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- 4 **Acknowledgements**
- 6 **A Letter from the Editor**
- 8 **Merleau-Ponty and Barthes on Image Consciousness:
Probing the (Im)possibility of Meaning**
Natasha Beaudin Pearson, McGill University
- 19 **The Horror of the Real: Filmic Form, *The Century*, and
Fritz Lang's *M***
Peter Gavaris, Boston College
- 29 **Phenomenological Reproduction in Thompson and
Mailer's New Journalism**
Brendan Chambers, Boston College
- 44 **Cognition, Domination, and Complexity**
Ryan Cardoza, Stony Brook University
- 61 **Walter Benjamin's "Über den Begriff der Geschichte"
and the Marxist Tradition**
Maxwell Wade, Rutgers University
- 75 **Patočka's Critique of Husserl: The Possibility of
A-Subjective Phenomenology**
*Gabriel Vidal,
Pontifical Catholic University of Chile*
- 91 **Review of *Discomfort and Moral Impediment***
Myles Casey, The Pennsylvania State University
- 98 **Contributors**

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ΔΙΑΝΟΙΑ

Dear Reader,

With immense pleasure and honor, I have the opportunity to present to you, once again, the culmination of rigorous scholarship, collaboration, and generosity. Issue VI of *Dianoia: The Undergraduate Philosophy Journal of Boston College* represents, indeed, the world's finest undergraduate work in philosophy. We were delighted this year to have received over 150 submissions from around the world, and our published articles and book review are the fruits of *Dianoia's* collaboration with scholars from North America, South America, and Europe. In fact, earlier this year, we were approached by Cambridge Scholars Publishing (Newcastle upon Tyne, UK) to publish a review of the Argentine philosopher Julio Cabrera's latest work on bioethics, *Discomfort and Moral Impediment: The Human Situation, Radical Bioethics, and Procreation*. Our graduate advisor, Myles Casey, has kindly offered a thought-provoking explication and review of Cabrera's work.

Our publication mandate has remained: "*Dianoia* publishes the world's finest and most thoughtful, original, and creative papers on any philosophical topic or idea." The papers in our current issue accordingly present thoughtful and original philosophical work that engages with some of philosophy's most revered fields of scholarship, including hermeneutics, phenomenology, philosophical anthropology, the philosophy of politics, as well as film theory, critical theory, and the philosophy of communication. In many ways, our selections this year represent our editorial staff's training in a robust and dynamic department of philosophy, which has uniquely provided us with, among other things, world-class training in contemporary continental philosophy. I am certain that such training will continue to influence our annual review and will continue to keep us firmly in our position as a top journal of undergraduate work in philosophy.

In many ways, the design of our front and back covers represents the ubiquity of the philosophical dialogue that *Dianoia*—and the journal's name further suggests this—proudly features. The dialogue—such as that occurring on our front and back covers—transcends physical borders and enables, as it does in Cézanne's work, its interlocutors to share a drink and a game of cards over philosophy. As you will see, our own choice of cover design, inspired by this issue's piece on Roland Barthes, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and Paul Cézanne, is already a manifestation of such a dialogical act. It is with bittersweet sentiments that I conclude my letter this year, as I will be stepping down from my post as Editor-in-Chief to focus on my graduate studies here at Boston College. Before I close, however, I would like to express my sincerest gratitude to those who have supported me during my editorial tenure. First and foremost, I would like to thank all *Dianoia* editors, past and present, whose

philosophical expertise and keen eye have made the journal what it is today. My colleagues (and, above all, friends), Noah Valdez, Weitao Liu, and Ethan Yates, in *Dianoia's* 'upper-level management,' as we call it, deserve my heartfelt thanks. I am greatly indebted to our faculty advisor, Fr. Ron Tacelli, for his generous words of encouragement and generous supply of dinner and snacks during our late-night editorial sessions. I thank the Boston College philosophy department and the Institute for the Liberal Arts, directed by Dr. Mary Crane, for the support, both in-kind and financial. Paula Perry, of the Boston College philosophy department, deserves a word of sincere thanks for her advocacy, support, expertise, and graciousness. I thank, also, Gregory Kacergis, of Boston College's Media Technology Services for turning our philosophical review into a work of art—his patience, and above all, his friendship, does not go unnoticed. And, at this point, as I officially complete my undergraduate studies at Boston College, I would like to thank publicly my family, as well as those friends, colleagues, and supporters who have made this and many other endeavors possible.

Happy reading!

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Peter Klapes". The signature is written in a cursive style with a horizontal line underneath the name.

Peter Klapes
Editor-in-Chief

MERLEAU-PONTY AND BARTHES ON IMAGE CONSCIOUSNESS: Probing the (Im)possibility of Meaning

NATASHA BEAUDIN PEARSON

For both Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Roland Barthes, images are not merely objects in space; they belong to the realm of the metaphysical. Paintings “move” us, according to Merleau-Ponty: their “quality, light, color, depth [...] awaken an echo in our bod[y] and [...] our body welcomes them.”¹ To encounter a painting is to apprehend it through one’s body. We constitute “brute meaning” by drawing upon the “fabric of the world” in which our bodies are inextricably caught.² Conversely, for Barthes, poignant photographs “wound” us: they contain an “element [the *punctum*] that rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces” us.³ Unlike Merleau-Ponty, Barthes believes that pictures resist meaning-making. They provoke an “internal agitation,” an “animation” in the viewer. Yet this “*affect*” cannot wholly be reduced or explained.⁴ Hence, I think the crux of Merleau-Ponty’s and Barthes’ disagreement about the ontology of image consciousness has to do with the possibility of meaning-making (or lack thereof). While Merleau-Ponty believes that a painting can be meaningful and express the essential “indivisible whole[ness]” and “imperious

1 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, ed. Galen Johnson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1993), 125.

2 *Ibid.*, 123.

3 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 26.

4 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 19-20.

unity” of the world,⁵ Barthes contends that “since every photograph is contingent (and thereby outside of meaning), photography cannot signify (aim at a generality) except by assuming a mask.”⁶ In this paper, I outline Barthes’ critique of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology of painting—and his phenomenology more generally—and propose how we might explain the two philosophers’ disagreements on the subject.

For Merleau-Ponty, paintings do more than just depict the world: they “attempt” to become “a piece of nature.”⁷ Phenomenology, the philosophical current Merleau-Ponty belonged to, posits that as humans, we are embodied subjects living in the world, which we experience through our sensations (our perception). One’s body is not merely “a chunk of space or a bundle of functions” distinct from one’s consciousness; rather, one’s body *is* one’s consciousness.⁸ The soul “thinks according to the body, not according to itself” because the body is what grounds all cognition. It is the “degree zero of spatiality” from which I see the world around me.⁹ In other words, it is impossible to understand the world “from the exterior” because I am “immersed” in it; I live it “from the inside.”¹⁰ The meaning that I give to the world is thus fundamentally informed by how I perceive it through my body. Paintings, Merleau-Ponty contends, are the repositories of the meaning given to the painter through her vision and movement. The painter’s eye “is an instrument that moves itself, a means which invents its own ends; it is *that which* has been moved by some impact of the world, which it then restores to the visible through the traces of a hand.”¹¹ For this reason, when we view a landscape painting by Paul Cézanne, we see how Cézanne translated onto the canvas the sensations that he experienced when he laid eyes on a particular landscape.¹² Cézanne’s body was moved by the landscape that his eyes perceived, and this movement was transformed into the movement of his hands painting the landscape onto the canvas.¹³ As viewers, we see the painted landscape and are ourselves moved by it. Thereby we imbue the painting with our own meaning(s). Thus, the painting allows us not only to see as Cézanne saw, but also to impart on it the countless other meanings that we may choose to give to it.

For Merleau-Ponty, paintings are indeed inherently and endlessly meaningful. A person unfamiliar with the work of Vincent van Gogh might look at his painting *Wheatfield with Crows* (figure 1) and simply see a bright ochre wheat field under an inky blue sky. Individuals who know that this was (supposedly) the last painting van Gogh completed before committing suicide will likely add an extra layer of meaning

5 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s Doubt,” in *The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader*, ed. Galen Johnson (Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1993), 65.

6 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 34.

7 Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s Doubt,” 62.

8 Merleau-Ponty, “Eye and Mind,” 124.

9 *Ibid.*, 138.

10 *Ibid.*

11 *Ibid.*, 127.

12 Merleau-Ponty, “Cézanne’s Doubt,” 63.

13 *Ibid.*

onto this first interpretation: they may see the artwork as an evocation of death (symbolized by the dark sky) looming over and encroaching upon life (symbolized by the vibrant wheat field). Alternatively, an art historian might look at this painting and instead understand it through the lens of Western art historical scholarship: she might take the flatness of the pictorial elements and the visibility of the brushstrokes as evidence that van Gogh's art foreshadowed modernism. A person who grew up on a farm and spent his childhood ploughing wheat fields may, upon viewing *Wheatfield with Crows*, be flooded with memories of his early years (such memories may include the first time his father showed him how to mount a horse, or the memory of running around the fields with his friends, or of how the fields smelled after the first snowfall). In each of these cases, individuals bestow onto van Gogh's painting meaning(s) that are informed by—but not limited to—her personal lived experience. Giving meaning(s) to a painting, Merleau-Ponty argues, is an infinite act of interpretation: it is a hermeneutic.¹⁴ It is interpersonal and timeless; in fact, one person may give *Wheatfield with Crows* multiple different layers of meaning at different moments in her life. This shows that the process of meaning-making is never sterile nor static, but, instead, rich, fertile, and bound to never be fully complete.¹⁵

Barthes' account of meaning-making in photographs is markedly different. Much like Merleau-Ponty, Barthes thinks that pictures have the ability to "move" us (to borrow Merleau-Ponty's language): they provoke a "pathos," an "affect" in the "Spectator [the viewer]."¹⁶ He pinpoints the source of affect as a detail he calls the "*punctum*," which is present in every "attractive" photograph.¹⁷ On a mission to "formulate the fundamental feature, the universal without which there would be no Photography," Barthes employs a "cynical phenomenology"¹⁸ in his analysis of photographs, which ultimately leads him to the conclusion that every compelling photo contains both a "*studium*" and a "*punctum*."¹⁹ The *studium*, Barthes posits, consists in "a kind of general, enthusiastic commitment [...] without special acuity" that every photograph possesses.²⁰ Meaning "study" in Latin, *studium* designates both a vague disinterest in the consumption of certain cultural products and a "kind of education" that allows one "to encounter the photographer's intentions, to enter into harmony with them, to disapprove of them, but always to understand them, to argue them within myself for culture (from which the *studium* derives) is a contract arrived at between creators and consumers."²¹ The photographer ("Operator") communicates her intended meaning by using visual codes that are universal and can thus be deciphered by Spectators.²² Barthes uses William Klein's photo, "Mayday, 1959," as an example. In this picture,

14 Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," 149.

15 Ibid.

16 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 21.

17 Ibid., 27.

18 Ibid., 9.

19 Ibid., 26.

20 Ibid.

21 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 27-28.

22 Ibid., 28.

the *studium* would be the fact that I can make sense of the subject of the photo, and that I can learn certain ethnographical and historical details by examining it.²³ I can discern a black and white photograph of an old woman with a suspicious glance, who is surrounded by a few men of different ages. I notice that one boy is wearing a blazer, that another has a youthful haircut, and that the old woman is wearing a scarf around her head, for instance. The photograph “teaches me how Russians dress” in Moscow in 1959.²⁴ In other words, I recognize this picture as a “good [coherent and identifiable] historical scene.”²⁵

However, without searching for it, there is an “element” in this photograph that “rises from the scene, shoots out of it like an arrow, and pierces me.”²⁶ Barthes names this element the *punctum* and defines it as “that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me).”²⁷ He claims that the *punctum* is usually a small detail that was not strictly intended by the Operator. Its “wounding” quality cannot be analyzed or studied, but is instead “given right there on the page” and resonates with the Spectator.²⁸ Barthes seems to imply that a photograph’s *punctum* may differ from one Spectator to another when he says that “to give examples of *punctum* is, in a certain fashion, to *give myself up*.”²⁹ If we accept this and grant that a *punctum* is subjective, then we may posit that what “wounds” an individual depends on that individual’s past lived experiences. Nevertheless, if one tests this out phenomenologically, one quickly finds that what wounds someone does not always directly map onto that person’s past memories, and thus cannot be easily explained. For example, in James van der Zee’s “Family Portrait” (figure 3), Barthes identifies the *punctum* as the “belt worn low” by, and the “strapped pumps”³⁰ of, the woman standing behind the chair. Barthes is baffled by the fact that this detail strikes him: “(Mary Janes – why does this dated fashion touch me? I mean: to what date does it refer me?).”³¹ Personally, when I look at this picture, the detail I identify as the *punctum* is the seated woman’s right hand. When I try to understand why this element in particular “pricks” me, I can only say that the way in which the hand curves awkwardly over the armrest, and how one finger seems abnormally long, makes me uncomfortable, or “creeps me out.” This, however, is not a satisfying answer. What *exactly* bothers me about this woman’s hand? Why do the strapped pumps arouse “great sympathy [and] almost a kind of tenderness” in Barthes?³²

23 Ibid., 30.

24 Ibid., 30.

25 Ibid., 26.

26 Ibid.

27 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 26.

28 Ibid., 43.

29 Ibid.

30 Ibid.

31 Ibid.

32 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 43

The *punctum* significantly impacts one's understanding of the photograph: it "lashe[s]" the order and facile meaning of the *studium* and "changes my reading [of the photograph]", "mark[ing] [it] in my eyes with a higher value."³³ Ever since the woman's right hand in James van der Zee's "Family Portrait" "punctured" me, the only thing I can see when I look at that photograph is that gnarled hand. As Barthes succinctly puts it, the *punctum* suddenly—and paradoxically—"while remaining a 'detail,' fills the whole picture."³⁴ Yet, as Barthes asks, why is this the case? Why must I disturb the "unity of composition" that was found in the *studium* that constituted "Family Portrait" before the *punctum* wounded me?³⁵ After all, "whether or not [the *punctum*] is triggered, it is an addition. It is what I add to the photograph and what is nonetheless already there."³⁶ Why must this addition—this newfound *meaning* I give to "Family Portrait"—be made? Why must the facile meaning of its *studium* (which allows me to understand the picture in historical/ethnographical terms, as a family portrait of an African American family living in Harlem in 1926) be supplanted by the deeply disturbing and incomplete meaning engendered by the *punctum*, which reduces the entire photograph to the creepy hand? Moreover, why do I choose to impart meaning to something that seems irreducible, that seems to resist it?³⁷ I continue to ask: *why* do I think the woman's hand is creepy? If this persistent uncertainty tells me anything, it is that "the incapacity to name is a good symptom of disturbance."³⁸

Attempting to answer these questions, Barthes draws on certain notions of psychoanalytic theory. He introduces the concept of *heimlich*³⁹ (German for "familiar," "native," "belonging to the home"), which closely relates to its opposite notion, *unheimlich* (German for "uncanny"), an idea that is discussed in Freud's essay, "The Uncanny."⁴⁰ Freud defines "the uncanny" as "an experience of tension" that belongs to "that class of the terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar."⁴¹ Freud uses "the double" as an example of the uncanny: having connections with "reflections in mirrors, with shadows, spirits, with the belief in the soul and the fear of death," seeing one's *doppelgänger* (for instance, when I look at a picture of myself or catch a glimpse of myself in the mirror) "arouses dread and creeping horror."⁴² Though uncanny situations occur in real life, Freud argues that the uncanny is also "an aesthetic category": the feeling can emerge when we consume literature, songs, movies, and other art forms.⁴³ Personally, one of the first

33 Ibid., 42.

34 Ibid., 45.

35 Ibid., 41.

36 Ibid., 55.

37 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 21.

38 Ibid., 51.

39 Ibid., 40.

40 Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," 2, accessed 2 December 2017, <http://web.mit.edu/allanmc/www/freud1.pdf>.

41 Freud, "The Uncanny," 2.

42 Ibid., 10.

43 Ibid., 2.

artworks that comes to mind when I think of the uncanny is Lars von Trier's film *Breaking the Waves* (1996) (figure 4), which tells the story of Bess, an unusual woman who is in love with her husband Jan, an oil rig worker who asks her to have sex with other men after he is gravely injured in a work accident. It is a dark, tragic story of sexual debasement, religious paranoia and death. These are certainly disturbing themes, but I do not know exactly why *Breaking the Waves* disturbs me more than most horror movies, which deal with similarly frightening topics such as murder, torture, and ghosts. This inability to explain fully my uneasiness or to give meaning to my experience is precisely what constitutes the uncanny, according to Freud: "We, with the superiority of rational minds, are able to detect the sober truth; and yet this knowledge does not lessen the impression of uncanniness in the least degree."⁴⁴

In photographs, what is uncanny is the *punctum*, which, as we have said, is the detail in the photo that pricks me, that disrupts the *studium's* harmony, order, and identifiable meaning. To make sense of the *punctum* and of the uncanny, we may turn to Freud's "Beyond the Pleasure Principle." In his 1920 essay, he postulates the existence of two fundamental principles that drive human behavior: the pleasure principle and the "death instinct."⁴⁵ The pleasure principle states that our bodies (and minds) are designed to rid themselves of tension (what Freud calls "unpleasure"; this includes hunger, thirst, and sexual desire), such that all of our actions are motivated by "a lowering of that tension – that is, [...] an avoidance of unpleasure or a production of pleasure."⁴⁶ This drive is productive and life-sustaining, as it seeks to restore our constitution to a state of balance and harmony. At first glance, this seems intuitive and accurate. Yet, upon treating numerous patients who suffered from post-traumatic stress disorder, Freud realized that the pleasure principle offered an incomplete account of human behaviour. His patients, most of whom had fought in World War I, would constantly recall their most painful memories (consciously, in therapy and unconsciously, in dreams), "reviv[ing] them with the greatest ingenuity."⁴⁷ But this repetition is stale, unproductive, and contradicts the pleasure principle: instead of releasing tension, this "compulsion to repeat" only heightens tension, only disturbs our constitution, and only generates imbalance and chaos.⁴⁸ Freud cannot explain these "mysterious masochistic trends of the ego" that all humans seem to bear, but nonetheless we cannot deny their existence.⁴⁹ This leads him to posit the existence of a second fundamental drive that opposes the pleasure principle and seeks to negate it: the "death instinct."⁵⁰

⁴⁴ Freud, "The Uncanny," 7.

⁴⁵ Sigmund Freud, Salman Akhtar, and Mary K. O'Neil, *On Freud's "Beyond the Pleasure Principle"* (London: Karnac Books, 2011), 55.

⁴⁶ Freud et al., "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," 13.

⁴⁷ Freud et al., "Beyond the Pleasure Principle," 27.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 25.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 55.

Freud's account of these two antagonistic—but intertwined—drives maps onto Barthes' theory of photography. The pleasure principle (or "Eros") corresponds to the *studium*: both embody harmony, order, balance, cohesion, and meaning. Meanwhile, the death instinct is analogous to the *punctum*. Both the death instinct and the *punctum* disturb the harmony and meaning of the pleasure principle and the *studium*, respectively. This meaning is intelligible: James van der Zee's "Family Portrait" is the picture of an African-American family living in Harlem in 1926. The woman's eerie hand becomes such a fixation to me that I ignore all of the other elements present in "Family Portrait"; the death instinct causes traumatic war memories to repeatedly resurface in Freud's patients' minds, thereby shattering all semblance of serenity, harmony, or meaning. Both cases indeed resist meaning: nothing can fully capture what makes the contorted hand creepy to me, and nothing can explain why this particular detail resonates within me but not necessarily within every other Spectator. Likewise, the veterans' stale repetition of painful memories cannot be contextualized by any philosophical or scientific system; it refuses to be understood within the organized, satisfying framework of the pleasure principle.

