philosophers doubled as mathematicians and scientists—it was possible to speak of materialism without suture, as one possible position among many. As expertise has evolved elsewhere however, the suture, or the constraint of philosophy by reference to an outside standard, has become commonplace. The modern genre of materialism would then include those texts, still philosophical, which nevertheless take philosophy in toto to task for its ignorance or laziness with regard to art, politics or science. This is different from the ancient materialists, who did not have the new disciplines to summon in support of their position.

3 *Ibid.*, 38.

4 *Ibid.*, 62.

5 It is important to point out that though Heidegger is the climax of the poetic suture, the emphasis on the inevitable inconstancy of language and the imperfection of cognition goes back to Kant—hence the “post-Kantian catastrophe.”

6 “Whip” is used in both the organizational bureaucratic sense of “party whip” and the more physical sense of corporal punishment.

submission. In Meillassoux's neo-positivism, it is the ancestral, or the scientific determination of a world prior to thought that serves this purpose. He writes of the scientist confronted with the ancestral: "And in any case, even if her theory is falsified, this can only be by another theory which will also be about ancestral events, and which will also be supposed to be true."<sup>7</sup>

In making this claim, the philosopher has impoverished the essential falsifiability necessary for the progression of theories to be considered scientific. By asserting that any subsequent theory of the ancestral can only be another such theory, he has placed the ancestral beyond the reach of scientific method, admitting no possibility of its ever being demonstrated false. This amounts to turning a research program into a metaphysical one.<sup>8</sup> The violence of this move becomes clear if we rephrase: "And in any case, even if his theory of phrenology is falsified, it can only be by another theory which will also be about how the shape of the head indicates the character of the person, and which will also be supposed to be true."

The way in which Meillassoux's desire to discipline philosophical correlationism forces him to betray the scientific method. If the ancestral could someday be proved false—which is the very condition of its being scientific—it cannot work on philosophy the way he needs it to. By making the ancestral legible for philosophy he makes it illegible as science.

What is missing for Meillassoux is precisely Badiou's conception of fidelity: He would graft the peculiar fidelity of scientific practice onto the whole of philosophy, abridging the process by which an *event* is transformed into a *truth*. Whereas, on the contrary, it is for philosophy to know the history of science is nothing other than a massive reorganization of assumptions—an effect of disciplined fidelity to the event. It is this that Meillassoux places out of bounds in his appeal to the ancestral and the arche-fossil. Consider:

If ancestral statements derived their value solely from the

<sup>7</sup> Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, trans., Ray Brassier (London: Continuum 2008), 12.

<sup>8</sup> See *Criticism and the Growth of Knowledge*, Lakatos, Musgrave ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

current universality of their verification they would be completely devoid of interest for the scientists who take the trouble to validate them. One does not validate a measure just to demonstrate that this measure is valid for all scientists; one validates it in order to determine what is measured. It is because certain radioactive isotopes are capable of informing us about a past event that we try to extract from them a measure of their age: turn this age into something unthinkable and the objectivity of the measure becomes devoid of sense and interest, indicating nothing beyond itself.<sup>9</sup>

To speak of "value" without a qualifier here is suspect. It is undoubtedly possible that the absolute value—whatever that would be—of ancestral statements is not exhausted by their current universality, for scientists, preachers, or my aunt Paula for that matter, but it is certainly the case that their scientific value is so consumed. One may validate a measure to "determine what is measured," but one may also validate a measure because one is being paid to do so, or because one is interested in utilizing that measure to build a bomb to exterminate one's enemies, or because one has some free time on a Sunday afternoon. What makes it scientifically valid however, is that it is valid for *all* scientists. The stubborn refusal of data to interpret itself is what makes it data. Once again, Meillassoux has confused a series of personal assumptions about the beliefs and intentions of scientific professionals with the philosophical significance of science itself.

In other words, it may be that the ancestral's validation in a lab somewhere amounts to a scientific truth event, which, via the faithful discipline of its subjects, reorients the practice of science. But to foreclose philosophy by the same logic reinstates the suture that has philosophy taking place only to the extent that science allows it, when the historical and conceptual reality is the other way around. Only philosophy, being without a truth of its own, can account for the history of science. If Meillassoux's account of the scientific process were accurate, if science were actually revelation, it would not be simply

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

incorrect to believe otherwise than he, it would be impossible.<sup>10</sup> Thus we are left with the denigration of both the scientific method—now hamstrung by the metaphysical inevitability of the ancestral—and the innate freedom of philosophy, which must proceed with this bastard science as its lord and master.

Such are the bitter fruits of the positivist suture in philosophy, a depleted condition which I see as paradigmatic of the entire genre of philosophical materialism. For instance, Badiou has offered Marxist philosophy as the “dual suture” of philosophy with politics and science, of which Stalinism is the clearest expression. Étienne Balibar, working within the same tradition as Badiou, has argued that the opposition between materialism and idealism is in some sense ill-conceived:

It is possible to say that, by identifying the essence of subjectivity with practice, and the reality of practice with the revolutionary activity of the proletariat (which is one with its very existence), Marx transferred the category of subject from idealism to materialism. But it is equally possible to assert that, precisely by so doing, he set up the permanent possibility of representing the proletariat to itself as a ‘subject’ in the idealist sense of the term...one might even go so far as to suggest that this is what makes of Marx and his ‘materialism of practice’ the most accomplished form of the idealist tradition.<sup>11</sup>

This materialism is always, in some sense, a performance within philosophy, whereby philosophy itself is denigrated by the terms of some other discipline. For historical Marxism, scientific pretensions notwithstanding, this other discipline was chiefly politics, as the philosophers were quite literally damned for not being politicians. For Heidegger, it was poetry, which did a better job at summoning the meaning of being than philosophy ever could. For Meillassoux and positivists like him, it is science that must set the table at which philosophy eats. The

<sup>10</sup> Another way of making the same point would be to say that it is precisely the distance between scientific and general consensus that correlationism attempts to account for.

<sup>11</sup> Étienne Balibar, *The Philosophy of Marx*, trans., Chris Turner, (London: Verso, 1995), 26-27.

materialism/idealism split has become a game of philosophical exorcism, whereby the inevitable idealism of philosophy is summoned repeatedly, only to be cast out again and again.

Alberto Toscano compares Meillassoux’s project with that of the Italian Marxist-cum-Berlasconite Lucio Colletti, in an effort to show that the former’s ostensible realism conceals a kind of idealism. He concludes,

In trying to maintain the speculative sovereignty of philosophical reason, albeit advocating a principle of unreason and breaking correlationist self-sufficiency, Meillassoux can be seen to reintroduce idealism at the level of form at the same time as he valiantly seeks to defeat it at the level of content....Logical form undermines materialist content, the struggle against finitude reproduces the ideality of the finite, the intellectualist defense of the Enlightenment conceals the reality of abstractions. The antidote to a post-Kantian catastrophe threatens to be a neo-Hegelian reverie.<sup>12</sup>

I would argue that there is no such thing as materialism *at the level of form*. Materialism, to the extent that it exists, is always the enlisting of *materialist content*—that is, content that is not traditionally understood to be philosophical in the service of an attack on philosophy.

To that end, I do believe Meillassoux to be a materialist, and a rather good one, if by that term we understand a professional philosopher who successfully castigates the whole of his profession for ineffectual fecklessness (“The philosophers have merely interpreted...” and “post-Kantian catastrophe”) by making reference to that which stands outside their domain. Thus the more revealing comparison is not Lucio Colletti but Sebastiano Timpanaro. Timpanaro writes in *On Materialism*,

What are we to understand by materialism? Moreover, how is materialism to escape from the accusation of itself being

<sup>12</sup> Alberto Toscano, “Against Speculation, or, a Critique of the Critique of Critique,” *Infinite Thought*, May 10, 2009. <http://infinitethought.cinestatic.com>

a metaphysic too, and one of the most naïve ones at that? By materialism we understand above all acknowledgement of the priority of nature over ‘mind’...both in the sense of chronological priority (the very long time which supervened before life appeared on earth, and between the origin of life and the origin of man), and in the sense of the conditioning which nature still exercises on man and will continue to exercise at least for the foreseeable future.<sup>13</sup>

And then, later:

To maintain that, since the ‘biological’ is always presented to us as mediated by the ‘social’, the ‘biological’ is nothing and the ‘social’ is everything, would once again be idealist sophistry. If we make it ours, how are we to defend ourselves from those who will in turn maintain that, since all reality (including economic and social reality) is knowable only through language (or through the thinking mind), language (or the thinking mind) is the sole reality, and all the rest is abstraction?<sup>14</sup>

Substitute “ancestral” for “the very long time which supervened before life appeared on earth” in the first quotation, and “correlationist” for “knowable only through language (or through the thinking mind)” in the second, and Timpanaro’s materialism sounds very much like Meillassoux’s.