Thus, Barthes' main disagreement with Merleau-Ponty has to do with the latter's belief that images (and especially paintings) are endlessly meaningful. According to Barthes, pictures have a limited semiology: "all we can say is that the [photograph] speaks, it induces us, vaguely to think."⁵¹ The photograph's meaning is evident and restrained: it can be recognized by any Spectator. Indeed, anyone who looks at William Klein's "Mayday, 1959" will say that it is a picture of an old woman with a scarf wrapped around her head, gazing menacingly at the lens, and surrounded by seven men of varying ages. More specifically, the work's title informs us that these people are in Moscow in 1959. This is the definite subject of "Mayday, 1959": the photo will never be about tulips in seventeenth century Amsterdam, or fishermen in nineteenth century Brazil. Thus, even though an image may provoke different emotions in viewers, the image's meaning will always be contingent, circumscribed, and "a closed field of forces."⁵² It is therefore incorrect to claim, as Merleau-Ponty would, that "Mayday, 1959" can be interpreted in an infinite number of ways. Spectators might be wounded by different *punctums*, which are, as Barthes puts it, "outside of meaning."⁵³ However, for all viewers the photo's *studium*, which "aim[s] at generality [...] by assuming a mask," is the same.⁵⁴

Barthes challenges Merleau-Ponty's contention that paintings "come to life" and make visible "the overtaking, the overlapping, the metamorphosis [...] of time."⁵⁵ Instead, Barthes claims, they freeze time: they capture a moment that is dead and that is bound never to happen again. Barthes indeed believes that Death "is the *eidōs*" (the

⁵¹ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 38.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵³ Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 34.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," 145.

essence) of Photography.⁵⁶ To view a photo capturing a moment that one has lived is to be reminded of the fleetingness of one's life and of the inevitability of death. Many photographs—especially ones dating back to a time when sitters had to pose for several hours when they had their picture taken—possess a haunting, “deathly” quality. (“Family Portrait” is the perfect example of this phenomenon: the figures appear to be spectral—far from “life-like.”) Barthes argues that the experience of being photographed is also like death: the photographer's “target” (subject) experiences “a micro-version of death (of parenthesis): I am truly becoming a specter, [...] Death in person.”⁵⁷ This is because I feel like I am being transformed from a “subject into [an] object”: whenever someone takes my picture, I feel a strange sense of inauthenticity, for I perceive my “real” self being misrepresented—*distorted* even—by the camera lens.⁵⁸ Conscious that I am being watched (and “captured” by another person), I pose and change my behaviour in a “cunning dissociation of consciousness from identity.”⁵⁹ Moreover, when I look at a portrait of myself, I feel alienated, for my deep “self” “never coincides with my image”: while I am “light,” moving, and alive, my image is “heavy [and] motionless”—in short, dead.⁶⁰ It is no coincidence then that Barthes relates photography to Freud's “death instinct.” Death punctures life much like the *punctum* disrupts the *studium* and the death drive obstructs the pleasure principle. Life is not intrinsically meaningful; rather, we bestow meaning onto it because our existence would seem pointless otherwise. By extension, paintings can never be “alive” or meaningful in the way that Merleau-Ponty claims they are.

Hence, Merleau-Ponty and Barthes appear to be in a stalemate on the question of meaning-making in image consciousness. Merleau-Ponty offers a convincing argument for the hermeneutic possibilities of painting, but his theory does not consider the death instinct. Moreover, while both philosophers agree that images have the ability to affect us (whether by wounding us or by moving us), Barthes' concepts of the *studium* and the *punctum* do not easily map onto Merleau-Ponty's theory. This makes comparing both accounts tricky. Added to this is the fact that they focus on different visual mediums: Barthes mostly talks about photography, whereas Merleau-Ponty only discusses painting. The two thus seem to approach the same question with a different set of considerations, and this might be why they arrive at radically different conclusions. Perhaps Merleau-Ponty crystallizes the conundrum best: “ambiguity is the essence of human existence, and everything we live or think has always several meanings,”—including meaninglessness.⁶¹ ♦

56 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 15.

57 Barthes, 14.

58 *Ibid.*, 13.

59 Barthes, *Camera Lucida*, 12.

60 *Ibid.*

61 Richard Askay and Jensen Farquhar, *Apprehending the Inaccessible: Freudian Psychoanalysis and Existential Phenomenology* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2006), 296.



Figure 1: Vincent van Gogh, *Wheatfield with Crows*, 1890. 50.2 cm × 103 cm (19.9 in × 40.6 in). Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam.



Figure 2: William Klein, "Mayday, 1959". Moscow, 1959.



Figure 3: James van der Zee, "Family Portrait". Harlem, 1926.



Figure 4: Lars von Trier, *Breaking the Waves* (1996).

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THE HORROR OF THE REAL: Filmic Form, *The Century*, and Fritz Lang's *M*

PETER GAVARIS

Near the end of *The Century*, Alain Badiou comes to the conclusion that “the art of the century inscribed itself paradigmatically between dance and cinema.”¹ He never explains this development explicitly, though it can be reasoned that he arrived at this conclusion through a consideration of the immediacy inherent to the nature of both forms. Evidently, dance and cinema share a fixation on dynamic movement, and for Badiou, this distinguishes them from everything that came before, especially since the century “violently declares the present of art.”² In what follows, I will focus specifically on cinema and the cinematic role as the essential art form of Badiou’s century. I will begin by considering why film has been taken up by so many contemporary theorists, examining why the medium (seemingly defined by its constitutional conundrums) lends itself so easily to analysis, and conclude with a consideration of Fritz Lang’s *M* (1931), a film that embodies many of the central ideas presented in *The Century*.

Cinema, from its conception at the end of the nineteenth century, differentiated itself first and foremost by the way it was to be consumed. Unlike reading a book or looking at a painting, the act of watching a film always involves something of a

1 Badiou, Alain. *The Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano. Malden: Polity, 2008, p. 160.

2 Badiou, *The Century*, 135

power dynamic in the way that it strips the viewer of autonomy. We cede all control when we enter the dark room, look up at the bright screen, and gaze as images unremittingly flash before us until the credits roll. Conversely, we choose the pace at which to read a book; we can deliberate over certain words, re-read pages, and put the book down whenever we want. The same could be said of looking at a painting, since the act still leaves us with our autonomy. We can look away whenever we want, and the canvas is fundamentally static. Given this essential difference, cinema aligns itself much more obviously with theatre, performance art, and dance, as Badiou points out. These art forms originate from movements in a setting that requires us to relinquish control and from the construction of resemblance to our lives. This act of replication, whether it be naturalistic, expressionistic, or anything in between, is just that. Apart from being far more democratic than theater or dance, film differentiates itself from these other forms in that its replication of life has greater potential for resembling life as it is, and duly, bears greater potential for abstraction. Rather than watching the action play out in front of us with the naked eye—as is the case with these other forms of performance—cinema necessitates further layers of construction (and artifice) that are communicated by a director’s shot selection, the editing of scenes, among other things. When writing on film, Walter Benjamin observes: “The camera intervenes with the resources of its lowerings and liftings, its interruptions and isolations, its extensions and accelerations, its enlargements and reductions. The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses.”³

These “unconscious optics,” as Benjamin puts it, come about through the dissonance between cinema’s base artificiality and its potential for capturing life in motion. Consider the early Lumière films that attempted to do just this. *The Arrival of a Train* (1896) is simply what its title implies (see Figure 1). Yet, it is much more than just that, since, as Benjamin put it, “filmed behavior lends itself more readily to analysis because of its incomparably more precise statements of the situation [...] it can be isolated more easily.”⁴ The same cannot be said for any other artistic form, even those that are movement-based, because it is the camera that imbues an image with meaning by subtracting something from it. Life is at once imitated, and thusly, removed (indeed, Benjamin would likely argue that “the aura” is that which is being removed). Even in shooting life as it is (say, a train arriving at a station), the camera adds an unquantifiable number of variables to the equation: the shot angle, the shot length, the exposure, to name a few. These variables create a specific, irreplicable image for the camera frame. It is the frame itself that further complicates things. In many ways, shooting a film is an act of profound exclusion, since a shot is defined not only by what is in the frame, but also by what is excluded. A shot of a train

3 Walter Benjamin. “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism*, ed. Vincent B. Leitch. W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 2001: 1181.

4 Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” 1180-1181.

arriving at a station implicitly asks us to consider what is occurring outside of the frame. Therefore, the frame is at once finite—and infinite—and this constitutive contradiction lies at the heart of the medium, which makes film the definitive art form of the century, and an object of curiosity for theorists like Benjamin and Badiou.

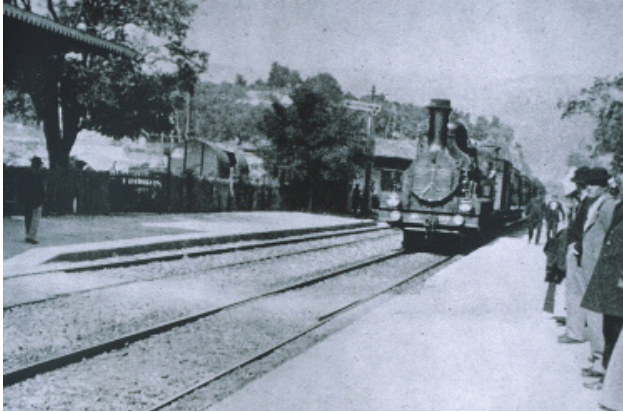


Figure 1

Badiou takes up Cinema’s infinite finitude in his chapter on “The infinite.” For him, cinema is almost deceitfully deceptive in its promise of showing us life as it is, and the harsh reality that the medium’s replication of life is wholly artificial. After all, what is cinema other than a series of still images flashed quickly before us in such a way as to imply movement? In any case, Badiou’s conception of the Real, which he correlates to the infinite, can never be replicated in art, including cinema: “The torment of contemporary art in the face of the infinite situates it between a programmatic forcing that announces the return of romantic pathos, on the one hand, and a nihilistic iconoclasm, on the other.”⁵ Cinema is situated nicely at this crossroads, as I’ve explained, because it seems almost to hold these two conflicting ideals (a “romantic pathos” and a “nihilistic iconoclasm”) at once, in that its infinite quality only comes about in its shear finitude. Every shot is utterly unique and cannot be replicated perfectly; yet, the shot’s artificial construction allows for said uniqueness. Consciously or otherwise, every film carries with it this inherent contradictory, romantic promise of the infinite, which arises from its own formal limitations, as Badiou acknowledges: “The infinite is not captured *in* form; it *transits* through form [...] finite form can be equivalent to an infinite opening.”⁶ Since the film’s form loudly announces its own ineptitude, we are pointed to this infinite opening more frequently than when engaging with other artistic forms.

⁵ Badiou, *The Century*, p. 155.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 155.

In exploring the dichotomy between art's "romantic pathos" and "nihilistic iconoclasm," Badiou spends noticeably more time addressing the latter, focusing on how the "art of subtraction" renders the medium inoperative. (This exemplified by his lengthy analysis of Malevich's *White on White*.) Admittedly, art can function as a study of surfaces, critiquing its own medium while also incorporating narrative elements and interiority. As discussed, cinema intrinsically seems able to hold these two contradictory elements at once. Badiou's reluctance to take up film as an "art of subtraction" that does *not* inherently eschew interiority is somewhat disappointing. With that, this essay will henceforth attempt to amend this fact by applying a Badiouian reading to *M* (1931), a film that succinctly embodies much of the theory presented in *The Century*.

A far cry from the early cinema of the Lumière Brothers, Fritz Lang's *M* is one of heightened drama and hyperstylization, featuring exquisite sets, ostentatious camerawork, and dynamic performances. *M*'s formal qualities belong to the German Expressionist movement. Founded on the basis that abstraction could better emulate a sense of interiority than strict, naturalistic representation, expressionism draws attention to itself as artificial (and it makes perfect sense that a form predicated on artificiality would take up abstraction in such a way as to carve out a greater opening for the Badiouian Real to transit through). *M*'s expressionism seems far from the art of subtraction that Badiou discusses in *The Century*, and yet, it arrives at a similar impasse. Expressionism and film go hand in hand precisely because cinema is expressionistic in nature, and Lang's film embodies this synthesis, as the apparent, meticulous construction of its images gives way to a newfound interiority.

Wedge between two world wars, *M* appears to present itself as a procedural, almost rudimentary, crime thriller about a string of child murders, before revealing itself to be an eerily prophetic critique of a society ready to embrace totalitarianism. The mystery of the story is not so much about the identity of the killer—who we learn early on is Hans Beckert (Peter Lorre)—but is rather about the lengths to which the residents of Berlin will go to capture him. Lang commits to highlighting the interconnectedness of the "society of the century," showing how seemingly everybody (from the police force, to the crime bosses, and even the beggars) is working to get this man for a smattering of different and self-serving reasons. By the end, the crime bosses, helped by regular residents who form a sort of citizens' tribunal, capture Beckert. They conduct an unfair trial and commit to killing him before the authorities rush in to break up the party. All this comes after Beckert gives a rousing monologue as the tortured killer, expressing in between shrieks and screams the compulsivity of his actions in a surprisingly affecting call for sympathy. This climactic sequence of the citizens' trial and Beckert's pleading marks a key moment in the film where Lang pulls the wool from our eyes and turns the table on the residents of Berlin (see Figures 2 & 3). Badiou argues that war and extreme violence in the century come as

a result of passion for the Real: a stark idealism that requires violence before peace. In what will follow, I aim to argue that this passion for the Real is not manifested in Beckett's compulsive kills, but is rather embodied in the citizens' desire to "put [him] out of commission."⁷ For the film's residents of Berlin, the Real can only be actualized by exterminating this evil from within their own society. When outlining his method for approaching *The Century*, Badiou explains that he wants to examine "how the century thought its own thought."⁸ I wish to do the same by considering Lang's film as an artifact of the century, a work of profound self-diagnosis that will provide further insight into how the century thought of itself.



Figure 2



Figure 3

In *The Century*, Badiou seemingly co-opts the Lacanian Real to refer to that which is unsignifiable: "representation is a symptom (to be read or deciphered) of a Real that it subjectively localizes in the guise of misrecognition."⁹ The Real, as conceived of, and explained by, Badiou, refers to a plane of perfection that is perpetually out of reach, separated from us by a gap. Nonetheless, this passion for the Real inspires the destruction, subtraction, and formalization that seem only to manifest in either art or violence. Idealism, more than anything else, becomes the driving force behind this passion for the Real since the passion itself comes from a belief that the gap between semblance and Real can be transcended. Badiou explains this idea in relation to Nazi thought before concluding that "passion for the Real is devoid of morality [...] extreme violence is therefore the correlate of extreme enthusiasm."¹⁰ It, therefore, becomes paramount to acknowledge that Nazism, or any other form of oppressive regime, bears an ideology. As horrific as it may sound, it is a fundamental optimism—that of attaining the Real—that accounts for so much violence in the century that Badiou claims is defined by its passion: "Bad violence must be followed

7 Lang, *M*.

8 Badiou, *The Century*, p. 3.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 49.

10 *Ibid.*, p. 63.

by good violence, which is legitimated by the former [...] the good war will put an end to the bad war.”¹¹ In turn, it makes perfect sense to view Berlin’s residents’ totalitarian, self-serving desire to kill Beckert as a passion for the Real.

Surely, the perversity of the situation manifests itself in the simple fact that the residents of Berlin are acting reasonably—at least initially—when it comes to their desire to catch Beckert (since he represents a legitimate threat to their society). Their crusade, their “just war,” *is* justifiable up until the point at which society collectively decides that Beckert is less than human and undeserving of justice. This almost casual change in mindset has profound consequences, as Badiou explains, in that it accounts for much of the violence of the century: “the century’s Real problem is to be located in the linkage between ‘democracies’ and that which, after the fact, they designate as their Other [...] What needs to be undone is precisely this discursive procedure of absolution.”¹² The film’s title refers to the chalk letter “M” (for murderer) slapped onto Beckert’s back at one point in the film (see Figure 4). This moment holds significant import in that it represents the moment when Beckert is explicitly made to be Other; he becomes the target. The citizens, in turn, find no issue in making Beckert the ostensive Other in accordance with the belief that his elimination will allow for a lasting peace: “The twentieth century’s idea of war is that of the decisive war, of the last war.”¹³ It is this stark optimism—and an inability to see beyond the present moment and situation—that allows for this sort of barbarous, ideological collective consciousness to take shape.



Figure 4

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 30.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 5.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

Lang effortlessly makes us aware of this shifting subjectivity through the use of cinematic techniques that informs our internalization of the narrative. Notice, for instance, the way most of the action is staged throughout the film. The scenes where Beckert is being chased through the streets are shot using high-angle long shots (see Figure 5). Shots of this kind emphasize the smallness of these characters, making them appear almost like pawns in a game as they chase each other down corridors and dark alleys. The camera shoots them at a distance to represent the metaphorical distance established between these characters and the viewer. By the film's conclusion, Lang closes this distance, through his use of close-ups, in order to evoke our sympathy for this character. If the long shots before were meant to imply distance, then these close-ups, like the famous one of Beckert pleading (see Figure 6), are meant to elicit empathy and imply interiority. Writing on the close-up shot, Benjamin concludes: "With the close-up, space expands [...] the enlargement of a snapshot does not simply render more precise what in any case was visible, though unclear: it reveals entirely new structural formations on the subject."¹⁴ Surely, the power of the film's ending comes in our acknowledgement of the newly discovered structural formations of Beckert's character. Notable, too, is the fact that we can only collapse this emotional distance as Lang does in film: live performance cannot replicate the cinematic freedom that comes with using a camera.



Figure 5



Figure 6

Adding to the novelty of *M* is the fact that the crime bosses, and not the police, mastermind the plan to capture and to try Beckert's. We come to realize that the heightened police activity—brought about by Beckert's killings—thwarts the city's criminal activity. In laying down this groundwork, Lang sets up a strange sort of hierarchy wherein the police hold power over the criminals and the criminals hold power over Beckert. They resort to a dangerous kind of absolutism in the end, which

¹⁴ Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," p. 1181.

Badiou vehemently warns against when writing on Nazi ideology. He disapproves of those who simply consider Nazism unthinkable evil, since this inability to acknowledge ideology (or interiority) often results in even more violence and horror. Badiou explains: “To maintain that Nazism is not a form of thought, or, more generally, that barbarism does not think, is to abet a process of surreptitious absolution.”¹⁵ We see this surreptitious absolution in the sheer cruelty of the criminals and other residents of Berlin who put Beckert on trial, and who laugh and jeer at the killer as he begs for his life. In a strange way, Lang’s directorial method asks us to consider this killer’s thought—that is, to assume a basic sort of interiority. Badiou writes of wanting to know how the century thinks of itself, and Lang’s film almost seems to want to achieve the same thing, *M* not only thinks about the century, but it also goes further to criticize it in the midst of its happening.

The “surreptitious absolution” taken up by the residents of Berlin represents how ideology becomes collective, and, evidently, political. In *M*, passion for the Real is addressed and brought to life by groups of smarmy men in smoke-filled rooms: the crime bosses, and also the police chiefs (see Figure 7). Ideology, under the guise of politics, forms amidst the few before it is promulgated to the masses. The central dichotomy, that between the thinking, ideologically protected residents and the barbarous Beckert, is achieved through this absolution and enforced by the simple, undeniable fact that politics thinks itself just. A lone killer cannot have an ideology—or any sort of interiority—whereby a group of likeminded residents must be justified in their thinking since there are so many of them. Badiou confirms this very suspicion: “Politics, when it exists, grounds its own principle regarding the Real, and is thus in need of nothing, save itself.”¹⁶ Evidently, passion for the Real acts both as a justification for a *genuinely* barbarous ideology, and as a way to self-legitimize that which wields power. Politics is self-serving, and this point is made explicit by the fact that those condemning Beckert are, themselves, criminals too!

This propensity of politics to “save itself” calls to mind Giorgio Agamben’s theory of ‘bare life,’ whereby a sovereign-power must exclude—deem worthless—some other form of life in order to maintain its own hegemony: “[the] living being who, though being human, is excluded—and through this exclusion, included—in humanity, so that human beings can have a human life, which is to say a political life.”¹⁷ Though, it’s unclear if Agamben’s exclusive inclusivity of the sovereign-power/bare-life dichotomy requires bare-life to exist. Is Beckert ‘bare life’ if he is to be killed? Even in death, does he live on as an emblem of the Agambenian *homo sacer* for the politically minded residents of Berlin? History mournfully reminds us that many of these same Germans would find a new form of ‘sovereign power’ in the decade to follow. Either way, in

¹⁵ Badiou, 4.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁷ Agamben, Giorgio. *The Use of Bodies*. Edited by Werner Hamacher. Translated by Adam Kotsko, Stanford University Press, 2016, p. 23.

attempting to synthesize Agambenian and Badiouian theory, looking at Lang's film through the lens of both, I extrapolate a few notable points. First, I argue that this passion for the Real is a justification—a kind of moral imperative—for Agambenian 'bare life.' We can also determine that the specifics of 'bare life' as described by Agamben, life whose biological existence is considered worthless, applies to Badiou's thoughts on politics. Do all politics and ideologies subsist on rendering the Other as *homo sacer*?