The contrast then lies in the fact that Timpanaro is writing not as a philosopher (he was a philologist), but explicitly as a political subject—a Marxist in this case. On such functionalist terrain, critiques of this kind are entirely appropriate, necessary even—but they are not materialist in the sense I am attempting to indicate. As a genre, materialism is always performed by a philosopher on the threshold of philosophy, at its edges, as—and here we come full circle—the expression of philosophy’s perennial desire to take place otherwise, to be other than it

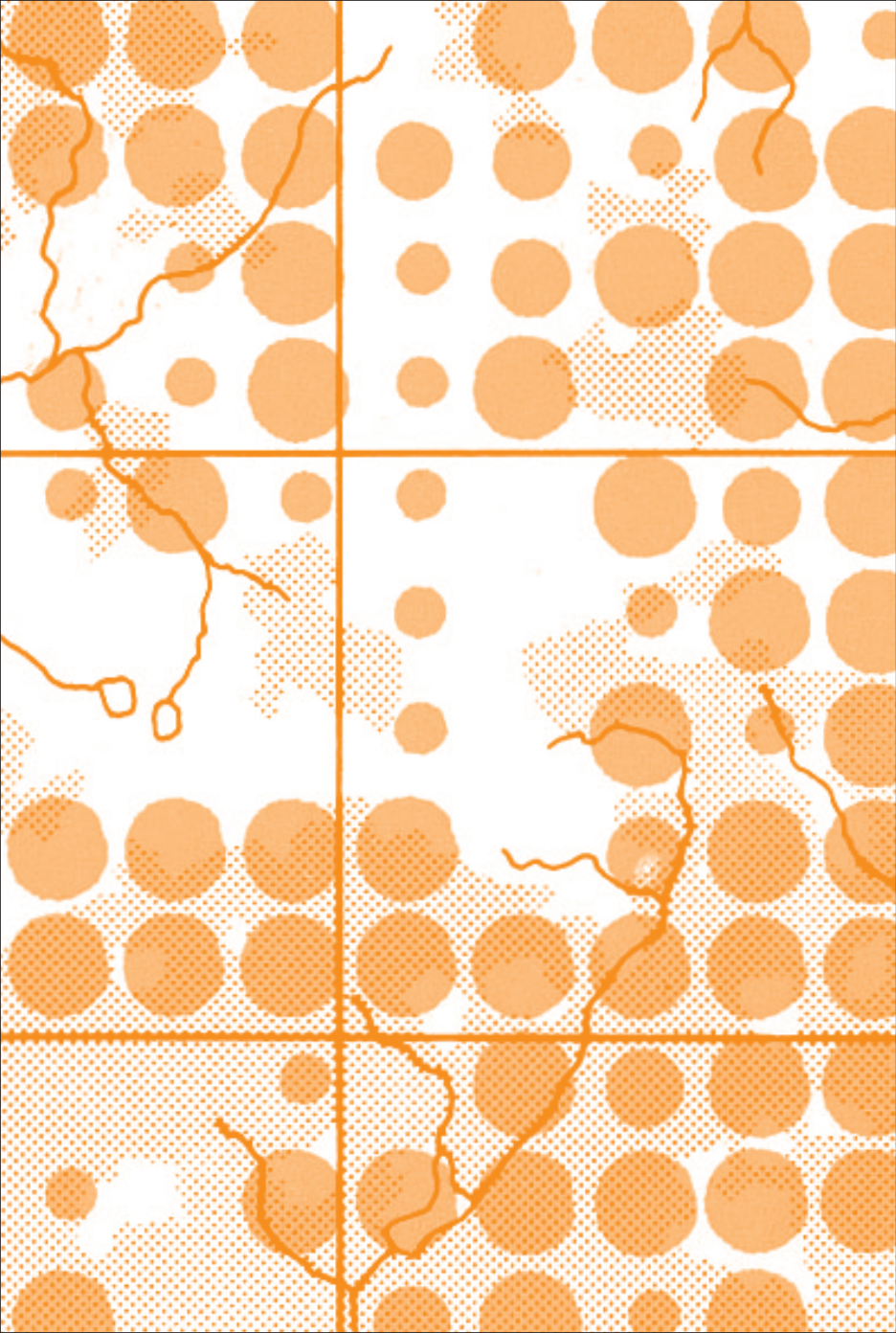
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13 Sebastiano Timpanaro, *On Materialism*, trans., Lawrence Garner (London: New Left Books, 1975), 32.

14 *Ibid.*, 37.

is. By severing philosophy from the production of truth, Badiou sought to save philosophy from its own infidelity precisely by placing fidelity itself out of reach. By publishing Meillassoux’s *After Finitude*, the same Frenchman has shown just how difficult some habits are to break.





French Theory Today:  
An Introduction to Possible Futures  
a pamphlet series by Alexander R. Galloway  
and the Public School New York

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# French Theory Today

An Introduction to Possible Futures

A pamphlet series documenting the weeklong seminar by Alexander R. Galloway at the Public School New York in 2010.

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This pamphlet documents the class on the work of François Laruelle that took place on October 29, 2010. The reading assignment was: François Laruelle, “The Truth According to Hermes: Theorems on the Secret and Communication,” trans., Alexander R. Galloway, *Parrhesia* 9 (2010).



François Laruelle, or The Secret  
by Alexander R. Galloway

Let us begin today with the concept of “plastic reading” described in some of Catherine Malabou’s recent writings, in particular the book *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing* (2004).

Malabou tells a story in this book. It is a story about the end of writing, or rather, the evening, the dusk, the winter of writing. There is an “historical tendency,” she reminds us, proving again her good Hegelianism.<sup>1</sup> By this she means that our particular mode of being is one that is necessarily predicated on history and historical change. Or to use the words of Fredric Jameson, “We cannot not periodize.”<sup>2</sup>

In Malabou’s historical periodization, we have arrived today at the end of writing. For Malabou, writing refers to the graphic, to the sign, to the inscription, to the trace—all those kinds of mediation having to do with fixity. In this she includes everything up through structuralism, and even including “linguistics, genetics, and cybernetics.”<sup>3</sup> Genetics, therefore, is still writing in Malabou’s view; she does not privilege literature, or even, for that matter, writing on paper.

But at some point in the second half of the twentieth century, the fixity of writing began to give away to change, or in her parlance, plasticity. “Today we must acknowledge that the power of the linguistic-graphic scheme is diminishing and that it has entered a twilight for some time already. It now seems that plasticity is slowly but surely establishing itself as the paradigmatic figure of organization in general.”<sup>4</sup>

This is quite a dramatic claim to make. Fixity has given way to flux, she argues in essence. Nothing can ever be written anymore, for we are living today in an era of endless fungibility. Plasticity is writing, but writing changed. There is a new graphical mode today, seen most vividly, suggests Malabou, in the cerebral plasticity of the brain—and here one can see the reasons for why her interest in brain science cannot

1 Catherine Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing: Dialectic, Destruction, Deconstruction*, trans. Carolyn Shread, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 35.

2 Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (New York: Verso, 2002), 29.

3 Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing*, 57.

4 *Ibid.*, 59.

be considered a mere appendage to her larger philosophical project. “It is therefore in the capacity of a new pure historical image that plasticity, as a still uncertain, tremulous star, begins to appear at the dusk of written form.”<sup>5</sup> She calls plasticity “the style of an era.”<sup>6</sup> The era is our era.

This style, this plasticity, also produces its own form of reading. *Plastic reading*, she admits, is a kind of structural approach that aims to document the “structure of philosophy” that remains after a text has been subjected to certain analyses. Thus, Malabou’s structures are not essential in the sense of existing *prior* to the appearance of the systems they describe. They only appear at the end, like the husk that remains.