Figure 7

Badiou surely overlooked *M* because its expressionist sensibility flies in the face of the 'art of subtraction' that he champions in *The Century*. And while his points on subtraction (the art of auto-interrogation) are made clear in the text, there remains something to be said about more mainstream art that still manages to interrogate these aspects of society. The closest *M* gets to modernism is in its jagged construction, which comes from its constantly shifting perspective, oscillating from the crime bosses, to the beggars, to Beckert, to the police, and back again. Take that as you may, but there is something tragic about the fact that Lang's film was widely seen—largely championed—and yet, failed to make the country of its origin aware of its demons. If Badiou is correct in postulating that passion for the Real manifests in the disjunctive synthesis between art and violence, than *M* proves, more than anything else, that this violence may overpower its artistic correlate. ♦

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PHENOMENOLOGICAL REPRODUCTION

in Thompson and Mailer's New Journalism

BRENDAN CHAMBERS

“The truth is no more nor no less than what one feels at each instant in the perpetual climax of the present.” – Norman Mailer, “The White Negro”

In his classic essay, “The New Journalism and the Image-World: Two Modes of Organizing Experience,” David Eason sought to distance interpretations of New Journalism from what he saw as the facile, superficial description of its resemblance to novelistic writing, and to create a more complex conception of the relationship between style, culture, and consciousness. He argued that the widespread view of New Journalism as literary journalism (particularly as propounded by Tom Wolfe) “abstracts the reports from their cultural contexts [...] giving] only passing attention to the experiential contradictions represented in many of the reports.”¹ Within his own formulation, Eason proposed instead that we think of two countervailing subdivisions within this body of work, each reflecting a different approach to conceptualizing the relationship of reporter to the cultural fragmentation of the 1960’s and 1970’s. In so doing, Eason established categories that influence critical discussion to this day.²

Eason called the first of these approaches “ethnographic realism.”³ This mode aims to enter a group and “constitute the subculture as an object of display,” from whence “the reporter and reader, whose values are assumed and not explored, are conjoined

1 Eason, David L. “The New Journalism and the Image-World: Two Modes of Organizing Experience” in *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* (1984), 52.

2 For instance, Robert Alexander’s analysis of Thompson’s Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas’ role in the history of narrative journalism, or Norman K. Denzin’s work describing performance ethnography.

3 Eason, “The New Journalism and the Image-World: Two Modes of Organizing Experience,” 51.

in the act of observing,” work “to reinvent textually the consensus which cultural fragmentation had called into question.”⁴ This approach, exemplified by the work of Tom Wolfe, effectively places the reporter and his reader outside of a given event (or cultural moment, as Eason was more wont to describe it), and in the passive role of bystander, observing without participating. By unifying them in this role, the text positions both reader and reporter within a shared culture and value system, often appropriating obsolete codes of understanding to do so. Scenes and subcultures are made accessible to the reader only by depicting him in relation to the (assumed) shared dominant cultural framework. Positioned in that way, the journalist then penetrates the world of the Other, affording the reader with a passage into its hidden reality. In Eason’s view, ethnographic realism, at its core, largely sought to assuage the fears of mainstream audiences about the fracturing of society by comparing what appeared to be new and frightening cultural changes to supposedly similar movements of the past: in Wolfe’s case, for instance, linking the worryingly impenetrable symbolic world of Ken Kesey’s ‘Merry Pranksters’ to the base human religious impulse. To Eason, this explanatory role also disguised an unequal power dynamic between reporter and reader. Though they are unified in the assumed shared cultural understanding, writer and reader are often simultaneously placed on uneven ground, with the reporter in a paternal role, guiding the reader from ignorance to understanding.⁵

Eason terms his second variant of New Journalism—the one that will interest me in the following pages—“cultural phenomenology.” This approach takes in some ways an entirely opposite angle in addressing cultural fragmentation. It not only acknowledges, but also embraces the mindset that “there is no consensus about a frame of reference to explain ‘what it all means.’”⁶ It equivocates on calling any one experience “reality,” instead sitting with the “experiential contradictions represented in many of the reports.”⁷ Finally, it joins together reporter and reader in the co-creation of a reality, engaging in a “multi-level interrogation, including that between writer and reader.”⁸ In contrast to ethnographic realism, this collaborative construction by reader and author puts both on a more equal footing, reflecting the cultural values of the time period that produced it. While ethnographic realism can exist at any time, cultural phenomenology is representative of a specific cultural moment; it is a manifestation and product of the 1960’s and early 1970’s, a time when “the doctrine of representation had crumpled [and] the center which separated image and reality were not holding.”⁹ Each approach reflects a methodology of understanding, a means to the end of reckoning with an unrecognizable world.

4 Ibid., 52.

5 Ibid., 54.

6 Ibid., 52.

7 Ibid., 52.

8 Ibid., 52.

9 Ibid., 51.

As Eason suggests, the divergent means of “coming to terms with disorder” in the rapidly changing media world are reflected in the meta-analyses that crop up in each style.¹⁰ As Mas’ud Zavarzadeh explains in his *Mythopoeic Reality*, given the expansion and diversification of mainstream news media in the 1960s, readers grew to be wary of any text that sought to totalize experience, which presented a singular, universal understanding of events, as both traditional literature and reportage had. In Zavarzadeh’s telling, they began to eschew anything that presented a single, solid “harmonizing principle behind manifold reality.”¹¹ Instead, readers often sought what New Journalism offers: a self-conscious, self-aware approach to representation, which recognizes the limitations of individual experience and makes explicit reference to them, so as to most accurately present information to the reader. More traditional forms of ethnographic realism attempted to keep pace with these changes, though it often left little room for the reader to decide whether the journalist’s representation was accurate, taking that truth-claim as a given. Ethnographic realism often creates the illusion that the processes of its creation could produce nothing other than an objective representation of reality, despite the sculpting necessarily done by matters of selection, point of view, and so on. I see Eason’s conception of cultural phenomenology as the opposing approach, calling attention to the inherent limitations of its form and method. It is not only cognizant of these limitations, but it also makes use of them in order to investigate, in conjunction with the reader, the possibilities available to construct a world “rooted in the interaction of ‘images of reality’ and ‘the reality of images.’”¹²

If asked to distill the distinction between the two styles to a single phrase, I nominate authorial self-reflexivity. Cultural phenomenology recognizes the existence and effects of this liminal image-world¹³ on writing itself and any attempts, therefore, to represent such a world. By taking stock of the contemporary cultural moment, and the effects of the proliferation and dissemination of media, writers using a cultural-phenomenological approach are careful to track the effects that the image-world have on their own actions and the events that they attempt to report. This reciprocity within Eason’s second model—which is quite similar, as he acknowledges, to what Zavarzadeh terms a “testimonial” approach to nonfiction novel writing—even shapes the decisions of the journalist *as* he is writing.¹⁴ If, for example, Norman Mailer changes his behavior to conform to, or to challenge, the constructed media image of Norman Mailer, then that image influences his account of “the real.” In this way, the author serves as a vehicle to represent our new lives simultaneously in the world, and

10 Ibid., 54.

11 Zavarzadeh, Mas’ud. *The Mythopoeic Reality: The Postwar American Nonfiction Novel*. (University of Illinois Press, 1976)

12 Eason ““The New Journalism and the Image-World: Two Modes of Organizing Experience,” 55.

13 For the purposes of this paper, the image-world is “a realm which blurs the distinctions between fantasy and reality,” one which challenges the traditional dichotomy of image and real, instead imagining “a world in which image and reality are ecologically intertwined” (Eason 54, 53). In practice, this is the conception of reality, formed through the consumption of media and experience, which exists in the collective consciousness of society.

14 Zavarzadeh, *The Mythopoeic Reality: The Postwar American Nonfiction Novel*, 128.

outside of it, in the image-world. The distinction between the two—to this historical point well-established—has, in response to reality's conceptual fragmentation, become blurred. Understandings of reality influence understandings of the self; thus, the self must now be understood to be similarly fractured, or lost in the liminal space that our "technotronic society" has opened between the image and the real.¹⁵

I will now examine how Eason's phenomenological method and Zavarzadeh's testimonial approach¹⁶ are manifested in the works of Hunter S. Thompson and Norman Mailer. I will examine how Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* and Mailer's *Armies of the Night* conform to—and/or complicate—the categories that Eason postulates. I am interested in the reciprocal manipulation of artistic practice and public image in both writers, as well as the relation of that manipulation to each authors' claims regarding epistemological authority. Additionally, I will explore both authors' use of writing as a reconstitution of self, using the lens of Eason's conception of cultural fragmentation as a point of departure. This question is critical to reckoning with the full scope of their works, as the centrality of self is an inherent characteristic of subjective reportage.

Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* embodies Eason's description of cultural phenomenology as a "symbolic quest for significance in a fragmenting society."¹⁷ Las Vegas's image-world increasingly fractures the supposed object of his quest—an "American Dream" now irreparably divided into bike racers at the Mint 400, the police at the National Conference of District Attorneys, or the various outcasts and addicts who populate the city's casinos and fringe—making the search for concrete, universal truth increasingly more suspect and improbable. The actual quest thus becomes Thompson's own struggle—and, at times, a fruitless quest—to establish new avenues for epistemological authority by constantly shifting stylistic modes and journalistic strategies. Thompson's "savage dream" both exposes and displays the inconsistencies inherent in his own storytelling so as to construct more truthfully a new, fragile and even "failed" reality with his reader.¹⁸

It is impossible to say definitively whether Thompson intended the process for this work as a rhetorical strategy, that is to say, understood the impossibility of finding a universal framework through which to unify his subjects. But what is certain—or, at least, what most critics believe¹⁹—is that Thompson embraces this disunity, working to document "what it feels like to live in a world in which there is no consensus about

15 Zavarzadeh, 1.

16 The testimonial nonfiction novel, as Zavarzadeh terms it, "assumes that the only authority on appearance and existence is the witness himself." In other words, that the author's epistemological authority derives from presence at an event, and that the only information that can be conveyed with absolute authority is that which was registered by "one's participating senses" (128).

17 Eason, "The New Journalism and the Image-World: Two Modes of Organizing Experience," 52.

18 In his "Jacket Copy to *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey into the Heart of the American Dream*," Thompson describes the work as a "failed experiment in Gonzo Journalism."

19 See, for instance, Hollowell, John. *Fact & Fiction: The New Journalism and the Nonfiction Novel*. (University of North Carolina Press, 1977), 11.

a frame of reference to explain ‘what it all means.’”^{20;21} Because of this, he makes forays into a variety of avenues for authority, seeking a method of communication that can convey experience. Thus on a diegetic and conceptual level, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* serves simultaneously as a representation of the new “supramodern” world and as a documentation of Thompson’s attempts at recording it.²²

Thompson’s ultimate task, of course, is to establish the disunity of American society in the ’60s and ’70s and to articulate the absence of a unifying cultural framework (represented in *FLLV* by the American Dream). After eating at Terry’s Taco Stand, near the end of their ostensible quest, Duke and Gonzo reach what is left of the club they think is called the American Dream, finding only “a huge slab of cracked, scorched concrete in a vacant lot full of weeds,” and are informed that “the place had ‘burned down about three years ago,’” leaving little interpretation necessary for the reader.²³ It is not by accident that Thompson chose Las Vegas as the backdrop for this tale of fragmentation. The city is the preeminent example of what Eason calls “the marketing of worlds of experience,” and, therefore, is the ideal place to bring into question “the relativity of *all* worlds, including one’s own.”²⁴ Las Vegas is also a perfect example of the bidirectional influence of the image-world, where “image and reality are ecologically intertwined.”²⁵ Full of neon lights, unsavory spectacles, and uninhibited hedonism, Las Vegas is the “vortex” of the American Dream, a grotesque paradise and a world of its own.²⁶ These excesses of Las Vegas of course influence its image, but to the same degree the collective perception of the city as a haven for vice and excess forces it to cater to this conception, the reality thus changing to conform to the image.

The same transformative process occurs through Thompson’s strategy of internalizing the image-world into a distorted caricature of his own identity. Raoul Duke is famously a rum-guzzling, drug-frenzied maniac: the “Gonzo” journalist. Even Thompson’s so-called “biographies” document a self that has morphed into that Gonzo identity, as Thompson and his constructed image became inseparable.²⁷

20 *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* was originally serialized in two parts in Rolling Stone magazine in 1971 and 1972. As Thompson describes it, he intended to travel to Las Vegas and cover the Mint 400, “to buy a fat notebook and record the whole thing, *as it happened*, then send in the notebook for publication—without editing.” Instead, he laid the foundation for the work during “about 36 straight hours in [his] room at the Mint Hotel...writing feverishly in a notebook about a nasty situation that I thought I might *not* get away from” which was then compiled over the next six months at the behest of his editor, and put into print later that year.

21 Eason, “The New Journalism and the Image-World: Two Modes of Organizing Experience,” 52.

22 Zavarzadeh, *The Mythopoetic Reality: The Postwar American Nonfiction Novel*, 1.

23 Thompson, Hunter S. *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey into the Heart of the American Dream*. (Random House, 1998), 168.

24 Eason, “The New Journalism and the Image-World: Two Modes of Organizing Experience,” 51.

25 *Ibid.*, 53.

26 Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey into the Heart of the American Dream*, 47

27 The biography written by E. Jean Carroll, for example, opens with a schedule of Thompson’s daily drug use, beginning:

3:00 p.m. rise

3:05 Chivas Regal with the morning papers, Dunhills

3:45 cocaine

This image is constructed to a strategic end, however. By suffusing his writing with alternating mania and introspection, Thompson places himself in the tradition of the blind prophet, a strategy that stretches back to Tiresias, one who ostensibly cannot see, but who, in fact, “sees” better than most. Visionary hallucinations afford the opportunity to place the symbolic in the real without straying too far into the realm of the fictional: a hotel lounge full of humanoid lizards cannibalizing one another stand as a report of Thompson’s true lived experience, while simultaneously representing an allegorical understanding of Las Vegas’ patrons.

In Thompson’s visionary brand of New Journalism, therefore, individual experience remains the highest source of epistemological authority, even as its hallucinatory style testifies to the author’s refusal to attempt a supposedly “objective” representation of reality. He eschews presenting a “harmonizing principle behind manifold reality,” instead working constantly to remind the reader of the constructedness of the very identity that bears witness to a surreal narrative.²⁸ Throughout *Fear and Loathing*, for example, Thompson inserts small tags that allude to his process of creating the story, but they are themselves documents of immersion, chaos, haste and disorder: they are the notes from which he constructs his account, scribbled on “a pocketful of keno cards and cocktail napkins,” or on the handful of ink splotches splattered throughout the text, as if the pages the reader holds were torn straight from Thompson’s handwritten journal.²⁹ Likewise, he includes qualifiers such as “As I recall” and “Memories of this night are extremely hazy,” so as to be candid with readers about his state of perception in a way that both qualifies and authenticates his report.³⁰

Perhaps the most revealing moment is the one in which *Fear and Loathing* claims to offer the rendering of an event from Thompson’s own notebook, sans edits; the section entitled “Breakdown on Paradise Boulevard” is presented as simply the transcript of the conversation between Duke and Gonzo. The editor’s note, which heads the section, states:

At this point in the chronology, Dr. Duke appears to have broken down completely; the original manuscript is so splintered that we were forced to seek out the original tape recording and transcribe it verbatim. We made no attempt to edit the section, and Dr. Duke refused even to read it [...] In

3:50 another glass of Chivas, Dunhill

4:05 first cup of coffee, Dunhill

4:15 cocaine

4:16 orange juice, Dunhill

4:30 cocaine

4:54 cocaine

5:05 cocaine

28 Zavarzadeh, *The Mythopoetic Reality: the Postwar American Nonfiction Novel*, 8.

29 Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey into the Heart of the American Dream*, 41.

30 Thompson, 37, 41.

the interests of journalistic purity, we are publishing the following section just as it came off the tape.³¹

In this section, we might say, Thompson operates somewhere between Zavarzadeh's testimonial and notational modes, complicating their distinction in his process of searching for avenues to authority. While the testimonial mode, Zavarzadeh writes, derives epistemological authority from presence during an event, the notational mode typically does so through the direct, unedited nature of the work, where the author serves only to record the event verbatim for the reader and to reproduce it exactly. Thompson intended *Fear and Loathing* to toe the line between the two. He sees "the eye & mind of the journalist [...] functioning as a camera," and wants the material to be unedited once recorded, but also recognizes that "the writing would be selective & necessarily interpretive," since it is filtered through the lens of the author's experience.³² The above section exemplifies Thompson's operation in this liminal space: it is supposedly a direct recording of the events as they occurred, transcribed from "the original tape recording," but given that it exists in a work that makes editorial decisions in other sections means, by necessity, that its inclusion is an editorial decision. In this way, Thompson operates in both modes simultaneously, notationally including verbatim recordings while testimonially shaping the narrative through decisions that most accurately represent his subjective experience. Though Thompson writes off this moment by judging the work "a victim of its own conceptual schizophrenia," he tempers his own dismissal with a coda, claiming it as "a first, gimped effort in a direction that Tom Wolfe calls 'The New Journalism' has been flirting with for almost a decade."³³

Perhaps most importantly, these moments of narrative discontinuity—from reminders of narrative construction to sudden style changes—execute a sort of Brechtian fourth-wall break, bringing readers out of an essentially immersive narrative and forcing them to evaluate their active participation in a more distanced, critical way. Through this, such readers are inoculated against taking the work as representative of *the* world, but rather shown that it is *a* world in a multitude of worlds. In Eason's formulation, Thompson invites the reader to engage in a "multi-layered interrogation of communication [...] between the writer and the reader, as a way of constructing reality."³⁴ Readers are empowered to reconstitute their own understanding of the reality presented to them—given the ostensibly unqualified facts of the experience and its conveyance—and thereby accept or reject its truth.

Norman Mailer was as, if not more, aware than Thompson of the image-world, and has worked to complicate, engage, and interrogate traditional modes of representation. The first page of *Armies of the Night* opens with a selection from *Time* portraying

31 Ibid., 120.

32 Ibid., 120.

33 Thompson, Hunter S. *The Great Shark Hunt: Strange Tales from a Strange Time*. (Picador, 2012), 123, 122.

34 Eason, "The New Journalism and the Image-World: Two Modes of Organizing Experience," 52.

him as an uncontrolled drunk, “slurping liquor from a coffee mug” and expounding upon the lack of bathroom facilities in the theater where he is speaking.³⁵ But just as for Thompson, Mailer’s constructed image is part contrivance in the moment (a construct next to the liberal but respectable Robert Lowell) and partly the result of a retrospective literary self-fashioning, as John Hollowell sees it, into “a kind of psychic president, a moral leader” for the contemporary cultural moment.³⁶ He is “semi-distinguished and semi-notorious,” “the modern everyday fellow,” and “the wild man.”³⁷ By crafting a complex, dipolar, and at times paradoxical self-caricature, he can implicitly criticize the media processes that would claim singular objective construction of his image while only selectively including observations from the event.

In *Armies of the Night*, Mailer operates in two distinct modes: Novelist and Historian. As Novelist, Mailer performs two roles. First, the Novelist documents reality as it happened to him; he is, in Mailer’s words, the “narrative vehicle for the March on the Pentagon.”³⁸ However, this experiential record is not entirely forthright or trustworthy. Of course, it includes retrospective revisions, as memory, especially since one apparently so often drunk as Mailer cannot be trusted to be entirely faithful to original perception. This leads to the second role of the Novelist, which is to construct as truthful an image of Mailer as possible, by which the reader can correct the effects of his biases on the narrative. In this way, the image of the Novelist is a tool, an “instrument to view our facts and conceivably study them in that field of light” that his construction of Mailer has produced.³⁹ Having established this critical lens, as Historian, Mailer seeks to accurately “elucidate the mysterious character of that quintessentially American event,” the March on the Pentagon.⁴⁰ In this way, *Armies of the Night* serves both as an implicit treatise on behalf of the New Journalism and as an explicit criticism of the old, demonstrating Mailer’s belief that reporting “intensity and wholeness of perceptions more closely approaches the truth, or the most important truth, of the thing perceived than objective reporting.”⁴¹

By choosing an event whose literal occurrence maps onto his view of the Vietnam War, Mailer creates, as John Hollowell describes it in his *Fact and Fiction*, an “impressionistic history as seen through the lens of participant-observer.”⁴² Mailer presents the two sides of the literal-figurative war through a series of representative images, relying on connotative understandings to bolster his depictions: “healthy Marines, state troopers, professional athletes, movie stars, rednecks, sensuous life-

35 Mailer, Norman. *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, the Novel as History*. (Plume, 2017), 3.

36 Hollowell, *Fact & Fiction: The New Journalism and the Nonfiction Novel*, 39.

37 Mailer, *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, the Novel as History*, 13, 15.

38 *Ibid.*, 54.

39 *Ibid.*, 216.

40 *Ibid.*

41 Begiebing, Robert J. *Acts of Regeneration: Allegory and Archetype in the Works of Norman Mailer*. (University of Missouri Press, 1980), 135.

42 Hollowell, *Fact & Fiction: The New Journalism and the Nonfiction Novel*, 90.

loving Mafia, cops [etc.] Arrayed against...the Freud-ridden embers of Marxism, good old American anxiety strata—the urban middle class with their proliferated monumental adenoidal resentments.”⁴³ Rather than maintaining a strict focus on the events that he is reporting on, Mailer often chooses instead to move into exegetical commentary. In this way, like Thompson, he complicates Zavarzadeh’s categories of ‘nonfiction novel,’ using them as shifting modes of representation. Though Mailer seems to operate in the testimonial mode, absorbing and regurgitating events as “witness-participant-narrator,” just so often, he shifts to “a private interpretive scheme to reorder the seemingly random incidents into [...] ‘a significant form.’” This is more in line with Zavarzadeh’s exegetical mode⁴⁴, as, for instance, when Mailer moves from a debate with Lowell and Macdonald about the relative merits of being arrested, to an encompassing diatribe on the history of ideological changes of the Left over the course of a paragraph.⁴⁵ In the testimonial mode, he operates as Novelist: a vehicle for experience. In the exegetical mode, he is Historian, providing interpretive commentary tempered by the reader’s use of his constructed image.

Diversions characterize Mailer’s work; he is even willing to concede the inaccuracy of his perceptions, recording his experience with inconsistencies included. At the height of the March’s frenzy, for example, Mailer notes that despite the literal erroneousness of his perception, he experienced a “superimposition of vision,” seeing real men fleeing and carrying an N.L.F. flag chased by phantom MP’s and policemen.⁴⁶ Though he experienced that vision, he also acknowledges that his perception ran contrary to what other participants reported. In this way, he implicitly acknowledges Eason’s premise that phenomenological works are a representation of a world among worlds, each bearing the weight of epistemological authority over itself, but no other.⁴⁷

Perhaps the most distinctive element of Mailer’s craft is the voice through which he expresses his ideas. In *Armies*, he creates the feel of a novel by having an unnamed narrator describe the events that occur to Mailer (of course, the author) as character. In this way, Mailer is able to split his presence and voice, paradoxically laying claim to both omniscience and subjectivity. Mailer the writer is omniscient because of his unfettered access to the thoughts and motivations of Mailer the character. However, he also simultaneously claims epistemological authority through documentation of his subjective experience of the event. Clearly, this technique seems to transcend both Eason’s categories as well as Zavarzadeh’s. Though Eason asserts that Mailer is operating in the phenomenological mode, third person narration typically creates a voice that mediates experience between recorder and consumer, and thus falls more neatly under the umbrella of ethnographic realism. Mailer wants his narrator to be “an eyewitness who is a participant but not a vested partisan,” and indeed often

43 Mailer, *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, the Novel as History*, 34.

44 Zavarzadeh, *The Mythopoeic Reality: the Postwar American Nonfiction Novel*, 129, 93.

45 Mailer, *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, the Novel as History*, 85.

46 Ibid., 127.

47 Eason, “The New Journalism and the Image-World: Two Modes of Organizing Experience,” 51.

maintains a strong commitment to unfiltered communication of the experience. In other moments, however, he does interpretive work for his readers, presenting them with a rather clean, uncomplicated understanding of events' relationship and meaning.⁴⁸ In this way, Mailer actually sits in a more intermediate space between phenomenology and ethnography, as well as between testimony and exegesis, since he is both the active communicator of participatory experience and passive commenter on the significance of events. Mailer in fact comments on this tension explicitly, explaining that the central figure of his story must, by necessity, be ambiguous, "to recapture the precise feel of the ambiguity of the event and its monumental disproportions."⁴⁹

A telling example of Mailer's complication of traditional media's objectivity in *Armies* is his account of the evening at the Ambassador Theater. Whereas *Time* portrays Mailer "stumbling" about the auditorium, incoherently spewing a "scatological solo," the novel delves into Mailer's reactions to his audience, and the power struggles between the authors on the stage, which would have been invisible to anyone not participating in them. By placing his retrospective account in conversation with *Time*, a proxy for supposedly trustworthy news coverage, Mailer positions himself as the epistemological authority on this event. From the opening pages of the work, Mailer is playing with twin conceptions of "time," both in its manifestation as representative of traditional news media as a whole, and in its distorting effects of retrospection on storytelling. The novel is framed as an attempt to supersede both of these impediments to understanding, working to "leave *Time* in order to find out what happened."⁵⁰ With his intimate knowledge of what occurred, and, more importantly, his very dispensing with a claim to objectivity, he invites readers to place their trust in the authority of his experience, placing (as Mailer writes) "adjectives" and especially "adverbs" (that is, qualifications of perception) beyond the authority of traditional reporting.⁵¹

Collaterally, he is then well-positioned to expound his own views. Unlike Thompson, for whom creation of image is not the stated aim, but a byproduct of his writing, Mailer presents himself as setting out with the explicit intention of recreating himself in the image-world in the first half of the work, so as to provide the reader with a metric against which they can measure his report in the second half. Through what he alerts readers to—"our intimacy with the master builder" of the narrative itself—the reader can account for whatever limits they perceive in Mailer's own ability to report accurately.⁵² During the early stages of the March, for example, Lowell and Mailer arrive to the sound of music, which the author initially notes "was being played by the Fugs," but which Mailer quickly qualifies (being "scrupulously phenomenological").

48 Mailer, *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, the Novel as History*, 53.

49 *Ibid.*, 53.

50 *Ibid.*, 4.

51 *Ibid.*, 282.

52 *Ibid.*, 218.

As per usual, Mailer places himself in the third person: “Mailer heard the music first, then noticed the musicians and their costumes, then recognized [...] it was the Fugs.”⁵³ By comically highlighting the issue of phenomenology, Mailer demonstrates an awareness of the audience’s concerns, and preempts their questions before they even have them.

Thompson and Mailer thus adopt somewhat divergent strategies. By grounding himself in the first-person, Thompson plays on the epistemological authority of experience to give weight to his account; he then crafts his argument through the symbolic representations that largely appear through hallucination. Mailer, on the other hand, constructs his argument through a multifaceted approach to documentation, which addresses the weaknesses of both subjective and objective reporting so as to craft the truest retelling possible. “The History as Novel” contains both the strengths and weaknesses of subjectivity, strong in its documentation of the “history of himself”—the story of an individual experience—and yet, it is weak in its necessarily limited scope.⁵⁴ “The Novel as History” is in turn the embodiment of objectivity, with strength in its far-reaching account of events, and weakness in its necessarily biased universalization. As Begeibing comments in his *Acts of Regeneration*, Mailer responds to traditional objective journalism by “fusing the personal truths of the experience with the events themselves” and sits with the understanding that “neither kind of truth is exclusive to either book.”⁵⁵ By operating in both modes, Mailer is able to account for the flaws of both the Novelist and the Historian, using the strengths of each to balance out the weaknesses of the Other.

The central event in *Armies of the Night*, the March on the Pentagon, exemplifies Mailer’s skill at hewing metaphorical meaning from literal events. He considers the purpose of the March itself “to wound [the Pentagon] symbolically,” extending the ideas that he had developed as far back as “The White Negro.”⁵⁶ In that essay, he suggested that hipsters, who (as he saw it) in *Armies* make up the shock troops of the March, seek to live not within the world, but outside of it, in a life and reality of their own creation. They interact with the world through energy and vibrations, where every interaction ends in either an increase or decrease in the energy that one possesses, and thus one’s ability to perceive the world. Mailer sketches the mindset of the marchers in the same terms, as they seek not military victory, but instead “new kinds of victories [that] increase one’s power for new kinds of perception.”⁵⁷ Through this language of perception and energy, Mailer is able to construct a retelling of the event, which operates simultaneously on the literal and figurative level. He re-forms the march into symbolic civil war while simultaneously portraying the reality of what occurred.

53 Ibid., 119.

54 Ibid., 215.

55 Begeibing, *Acts of Regeneration: Allegory and Archetype in the Works of Norman Mailer*, 141.

56 Mailer, Norman. *Advertisements for Myself*. (Penguin Books, 2018), 54

57 Mailer, 76.

Upon arrival at this climactic scene, the first detail that Mailer notes is the chaotic mix of cymbals, chanting, and spoken word played by the Fugs. Throughout the beginning of the Pentagon episode, much of Mailer's attention is focused on the Fugs' role in the Yippie army's attempt to raise the Pentagon "three hundred feet," where it would then "turn orange and vibrate until all evil emissions had fled this levitation."⁵⁸ Through his description of their production, Mailer implicitly draws a parallel between the intention of the Fugs's artistic performance and his own:

The exorcism would proceed, and the Fugs were to serve as a theatrical medium...While the Indian triangle and the cymbal sounded, while a trumpet offered a mournful subterranean wail, full of sobs, and mahogany shadows of sorrow, and all sour groans from hell's dungeon, while finger bells tinkled and drums beat, so did [Ed Sanders, lead vocalist of the Fugs'] solemn voice speak something approximate to this.⁵⁹

Mailer then goes on to describe Sanders' extended meditation on the evils of the war in Vietnam. Here, in their role as "theatrical medium" the Fugs act as both representative of, and conduit for, experience, as their music simultaneously reflects and feeds the energy of the crowd. Meanwhile, Mailer does the same, recording the event while he participates in it, chanting along with the crowd. He describes a paper passed around in the terms of mutual co-construction of experience: "By the act of reading this paper, you are engaged in the Holy Exorcism," a collective understanding of what the event is and yet also how a common vision means to transform it.⁶⁰

At the same time, the phenomenological information that Mailer conveys is permeated by a tone that matches the strangely serious and absurd approach of the protest itself. While the Fugs chant about the Pentagon's first grope-in for peace, for instance, Mailer finds himself musing about how his "three divorces and four wives" have forced him to concede "the absolute existence of witches."⁶¹ Though the protest of the Pentagon is deeply serious—addressing, after all, the horrors of war in general and the Vietnam War in particular—neither Mailer nor his Yippie shock troops can seem to broach the subject without a bent towards the ridiculous, or even the irreverent. Thus, by jumping back and forth between documentary and experiential modes, from straining "to see what was going on at the head of the column," over to the Fugs playing "Out, demons, out!" to the people "streaming [...] to see what the attack had developed," Mailer mimics the head-turning hysteria of the March.⁶²

Yet, as Mailer's participation in the event comes to its conclusion, his narration snaps back into the Novelist's sharp focus on minute detail and reader-absorption. After

⁵⁸ Mailer, *The Armies of the Night: History as a Novel, the Novel as History*, 120.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 120-121.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 121.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 122, 123.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 126.

stepping past the rope meant to separate the marchers from the Pentagon, what occurs next is illustrated in stark relief, and in a coherent, logical order:

The MP's stood in two widely spaced ranks. The first rank was ten yards behind the rope, and each MP in that row was close to twenty feet from the next man. The second rank, similarly spaced, was ten yards behind the first rank and perhaps thirty yards behind them a cluster appeared, every fifty yards or so, of two or three U. S. Marshals in white helmets and dark blue suits...He made a point of stepping neatly and decisively over the low rope. Then he headed across the grass to the nearest MP he saw. It was as if the air had changed, or the light had altered; he felt immediately much more alive—yes, bathed in air—and yet disembodied from himself, as if indeed he were watching himself in a film where this action was taking place. He could feel the eyes of the people behind the rope watching him, could feel the intensity of their existence as spectators.⁶³

Mailer takes time to describe the smallest details, from his augmented perception of the light, to his feeling of being watched, to the “naked stricken lucidity” of the military police as he strides towards them.⁶⁴ He also returns to an extended meditation, making attempts at recreating the interiority of the MP in front of him, wondering whether he quivered from a “desire to strike [Mailer], or secret military wonder [...] now possessed of a moral force which implanted terror in the arms of young soldiers.”⁶⁵ Throughout this sequence, he refers back to the air quality, calling it “mountain air,” though Washington sits firmly near sea level. He ceases referring to it as such only when he is finally brought away from the crowd and is placed out of view.⁶⁶ In doing so, Mailer sets apart those moments at which his image is being created—when he is on display—not only for the people present, but also for those who will watch the BBC footage later on. Mailer writes of having felt—in a variation on Thompson’s claim, quoted earlier—at once “more alive [...] and yet disembodied from himself, *as if indeed he were watching himself in a film where this action was taking place.*”⁶⁷ Mailer paints himself as aware, in the moment of experience, of the simultaneity of the real and the image. He feels that his actions were being recorded, whether on video or in memory, shaping his conception in the public consciousness.

Though Eason’s separation of ethnographic realism and cultural phenomenology offers a critically important approach to New Journalism, Thompson and Mailer both illustrate that the distinction is not as dichotomous as Eason might suggest. For Thompson, representation of reality is not consistently an active, co-constructive act in conjunction for the reader, as Eason’s categorization of Thompson as cultural phenomenologist might suggest. Though Thompson often qualifies the faithfulness

63 Ibid., 129-130.

64 Ibid., 130.

65 Ibid.

66 Ibid., 130, 138.

67 Ibid., 129. (Emphasis mine)

of his account in “Breakdown on Paradise Boulevard,” he presents the report to the reader as patently representative of what occurred, taken “verbatim” for the sake of “journalistic purity.”⁶⁸ This sort of ostensible straightforwardness strays toward the realm of ethnographic realism in that it assumes a shared perception with the reader, namely that verbatim recordings are a “purer” representation of reality than memory or perceptual experience. However, the section also has elements of cultural phenomenology: it cedes the fragmentary nature of reality (indeed, the manuscript is “splintered,” acknowledging the inability to communicate that perceptual experience). These sorts of paradoxical, intermediate moments expose the weaknesses of Eason’s categories. Though they are at times not as strictly separate as one might wish, they still prove useful in the framework that they provide to describe the reciprocal interaction of the image-world and reality in these pieces, and how Thompson and Mailer’s understanding of that relationship shapes their reconstruction of self.

In spite of the fact that the world appears irreparably fractured, into brutish factions that populate Washington and Las Vegas, Mailer and Thompson both use the image-world as a tool to construct a more stable, cohesive self. The March, for Mailer, is an almost incommunicably chaotic event; however, by placing himself at the center of it in his retelling, he builds an image of Norman Mailer which, though at times confusing and complex, is nonetheless solid. This reconstitution of the self comes as a result of the interplay of reality, in his actions, and the image-world, in his book and other representations. By this self-reflexive recreation, he puts forth an addendum to Eason’s categories, whereby the journalist is able both to penetrate the image to reveal the reality (for example in his rebuttal of the *Time* depiction) and to understand the implication and mutualistic relationship of the image on reality, and vice versa. Through these complications, we see how each journalist simultaneously supports and undermines Eason’s distinctions. By bringing each category into question, and the two into conversation with one another, we can then most fully explore these modes of representation. ♦

68 Thompson, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas: A Savage Journey into the Heart of the American Dream*, 161.

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COGNITION, DOMINATION AND COMPLEXITY:

A Speculative Outline of Intersections Between Cognitive Activity and Structures of Control, and Their Relation to Dynamics of Complexity and Simplicity

RYAN CARDOZA

*“Organization is suppression.”*¹

*“Life is founded upon the premise of a belief in enduring and regularly recurring things; the more powerful life is, the wider must be the knowable world to which we, as it were, attribute being.”*²

*“Morality of truthfulness in the herd. ‘You shall be knowable, express your inner nature by clear and constant signs—otherwise you are dangerous: and if you are evil, your ability to dissimulate is the worst thing for the herd. We despise the secret and unrecognizable.’”*³

1 Land, Nick, interview by James Flint. *Organization is Suppression* (February 1997)

2 Nietzsche, Friedrich. “Will to Power.” In *Will to Power*, by Friedrich Nietzsche, 298. New York: Random House Inc., 1968.

3 Nietzsche, Friedrich. “Will to Power.” In *Will to Power*, by Friedrich Nietzsche, 158. New York: Random House Inc., 1968.

1) Introduction

Cognition and control are like two intertwined vectors of domination. To *identify* something is to bring it into one's own order, so that it may *become knowable*—so that it may be *suppressed* into boundaries which facilitate a clear and unified apprehension of it. To implement a law of nature is to organize phenomena into something apprehensible; to conceptualize something is to integrate it into parameters of explication, and, thus, into the order of the knowable. *The Human*, which is unaware of its fate as being *doomed to want to know*—being doomed to *need to make knowable*—gives names and systems to nature so that it might bring phenomena into its order of identification, thereby dominating them. A system of sovereignty is no different; an Empire that expands inevitably makes territories and peoples *known* to it; the State makes its territory knowable by *imposing categories of representation* onto geographical spaces, making its citizenry knowable by bringing it into its order of domination—into its realm of *identification*, so that it might *know it*. Functions of control and functions of cognition intersect in the sense that both employ *techniques of domination*, identification being but one of these techniques, albeit a very important one. The eyeball, which observes physical phenomena, and the eye of a surveillance camera, are both products of the same drive—they express the command “*make knowable!*”

Conquest is a word that commonly describes the trajectory of Empires or States, but the order of knowledge, too, has a conquest: a trajectory of cognitive-intellectual imperialism. If it is observable to us, then it is not immune from systematization and integration into something cognizable. Not even the stars are out of reach from the cold hands of knowledge, which bring them into the realm of identification, and which systematize their organizations, giving them names, and applying laws to their behavior.

The story of control on earth is one whose trajectory is guided by *concepts*, which have a *relative autonomy* in the sense that the power of the concept is the power of the particular control system that incarnates it and that is guided by it. Internal to every regime of domination is a cohesive conceptual structure that determines the way it operates and functions. A critical reconfiguration of a concept necessitates a substantial reconfiguration of the control structure that envelops it.

I start with the following points, which will be expounded upon in what follows:

- 1) Cognition and control converge at the point of *the integration of materials into organized aggregates, the partitioning of matter into distinct categories of representation, and the selection out of what is not capable of being schematized.*

2) Higher-level operations of unification and integration—whether operations of a regime or operations of mind—are conditioned by the possibility of very high degrees of stratification at the level of structural organization.

3) Stratification is not only a condition, but is also a shared tendency between cognition and control; the double-helix of control and cognition are connected by a bridge of stratification. Functions at the level of the mind and mechanisms at the level of political control *integrate, systematize,* and *identify* (which necessarily implies a form of stratification).

4) Structures of political control have as their internal mechanisms *relatively autonomous concepts*. Relative autonomy is established in contradistinction to absolute autonomy, in the sense that concepts are not unconditioned Platonic Ideas, but are rather *relatively autonomous*, since the concept guides the functioning of the regime, and the totality of the conceptual structure functions independently of any individual subject thinking or apprehending it.

5) Concepts and materiality interact with one another through relations of feedback and interpenetration.

2) Stratification

In this paper, I will be using the definition of stratification provided by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, wherein *Stratification* “consist[s] of giving form to matters, of imprisoning intensities or locking singularities into systems of resonance and redundancy, of producing upon the body of the earth molecules large and small and organizing them into molar aggregates. Strata are acts of capture; they are like ‘black holes’ or occlusions striving to seize whatever comes within their reach.”⁴ Stratification (when considered at the level of materiality) is the *suppression* and *imprisonment* of primary intensive matter. Stratification at this level is the process whereby the indeterminacy and disparate potentialities of intensive material flux are suppressed into more rigidified and complex forms of determinate organization. When one refers to something that is stratified, he speaks about something that can also be said to have some degree of sophistication, which necessarily implies order. Stratification will be a useful concept, because we can use it to talk about the convergence of certain tendencies two different levels of matter without equivocating between levels. The two levels at which stratification occur are 1) the level of human cognition/cognitive activity in general, and 2) the level of materiality. While stratification extends to both levels, the precise nature of stratification implemented at one level is not reducible to

4 Guattari, Gilles Deleuze and Felix. "A Thousand Plateaus; Capitalism and Schizophrenia ." In *A Thousand Plateaus; Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, 40. Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

the nature of stratification at the other level; there is no equivocation between levels, only an “isomorphism without correspondence”⁵ between the two.