By “structure of philosophy,” I mean the form of philosophy after its destruction and deconstruction. This means that structure is not a starting point here but rather an outcome. Structure is the order and organization of philosophy once the concepts of order and organization have themselves been deconstructed. In other words, the structure of philosophy is metamorphosized metaphysics.<sup>7</sup>

Structure is the thing that remains. It is not a “truth” or “skeleton” (53), but a trace or fossil. Structure is not a starting point, but an outcome. It is an “after,” a result. Plastic reading is thus the reading that comes *after* deconstruction. (She means this quite literally: it comes after deconstruction in the sense that it comes historically after the decades in which Jacques Derrida was active, but it also comes after deconstruction in the sense that one must first apply the methodology of deconstruction to a text in order to see its resulting plastic characteristics.) The blank experience itself of change noticed afterward: this is the plastic reading.

I will cite a longer section from an essay by Malabou on structuralism cleverly titled “Generation After”:

To read, to comprehend a text can certainly consist, even today, in withdrawing from it a structural kernel. But we know henceforth that this structure is not original. It

5—*Ibid.*, 15.

6—*Ibid.*, 1.

7—*Ibid.*, 51.

emerges from the text as a result, the result of its own deconstruction. The structure, or the structural kernel, arrives then in some sense after that which it structures. The structure would be thus that which remains in a text after its deconstruction. The structure names then that which, in a text, survives its own deconstruction.... This regenerative power of reading is what precisely I label its plasticity.<sup>8</sup>

There is some kind of structure in a text that is immune to deconstruction, for this is the structure that remains. To return to the *Dusk* book, Malabou puts it this way:

The structure refers to the form of the system without its presence, the form of the dialectic without its metaphysical understanding. But this form is not a mere remainder. It relaunches itself beyond destruction and deconstruction. It puts into play or sets off again that of which it is the form.<sup>9</sup>

To Malabou plastic reading is neither traditional nor deconstructive. It is neither reactionary nor destructive. In a sense, it is agnostic to these larger analytical forces. Once the dust clears, and it becomes clear that the text has changed, Malabou simply enters the fray and documents the change. This change is the text in its plasticity. There is an almost *clinical* quality to Malabou’s approach to reading. She does not wish to “intervene” in a text, neither does she wish to read it “straight.” There will be those who critique, and those who do not. Malabou merely seeks to be a witness to this event and reconstruct the metamorphosis taking place beyond it all.

I begin with a return to Malabou because her image of plastic reading is surprisingly similar to the general methodology espoused in the work of François Laruelle. Laruelle’s project is extremely idiosyncratic and notoriously hard to get a handle on. Thus, while they otherwise have

8—Catherine Malabou, “La génération d’après,” *Fresh Théorie* (Paris: Léo Scheer, 2005), 541. My translation.

9—Malabou, *Plasticity at the Dusk of Writing*, 53.

little in common, this description of plastic reading in Malabou might soften our entry into the work of Laruelle. When Malabou evokes, as in the previous quote, “the form of the system without its presence, the form of the dialectic without its metaphysical understanding,” one could easily mistake her for Laruelle.

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari understood the significance of Laruelle’s project before many of the rest of us. “François Laruelle is engaging in one of the most interesting undertakings of contemporary philosophy,” they pointed out admiringly in their 1991 book *What is Philosophy?* “He invokes a One-All that he qualifies as ‘nonphilosophical’ and, oddly, as ‘scientific’, on which the ‘philosophical decision’ takes root. This One-All seems to be close to [Baruch] Spinoza.”<sup>10</sup> ~~And as I already mentioned on Tuesday, the final comment is high praise coming from Deleuze. Elsewhere they would also admit to the necessity of Laruelle’s enterprise: “Philosophy needs a nonphilosophy that comprehends it.”<sup>11</sup>~~

Born in 1937, and former professor at the University of Paris X at Nanterre, François Laruelle has elaborated over many years a project he calls “non-philosophy.” Let us open this investigation into Laruelle and non-philosophy by looking in some detail at his essay “The Truth According to Hermes: Theorems on the Secret and Communication,” first published in French in 1987. Allow me to read from my short introduction to the translation:

While the present essay does not address non-philosophy directly, and thus stands nicely on its own, nevertheless important traces are evident of Laruelle’s general approach. In particular one might reference Laruelle’s interest in radical immanence, evident here in his evocation of a “pure” Hermes, that is, a Hermes unsullied by the sallies and wanderings of hermeneutics. Laruelle’s Hermes is a non-Hermes, one who touches the truth as such, without any threat of deceit in exchange, without any metaphysical depth, and without the fog of semantic transfer. Laruelle’s

10 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Qu’est-ce que la philosophie?* (Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit, 1991), 43n5. My translation.  
11 *Ibid.*, 218.

goal is to cut through the correlationist thinking associated with hermeneutics that forever breaks truth in half as: truth and its communication, or the secret and its manifestation. We must instead, as Laruelle writes here, “let the philosophers in on the secret,” so that they may pursue a rigorous science of truth.<sup>12</sup>

“The unitary or dominant way of thinking is that of a *generalized hermeneutics*” (page 19, thesis 1), writes Laruelle at the opening of the essay. But what is a generalized hermeneutics? It is an “indissoluble correlation,” he claims. (And here you should hear echos of yesterday’s discussion of correlationism in Quentin Meillassoux.) It is “the undecidable coupling of truth and its communication” (page 19, thesis 1). Truth, argues Laruelle, never simply stands on its own. It always exists in a relationship of givenness vis-à-vis a human agent. This relationship of givenness is one in which truth is always given over to being something available to the consumption of man. It matters little if that truth is hidden or revealed. What matters is that it is *always already given over in advance* to the possibility of being hidden or revealed. So just like Meillassoux’s theory of correlationism, Laruelle describes here a scenario in which truth as such is only ever given over to a receptive perceiver.

Thus, if one were to extract a “correlationist principle” from Laruelle, it might be something like what he says in thesis 16: “The real is communicational, the communicational is real” (page 22, thesis 16). This is the classical model which has been given over to us as Hermes, the god of (among other things) transport into and out of foreign places. In this sense, Hermes would be the most emblematic correlationist.

This “correlation” runs deep. It is evident in metaphysical models. It is evident in how we think about interpretation and communication. It structures the basic relationship between, to use the terminology from Heidegger, Being and *Dasein* (or “being-there,” the uniquely human mode of being).

Hermes is the patron saint of such a scenario, a scenario in which

12 See the translator’s note for François Laruelle, “The Truth According to Hermes: Theorems on the Secret and Communication,” trans. Alexander R. Galloway, *Parrhesia* 9 (2010): 18-22. Subsequent parenthetical citations refer to this edition, giving both page number and thesis number.

something far away must be given over to something close at hand. Hermes is the chaperone of travelers in foreign lands; the god of markets and merchants too, for they and their goods travel abroad just like the traveler; he sits at the door hinge, for he is the god of thresholds; he gives his name to the art of literary interpretation, hermeneutics, for he is the god of translating what is obscure into what is known.

But to Laruelle, this is all merely a picture of the “unitary and authoritarian” Hermes. This Hermes must be replaced by a non-philosophical one, a Hermes who does not take the correlationist bait. Thus Laruelle’s Hermes “defines the essence of truth as a secret, but as a secret that in order to exist and to be made known needs none of the light of *logos*, none of the tricks of meaning, the strategies of interpretation, the horizons of the World, or the transcendent forms of appearance. Truth as secret exists autonomously *prior to* the horizontality of appearance. The secret enjoys an absolute precedence over interpretation; it is itself the Uninterpretable...” (page 20, thesis 4). Laruelle’s Hermes is an *exclusively* transcendental one.

Alienation, translation, interpretation, withdrawal, reflection—these many vectors of the human mind are all steadfastly resisted by Laruelle. In our vanity, we consider reason and logic to act in this way because we act in this way. But Laruelle is resolutely against such a narcissistic “we.” His is a strong anti-phenomenology. That is to say, his is the rejection of any scenario in which a world or a thing is revealed to a solicitous subject. If Meillassoux opposes himself to correlationism in the hope of arriving at absolute reality, Laruelle opposes himself to correlationism in the hope of arriving at absolute reason. In any case, both philosophers wish to remove the human perceiver from the equation.

What remains is pure essence, transcendental immanence. “The secret is the strictly unreflected upon form of truth that, given to itself, gives nothing of itself and receives nothing of itself except the modality in which it is given” (page 20, thesis 5). Like data encryption, the secret admits nothing, except for the fact of it being communicated. Such a condition is named the “One” by Laruelle, or alternately the “Indivision,” or the “Without-Division,” or the “Non-interpretable.”

But this One is not infinite; it is not god or the absolute. Entities in their transcendental immanence are still simply entities. Hence

Laruelle labels these entities “finite” rather than infinite. They are finite in their immanent oneness. “The secret is truth when it no longer needs to go out of itself and be for itself, when it is itself by staying in itself” (page 20, thesis 6).

The terminology can be tricky here. Hermes number one, the dominant Hermes, is the Hermes of hermeneutics. From the Greeks up to Derrida, Hermes number one traffics in difference and dialectics. His priests are called hermeneuts (or alternately hermetologists, the ones who practice hermetology). Hermes number two, Laruelle’s version, is contracted to a simpler form. The practice is simply called hermetics, the practitioners, hermeticians. The Laruellean Hermes supercedes the classical Hermes. The shift is slight. Not “hermeneutics” practiced by “hermeneuts,” but “hermetics” practiced by “hermeticians.” Laruelle’s is a Hermes-as-science, not a Hermes-as-art. The old “hermeneuts” are like astronauts or argonauts; these are people who travel, with Hermes at their elbow, to a foreign place. Recall how Laruelle dismissively calls philosophers the mere “mailmen of truth” (page 22, thesis 16). But Laruelle subtracts the individual from the equation, reaching directly through this mediating individual to touch Hermes himself. The secret “never reaches a consciousness, or vanishes when it does” (page 20, thesis 6). In this way, a “hermetics” is the *direct* science of Hermes, not the science of the person traveling with Hermes. “Hermeticians’ [are] *finite or ordinary individuals* and as such subjects (of) the rigorous science of truth” (page 21, thesis 13, emphasis added). Removing the extra fluff of human mediation is part of what it means to do non-philosophy.

One can now catalog the many enemies for Laruelle. Hermeneutics is out of course. And so is phenomenology. Strike dialectics as well.

Listen to the direct assault on Heidegger in the following quotation: “To meditate on the essence of Being, on the forgetting of Being, is a task that has lost its sense of urgency” (page 21, thesis 10). Or here, the assault on [Roland] Barthes, Derrida, and the other poststructuralists: “The essence of the secret knows nothing of the play of veiling and unveiling, of the structure of difference in general” (page 21, thesis 9).

Shunning these philosophical traditions, Laruelle has essentially barred himself from entry into the intellectual currents of the twentieth



century. What else was there that was not dialectics, or phenomenology, or hermeneutics? All are taken off the table: Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Saussure, Husserl, Heidegger, Sartre, Cixous, Derrida, Kristeva, Barthes, Malabou. All that is left is a kind of transcendental immanence. It is natural then, that Laruelle would have found a friend, however remote, in Deleuze:

Laruelle illustrates what it means to do non-philosophy in these eleven and twelve of this essay. Non-philosophy means, essentially, to select an existing philosophical system, hermeneutics say, and to analyze it exclusively for the abstract transcendental logics that exist within it. These logics are what remain once the human, the person who decides to do philosophy, is removed. Thus, even hermeneutics has a non-philosophical core, for it must propose something like an “absolute or finite experience of truth” (page 21, thesis 11) if it ever is able to meditate on the intractable difficulties of getting at such a truth (via interpretation, etc.). Even if it adamantly refuses that such a truth is graspable, *it has proposed it*, if only in silhouette. The non-philosopher, then, enters the scene, removes the human decision to reflect, and rescues the logic of the situation that remains. If “truth” is the scene, and the communication of truth is removed, then what is rescued is the transcendental immanence of a secret truth that has been revealed to no living man.

If a tree falls in the forest when no one is around, does it make a sound? For Laruelle, all trees only ever fall in forests where no one is around, and they always make a sound.

Let me pull back a little bit to explain how this essay on Hermes intersects with some of the larger concepts in Laruelle. Non-philosophy hinges on a rejection of what Laruelle calls the philosophical decision. To engage in the philosophical decision is to endorse the position that anything and everything is a candidate for philosophical reflection. Thus to do philosophy means to reflect on the world, and likewise if one is being philosophical, one is necessarily also being reflective or meta-philosophical.

Non-philosophy means simply *to refuse to engage in such a decision*. In other words, non-philosophy refuses to reflect on things. Instead non-philosophy withdraws from the decision (to reflect on things), and in doing so enters into a space that Laruelle calls theory or science. From this place “alongside” philosophy, non-philosophy is able

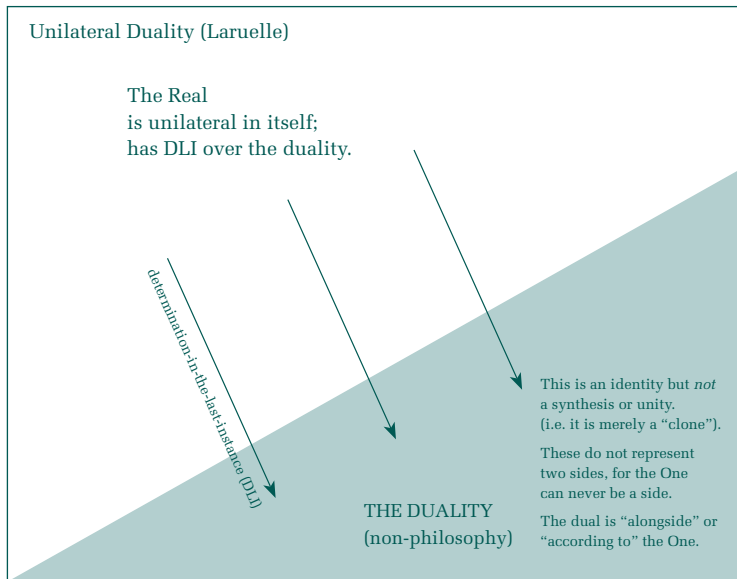
to take philosophy as its raw material, extracting from it various kinds of pure, non-reflected, autonomous, and radically immanent logics. As John Mullarkey describes it, Laruelle is “abstaining from philosophy as such while simultaneously taking it as its own raw material.”<sup>13</sup> The goal of non-philosophy is a rigorous theoretical knowledge *of* philosophy. (Although even the word “of” becomes problematic for Laruelle, for through the structure of language it posits a relationship between to things—something is *of* something else. For this reason Laruelle will often render the word “of” in parentheses.) In this sense non-philosophy does not reflect back on itself. Non-philosophy does *not* reflect on philosophy; Laruelle is adamant on this point. Non-philosophy is non-circular. There is nothing “meta” about it. Rather, according to Laruelle, non-philosophy is scientific and axiomatic.

The philosophical decision also goes by a second name in Laruelle, the *principle of sufficient philosophy*. Similar in form to Gottfried Leibniz’s principle of sufficient reason, which states that everything happening in the world happens for a specific *reason* (Alfred North Whitehead’s slight modification of the principle is elegant in its simplicity, “no actual entity, then no reason”), the principle of sufficient philosophy states that for everything in the world there must be a *philosophy* oriented toward it and bent on explaining and unpacking it. The principle of sufficient philosophy thus implicitly asserts that philosophy is an autonomous field, and that philosophy has the privilege and ability to tackle any subject whatsoever.

The subtext is that Laruelle considers philosophy to be essentially a narcissistic enterprise in that it turns the real world back on itself into the shape of something that can be looked at, reflected upon, absorbed in, and given up to man so man can be solicitous toward it. Laruelle hates things like dialectics, causality, and representation, but it is clearly the *phenomenological scene* that he hates the most, and that he most closely associates with the practice of doing philosophy: “The world is given to us so we can think about it.”

Thus, instead of a notion of ontology as the relationship between Being and existing, which we saw was endorsed by Malabou despite her positing of plasticity as the new super-concept, Laruelle speaks of the

<sup>13</sup> John Mullarkey, *Post-continental Philosophy: An Outline* (London: Continuum, 2006), 133.