3) Scientific Conceptualization; Physics

In his *Will to Power*, Friedrich Nietzsche writes that “*Thinking* in primitive conditions (pre-organic) is the crystallization of forms, as in the case of a crystal.—In *our* thought, the essential feature is fitting new material into old schemas (=Procrustes’ bed), *making* equal what is new.”⁶ According to Nietzsche, when we refer to human thought, we undertake a *process of integration and equalization*. If we look at certain disciplines of human knowledge, we can see this tendency of “*making* equal what is new”⁷ in a very potent and effective register. Physics is a practice that often proceeds by integrating different lines of information (different causal chains) into simple and unified schemata that explain these phenomena.⁸ In the case of Isaac Newton, the law of universal gravitational attraction is such a schema in the sense that it is meant to explain highly diverse phenomena. Yet, the law itself is a mathematical simplicity of sorts—the inverse square law.⁹ The simplicity of the law integrates the phenomena it is meant to explain into a *unified system of understanding*. The parameters of a scientific law are *imposed* onto phenomena in order to facilitate a conceptual understanding that can be further built upon, and the application of a law forms a schema through which the particular phenomenon in question is translated and codified, in the hope that the schema itself can also continue to be engaged with as science develops. Phenomena hitherto not understood by us become *dominated*; occurrences in nature are colonized and partitioned into territories that now belong to the sovereignty of knowledge.

What’s interesting, however, about this integration of phenomena into unified understandings is that, in observing the materials upon which these laws are imposed—such as the relations of the planets in orbit—there is nothing that suggests an essential simplicity that is absolutely independent of human cognition or perception. Moreover, why is it that humans come to understand relatively diverse phenomena as implicitly capable of being integrated into a unified scientific or mathematical schema? We agree with Nietzsche that the reason for this has to do with processes of integration and equalization as tendencies of cognitive functioning. The desire for more knowledge is the desire to integrate what is new into a schema that is further utilizable, and which can continue to be built upon. It is simply taken as a given that physical phenomena can be subjected to this process.

5 *A Thousand Plateaus; Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987.

6 Nietzsche, Friedrich. “Will to Power.” In *Will to Power*, by Friedrich Nietzsche, 273. New York : Random House Inc., 1968.

7 *Ibid.*

8 For more on the relation between scientific laws and different causal chains, see Stewart, Jack Cohen and Ian.

“Collapse of Chaos; Discovering Simplicity in a Complex World .” In *Collapse of Chaos; Discovering Simplicity in a Complex World*, by Jack Cohen and Ian Stewart, 13-14. New York: Penguin Books, 1994.

9 *Ibid.*

4) Identification

a) Partitioning

At a level that is further removed from specificity of scientific conceptualization, there is the act of *identification* in general. To speak of identification is to speak of a connection between points; the connection between the agent who identifies and the matter that comes to be identified as a *thing*. Identification is the mechanism that bestows *thinghood* onto matter. Identification is also an example of stratification at the level of human cognition; to the extent that identification *integrates* in the same way that processes of stratification integrate indeterminate matter into a determinate form. Identification is an action that *selects out*; the bestowing of thinghood onto matter implies the partitioning and selection out of any difference that would disrupt the simple continuities involved in the apprehension of a thing as a particular thing. That which is *different*—or that primary intensive materiality which would overturn thinghood as a category coextensive with representation – is *partitioned outside* of the territory of identification. Any particular instance of identification effectuates a partition at two different levels: 1) At the level of *things*; in the sense that to identify a thing or an aggregate of things is to select out *other things*, which are not part of that particular occurrence of identification, and, 2) at the level of *primary intensive materiality*; in the sense that what is primary at a material level is *made* to be something of the Outside. To be more precise, it is made to be of a transcendental delimitation that relegates it to a territory that cannot be seen or spoken of—primary materiality is encased within the parameters of a distinction whereby it becomes delimited to an “in-itself” on the side of a transcendental barrier that is across from thinghood. To impose this type of inside/outside distinction is precisely to enact a partition onto matter.

According to Immanuel Kant, “pure reason” is a faculty that makes a similar partition. (This, indeed, is dependent on the extent to which we take Kant to be saying that the phenomena/noumena distinction itself is an ‘Idea of Pure Reason’.)¹⁰ The phenomena/noumena dichotomy is not a concept given through the categories of the Understanding; rather, it indexes a point at which Reason encounters a critical limit and produces this distinction in its striving to grasp an Idea of which there cannot be knowledge. The Idea in question is *a world independent of our experience of it*. In trying to conceive of this Idea, thought becomes determined under such significant constraints that try to explicate the problem, which descends into deep conceptual rabbit holes. If it is true that we cannot know the things in themselves, then how can one speak in terms of a *world* completely independent of our experience, when to speak of a *world* is to speak within the parameters of our mechanisms of representation? And, as Arthur Schopenhauer (perhaps gratuitously)

¹⁰ For a more comprehensive and rigorous account of this partition and its implications, see Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998.

pointed out, how can one speak of things-in-themselves when to speak of *things* is to imply multiple objects (the conditions for which are the inner intuitions of space and time)?¹¹ A world independent of our experience would not contain *multiple things* that we cannot know—it would simply be unknowable altogether. But to follow this line of questioning is to miss the point completely. To speak about the problem strictly in terms of “we can/cannot know the things in themselves,” and to point out contradictions in the words being used to articulate it (like in Schopenhauer’s case) wades into the pitfalls engendered by ‘Dialectical Reason.’¹² (I. Kant, *Transcendental Dialectic*, First Book, On the concepts of pure reason 1998) (I. Kant, *Second Book of the Transcendental Dialectic*, First Chapter, The paralogisms of pure reason 1998) One could consider Schopenhauer’s criticism: “how can you say *thing* in itself when even thinghood is something conditioned by out interaction with the world?” But this contradiction bespeaks the nature of the problem. It is precisely due to the nature of the possible pitfalls produced by this problem that Kant knows to say very little about things-in-themselves or a world independent of our experience—he simply says that you may *think* it, but that you cannot *cognize* it. In this paper, I do not aim to take an extreme position on one side of the very famous and inflated philosophical divide that this problem precipitates. In fact, if Kant were indeed correct, and if he were indeed saying what we take him to be saying, many of the philosophers who have fiercely articulated opposing positions of this divide have merely been bickering from two dyads of an antinomy of Pure Reason. Instead, I am of the opinion that this Idea of Pure Reason is a compelling example of *partitioning* at a transcendental level, which appears to be of something that has an extremely significant purchase on tendencies of thought. We do not take the fact that this inside/outside distinction is an Idea of Pure Reason to mean that we cannot talk about processes that implicate such a partition; rather, we understand it to be a powerful example of this tendency that lends itself to the point that we are trying to make about the significance of partitioning as a feature of cognition.

b) Unification/Complexity

A thing is a type of simple unity that can be further integrated into other unified schemata of representation. If I am to identify an object that is in front of me, I can apprehend that object as a simplicity to the extent that it is totalizable in thought. I can integrate this object into a whole of compared and connected representations – a *cognition*, in the Kantian sense of the word.¹³ Not only does identification facilitate

11 Schopenhauer, Arthur. *The World as Will and Representation*. New York: Dover Publishing, 1969.

12 See Kant, Immanuel. *Critique of Pure Reason*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998, specifically the sections; “Transcendental Dialectic, First Book, On the concepts of pure reason.” In *Critique of Pure Reason*, by Immanuel Kant, 394-95. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998., “Second Book of the Transcendental Dialectic, First Chapter, The paralogisms of pure reason.” In *Critique of Pure Reason*, by Immanuel Kant, 438-39. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998., and the section “Transcendental Dialectic.” In *Critique of Pure Reason*, by Immanuel Kant. in general, wherein illusion and fallacious inference of unrestricted pure reason is termed “dialectical.”

13 Ibid.

more sophisticated operations of connecting and comparing representations, but the act of identification itself implicates the apprehension of simplicity to the extent that a *thing* is a unified simplicity. Even if I can analyze and break down a thing into many different parts (or even different *things*), I will never stray outside the category of thinghood, and I cannot venture into the wilderness which identification partitions out without losing all semblance of thinghood and representation. Underneath, however, the operations of simplicity lies a dense complexity that bears no resemblance to the identity of thinghood. Contemporaneous with the apprehension of a simple identity such as thinghood are highly complex processes and firings at the molecular level of the brain. Additionally, the brain itself is a highly complex structure with more densely layered intricacies in functioning than the most robust computer (currently, at least), and the brain is nested within the larger—but still highly complex—structure of the human body, which is far from short of coexisting and comingling systems of organization. The dense material complexity of the body is an example of a *highly stratified structure*, which functions as the productive conditioning for “higher-level” operations (in this case, operations of identification, cognition, representation) without resembling them.

5) Conceptual Regimes; Societies of Control

In a short essay entitled “Postscript on the Societies of Control,”¹⁴ Deleuze identifies two distinct conceptual structures that accord with two distinct regimes of domination. At the time of writing the essay, according to Deleuze, society was standing on a precipice that faces an auspicious horizon: the arrival of a new regime—*control societies*. The regime that Michel Foucault called the “disciplinary society” is progressively being phased out in favor of a regime with an essentially different conceptual structure.¹⁵ Deleuze compares the structures of the two regimes and indexes distinctions that concern a difference of concepts. Each of the two societies incarnates a distinct conceptual structure, and domination is effectuated in accordance to the structure of each particular concept. I believe that Deleuze’s analysis and theoretical approach lend themselves to a concrete example of what we have been referring to as “conceptual regimes,” or regimes that are guided by concepts. The two concepts in question are not only a way to describe either regime, but they are also something that is *said of each regime* in a significant sense. Below, we will briefly outline some of the structural differences that Deleuze indexes in each regime. His allusion to the increasing level of complexity in the new regime also gives us another example of the dynamic between high degrees of stratification and simplicity. The distinctions between the two regimes discussed in the essay will be referenced in terms of *identification, territory, and complexity*.

¹⁴ Deleuze, Gilles. “Postscript on the Societies of Control.” *October*, 1992: 3-7.

¹⁵ *Ibid.* “... a disciplinary society was what we already no longer were, what we had ceased to be. We are in a generalized crisis in relation to all the environments of enclosure – prison, hospital, factory, school, family.”

Identification: The precise manner in which each regime brings a citizenry into its order of *identification* presents two distinct cases. Under the mechanisms of disciplinary societies, citizens are placed on one side of an individual/group partition, and are defined and identified by the regime in accordance with these limitations. The individual is determined in contradistinction to the group. But the workings of control societies facilitate an identification that is more abstract: “We no longer find ourselves dealing with the mass/individual pair. Individuals have become “dividuals,” and masses, samples, data, markets or ‘banks.’”¹⁶ The aforementioned individual/group partition no longer has a place in the primary conceptual mechanisms of control societies—operations of quantitative abstraction act on the populace such that they primarily become identified as abstract mathematical aggregates.

Territory: The spaces of disciplinary societies are *analogically* connected enclosures or *molds*. Each enclosure is an independent variable that starts from zero. The individual is at school, *now* at work, *now* with the family; one “never stops starting” from zero.¹⁷ Disciplinary societies consist in spaces in which the individual always starts from a blank slate in learning a new discipline (work, schooling, family). In contrast with this, societies of control are characterized by the *continuous modulation* of metastable states; one is always undergoing more training, preparation or schooling.¹⁸ The closures of disciplinary societies dissipate, opening wide onto a complicated, seemingly un-partitioned space of flux, continuity, and relationality that give themselves to power; there is no longer a political space because everything is now political; there is no space in which privacy exists to the extent that mechanisms of surveillance only become more and more sophisticated. The ‘public sphere’ is no longer a distinct, purely physical space, but rather becomes inverted and enmeshed with certain pockets of cyberspace.

Complexity/Stratification and Identity: The arrival of control societies at the impending end of the twentieth century bespeaks an omen which envisions a labyrinthine entanglement of connected serpent tails and cryptic vapors which conceal molecules of venom. The change from *disciplinary societies* to *control societies* indexes a distinct *increase in complexity*.¹⁹ (“The coils of a serpent are even more complex than the burrows of a molehill.”) The (conceptual) structure of the *control* regime is far more complex than the structure of the *disciplinary* regime it supersedes. This is also to say that control societies are more *rigorously stratified* than disciplinary societies. And it is none other than this dense level of stratification in terms of complex structural organization that facilitates the emergence of *unified simplicities*. *A degree of stratification which is adequate to an idea of rigorous complexity is the condition for the possibility of emergent simplicities*. In the particular case of a conceptual regime,

16 Ibid.

17 Ibid.

18 Ibid.

19 “The coils of a serpent are even more complex than the burrows of a molehill.” Ibid.

high complexity facilitates unifications and simplicities at the surface level of its functioning and instantiation. For, in fact, a corporation or a datum is nothing more than one of these mysterious, “emergent” simplicities?²⁰ And to the extent that it becomes a function of political tactics that are currently deployed within control societies, is *identity* not one of these simplicities? The current tactical use of identity in American political spaces is extremely ubiquitous, from racial identitarianism on the right, to identity as a compartmentalizing mechanism for groups which are purported to require activist assistance on the left. Meanwhile, many people who claim they would like to move away from “identity politics” have no problem appealing to the abstract identity of the country, the equalizing power of which is apparently sufficient in subsuming any and all adversarial relations between groups. Identity has become widespread as a political tool because the current parameters of domination under which we are determined facilitate the intensified instantiation of this vaporous simplicity. Obviously, identity is an illusion that has long had a formal reality contemporaneous with the abstract and material processes of the brain. It just so happens that the complexity of the current regime determines its effectiveness as a political tool. This is not something that was present when Deleuze was analyzing the characteristics of control societies. Perhaps even this highly complex regime has reached its critical point of saturation.

6) Complexity - The Body

Another complex structure, which facilitates the ‘functioning of unities’ like identity, is the Human. Humans are *highly stratified* organisms. It is this high degree of stratification at the material level—in this case, at the level of the body—that facilitates the capacity to *identify* and *stratify* at the level of cognition. In general, highly stratified systems have the capacity to *produce sophisticated schemata of unified and simple understandings*. The high level of material stratification in the body as a whole also facilitates abstract functions like identity, concepts, and conceptualization. The human body is a highly complex machine, even within just the eye/brain connection alone. In a procedure that requires a high amount of processing power, the brain creates the illusory experience of looking “through” one’s eyes. In reality, however, the retina—which is at the back of the eye—stops all light, and what appears as a *continuity* of colors and shade are in fact “pictures” or “frames” that are *discretely* captured and transmitted as electrical impulses by the retina’s nerve cells (and then sent to the brain).²¹ In the 1960s, David Hubel and Torsten Wiesel proved that about half of the nerves that connect the eye to the brain are not simply passive receptors of light input, and that some fibers in the optic nerve actually convey highly complex

20 Deleuze, Gilles. "Postscript on the Societies of Control." October, 1992: 3-7. "... but in a society of control, the corporation has replaced the factory, and the corporation is a spirit, a gas."

21 Stewart, Jack Cohen and Ian. "Collapse of Chaos; Discovering Simplicity in a Complex World." In *Collapse of Chaos; Discovering Simplicity in a Complex World*, by Jack Cohen and Ian Stewart, 155. New York: Penguin Books, 1994.

messages to the brain in the form of electrical impulses.²² We see in three dimensional dimensions, even though our eyes only receive input from two. This is because both halves of the optic tectum (also known as the *Superior colliculus* in the literature, a structure common to the mammalian midbrain, which contains the neuronal visual pathways of both eyes) receive information from each eye—the right side of each retina sends its information to the left side of the tectum, and vice versa.²³ The ear is another very complex organic device; the extremely small hair cells (of which humans have 15,000) on the basilar membrane are tuned to specific frequencies so that particular pitches are sensed at different positions along the cochlea.²⁴ The cochlea is a “tuned receptor” that converts *frequencies* from vibrations of the eardrum to corresponding *positions* of vibration in the basilar membrane.²⁵ The brain itself is an organ that also has a deeply intricate “structure.” The cerebrum consists of two cerebral hemispheres, and each hemisphere is connected to the other by thick bands of nerve fibers, with one larger fiber known as the *corpus callosum*.²⁶ Each hemisphere has approximately three layers; the first and outer layer (i.e. the cerebral cortex), the second and central layer, which is made up of white matter, and the third and deepest layer (also known as the *basila ganglia*), which is made up of gray matter.²⁷ If we look deeper into the brain, we find other structures such as the *thalamus* or the *hypothalamus*. Each sub-structure of the brain has its own intricate internal organization, and different sections of the brain correspond to different aspects of cognitive function.²⁸ The body is certainly replete with order and organization, and to this extent, qualifies as a very stratified aggregate of matter.

7) Concepts and Materiality

Concepts are not precluded from interacting with materiality by virtue of their abstract level/function. This notion presupposes a framing of the distinction between the abstract and the concrete, which is unsustainable to the extent that it implies a relation of strict separation between the two. In reality, the abstract and the concrete are enmeshed within each other, and thinking is both a locus of convergence and an interpenetration between the two levels. I do not wish to imply that the abstract and that the concrete are not distinct or different from one another. Rather, we are calling into question the precise nature of their separation. They can be thought of

22 Stewart, Jack Cohen and Ian. "Collapse of Chaos; Discovering Simplicity in a Complex World." In *Collapse of Chaos; Discovering Simplicity in a Complex World*, by Jack Cohen and Ian Stewart, 156. New York: Penguin Books, 1994.

23 Ibid.

24 Stewart, Jack Cohen and Ian. "Collapse of Chaos; Discovering Simplicity in a Complex World." In *Collapse of Chaos; Discovering Simplicity in a Complex World*, by Jack Cohen and Ian Stewart, 158. New York: Penguin Books, 1994.

25 Ibid.

26 Stewart, Jack Cohen and Ian. "Collapse of Chaos; Discovering Simplicity in a Complex World." In *Collapse of Chaos; Discovering Simplicity in a Complex World*, by Jack Cohen and Ian Stewart, 170-171. New York: Penguin Books, 1994.

27 Ibid.

28 Ibid.

as two different and distinct levels, each with its own distinctive order and dynamic. Additionally, the concrete and the abstract can also be understood as levels that are significantly interconnected and always in relations of mutual interaction. There is a widely discussed phenomenon in science that can give us examples of how different levels of matter can, while remaining distinct and disparate, be internally connected to one another. This is what is typically referred to as *emergence*. For example; the gas laws, which are indexed by *statistical* properties, are determined by dynamics at a micro-level (which is to say a non-statistical level);²⁹ *pressure* is measured by the average number of molecules in a given region of gas; *temperature* is the average kinetic energy of the gas molecules.³⁰ The simple apprehensible averages constitutive of the gas laws are produced by dynamics at a level of matter that is different in nature from the “emergent” level of statistical features. A complex *molecular* dynamic (in this case, the interactions and dynamics of the gas molecules) produces *molar* simplicities (the averages which constitute the gas laws).³¹ Another popular example of emergence is the case of the Mandelbrot set, in which a high degree of geometrical complexity is generated by “simple” dynamical rules that bear no resemblance to what they produce. There is no apparent connection between the dense intricacies of the Mandelbrot fractal and the terse simplicity of the rules for making the Mandelbrot set. These examples are meant to demonstrate scientifically observable instances of feedback and resonance between disparate levels of matter. The contention is merely that a similar relation between levels exists in the case of the abstract-concrete distinction, not that this instance is fundamentally the same in nature as these scientific examples.

If we accept that there are disparate levels of matter that are nevertheless in a relation, then we can establish the two most relevant levels to the problem of the abstract/concrete distinction. There is a *conceptual* level—an order of matter purely concerned with concepts—and an explicitly *material* level of matter. The former corresponds to what one might think of as the abstract and the latter as the concrete. The cognitive activity of a human brain (material/concrete level) imposes partitions onto concepts, which transforms and reconfigures said concepts (conceptual/abstract level) until the reconfiguration of the concept affects activity at the material level of matter. There exists a counter-effectuation of concept and materiality; the cognitive activity of humans entails conceptual re-configurations, implemented partitions, and transformations at the purely conceptual level. These transformations make a difference, insofar as that cognition imposes partitions that entail a distinct change in *what* thought is interacting with (thought engages with a re-configured concept), as

29 Ibid.

30 Stewart, Jack Cohen and Ian. "Collapse of Chaos; Discovering Simplicity in a Complex World." In *Collapse of Chaos; Discovering Simplicity in a Complex World*, by Jack Cohen and Ian Stewart, 233-234. New York: Penguin Books, 1994.

31 For various thorough conceptualizations of relations between “molecular” and “molar”, see *A Thousand Plateaus; Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987., and *Anti-Oedipus; Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983.

well as in *how* it is functioning. Thinking a transformed concept, as well as thinking the transformation of a concept, exacerbates different tendencies and intensities of thought. A concept always corresponds to a degree of intensity—or an intensive zone—to the extent that the concept is grasped within thought. To provide a rough mathematic sequence of what occurs, a reconfiguration in the concept = a change in intensity = thought traverses a new zone of intensity. To the extent that thought is something that occurs in the brain, a material difference made in thought necessitates a difference made in materiality *in general*. The difference is made not only at a molecular level—the material processes that occur in the brain—but also at a molar level; differences made in thought can cause people to take different actions, and to react differently to stimuli than they otherwise would have. To re-encapsulate the dynamic, thought subsists in materiality and in material processes (thought subsists in a brain). Thought enacts transformations at the level of concepts, the transformation of concepts, and enacts a new difference in thought, which effectuates change at molecular and molar levels of materiality.