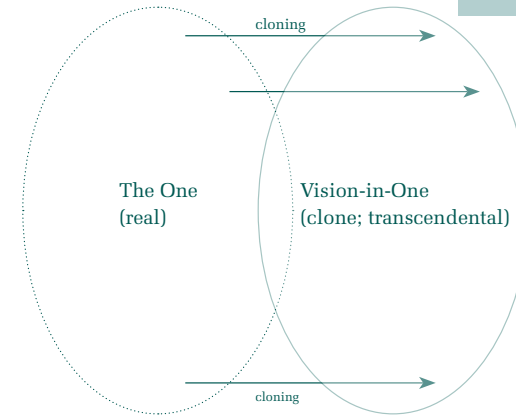


One as the real that is radically autonomous. Malabou’s baseline morphability of Being is anathema to Laruelle, who would cast Malabou off as nothing more than the same philosophical tricks. There is no low-level convertibility between the One and Being for Laruelle. The One is the *nonconvertible*, the *nonmorphable*. The One has no relationship to anything else. He rejects anything having to do with reciprocity, reversibility, or exchange. Normal notions of causality must therefore be scrapped, for they always imply a causality of two directions (as action/reaction, dialectical contradiction, and so on), even if it is a “frustrated” bidirectionality. Instead Laruelle’s theory of causality is a strong *unidirectional* causality, for which he borrows the Marxian label determination-in-the-last-instance (DLI). Determination-in-the-last-instance is Laruelle’s replacement for all the hitherto existing definitions of causality. The only causality proper to the One is a unidirectional and rigorously irreversible causality.

Causality is therefore given a new name in Laruelle. It is called “cloning,” for cloning is a kind of logic that produces a dual entity through an

Cloning (Laruelle)

The relation of cloning is irreversible and governed by determination-in-the-last-instance.



“The non-philosophical clone is in essence or according to its matrix a transcendental instance, which is to say a vision-in-One which is said of this or that material of philosophical type. It is thus the exact content of all talking/thinking—according to—the One” (SoNP, 145).

identical copying, but the clone parent and the clone child never need establish a relationship with each other and hence nothing is produced or synthesized during the act of cloning. The clone is thus a “duality which is an identity but an identity which is not a synthesis.”<sup>14</sup> (Note that “dual” is okay for Laruelle, but he throws out concepts like pair or binarism. Dual is acceptable to Laruelle because it provides an avenue for thinking about two-ness without resorting to relationship.)

This also helps explain why Laruelle’s One is not at all meta-physical in nature. The One is absolutely foreclosed to the clone, yet the clone-as-copy is entirely dependent on the One. Thus the One exerts total determination over the clone (determination-in-the-last-instance), yet is at the same time absolutely ignorant of the clone, and therefore in a non-relation with it. Laruelle calls this a “unilateral duality.” It is unilateral because the One, in its absolute totality, is never in a relationship with anything, and hence operates *unilaterally*. (If the One were merely one “side” pitted against another “side” we would be required to

<sup>14</sup> François Laruelle, “A Summary of Non-Philosophy,” trans., Ray Brassier, *Pli* 8 (1999): 138-148, p. 143.

speak in terms of a bilateral relationship; but this is never the case in Laruelle. The One never takes a side.) Likewise it is also a duality, because the clone is a dual of the One, running “alongside” it or “according to” it. Laruelle’s duality is thus never a two, or a pair, or a binarism, or an opposition. Binarisms only exist between *like* categories, between *equals*; the One is not equal to anything. There can be no parity with it, only the duality of a clone.

\*

Given the flexible utility of Laruelle’s non-philosophical method, he has engaged broadly across the spectrum of philosophical thought, replacing a number of discourses with their non-philosophical counterparts. Hence strewn across Laruelle’s paper trail one discovers a non-Marx, a non-Deleuze, a non-Derrida, and so on.

~~And from here on out the project gets very esoteric very quickly. In closing I will mention just a few highlights:~~

For example, the classical *ekstatic* notion of existence as *ex-ist* (being out of) Laruelle replaces, quite cleverly, with the term *in-One*. The “*ex*” of *exist* becomes “*in*” and the “*is-ness*” becomes *One*: so not “*exist*” but “*in-One*.”

~~He also performs non-philosophical surgery on phenomenology. Phenomenology’s central conceit that Being is given over to the thought-world of man, establishing the fundamental structures of perception, visuality, projection, orientation, absorption, attention, and solicitude, is replaced by what Laruelle calls *vision-in-One*. *Vision-in-One* refers essentially to a non-phenomenological phenomenology. The basic logic of perception, visuality, orientation, and so forth, is abstracted from its humanness and collapsed back into a structure of immanence. Thus it is no longer a vision of the world, or a solicitude toward the other, but a vision within the One, a solicitude within immanence.~~

As the dual of the philosophical Subject, there is likewise a non-philosophical Subject. Laruelle claims that these subjects do not exist (nor do they persist or subsist), they *adsist*, they provide *assistance*. Like our hermeticians they operate for the real, never in relationship with it.

I’ll end with the following summary, provided by John Mullarkey

in his book *Post-continental Philosophy*:

Non-philosophy is not just a theory but a practice. It re-writes or re-describes particular philosophies, but in a non-transcendental form—non-aesthetics, non-Spinozism, non-Deleuzianism, and so on. It takes philosophical concepts and subtracts any transcendence from them in order to see them, not as representations, but as parts of the Real or as alongside the Real.<sup>15</sup>

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15 Mullarkey, *Post-continental Philosophy*, 134.

## Question and Answer

[Participant 1] *My question concerns the human in Laruelle's project. You noted that removing the "human perceiver" is central to the concept of non-philosophy. But are not reflection, contemplation, and interpretation at the very core of what it means to be human? Are these not precisely what the human enjoys? Is there a reading of Laruelle that can be reconciled with this aspect of the human?*

[Galloway] I was thinking about this the other day: What would it be like if everyone was a Laruellean? What if we lived in that world? Perhaps these questions don't immediately pose themselves because he is so far out there? I don't know. I suppose I'm drawn to the weird darkness in his work. He hates phenomenology because he thinks that kind of absorption is always self-absorption—again, a type of narcissism. But I think your question is a really good one. Could we ever really be non-philosophers? Or is non-philosophy always simply a useful exercise that we should trot out from time to time to keep us in check?

[Participant 2] *My question follows up on the one previous, but I'd like to push it a little further. There seems to be a big difference between describing non-philosophy as the absence of the human—as you did toward the beginning of the lecture—versus a kind of procedure, a practice, as you discussed in your closing remarks. That confused me: For Laruelle to speak as a non-philosopher, needn't he be thinking about or reflecting on the secret? And then, that move towards practice, that move towards gamesmanship if you will, seems to me deeply human. How would he respond to this?*

[Galloway] The last thing you said is really interesting. I think Quentin Meillassoux and Laruelle are both obsessed with the virtuosity involved in the act of philosophy, not unlike a one-upmanship. At one point in *After Finitude*, Meillassoux essentially says, "You all must be thinking by now that this is sophistry." To which he replies, "Sophistry has always had an important relationship with philosophy and let's deal with that at some point." So you're right. And I'm not trying to say he's a



sophist, but I agree that there's something uniquely human in the one-upmanship of the mind, in the virtuosity of thought. Bernard Stiegler calls this tendency "Mr. Know-it-all."

To address your first comment: Laruelle has previously responded to a similar line of reasoning, saying, "Since everybody in the world is a philosopher, from time to time I have to speak your language in order to describe and communicate certain ideas. But don't hold it against me. There is a project, and if you allow me to elaborate it, eventually I can speak in my own language." There's a really great interview—or rather, an incompatible dialogue—between Laruelle and Jacques Derrida, part of which has been translated. It's the only time I've ever seen Derrida disoriented.

[Participant 3] *If his method or his practice always uses another philosophical text as raw material, could a world in which—as you mentioned earlier—"everyone is a Laruellean" ever be the case? Because, implicit in the practice of non-philosophy is a seeming necessity for other resources. So is it a reactive model? A dialogic model? In actual practice, how does one perform a non-Spinoza, for instance?*

[Galloway] That's a good question, and I think I know the answer to the second part, but I'm not sure about the first part. To the second part, he would definitely say he is not reacting to or in dialogue with philosophy. He is instead running alongside of philosophy. He is in a relationship of the dual with philosophy.