Outlining this dynamic of abstract and concrete levels and their relation to thought also sheds light on the precise nature of thought's position. That is, *thought is a point of convergence and interpenetration between the two levels*. What is *abstract is immediately apprehensible to thought* and is cognizable *a priori*. Mathematical universals are the best example of this: a right angle, a straight line, an equilateral triangle, all of which are perfectly cognizable *a priori*. These things are immediately apprehensible and graspable in thought, and they have their own order of necessity. I am perfectly capable of cognizing a straight line *a priori*, and the essence of the straight line is such that if I imagine three straight lines congruent with one another, they each form an equilateral triangle. However, one never encounters in experience (i.e. 'the concrete') a perfectly straight line. What is 'concrete,' on the other hand, is *clearly and immediately grasped* by mechanisms of perception. Yet, there are things encountered in experience that are clearly not cognizable *a priori* (or, at least, not as easily as our straight-line example). The example that Aristotle gives is "the snub nose."³² A misshaped nose is something immediately perceived; however, we cannot grasp it in thought with the same efficacy as we do with mathematical universals. *The abstract is concrete in thought, but the concrete is abstract to thought*. If we relate this configuration of the abstract/concrete distinction regarding thought to our discussion of conceptual/material orders of matter, we can also view the interaction of the two orders (concepts and materiality) in another equally valid way; concepts are something abstract, and engage, and deal with, the concrete abstractly, or by virtue of abstract connections. The cognition of an object is an action that is enmeshed within the territory of the concrete, but the activity of cognition entails the powers and aspects of the abstract, abstract faculties, and the powers of abstraction. (I am tentatively defining abstraction

³² For a similar distinction between differences in accessibility of the Abstract and the Concrete, see Aristotle's *Metaphysics*.

here as the apprehension of abstract properties [the straight/straight line], which are coextensive with the cognition and experience of a concrete object.)

8) The Implementation of Concepts in a Regime

In order that a regime effectively realize the concept that is said about it, concepts must be configured and interacted within a particular way. This can be understood in terms of the conceptual-materiality circuit. The material order and the conceptual order must interact in order to implement conceptual structures into material structures of control. A partitioning and value distribution process must occur in terms of concepts in order for this to happen. This is something that is necessary for the regime to employ, since concepts apprehended at a purely abstract level are not sufficient for political instantiation. Take something like equality: even though a dichotomous relation can be said of purely conceptual articulations of equality—to the extent that equal/unequal is an abstract conceptual principle—articulations that are exclusively of the conceptual level are obviously not insufficient for politics. The order of the abstract on its own is too *cold* for political dynamics; *heat* must be applied in order to set things in motion. A partition must be applied to the concept, and values must be distributed according to the partition. At the conceptual level, a stricter partition must be applied to equality; the partition is *imposed* as an overlay to the purely conceptual dichotomy (equality/inequality), and different values are distributed to the two sides of the instantiated partition. In accordance with the relation of feedback between levels, the implementation of this partition functions on the part of those material institutions that conceive of it, who, in turn, determine the concept of equality in a certain way. The determination of this concept effectuates how the political program carries out that conception, and in what manner it does so at the actual/concrete level. It might be objected that the aforementioned dichotomy of equal/unequal already invokes a type of conceptual partition, even though we are talking about it as if it is something different in kind from the partitioning process. This type of dichotomy exists completely *a priori*, so even if a partition is said about it, it is a partition that occurs at a level irrelevant/distinct from the political instantiation of concepts. Pairs of *a priori* conceptual differences, such as straight/curved, discrete/continuous, or equality/inequality, are not *deliberate* partitions on the part of any given subject or regime. It would be more accurate to say that they are conceptual dichotomies that incarnate tendencies and internal limitations in thought.

9) Conclusion; Complexity—The Order of Knowledge and Nihilism

If we are told that the arrow of time necessarily corresponds to an increase in disorder, then the trajectories of both control structures and the domain of human knowledge would exemplify a tendency that does not accord with this postulate. The arrow of time that follows the trajectories of our control-cognition double helix also appears

to correspond with a progressive increase of *order* rather than disorder over time. Deleuze's example of control societies alludes to this—political domination begins to become more complex, more sophisticated. Even before the control society, the modern State in general appeared to index something particularly sophisticated and abstract. What exactly is the State? It is not completely physical since many of its important functions (such as law and rights) are not concrete. Yet, despite not being completely physical, it clearly exists, and disobeying the injunctions of this thing that is not completely physical still has concrete material consequences (such as going to jail or paying a fine). On the other side of the double helix, the body of human knowledge becomes extremely saturated with systems and sub-systems of organization. Knowledge considered as a total body is not only a system of information, preservation, and organization. It is also like a gigantic complex of interlocking and communicating systems. Different intellectual disciplines communicate and interact with one another, often forming new sub-disciplines. Sometimes there is even a synthesis that produces a completely novel field. Even as older schemata become phased out or invalidated by new discoveries, archaic systems or ideas sometimes resonate with newer scientific projects, and can be re-integrated and updated into contemporary scientific practices. The order of knowledge is like an expanding but increasingly detailed web whose parallel lines resonate and communicate with one another. Different sections of the web are sometimes folded into and connected to other parts of the web, yet, the structural totality retains its distinct parts, and the entire thing continues to increase in size and detail.

However, as this web becomes more and more detailed, a corresponding dynamic arises that is different from the other dynamics contemporaneous with complexity that we touched upon earlier. This web of knowledge possesses *within it* unified simplicities, but there is no higher-level simplicity that emerges on behalf of this sprawling structure of complexity. In the complexity of the human body/brain, we have something like identity, as well as abstract operations of identification and cognition. In the practice of science, which is an activity within the body of knowledge, we have the conceptualization and unification of phenomena under laws of nature. With the increased complexity of control societies, we witness the emergent function of certain mechanisms like corporations, data sets, and code. Where is the level of unification that corresponds to this highly stratified body of knowledge? There does not appear to be a connected level of unified simplicities and/or abstractions that corresponds to this complex web. However, this does not mean that there is no a corresponding dynamic related to the increasing order in the body of knowledge. As knowledge becomes more saturated with order, another tendency intensifies in connection with the former dynamic. If one looks *up* for a corresponding process of unification at a higher level, it looks like nothing is there. But if one looks *down below*, he will find that there *is* nothing. There seems to be a flattening effect; something becomes *liquidated*, something is increasingly *becoming*

leveled. The progressive acquisition and articulation of abstract universals on behalf of knowledge causes the implementation of a concrete universal of *disenchantment* among those organisms that are supposed to be its inheritors. The more about the world that is rigorously explicated and systematized on behalf of knowledge, the more that we seem to feel as if something that once deeply belonged to us is being expropriated from us before our very eyes. In fact, there seems to be almost no limit to what can be expropriated from our most cherished, personal intuitions about ourselves as they become articulated and codified into the colder, more impersonal territory of knowledge. This is because processes of knowledge and intelligence *disintegrate*, and what is being disintegrated are the givens upon which we have constructed very useful fortresses of illusion and ignorance that keep us sheltered from the Outside. Rather than producing a corresponding dynamic of *unification*, the trajectory of knowledge effectuates a dynamic of the intensified *disintegration* and *destruction* of unities—the destruction of *givens* which knowledge finds to have *never existed in the first place*. The liquidation of the ‘given’ opens humanity up to the absolute indifference of a universe that does not consider humankind to be nearly as important as it finds itself. Looking to a universe that operates with complete autonomy (but with no knowledge), we find ourselves on the other side of that chiasmus, as something endowed with knowledge, but with little to no autonomy. In understanding itself to be determined by impersonal and autonomous processes which *lack* knowledge, something which *possesses* knowledge apprehends its own lack of autonomy. Paradoxically, the condition of possibility for cognizing such a disparity is a condition that is produced by the autonomous—by a blind god. As the structure of knowledge becomes more saturated with order and detail, nihility coagulates and rises from the core of the Earth, oozing through the cracks in the surface, melting the ground below us. But there is nowhere to go but further down. ♦

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WALTER BENJAMIN'S [ÜBER DEN BEGRIFF DER GESCHICHTE] and the Marxist Tradition

MAXWELL WADE

Walter Benjamin's "On the Concept of History" has long puzzled readers due to its eclectic and novel theses that call into question orthodox understandings of religion, Marxism, and historical progress. Many readings have emphasized the feeling of rupture throughout the text, treating it as an intense break with his prior intellectual commitments,¹ a political and theoretical "dark night of the soul" at the end of Benjamin's life. Elements of the text certainly support this reading, and many interpreters, such as Gershom Scholem,² take this text as a clear-cut rejection of Benjamin's prior Marxism. In what follows, I aim to push back against this trend in scholarship and argue that "On the Concept of History" can be understood as an attempt to move Benjamin's thought in a new direction, while still remaining faithful to radical political traditions and much of his earlier thought. I will begin by looking at various attempts to make sense of Benjamin that fall short of adequately dealing with the nuances of the text. I will then analyze the theses themselves in an attempt to read them in tandem with other key texts from the Marxist tradition, and will use that method to make sense of the political implications of "On the Concept of History."

1 Wilde, Marc de. "Benjamin's Politics of Remembrance: A Reading of 'Über den Begriff der Geschichte'." *A Companion to the Works of Walter Benjamin*. Ed. Rolf J. Goebel. Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2009. 177.

2 Beiner, Ronald. "Walter Benjamin's Philosophy of History." *Political Theory* 12, no. 3 (1984): 423-434.

Perhaps one of the most basic difficulties in Benjamin scholarship with “On the Concept of History” is the plethora of interpretations around it, many of which contradict each other. Scholars frequently reach radically different conclusions about the meaning of the work and its place within Benjamin’s thought, and consensus on this issue seems impossible. Part of this difficulty, I believe, is rooted in an understanding of Marxism and religion as intrinsically opposed or adversarial (it is no wonder Benjamin’s audience would be left scratching its head at such a strange blending of Jewish mysticism and radical politics). Rainer Nägele, for example, thinks that “Benjamin was compelled to make a paradoxical turn, or *Umschlag*, from politics to religion and this had to do with his psychology.”³ But it is not clear to me where the paradox lies in this turn, unless we are to take it that religion and politics are like oil and water, absolutely incapable of intermixing. Others have even considered this text to represent a kind of melancholic neurosis in Benjamin’s psyche,⁴ thereby completely domesticating, under the pretense of psychologism, many complicated or challenging insights in the text.

Being charitable, one might say that these psychological readings are able to give some insight into the conflicts and tensions that gave rise to such a unique and polarizing text. But they neglect the implications of the text itself, merely treating its content as such a theoretical oddity that it must be filed away under the category of “paradox” or “neurosis.” Other interpretive frameworks for the theses seem to fare no better. As Marc de Wilde explains:

The metaphor of the dwarf in the chess machine, which identifies the relation between historical materialism and theology as among the main philosophical stakes of Benjamin’s theses, has prompted a debate between, on the one hand, scholars inspired by Marxism who, in the wake of Bertolt Brecht’s observation that “the small work is clear and illuminating (despite its metaphors and Judaisms),” emphasize the importance of historical materialism at the expense of theology, and, on the other hand, cultural theorists who, following in the footsteps of Gershom Scholem, emphasize the work’s “deep connections with theology,” claiming that “[often] nothing remains of historical materialism but the word.”⁵

Both interpretative camps end up pursuing a certain method in their reading that emphasizes one aspect of the text at the expense of another. Either Marxism is given centrality while theology is pushed aside, or the opposite happens, and theology becomes the only relevant theme in the text. I agree with Wilde’s assessment that “these interpretations, though not untrue, are one-sided.”⁶ They are founded on the same theoretical premise that axiomatically positions religion and Marxism as

3 Rapaport, Herman. “Benjamin as historian.” *Clio* 36, no. 3 (2007): 396.

4 *Ibid.*, 397.

5 Wilde, “Remembrance,” 180.

6 *Ibid.*, 181.

intrinsically opposed, with the coexistence of these two intellectual currents being taken as an oddity or abnormality. If Marxism and mysticism are being talked about together in such a way that they are influencing or supplementing each other, the orthodox critic—either Jewish or Marxist—reacts immunologically against the “contamination” of their tradition by an outside influence. The Orthodox Marxist readers, à la Brecht, are forced to jump through hoops to explain away the dominant messianic themes as either incidental or mere parables.⁷ The “cultural theorists,” conversely, take this text as an expression of Jewish religiosity that only incidentally has similarities to radical political thought. These readings place ideological purity over textual fidelity to the point of incoherence, and in doing so, distort Benjamin’s message that these theses “[do] not designate the precedence of one of these concepts over the other but rather points to their independence.”⁸ Benjamin challenges his readers to rethink the relationship between Marxism and religion, and unfortunately it seems that many have failed to live up to this task.

Of course, I speak to more than just the interplay between Marxism and religion. Readers have rightly pointed out from the start that Benjamin’s reconceptualization of time and his subsequent rejection of progress, as well as his messianism and notions of redeeming the past, are all generally anathema to what is normally taken as the standard premises of Marxist thought. If progressive teleology, future-oriented history, and a rejection of religious sentiment all constitute the theoretical core of Marxism,⁹ then perhaps it is true that Benjamin here is making a break with tradition. However, a close examination of both “On the Concept of History” and selections from Marx and Engels will serve to complicate this picture, showing how Benjamin is engaged in a project that seeks to bring back to the foreground certain elements in Marx’s work that were glossed over by later readers in favor of a simpler, more “systematic” and uncomplicated Marxism.

First and foremost, we must turn our attention to Benjamin’s reconceptualization of time. Time is an overarching theme throughout the text and remains a crucial point of focus for Benjamin’s attack. The metaphysics of time—how we conceptualize our place within history, and how time is treated politically are all intertwined, and

7 “According to Tiedemann, even explicitly theological concepts in Benjamin’s theses, such as ‘the Messiah, redemption, the angel, and the Antichrist,’ are thus merely to be taken as ‘images, analogies, and parables, and not in their real form.’” Ibid.

8 Ibid.

9 The label of “Marxism” itself has a complicated and interesting history, especially since Marx himself famously rejected the “Marxism” of his contemporaries, saying “what is certain is that I myself am not a Marxist.” The philologist Michael Heinrich takes this to mean Marx was engaged in a constantly changing critical project, rather than a “rigid science” found in later Leninist-inspired readers. This makes it quite difficult to pin down an “essence” of Marxism or Marxist thought, especially given the theoretical nuances of Marx’s writing. A main point of this paper will be to problematize the notion of a singular or unified “Marxism,” and instead look to see the ways in which Benjamin, like other “unorthodox” thinkers, can still work within the tradition. See Heinrich, Michael. “Je ne suis pas marxiste.” *Neues Deutschland*, January 24, 2015. Accessed December 11, 2018. <https://www.neues-deutschland.de/artikel/959492.je-ne-suis-pas-marxiste.html>. Full English translation available at <https://libcom.org/library/%E2%80%9Eje-ne-suis-pas-marxiste%E2%80%9C>.

“On the Concept of History” —starts by interrogating a certain unifying concept of time that is dominant in our present historical epoch. The common notion of time in the modern capitalist era is one of “progression through a homogenous, empty time,”¹⁰ which is the primary mode of thought that serves as the basic conceptual framework of the past, present, and future. Formally articulated by “positivist historians” like Eduard Meyer,¹¹ this way of thinking about history rose to dominate the academic study of history and reflects the material changes that have occurred under capitalism. Tied in with the development of new technologies used to subjugate both humanity and nature, this shift in thinking about time is a new development in consciousness (though it is surely one that has “corrupted the German working class” more than anything else).¹² Yet, unlike his earlier works in which historical or technological development would at least open up a new space of freedom, this progressivist historicism seems like pure illusion, an ideological dead-end. For example, the innovation of the photograph is “the first truly revolutionary means of reproduction [...which] for the first time in world history, technological reproducibility emancipates the work of art from its parasitic subservience to ritual.”¹³

This apparent break with the dialectical understanding of technological progress that guided his historical work would surely constitute a break with Benjamin’s prior Marxism if it were the case. However, dialectical tensions are still deeply present within the theses. For all of the polemics against the universal history of historicism, Benjamin also admits that “universal histories are not inevitably reactionary. A universal history *without* a structural [*konstruktiv*] principle is reactionary. The structural principle of universal history allows it to be presented in partial histories.”¹⁴ Universal history “has no theoretical armature”¹⁵—no structure that lets it express the historical particular—and because of this it will produce reactionary tendencies. In this sense, universal history is an unmoored idealistic fantasy: “a kind of Esperanto.”¹⁶ So, while it is true that “historicism rightly culminates in universal history,”¹⁷ it is not universal history that is itself the problem. In fact, it seems that the development of a universal history is a partial movement, one that is as of yet unfulfilled by bourgeois positivism. A true universal history is messianic in nature, as “the messianic world is the world of universal and integral actuality. Only in the messianic realm does a

10 Benjamin, “On the Concept of History,” in Benjamin, Walter. *Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938-1940*. Edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge [MA] and London: Belknap Press (2003), 395.

11 *Ibid.*, 401.

12 *Ibid.*, 393.

13 Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility” (1936-1939), in Benjamin, Walter. *Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938-1940*. Edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge [MA] and London: Belknap Press (2003), 256. A similar example is film, which “enriched our field of perception... by its use of close ups, by its accentuation of hidden details in familiar objects, and by its exploration of commonplace milieux through the ingenious guidance of the camera.” *Ibid.*, 265.

14 Benjamin, “History,” 404.

15 *Ibid.*

16 *Ibid.*

17 *Ibid.*, 396

universal history exist.”¹⁸ Universal history “comes too early” and does not tether itself to the historical materialist framework that can properly give it meaning.

This ambivalent dialectical tension within universal history indicates that Benjamin fully recognizes that there is a glimmer of freedom being opened up within progressivism. Yes, it is woefully destructive, but within that destruction is an element that points toward a redemptive, utopian vision. Here, a natural parallel to Marx emerges:

The bourgeoisie, wherever it has got the upper hand, has put an end to all feudal, patriarchal, idyllic relations...In one word, for exploitation, veiled by religious and political illusions, it has substituted naked, shameless, direct brutal exploitation...All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.¹⁹

Marx, like Benjamin, is no stranger to the horrors of progress, yet the horror likewise opens up a new clarity and vision of an unalienated world. Like the change in the structure of experience that allows for humanity to be able to “face with sober senses” the exploitation they experience, the change in our historical understanding of time and the past compels one to rethink universal history in a genuine, messianic light.²⁰

Much like the previous case of universal history, Benjamin’s idea of messianic time has also confounded many scholars (and not just due to its intentionally religious language). In Thesis A, Benjamin speaks about historicism as “content[ing] itself with establishing a causal nexus among various moments in history [...] the historian who proceeds from this consideration [...] tell[s] the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary,” *i.e.*, one after the other.²¹ Benjamin critiques this precisely because it fails to grasp history as a meaning-giving endeavor: “no state of affairs having causal significance is for that very reason historical. It became historical posthumously, as it were, through events that may be separated from it by thousands of years.”²² The historicist wrongly treats history as a series of events, and, in doing so, fails to realize that events only become historical in retrospect when we reflect upon them and situate their significance in world history.

18 *Ibid.*, 404.

19 Karl Marx, *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, in: *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1972) 473-474.

20 It seems reasonable as well to draw a parallel here with the “change in the structure of experience” Benjamin speaks about in his essay on Baudelaire. Here too there is a loss, a death of a certain aesthetic style, but in this experience of loss there is a new distance created with which one can view history, or in this case, poetry, in a new light. See Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” (1939), in Benjamin, Walter. *Selected Writings, Volume 4, 1938-1940*. Edited by Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings. Cambridge [MA] and London: Belknap Press (2003), 313-55.