As for the question about the parasitic nature of non-philosophy, I'm sure he's answered that somewhere, but I'd have to read more. Does anyone else here know what he would say to that? Could non-philosophy only ever stand on its own? I think he would admit that, no, it cannot, just as science needs to do its work somewhere, i.e. in the empirical world.

[Participant 4] *I come from a background in religious studies, and I want to bring up a distinction between western and eastern philosophies that might be helpful here. Whereas eastern traditions, mystic traditions, emphasize exercise or practice as such, western philosophy has a drive toward utility value: it must produce something or become something. I*

*would liken Laruelle's project to a more eastern practice. So I can see Derrida being like, "Are you kidding me? This has to equal or amount to something." For western thinkers, utility is almost inherently part of anything worth doing. If you bring that frame to the work of Laruelle, you are already asking the wrong question—it was never intended to be asked. And maybe in a world where Google is benefitting from our everyday online musings, where everything—technology, digits, processing algorithms—has utility value, the only way to defend or read this as useful is to say that the ultimate political move is to be useless. And so that might be a way to rescue this as a political project that has use value.*

[Galloway] And I think he's also responding to the centrality of the concept of exchange in a lot of French theory of the 60s and early 70s. So, whereas Hermes has a very special relationship to exchange, Laruelle privileges the unilateral—a fascistic causality.

[Participant 5] *I've been trying to understand Laruelle for years, and I'd like to bring up a couple points. First, he's sort of anti-chronological. And if you look at Ray Brassier's writings, he sees Laruelle as Lovecraftian—and by that I mean that there's some sort of inalienable experience, an experience that isn't animated in the human, in the body, but it is still a phenomenon. Also, I'd like to address the use of the word "practice." I'm not sure practice is really the right word since it can be understood as part of a dialectic. Most importantly, philosophy doesn't say what it does, and doesn't do what it says. Last thing: I'm not sure if cloning is causality; it seems more like a syntax for talking about philosophy. He's sort of an ontologist.*

[Galloway] A non-causality perhaps?

[Participant 5] *Exactly.*

[Galloway] If you have any suggestions on how to make the diagram better, let me know.

[Participant 6] *I have two questions. His absolute refusal of reflection*

certainly has to be performative in order to make sense. But is there a politics to that refusal? In so far as it's hard not to think of Karl Marx's Theses on Feuerbach, a sort of radicalized, absolute denial—an absolute refusal of philosophy. But of course, Laruelle's project lacks the corresponding materialist desire to change something. See what I mean? As for my second question: The whole thing feels very psychoanalytic to me, this attempt to define the real, the symbolic, the imaginary—it's almost a desire to inhabit the form of the hysteric. With an absolute incapacity or refusal of reflection, he's sort of building himself into this hysterical space. So I'm wondering, is there any Jacques Lacan in this? The whole thing is a little neurotic, but in a good way.

[Participant 4] *He has a book called Théorie des Étrangers. Science des hommes, démocratie, non-psychoanalyse* [Theory of Strangers: Science of Man, Democracy, Non-Psychoanalysis.] *The first part is about democracy, but the second half is all about psychoanalysis. He talks about jouie rather than jouissance.*

[Participant 6] *Last night you mentioned this in relation to Meillassoux, but I'm wondering whether it might be Laruelle who is undertaking a Kantian critical project for the 21st century?*

[Galloway] I think that's a great suggestion. I suppose I never thought about that question directly, because Laruelle radically refuses all of the obvious philosophical schools that would be options for him. So in 60s and 70s France, phenomenology is a big option; structuralism/post structuralism is a big one; dialectics is a big one—and he gets rid of all of them. Perhaps in a naïve way, I've always kept him as a kind of singular figure. But the influence of Immanuel Kant on Laruelle is a crucial question and worthy of further exploration.

[Participant 7] *You mentioned Catherine Malabou in your introduction. Do you have anything more to say about her ideas in relation to Laruelle's non-philosophy?*

[Galloway] Malabou's idea of plastic reading is vaguely Laruellean in a weird way, so I used it to segue into this evening's topic. But I don't

think there would be a lot of exchange between them because, unlike Laruelle, Malabou is not throwing out the dialectic. She's not even throwing out phenomenology, right? So she's still a correlationist. I don't think they have much to say to each other.

[Participant 8] *I don't know if this is helpful or deceptively convenient, but in trying to understand this diagram, it looks not unlike what the world looks like to our web browsers. There's an absolute something that came for a purpose, and there's a name and address, which is what something really is. But to know the name and address is to evoke a local copy, which ultimately becomes the object of interaction. It also raises issues that are working their way through our ethical system in terms of what has value....*

[Galloway] Yes—that brings out a crucial question, I think. The issue lies in whether that logic is embedded in computers, or whether it's more so a metaphysical logic about sources and instances and origins and manifestations. Or is it more like the logic we get from Laruelle? It could be that some technologies look like the cloning, unidirectional model, and some look more like the reversible metaphysical model. Certainly, in the world of computing, there exists a lot of surfaces and things behind surfaces—so you're exactly right.

I'm avoiding the political question, even though I came out swinging last night....

[Participant 12] *Are there any other new French philosophers you would recommend reading?*

[Galloway] Good question. I meant to address this on the first day, but didn't in the end. My goal with this seminar was not to suggest that these are the five people that should be read and there's nobody else. I think the work of Isabelle Stengers is really interesting. She has a book on Alfred North Whitehead, but it's not material that I know very well. I also thought to include the emerging “neo-situationist” movement: Tiqqun, The Invisible Committee, Claire Fontaine, and some other groups. I left them out for a variety of reasons, mostly because I did an

event last week about Tiqqun. Also, I think it might offend them to be called philosophers! And there were a number of other figures, some of whom are perhaps too obscure. For example Gilles Châtelet has written some weird and very interesting books.

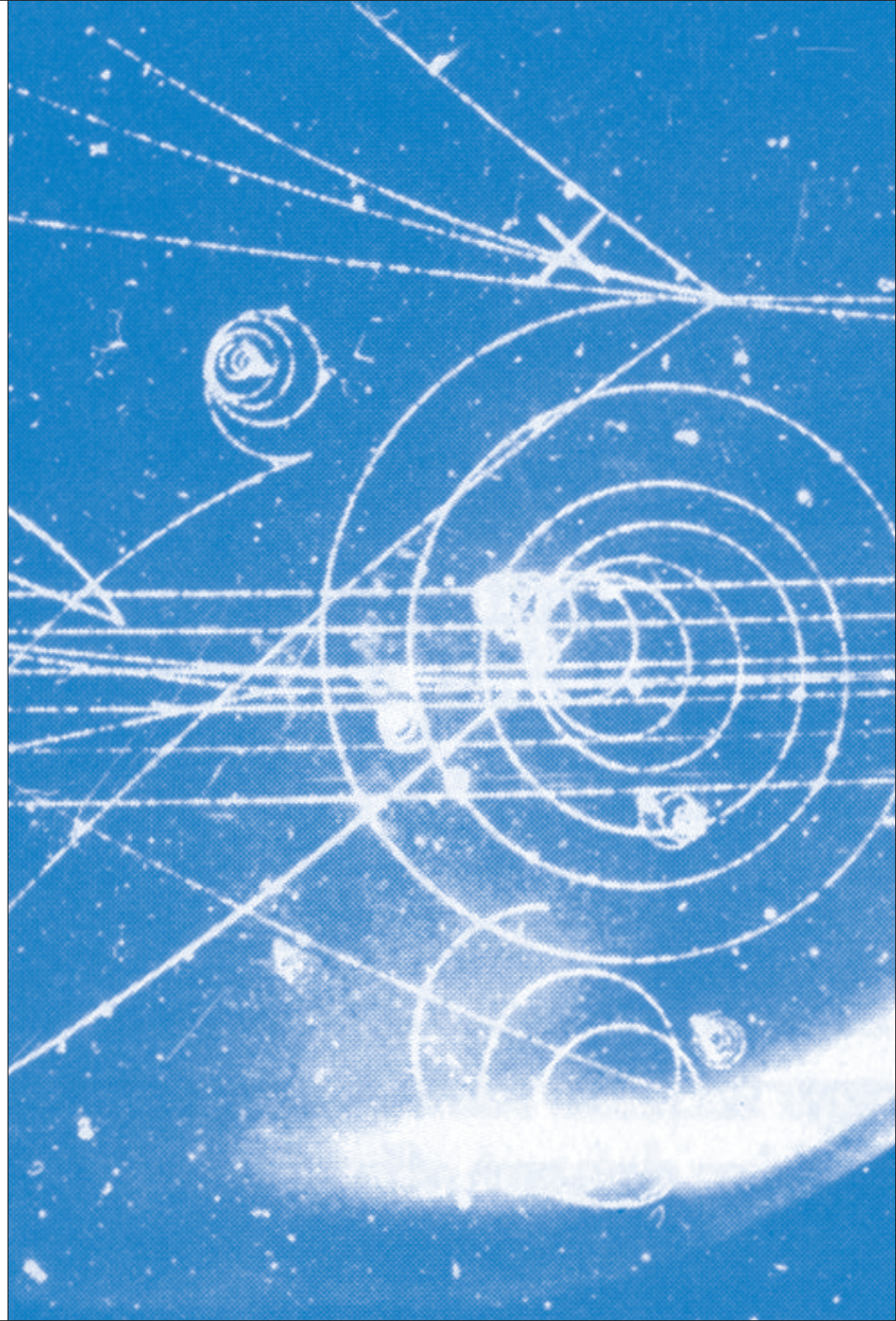
[Participant 5] *Serge Valdinoci—he and Laruelle were sort of partners at first, and they started a journal together called La Décision philosophique [The Philosophical Decision]. But he went off in a different way....His idea is that immanence is internal—so it's a phenomenology—and he considers his work complementary to non-philosophy.*