21 Benjamin, “History,” 397.

22 *Ibid.*

This was not a point lost on Marx. In his preface of the *Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, Marx writes that:

The bourgeois mode of production is the last antagonistic form of the social process of production – antagonistic not in the sense of individual antagonism but of an antagonism that emanates from the individuals' social conditions of existence – but the productive forces developing within bourgeois society create also the material conditions for a solution of this antagonism. *The prehistory of human society accordingly closes with this social formation.*²³

This passage begins with the standard Marxian understanding of capitalism as that which generates its own conditions of abolition from within. Indeed, though the final portion of the quote is the most noteworthy: all of human “history” is mere *prehistory* up to and including the present. We are living in a prehistorical epoch and only with communism can history truly begin. This is a radically Benjaminian point, to put it in an intentionally anachronistic way, as the past only gains its meaning when viewed through the lens of the utopian messianic time—a time so radically different that it cannot be on the same historical continuum as that which came before. One can likewise read this passage together with another thesis by Benjamin:

Only when the course of historical events runs through the historian's hands smoothly, like a thread, can one speak of progress. If, however, it is a frayed bundle unraveling into a thousand strands that hang down like unplaited hair, none of them has a definite place until they are all gathered up and braided into a coiffure.²⁴

Mapping Marx's schema onto this passage, we can speak of human “prehistory,” (*i.e.*, all hitherto existing class societies) as the “frayed bundle unreeling into a thousand strands,” a mismatched collection of disparate events without meaning or cohesion. However, the communist moment is that which gathers up these historical strands and unifies them into a universal history. Only then can we speak of progress or of genuine history.²⁵

This discussion is valuable because it us can help make sense of Benjamin's call to redeem the past and how it can relate to Marxism. Simply stated, communism is the movement to redeem the past and set history right. Benjamin openly and explicitly explores this theme, first with the idea that “there is a secret agreement between past

23 Marx, Karl. *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*. Translated by S. W. Ryazanskaya. (Moscow: Progress, 1977). Accessed from <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1859/critique-pol-economy/index.htm>. Italics added

24 Benjamin, “History,” 403.

25 Some interpreters may contest this reading of Benjamin on the grounds that this passage from New Theses C is arguing for the structural impossibility of history to run smoothly, therefore indicating the ultimate impossibility of progress. In this case, the comparison with Marx is invalid. However, given Benjamin's other comments on the messianic nature of a (true) universal history, it seems quite coherent to suggest that a redeemed history is one in which time can finally progress without catastrophe or fragmentation.

generations and the present one” that “endowed [us] with a *weak* messianic power.”²⁶ This connection between the past and present establishes a historical continuity in which messianic power is importantly not something that comes from the outside, as in more orthodox theological conceptions, but rather is something possessed by humanity. Mankind has the power to redeem itself—to “succeed in ridding itself of all the muck of ages”²⁷—thereby transforming the past. The past is transformed precisely because, as Benjamin puts it, class struggle “has effects that reach far back into the past. They constantly call into question every victory, past and present, of the rulers.”²⁸ A successful communist revolution means that the blood and suffering of past revolutions were not in vain and that the lives of all revolutionaries, past and present, have contributed to the same final goal.

Benjamin recognizes that this has been at work within the more radical strands of Marxism, as the proletariat is “the avenger that completes the task of liberation in the name of generations of the downtrodden. This conviction, which had a brief resurgence in the Spartacist League, has always been objectionable to Social Democrats.”²⁹ The choice of the name of the Spartacist League is of course not incidental, but is rather a form of remembrance and continuity that reaches back into the past. The revolting proletarians in Germany share the same lineage and connection with the slave revolts of Ancient Rome, in the same way that “to Robespierre, ancient Rome was a past charged with now-time, a past which he blasted out of the continuum of history. The French Revolution viewed itself as Rome reincarnate.”³⁰ Benjamin rightly points out the ways in which truly radical movements have challenged oppression precisely through their shared identification with past struggles, rather than an attempt to redeem future generations.³¹

Redemption of the past is intrinsically tied to historical memory and a sense of shared struggle with prior movements, and this, too, existed in the works of Marx and Engels. Perhaps the best and most striking example of this comes from Engels’ *The Peasant War in Germany*, in which he examines the peasant revolts of the 16th century not merely as a discrete and isolated historical event, but as something that still bears connections and inspiration for revolutionary movements of his time. He writes with great admiration for the radical mystic Thomas Müntzer:

Only in the teachings of Muenzer did these communist notions find expression as the desires of a vital section of society. Through him they were formulated with a certain definiteness, and were afterwards found in every great convulsion of the people, until gradually they merged with the

26 Ibid., 390.

27 Karl Marx, *The German Ideology*, in: *The Marx-Engels Reader*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1972) 193.

28 Benjamin, “History,” 390.

29 Ibid., 394.

30 Ibid., 395.

31 Ibid., 394.

modern proletarian movement...his political programme touched upon communism, and there is more than one communist sect of modern times which, on the eve of the February Revolution, did not possess a theoretical equipment as rich as that of Muenzer of the Sixteenth Century.³²

This passage may surprise some readers, as the stereotype of Marx and Engels as militant atheist arch-materialists still persists. Yet, the identification with religious mysticism as a revolutionary force runs throughout the text, and Engels sees the revolutionary movements of the Medieval period as being fundamentally of the same nature as proletarian movements in his time.³³ Another example of this is how “[Marx and Engels] shared Hegel’s high esteem for the sixteenth century German mystic and heretic Jacob Boehme, saluted by Marx in the *Rheinische Zeitung* in 1842 as ‘a great philosopher.’”³⁴ Here, too, we see the positive appraisal of mysticism by Marx and Engels, particularly in the sense that mystical thinkers were able to glean great insights into politics and philosophy, perhaps even to the extent that “secular” thinkers were not capable of.

Finding these themes in Marx requires a little more digging; his job as a journalist often meant that most of his time was spent writing about the present, not just past revolutions in antiquity. In recent decades, however, more attention has been paid to Marx’s *Ethnological Notebooks*, and scholars like Franklin Rosemont and Kevin Anderson have sought to explore the ways in which Marx saw revolutionary potential in premodern and non-Western social arrangements. Additionally, Marx was fascinated throughout his life by past societies and their relevance for communism, developing a deep fascination with the Iroquois Confederacy and the ways in which this society serves as an alternative mode of life to capitalism. His anthropological notes reveal that “it was not only Iroquois social organization, however, that appealed to him, but rather *a whole way of life* sharply counter-posed, all along the line, to modern industrial civilization.”³⁵ Another example of this can be found in his studies of Russia, which focus on the ways in which the communal lifestyle of the peasantry can provide an alternative pathway than capitalism. In his letter to Zasulich, Marx writes that “his recent studies of Russian society had ‘convinced me that the commune is the fulcrum for a social regeneration in Russia.’”³⁶ Equally relevant is his comment in the preface to the Russian edition of the *Communist Manifesto*, wherein he posits

32 Engels, Friedrich. *The Peasant War in Germany*. (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1969). 30, 37.

33 Likewise, it is important to note how Engels admired utopian religious communities as excellent examples of communism. For example, “In 1844 we find Engels writing sympathetically of American Shaker communities, which he argued, proved that ‘communism... is not only possible but has actually already been realized.’” Rosemont, Franklin. *Karl Marx & the Iroquois*. (Red Balloon Collective, 1992). 5.

34 *Ibid.*, 6.

35 *Ibid.*, 14.

36 Anderson, Kevin B., “Marx’s Late Writings on Non-Western and Precapitalist Societies and Gender,” in *Rethinking Marxism* 14, no. 4 (2002): 89.

that "Russia's peasant communal land-ownership may serve as the point of departure for a communist development."³⁷

These passages are illuminating precisely because they point to a strand of Marx's thinking that emphatically rejects the blind progressivism that Benjamin is critiquing in his theses. Marx is neither shrugging off the suffering caused by capitalism as a historical inevitability nor is he treating communism as a far-off world of the future. Rather, he is searching for alternative developmental paths for the world to take and looking at ways in which communal, egalitarian lifestyles are present in the world at the time of his writing. The great irony is that

At the very moment that his Russian "disciples" - those "admirers of capitalism," as he ironically tagged them - were loudly proclaiming that the laws of historical development set forth in the first volume of *Capital* were universally mandatory, Marx himself was diving headlong into the study of (for him) *new experiences of resistance and revolt against oppression* - by North American Indians, Australian aborigines, Egyptians and Russian peasants.³⁸

This leaves us with new view of Marx that is more in line with Benjamin's perspective. Not only are Marx and Engels deeply interested in the historical continuity between their struggle and past movements, but they also engage with many of the same philosophical issues as well. Challenging simplistic notions of historical progress, as well as grounding communism as an immanent human reality, results in a Marxism that harmonizes—rather than clash—with Benjamin's most radical theses.³⁹

This understanding can also help shed light on the notorious passage from Thesis XVIIa, in which Benjamin writes that "Marx says that revolutions are the locomotive of world history. But perhaps it is quite otherwise. Perhaps revolutions are an attempt by the passengers on this train—namely, the human race—to activate the emergency brake."⁴⁰ On the face of it, this seems radically conservative, rather than revolutionary, intimating that the point of revolution is an attempt to stop history where it is and bring things to a standstill, presumably to prevent further decay. Yet, it seems quite plausible to read Marxian strands here, despite the openly critical attitude Benjamin takes toward him in this section. Reading the two together, one can take the idea that "the history of all *hitherto* existing society is the history of class

37 Marx, Karl, and Frederick Engels. "Preface to the Manifesto of the Communist Party." Marxist Internet Archive. Accessed December 13, 2018. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/preface.htm>.

38 Rosemont, "Iroquois," 30.

39 It is important to note, of course, that it is unlikely (or in some cases, impossible) that Benjamin had read all of these texts from Marx and Engels' corpus. In many ways, their philosophical convergence on some of the same issues and themes points toward the fact that all three thinkers were dealing with many of the same philosophical dilemmas and reached similar conclusions.

40 Benjamin, "History," 402.

struggles”⁴¹ is the locomotive of what Benjamin calls “world history.” This world history is mere *prehistory* for Marx, however, as genuine history has not yet begun, and communist society with its abolition of the division of labor⁴² will bring about history in earnest. Therefore, if class struggle is the locomotive of (pre)history, then it is perfectly coherent to speak about communist revolution as an emergency brake: with the abolition of class society, there is no more “motor” to drive history and “world history” is brought to an end. Benjamin expresses this end of history as a messianic time, a wholly new state of consciousness, and Marx, too, understands communism as a vision in which mankind reaches a new, unalienated consciousness.

In his reading of this passage, the contemporary philosopher Benjamin Noys proposes a reading that reaches similar conclusions:

The conclusion is that the emergency brake is not merely calling to a halt for the sake of it, some static stopping at a particular point in capitalist history (say Swedish Social Democracy – which the American Republican Right now takes as the true horror of ‘socialism’). Neither is it a return back to some utopian pre-capitalist moment, which would fall foul of Marx and Engels’s anathemas against ‘feudal socialism’. Rather, Benjamin argues that: ‘Classless society is not the final goal of historical progress but its frequently miscarried, ultimately [*endlich*] achieved interruption.’ We interrupt to prevent catastrophe, we destroy the tracks to prevent the greater destruction of acceleration.⁴³

This analysis is particularly apt in the way that it recognizes that the pulling of the emergency brake signals not only a rethinking of the kind of historical progression that we are experiencing, but also a radical attempt to break with the whole history of class society. Noys likewise focuses in on a clever double-entendre with break/brake, as “Benjamin’s interruption suggests a more definitive break (or brake) with the aim of production. The stopping of the angelic locomotive tries to jump the tracks of history, or jump out of the vision of history as infinite waiting for the revolutionary situation.”⁴⁴ This “jump” out of history is, after all, “the dialectical leap Marx understood as revolution.”⁴⁵

In fact, even within this same thesis (XVIIa), Benjamin acknowledges the insight made by Marx in this regard. He begins by saying that “in the idea of classless society, Marx secularized the idea of messianic time. And that was a good thing.”⁴⁶ He is, in a very clear way, acknowledging his intellectual indebtedness to Marx—something not really plausible when one considers this text his “break” with Marxism—and sees

41 Marx, *Manifesto*, 473. Italics added.

42 Marx, *German Ideology*, 160.

43 Noys, Benjamin. *Malign Velocities: Accelerationism and Capitalism*. (Lanham: John Hunt Publishing, 2014) 63.

44 Ibid.

45 Benjamin, “History,” 395.

46 Ibid., 401.

the error as rooted in the Social Democrats' elevation of this to an abstract, idealistic principle.⁴⁷ Not only does this emphasize that the problem only began with the Social Democrats (not Marx, who therefore has a correct, or at least unproblematic, understanding of classless society), but he also indicates the ways in which Benjamin remains loyal to a materialist outlook that rejects elevating one's political goals into an unreachable "infinite task." This move toward abstraction is closely tied with the "empty and homogenous time" spoken of earlier, as "once the classless society had been transformed into an infinite task, the empty and homogenous time was transformed into an anteroom, so to speak, in which one could wait for the emergence of the revolutionary situation with more or less equanimity."⁴⁸

Returning to Marx, we again can see two resonant parallels between the two thinkers. The simplistic, reductionist (but unfortunately commonplace) reading of Marx would take him as placing communism in a far-off and distant future, maintaining that future-oriented stance that Benjamin so aggressively critiques in this text. Likewise, another common misreading of Marx takes communism as yet another political ideology, an idealistic framework that needs to be imposed on society from the outside. Yet, Marx explicitly states otherwise in *The German Ideology*, wherein he famously writes that "communism is for us not a *state of affairs* which is to be established, an *ideal* to which reality [will] have to adjust itself. We call communism the *real* movement which abolishes the present state of things."⁴⁹ The abstract as a political goal is rejected precisely because it forces reality to conform to it and is, therefore, an arbitrary and alien imposition on the world that is unmoored from its material conditions. Like Benjamin, there is a rejection of the future tense: the misunderstandings of communism are both that which is "to be," while true communism is squarely focused on the present state of things. It is focused on the here and now, and its power lies precisely in its immanence to the world as it is. Communism is not external or foreign, but rather is "the *real* movement," *i.e.*, the movement that actually exists in the world as it is right now.

When Benjamin speaks about classless society as "frequently miscarried,"⁵⁰ it still means the world is still "pregnant" with communism, much in the same way that Marx sees "the conditions of [the] movement result[ing] from the premises now in existence."⁵¹ This immanence is even more clearly explicated in his notion of messianic time, which shoots the present moment like splinters.⁵² Likewise, "every second was the small gateway in time through which the Messiah might enter."⁵³ These numerous passages all point toward a conception of utopia that is radically immanent

47 "It was only when the Social Democrats elevated this idea to an 'ideal' that the trouble began." Ibid.

48 Ibid., 402.

49 Marx, *German Ideology*, 162.

50 Benjamin, "History," 402.

51 Marx, *German Ideology*, 162.

52 Benjamin, "History," 397.

53 Ibid.

in its temporality, framing the revolutionary break as something that can happen at any time, which is not contingent upon some sort of “historical development” that justifies the exploitation and suffering leading up to it.

Therefore, we can take “On the Concept of History” as representing an attempt to synthesize the systematic and utopian tendencies within Marxism and bring it together into a unified whole. Historical materialism, as a rational and systematic historical framework, understands the role of class struggle and revolution, while messianism, as the utopian dream of redemption and salvation, recognizes the immanence of this radical change and the need to redeem the past from its suffering. Both serve as meaning-giving structures that help one understand the past and present, but not in such a way that resorts back to bourgeois historicism and positivist historiography. The two elements not only complement each other, but they also exert mutual influence in their coexistence, working together to provide a proper political program that can bring about this shattering of time and redemption of the world that Benjamin writes about.

Ultimately, the text should be understood neither as a rejection of the Marxist tradition, nor as an attempt to add a seemingly foreign element—religion—into the theoretical mixture. Rather, Benjamin is drawing on what is already latent in the text, and casts it in a new light, in order to draw attention to it and to cause readers to reevaluate their ossified, overly rigid notions of Marxism and revolution. It is a corrective measure against the failings and shortcomings of the Social Democrats that have ruined the workers’ movement and have let fascism triumph. It is precisely for this reason that this text needs to be understood in continuity with what has come before. Benjamin is working to redeem Marxism and salvage the messianic sparks hidden within, all while remaining loyal to what has come before. ♦

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PATOČKA'S CRITIQUE OF HUSSERL: The Possibility of A-Subjective Phenomenology¹

GABRIEL VIDAL

Phenomenology embodies the project of founding a new philosophical departure, one detached, if possible, from the mistakes—and especially of the biases—of former traditions and serves as a proper philosophical foundation.² The founder of this tradition, Edmund Husserl, proposes breaking with the subjective excesses of idealism and the naïve schemes of realism. This implies the task of debunking two theses: on one hand, the idea that the subject is the creator of the objects that appear to him and, on the other, the idea of the absolute independence of objects, or the thesis of the thing in itself.³ The path taken by Husserl in order to debunk both theses aims to restore the connection between the two dimensions at stake—subjectivity, and objectivity—by putting at the forefront their correlation. To do this, we must abstain ourselves from anticipating any unproven thesis in our investigation and exclusively refer back to the description of appearances in themselves. This is because everything that has the slight possibility of entering into our consideration does so

1 This article contains quotes that are originally in Spanish. All translations have been made by me in this case.

2 David Woodruff Smith, "Phenomenology," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2018 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2018), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/phenomenology/>.

3 This mainly refers to Kant's Thesis as outlined in Critique of pure reason Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, ed. Paul Guyer and Allen W. Wood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999). However, It does not only refer to Kant's interpretation, but to whatever doctrine that considers the object as completely independent of a subject's knowledge or experience.

insofar as it appears, and thus only the ways things appear will bring light to the mentioned correlation. Phenomenology asks us to attend exclusively to what is given in our description of it. Staying in this dimension of primitive donation⁴ of content is what gives phenomenology its rigor, to which Husserl remains faithful in the creation of this new science.

Nonetheless, many posterior phenomenologists have criticized Husserl for overemphasizing one of the two poles of the correlation—namely, the subjective—and so accusations of subjectivism became commonplace in transcendental phenomenology.⁵ The appearance seems to be constantly described in terms of a donation towards and made by the consciousness of a subject, and the acts by which the subject point to objects, but not the other way around.⁶ The problem is that most of the successors have simply disregarded Husserl's point of view, and have restarted the task from mostly different considerations without taking into account his foundational concerns. Jan Patočka is one of the few authors who has revised the foundational problem of phenomenology from a properly Husserlian approach to mind.

If we agree on the fact that Husserl was successful in setting the foundations of phenomenology, then we could claim that, if those foundations are incorrect, then further developments of phenomenology are completely misguided. However, if we can correct Husserlian phenomenology from its mistakes while keeping the foundation unaffected, then we can be reassured of phenomenology's future. This is why the possibility of phenomenology itself may be at stake under Patočka's criticism. If phenomenology, since its inception, already carried a bias in favor of subjectivism, then it was doomed to be a failed attempt at a new departure from former tradition. Patočka's intention is, indeed, to correct this misguided inclination towards subjectivism in Husserl's account, while keeping the fundamental features of phenomenology that allow us to recognize it as unaffected.

I will proceed in showing the most important elements of Husserl's phenomenology: constitution, *epoché* and reduction, the Husserlian description of perception, and the noesis/noema scheme. Then, I will show Patočka's attacks to the previously mentioned points and how these critiques reveal a subjectivist tendency in Husserl, specifically in the gesture of reduction. Finally, I will demonstrate Patočka's proposal of an a-subjective phenomenology that dispenses with reduction and explores a world-horizon as the *a priori* background of appearances.

4 The original word is "donación". It means something like "to be given as it is". When a content is given to consciousness, or makes its presence into it, that's a donation or (donación).

5 Robert J. Dostal, "Subjectivism, Philosophical Reflection and the Husserlian Phenomenological Account of Time," in *Phenomenology on Kant, German Idealism, Hermeneutics and Logic: Philosophical Essays in Honor of Thomas M. Seebohm*, ed. O. K. Wiegand et al. (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2000), 53, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-015-9446-2_4.

6 George Alfred Schrader, "Philosophy and Reflection: Beyond Phenomenology," *The Review of Metaphysics* 15, no. 1 (1961): 92.