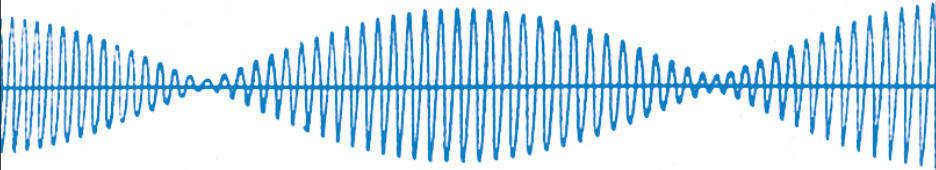
[Galloway] I also thought about exploring the work of Michel Henry, who works on phenomenology and affect. He is no longer alive, but his work is being read more and more. Barbara Cassin, whom I may have mentioned earlier this week. There are a few more influential figures in the younger generation—that of Meillassoux and Belhaj Kacem—but they've not been as prolific. Patrice Maniglier, for instance...Elie During as well. Maybe other people have suggestions—?

[Participant 12] *Has any more of Mehdi Belhaj Kacem's work been translated?*

[Galloway] As far as I know, there are two short essays in the journal *Lacanian Ink*—they're not particularly good. But otherwise, the answer is no. It's too bad because he's extremely prolific in French. He probably has ten full-size books, and three novels, and a bunch of smaller essays and pamphlets. The problem with Belhaj Kacem is that it's hard to select a book that would be the obvious candidate for translation. I predict that someone will put together a selection of translated essays. But I don't know...he's an odd figure, and nobody wants to translate him or publish him over here because nobody knows about him. Unfortunately a lot of his work isn't top shelf—he publishes too much. If he only published the good stuff, it would be different. He needs a really good editor.

Okay, maybe we should call it quits and head over to the bar. Thanks to all of you for making this week fascinating and so successful!





Near the end of his essay “The Truth According to Hermes,” François Laruelle points out the fundamental link between philosophy and media. All philosophy, says Laruelle, subscribes to the “communicational decision,” that everything that exists can be communicated. In this self-inscribed world, all secrets exist only to be communicated, all that is not-said is simply that which is not-yet-said. One senses that, for Laruelle, the communicational decision is even more insidious than the philosophical decision. It’s one thing to claim that everything that exists, exists for a reason. It’s quite another to claim that everything-that-exists-for-a-reason is immediately and transparently communicable, in its reason for existing. If the philosophical decision is a variant on the principle of sufficient reason, then the communicational decision adds on top of it the communicability of meaning.

But this is all speculation—there is no *reason* per se to presume this is the case. Perhaps it is on these grounds that Laruelle criticizes philosophers for simply being “mailmen of the truth,” these academic “civil servants of the Postal and Telecommunication Ministry.” When one presumes the communicational decision on top of the philosophical decision, what results, according to Laruelle, is a compounded and confusing fidelity to the communicability of being. “Meaning, always more meaning! Information, always more information! Such is the mantra of hermeto-logical Difference, which mixes together truth and communication, the real and information.”<sup>1</sup> As Laruelle notes, the

1 François Laruelle, “The Truth According to Hermes,” trans., Alexander Galloway, *Parrhesia* 9 (2010), p. 22.

logical conclusion of this position is the following: “The real is communicational, the communicational is real.”

Communication is inherently ambiguous; it connects at the same time that it separates, unifies at the same time that it differentiates. Arguably, the communicational decision reaches a point of crisis, not in the postmodern architectonics of semiotics, information theory, cybernetics, or language games, but in the premodern context of mysticism. Nearly every account of mystical experience dovetails in some way on a union between the mystical subject and an enigmatic, inaccessible, and mysterious “outside” that is variously called God, Godhead, or the divine.

The dominant paradigm for this is established by Augustine. In an account of one of his mystical experiences, Augustine describes an “Unchangeable Light” that is beyond human vision, beyond anything that can be seen, and ultimately beyond human comprehension. The motifs of light, illumination, and radiation are borrowed in part from Neoplatonic sources, where an inaccessible, transcendent One manifests itself in stages, radiating outwards in concentric circles from a central point. This is the phenomenon of divine manifestation, whose effects are witnessed and experienced, but whose cause remains hidden and occulted. This duplicity—accessible manifestation and inaccessible source—is especially marked in those mystical texts where the divine is almost paradoxically described in terms of darkness, shadows, or the abyss. As Dionysius the Areopagite notes, the divine is in itself absolutely inaccessible, and is therefore an enigmatic “ray of divine darkness.”



This sort of duplicity is addressed by Laruelle in his own non-philosophical vernacular. In his *Principes de la non-philosophie*, Laruelle distinguishes between “la mystique” and “le mystique.” Let us call “la mystique” *mystical* and “le mystique” *mystique*. A subtle and nearly invisible article distinguishes them, but the differences are significant. As Laruelle notes, “the mystical is an experience of identity



between the soul and the transcendent.”<sup>2</sup> But the soul—the divine part existing within the earthly subject—can only experience the transcendent “outside” of itself, and thereby attain a union with the divine, so long as there is a baseline immanence that can serve as the backdrop for the union of the soul with the transcendent. Thus, as Laruelle notes, this identity of transcendence takes place within a certain immanence. The mystical “makes of this immanence a property or an attribute of a relation between the soul and God, more than an essence in and of itself.”<sup>3</sup> Immanence is the mystical launching-pad for transcendence.

By contrast, Laruelle calls *mystique* “a real and actual essence, something already-formed-without-formation, as it were, an absolutely autonomous instance more than an attribute, property, event, or relation.”<sup>4</sup> The stakes of *mystique* are high; *mystique* “absolutely excludes transcendence.”<sup>5</sup> The reduced and residual aspect of the divine that is the soul begins to confuse itself with this absolute immanence. There is no mystical subject that goes out of itself (*ec-stasis*) to meet the divine or the great beyond. There is no religious subject that discovers the divine spark within itself as subject, relating to equally stable objects. “*Mystique* is never a *within* or a *beyond*, a phenomenon of the frontier or the limit...*mystique* is ‘subject’ in the most rigorous sense...that which determines in-the-last-instance the subject that is the force-(of)-thought.”<sup>6</sup> The finite and the infinite, the temporal and the eternal, the relative and the absolute—all these “confuse” themselves into an immanence that can only be immanent “with” or “in” itself.

But the immanence of *mystique* is, arguably, different from the over-present and fecund immanence of Gilles Deleuze, Henri Bergson, or Alfred North Whitehead. Laruelle’s brand of mysticism bears some resemblance to Meister Eckhart, for whom there was an important distinction between “God” and “Godhead,” the latter in itself a “nothing” or “nothingness” that immanently pervades everything. Insofar as this is immanence, it is a negative immanence, moving not towards proliferation but indistinction. It is, in Laruelle’s phrasing, an affect prior

2 François Laruelle, *Principes de la non-philosophie* (Paris: PUF, 1996), p. 66. All translations are my own.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

all affection, a given prior all givenness, a manifest prior to all manifestation. There is no First Cause because there has never been causality, but this also does not mean that what is real is simply what exists. When contingency becomes immanent in this way, it also becomes boundless, and this boundlessness, far from being a great beyond, is nevertheless something inaccessible that Laruelle can only call “the One” or “the Real.” As Laruelle comments, “*mystique* is in-us or better it is us who are actually in it, in-*mystique* or in-One as the One itself.”

From the vantage point of philosophy, Laruelle’s treatment of immanence here is complicated. On the one hand, he places himself “on the side of” immanence, and in particular on the side of an immanence that is not subordinate to transcendence. But Laruelle is also careful to distinguish immanence of this type from that of Deleuze and Michel Henry, both of whom remain committed to a dynamic, processual, and fecund notion of immanence. Laruelle also remains committed to a notion of the Real that is absolute, and which is not apparent (that is, not manifest, not given, not a becoming). Again, from the philosophical point of view, the only remaining option is a notion of immanence that is pervasive (immanent with/to itself) and that is absolutely inaccessible. In other words, immanence is the secret of *mystique*.

For Laruelle, *mystique* is less about the confirmation of the divine or the reaffirmation of the human (both of which lie within the domain of mysticism). Instead, *mystique* might be termed a certain negative absolute that, at the same time, determines the very possibility of the correlation of self and world. Perhaps this is the reason that Laruelle claims that *mystique* actually determines both philosophy and science: “In determining the philosophical and the scientific *only in-the-last-instance*, *mystique* destroys mysticism in general and that which is the basis of this amphibology that is the philosophies of science, epistemologies, the foundational scientific programs, and the encyclopedia-type programs that are, as we know, the goal of nearly all philosophy.”<sup>7</sup>

This brings us back to Laruelle’s discussion of the two decisions: the philosophical decision and the communicational decision. Mysticism is interesting here because, on the one hand, it subscribes to

7 Ibid., p. 67.

the communicational decision—in this case, that an experience of the divine or the supernatural can be communicated via earthly or natural means. While the actual forms of this communication may vary (from scholastic treatises to mystical poetry), what they have in common is this commitment to the communicability of experience. Except that, in these cases, what it is that is being communicated is itself, by definition, beyond all comprehension, and therefore, beyond language and rational discourse. Mysticism is interesting because it finds itself in the position of having to communicate the incommunicable. Even those who assert a positive, generative, fecund notion of the divine—as outpouring, radiating Light—must at some point resort to a paradoxical language beyond language in order to hint at the absolute inaccessibility of the divine. Others, in the darkness mysticism tradition for instance, utilize a hyperbolic language of darkness, nothingness, and the “wayless abyss” to indicate that which cannot be adequately thought or put into language. All roads of light, it seems, lead to darkness.

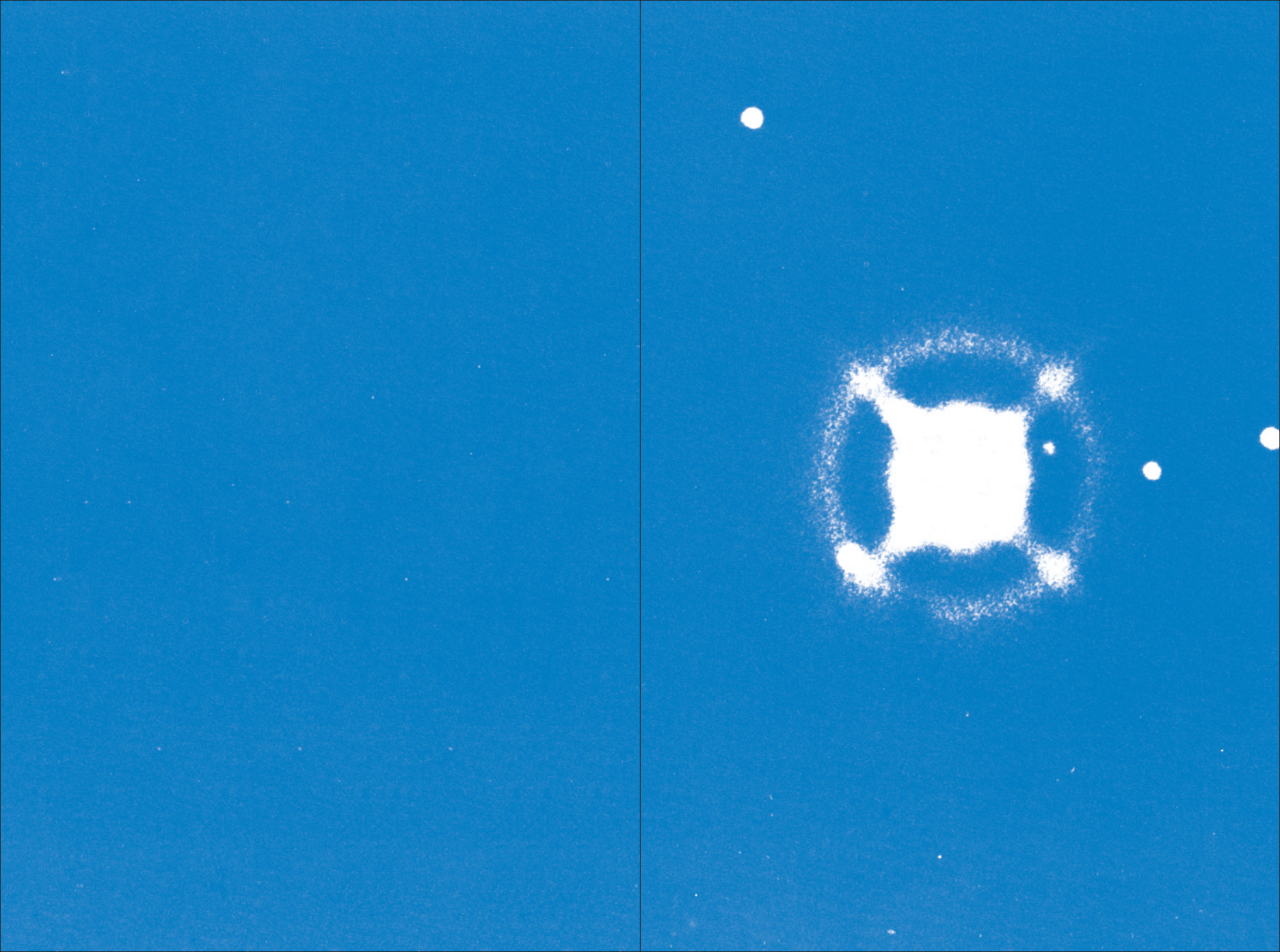
With mysticism generally (including both Laruelle’s “mysticism” and “mystique”), what we see is a sort of perversion of philosophy’s dual fidelity to the philosophical decision and the communicational decision. Philosophy believes in both—that existence is meaningful (by virtue of existing) and thus communicable. At one level, mysticism retains the philosophical decision, but it subtracts the communicational decision. The divine is manifest, and therefore filled with meaning, yet we as human beings cannot comprehend this manifestation and its meaning. Mysticism is the inability to communicate what is manifest in the inaccessibility of the divine (that is, the inaccessibility that “is” the divine).

But this opens onto a subsidiary form, in which mysticism inverts its prior position, retaining the communicational decision and subtracting the philosophical decision. Here the divine can indeed be communicated—in its incommunicability. Anselm’s proof: the divine is that beyond which nothing greater can be thought. Dionysius’s formulation: “...the more we take flight upward, the more our words are confined to the ideas we are capable of forming; so that now as we plunge into that darkness which is beyond intellect, we shall find ourselves not simply running short of words but actually speechless and

unknowing.”<sup>8</sup> However, this then means that what is communicated (in its incommunicability) can only be negative...and thus, “nothing.” There is no philosophical decision, because there is nothing on which to decide.

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8 Pseudo-Dionysius, “The Mystical Theology,” in *The Complete Works*, trans., Paul Ro-rem (Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1988), Section III, 1033B.



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