II. Husserl's Phenomenology

The necessity of showing the correlation is first seen in *Logical Investigations*,⁷ where Husserl engages in a critique of psychologism, which he claims reduces the logical dimension to that of empirical psychology, and completely disregards its apodictic and ideal character.⁸ In order to elucidate this issue, Husserl traces a distinction between the acts, which allows thoughts about content, and the contents themselves, whereas psychologism reduces all logic only to the acts.⁹ In this way, he shows that the same content can be conceived of, by employing completely different acts of thought (for example, the number “5” can be given to consciousness from conceiving five points as well as five lines). This demonstrates that in order to elucidate the issue of both the ideality and empirical reality of math and logic, it is necessary to pay attention to the correlation of contents and acts in a completely unbiased way, without advancing any thesis about it. Therefore, the inquiry will be about how it is possible that these ideal entities appear in consciousness, or how the apodictic can make its way “inside” something that is singular and contingent. The issue is solved when it is realized that, although ideal entities make their way into consciousness by means of acts, “the subject cannot constitute whatever signification, so constituent acts depend on the essence of the objects in consideration.”¹⁰

Here, the concept of constitution is discovered. That is, contents appear; they are not constructed, but are rather *brought into* presence. Constituent acts are “what makes the object representable” and “do not entail anything else but the act of going out to encounter the entity, in such a way that this entity, in the same act by which it is encountered, can announce itself.”¹¹

This way of conceiving the donation of objects makes Husserl think of consciousness differently. Consciousness is always a *consciousness of something*, such that the content of its consideration always accompanies it.¹² It is not a closed-in-itself structure that is then filled with contents, but it is in itself the pointing towards the object. That activity defines consciousness' essence. This is pure direction of consciousness towards the object—or *intentionality*—is the only thing that we can properly affirm about consciousness.¹³ This allows Husserl to affirm that constitution does not equal the construction of the object: the act is not, in some way, the absorption of the object inside a closed in consciousness, but is rather the appearance of the object to

7 Edmund Husserl, *Logical Investigations* (Routledge, 2013).

8 Dan Zahavi, *Husserl's Phenomenology* (Stanford University Press, 2003), 8–9.

9 Robert Hanna, “Husserl's Arguments against Logical Psychologism,” *Edmund Husserl: Logische Untersuchungen*, 2008, 78.

10 Walter Biemel, “Las Fases Decisivas En El Desarrollo de La Filosofía de Husserl,” in *Husserl. Tercer Coloquio Filosófico de Royaumont* (Buenos Aires: Paidós, 1968), 46.

11 *Ibid.*, 47.

12 Carlo Ierna, “Making the Humanities Scientific: Brentano's Project of Philosophy as Science,” in *The Making of the Humanities. Volume III: The Making of the Modern Humanities*, ed. Rens Bod, Jaap Maat, and Thijs Weststeijn (Amsterdam University Press, 2014), 547.

13 A. David Smith, “Husserl and Externalism,” *Synthese* 160, no. 3 (2008): 319–20.

an intentional consciousness (the object is pointed by intentionality and makes its presence).

I have said that in order to describe ‘appearance as such,’ one must attend to what is given, refraining from fabricating conjectures outside that pure donation. This motivates Husserl, in *Ideas I*,¹⁴ to pin down what this refraining attitude consists in. He calls this the *epoché*, and by means of this *epoché*, we can:

Put out of action the general thesis which belongs to the essence of the natural standpoint, we place in brackets whatever it includes respecting the nature of Being: this entire natural world therefore which is continuously ‘there for us’, ‘present to our hand’, and will ever remain there, is a ‘fact-world’ of which we continue to be conscious, even though it pleases us to put it in brackets.¹⁵

This does not imply the denial of the existence of the world, but implies, rather, its independence as a reality in itself. In this case, it would be possible for the world to be independent of any constituent act. Denying this thesis, then, allows one to make the world appear to an intentional consciousness instead of speculating about it without evidence. What appears to the intentional consciousness constitutes evidence,¹⁶ and what does not appear to it is just subjective construction. So, one can see that the *epoché* not only implies a suspension of the thesis of the independence of the world, but that it also implies a reduction to the intentional field of consciousness.¹⁷ In fact, everything that appears into our consideration does so insofar as it is assessed by this intentional field, which the *epoché* only takes out of its anonymity. By being faithful to this *epoché*, we do not make conjectures about what appears; we only describe what appears before the intentional field through constituent acts. If anything is to possess phenomenological validity, then a constituent act is required. This is what commitment to the *epoché* means: being faithful to the phenomenological reduction by always asking for the constituent act of the object in question.¹⁸

Later in his endeavor, Husserl again describes perception under the new concepts reviewed in the section above. After we commit to *epoché*, we develop a consciousness that points to objects in a completely equal correlation, where the object is neither created by the subject nor exists in a partial transcendence. Therefore, now the description of perception, reduced to the intentional field of consciousness, no longer risks becoming either subjectivism or realism. Therefore, perception will be constituted by three stages: hyletic, noetic and noematic. The hyletical stage refers to hylé as the basic matter of perception; namely, the pure sensation that makes no

¹⁴ Edmund Husserl, *Ideas: General Introduction to Pure Phenomenology* (Routledge, 2014).

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 110.

¹⁶ Ülker Öktem, “Husserl’s Evidence Problem,” *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology* 9, no. 1 (May 1, 2009): 3, <https://doi.org/10.1080/20797222.2009.11433986>.

¹⁷ Steven Crowell, “Phenomenological Immanence, Normativity, and Semantic Externalism,” *Synthese* 160, no. 3 (2008): 339.

¹⁸ Husserl, *Ideas*, 364.

reference to any object whatsoever, in the purely experienced sensation.¹⁹ In this sense, it consists of a *cogitatio* that is a mere ingredient of consciousness, where the ingredient is what makes the private current²⁰ of the subject's experiences. This purely immanent hylé is later animated by noesis, which is the stage in which the purely experienced becomes a trait of a thing.²¹ For example, the pure green becomes the green of a leaf. In this stage hylé no longer makes reference to itself, but instead points towards an object. In this stage, intentionality starts operating and allows consciousness to get outside of itself. Finally, noesis allows the noema to enter, which is the pointed object donated by an intuition.²² In the noetical moment, we point to the object, which by means of intuition, then allows the object to make itself present in the noematical stage. We can even describe falsity and truth within this schema: I can point noetically towards something that does not present itself noematically. In other words, I prepend a signification that does not correspond to the given intuition. Only when the signification is filled with a corresponding intuition does the constitution of the object become successful.²³

Although the former description underlies an effort to attribute equal importance to the subject and object roles respectively, it probably seems that the object is given only by means of acts of consciousness. Thus, it becomes dubious if things that appear to the subject are transcendent to it. There is a chance that everything will be components of consciousness. Husserl solves the issue by introducing the concept of foreshortening.²⁴ There's a substantial difference between merely immanent experiences and proper perceptions. Immanent experiences are given in a completely adequate way to the subject; they are conceived in a completely transparent way.²⁵ In other words, the thing is immediately and completely ended in all its possibilities of being perceived by the subject. Perceptions, on the other hand, are always only shown partially; one can never end all the possible perspectives that the object has to offer.²⁶ This means that perceptions are given inadequately. This foreshortened way of being brought into presence guarantees its exteriority since "an experience is only possible as a living experience but not as anything spatial."²⁷

19 Patrick Whitehead, "Phenomenology Without Correlationism: Husserl's Hyletic Material," *Indo-Pacific Journal of Phenomenology* 15, no. 2 (October 26, 2015): 6, <https://doi.org/10.1080/20797222.2015.1101830>.

20 By 'private current' I mean the subject's own flow of consciousness that is available only to himself. His thoughts, emotions, mental images and other things in motion constitute this private current.

21 Kenneth Williford, "Husserl's Hyletic Data and Phenomenal Consciousness," *Phenomenology and the Cognitive Sciences* 12, no. 3 (September 1, 2013): 502, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11097-013-9297-z>.

22 Ibid.

23 Lambert Zuidervart, "Synthetic Evidence and Objective Identity: The Contemporary Significance of Early Husserl's Conception of Truth," *European Journal of Philosophy* 26, no. 1 (2018): 125, <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejop.12192>.

24 The original term for this mode of appearance is *Abschattung*, and it refers to things that are given as not showing all of its sides. The reference painting tries to portray the idea of an unfinished sketch or perspective. Renaud Barbaras, *Introducción a una fenomenología de la vida: intencionalidad y deseo* (Encuentro, 2013), 43.

25 Juha Himanka, "Husserl's Two Truths: Adequate and Apodictic Evidence," *Phänomenologische Forschungen*, 2005, 93.

26 María Paredes, "Percepción y Atención. Una Aproximación Fenomenológica," *Azafes: Revista de Filosofía*; Vol. 14 (2012), 2014, 84–85, <http://revistas.usal.es/index.php/0213-3563/article/view/11680>.

27 Husserl, *Ideas*, 41.

Here, the distinction between acts and contents is raised again: even though the thing is given through multiple and different foreshortenings, it nevertheless points towards a unique object. Perception is already accompanied by the realization that the perspectives refer to the same object. We do not need to complete all the possible perspectives, nor do we need the mediation of a secondary abstraction or to provide a metaphysical explanation for this realization. In other words, the unity of the object is already given in perception by the many perspectives. This is called apprehension unity.²⁸ Both the possibility of the unity of the object and the foreshortened exteriority guarantee that things are not created by the subject. However, this is not a completely transcendent transcendence²⁹ in the sense that does not imply the independent existence of a world, but, rather, it implies exteriority for the intentional consciousness. In this sense, the external constitutes a transcendence inside immanence,³⁰ which is verified thanks to unprejudiced scrutiny of appearance that, therefore, it is inclined neither towards the subjectivist idealist thesis nor the realism of things in themselves.

III. Patočka's Critique

We must emphasize that, for Husserl, in the act of perception, only experiences are components of consciousness. Perception as such, however, including the foreshortenings and apprehension of unity, has an objective character. This betrays, according to Patočka, the explanation that Husserl himself proposed as a distinction for experiences and perception. Husserl says that the foreshortened donation of things guarantees the external character, and, so, everything that is given adequately constitutes consciousness' components. Indeed, foreshortenings are given to the subject as empirical data, which lacks signification. But in the case of what is also supposed to be given as objective—namely the apprehension of unity—the donation is neither forefronted nor empirical data, “but apprehension itself is affirmed; it is not any affluence of new sensations, but it has the character of an act, a mode of consciousness or a state of the spirit.”³¹ Since apprehension itself does not correspond to any proper intuition and is nothing empirical, one must conclude that constitutes signification itself. As such, it has the character of being an act of the subject and appears with the same apodictic evidence that is characteristic of the subjective experience. Therefore, apprehension taken as such corresponds to an adequate

28 Smith, “Husserl and Externalism” 326.

29 By ‘transcendent transcendence,’ I mean that the objectivity or externality of the thing has to resort to something that is beyond (or outside of) consciousness. This is why it is a ‘transcendent transcendence’, and is directly opposed to ‘immanent transcendence’ (a Husserlian notion), which assures the externality of the thing without resorting to something beyond consciousness.

30 Dermot Moran, “Immanence, Self-Experience, and Transcendence in Edmund Husserl, Edith Stein, and Karl Jaspers,” *American Catholic Philosophical Quarterly*, May 1, 2008, 268, <https://doi.org/10.5840/acpq20088224>.

31 Jan Patočka, *El movimiento de la existencia humana* (Encuentro, 2004), 103.

experience (not a foreshortened one) so that there is nothing indicating its external or objective character:

To summarize: sensations and the acts that apprehend them or perceive them are lived, but they do not appear objectively; they are not seen, heard or perceived with any «sensory faculty». We have before our eyes Husserl's subjectivism in germinal state.³²

These critiques demystify the supposedly objective character of apprehension of unity and, therefore, it loses its status as a perception, since apprehension is not an intuition of anything, but an act of signification, void of any empirical content. In light of this, apprehension enters the field of what constitutes consciousness, assuming we are faithful to Husserl's own explanation:

Subjective being does not foreshorten, it merely shows itself as what it is. Therefore, in the first place, the phenomenical sphere is divided into two stages: what appears in its modes of being given, on one hand, and the supposed subjective basis of this appearance, on the other hand.³³

In his project, Husserl restarts the former conception of consciousness, which is characterized by considering the subjective modes of being as intramental and the objective as extramental—or, in Husserlian terms, what is component and what is spatiotemporal. Though Patočka doesn't explicitly elucidate how this critique affects the noema/noesis schema, it can be easily understood. Noesis as such is not empirical; it is an animation of data that imbues noema/noesis with the capacity to have a direction towards an object. Due to this lack of empirical data—and the possibility of being foreshortened—one concludes that noesis is an adequate experience, a component. Noesis, thus, takes the side of the subjective (and noema of the objective), and the appearing process splits in two again. Finally, this confusion irradiates to hyletical data, since one cannot determine if they are components or foreshortenings. There are two equally probable answers: hyletical data are either foreshortened perspectives that acquire signification thanks to noesis, or they are components of consciousness that become externally directed thanks to noesis.

The aforementioned misunderstandings and contradictions rest, however, in a more fundamental mistake, according to Patočka. The great achievement of Husserl is, indeed, the discovery of the “phenomenological field” and the birth of describing the appearance as such in that field, but:

It is true here that Husserl has not abandoned the fundamental idea of a general correlation between appearances and what appears, he has even reinforced and elevated the entire philosophical endeavor to the methodical. However, a curious combination of Cartesian and Kantian ideas alongside the original idea of an intuitive foundation of knowledge

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid., 105.

that transcends argumentation lead here to the idea of a phenomenological reduction to the pure immanence of consciousness.³⁴

Indeed, Husserl tries to attend to appearances as such and to correlation, but when he tries to constitute this knowledge as a rigorous science, “he attempts, in a curious analogy with the cartesian concern with doubt, to methodically highlight and secure this dimension.”³⁵

The procedure chosen to do this, for Descartes, implies remitting to the apodictic dimension of the subject. In other words, the reduction to pure immanence is fundamentally an alternative term for the subjective, since it relies on an equal correlation of subject and object, and is thereby accompanied by the additional claim because it is an intentional field. But as was aforementioned, claiming its intentional nature does not solve the problem—the correlation of subject and object is always marked by the objectifying acts of the subject. This means that intentionality is only directed from the subject to the object, but not vice versa. All things considered, we find that the classical bifurcation of the world is accidentally replicated, now in the distinction between what is component and what is spatiotemporal. This is a dichotomy that intentionality alone cannot dissolve—it merely transports it.

One could say that in order to prevent the claim of an in-itself world, Husserl constantly refers to the appearance of the former only for a consciousness, but this has resulted in reducing appearances to the subjective experience, without considering the possibility that admitting that the autonomy of the phenomenal field is not equivalent to restarting the thesis of the thing in itself. The merely methodological commitment of evading the thing in itself started to slip into more serious claims of subjectivism.

Husserl, in fact, tries to describe appearances as such, and is aware that in order to describe the universal *a priori* of correlation, it is not possible to reduce appearances as such to any of the entities that appear in this field. That would imply the absurd claim that the appearance itself depends on the things that this field produces. However, in order to evade the thesis of the thing in itself, Husserl relies excessively on the dimension of immanent consciousness, in which he finds that there is complete and indubitable evidence. So he ends up relying completely on the self:

The intention points, therefore, to appearances as such, to the phenomenal sphere. But this intent is sketched in terms that come from the sphere of the subjective: he tries to speak about a reduction to pure immanence instead of putting on display the field of appearances as such.³⁶

Even though its initial motivation is always to stay true to the correlation, objectivity ends up being defined as “something that appears in living and is transcendent to

³⁴ Ibid., 114.

³⁵ Ibid., 106.

³⁶ Ibid.

the ingredient stream of experiences.”³⁷ In this way, the constitution of things—which claims to debunk that objects are created by consciousness or that things in themselves exist independently—is impossible if we do it from the presupposition that everything is put under the assessment of the immanence of intentional consciousness. It can be said, then, that this “transcendence inside immanence” fails:

Ultimately, the whole problem of constitution is irresolvable. How can ‘living as such’, as it is originally given in reflection, start to make something an objective, transcendent appearance? One cannot have intellectual evidence about it—it can only be accepted as a brute fact. Nothing should be questioned about it if it were not, in fact, an ultimately intuitable fact, but rather, an authentic fact, and not a construction.³⁸

Indeed, Husserl’s conjecture that the psychic is internal comes, according to Patočka, from Brentano’s interpretation of Cartesianism:

If the intentional object is not immanent but precisely transcendent to the subject, and the Brentanian apprehension of the psychic as an internal object remains, then it follows, necessarily, that the fundamental distinction is between lived experience and phenomena. Living experience does not appear, but is already there as a component that flows through time and causes the appearance of things. By virtue of living experiences transcendences appear.³⁹

This means that the subjective (psychic) is not one of the many kinds of entities that appear by means of the appearance as such, but, rather, is a privileged dimension that is the cause of the appearance in general. By this mistake, the procedure of *epoché* is also misunderstood because it is presupposed that *epoché* implies a “reduction” to the immanence of the subject. This is based on the misguided belief that if consciousness is intentional, then it is no longer closed in itself because is only direction towards the object. However, this is not possible if the psychic/internal mode of conceiving it is not abandoned. If not abandoned, the transcendent and immanent restart the intramental/extramental distinction that it purports to overcome.⁴⁰

IV. Patočka’s proposal

From the critique previously sketched, it is clear that the main attack resides in the understanding of the investigation of appearance as reduced to the immanence of consciousness. This produces all the problems that, in the end, are attributed to subjectivism. However, it is true that the investigation of appearances requires a

³⁷ Ibid., 107.

³⁸ Ibid., 108.

³⁹ Ibid., 124.

⁴⁰ Husserl pretended to demonstrate that sources of knowledge for phenomenology were not internal nor external Biagio G. Tassone, “The Relevance of Husserl’s Phenomenological Exploration of Interiority to Contemporary Epistemology,” *Palgrave Communications* 3 (July 11, 2017): 8.

disconnect from any possible thesis about the world⁴¹ and must remain faithful only to describing appearance as such:

[...] Phenomenology itself should be a science: an a priori science of the essential legalities that govern the appearance process of what appears as such [...] it is not an argumentative basis that resorts to the self as the ultimate explicative concept, but a revealing foundation that legitimizes the idea of foundation as such.⁴²

If phenomenology is supposed to be given the task of describing appearances as such, then this appearance cannot be based on one of the entities that appear, since that would require what is needed for explanation to reside within the explanation. From this point of view, both the subjective and the objective are things that made its presence in the phenomenological field as any other. This phenomenical field is, therefore, autonomous,⁴³ it is the condition of possibility for the apparition of every entity, but this field itself is no entity. Husserl's mistake is reducing it to one of the entities that appear:

There is a phenomenological field, a phenomenological being itself, which cannot be reduced to any entity that appears within it. Therefore, it can never be explained by the entity, even if this is objective, as in nature, or subjective, as in the self.⁴⁴

It follows that in order to describe appearances as such without biases, one must abstain from positing any thesis that we had with respect to appearance. That is precisely the role of the *epoché*, which “[...] claims that a thesis is neither attempted nor purported, but that one only experiences the freedom to use it or not to use it.”⁴⁵ It does not follow, however, from this abstention, that one should commit to a “reduction”; this requirement is added by Husserl in order to bring himself back to an indubitable sphere. In this sense, the reduction to the sphere of the self should actually be one of the theses that we should abstain ourselves from positing. Thanks to this way of thinking about the *epoché*, Patočka considers the possibility of posing a new question: “What would happen if the *epoché* did not stop before the thesis of the own self, but was understood as completely universal?”⁴⁶ If *epoché* becomes completely universal now, it can open the way for ‘appearance itself’ to make its appearance, without the obstacles of taking it as being originated from the self. In fact, “maybe the immediacy of the donation of the self is not a prejudice and the experience of one’s own self, just as the experience of external things, has its *a priori*,

41 Oded Balaban, “Epoché: Meaning, Object, and Existence in Husserl’s Phenomenology,” in *Phenomenology World-Wide: Foundations — Expanding Dynamics — Life-Engagements. A Guide for Research and Study*, ed. A. Ales Bello et al. (Dordrecht: Springer Netherlands, 2002), 111, https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-007-0473-2_10.

42 Patočka, *El movimiento de la existencia humana*, 113.

43 Dušan Hruška, “Patočka and English Sensualism and Its Place in Modern Philosophy,” *Folia Philosophica* 37, no. 0 (July 4, 2016): 28, <http://www.journals.us.edu.pl/index.php/FOLIA/article/view/4732>.

44 Patočka, *El movimiento de la existencia humana*, 129.

45 *Ibid.*, 244.

46 *Ibid.*, 247.

an *a priori* that allows the appearance of the self."⁴⁷ So, if we make *epoché* universal, we gain two things at once: freeing 'appearances as such' from the chains of the self and, by doing so, revealing the authentic essence of this previously misunderstood self. If we want to unfold this *a priori*, which is a condition for the possibility of the subjective as well as the objective, then we must universalize *epoché* in such a way that "it is a phenomenology void of reduction, but not without the *epoché*."⁴⁸ In other words, it is an *a-subjective phenomenology*.

This renouncement of reduction now allows us to open the phenomenological field as such, as an autonomous *a priori*, to whom objects and subjects appear on the same grounds: "We arrive in this way to the conditions of possibility of the appearance of what already appears; we do not remain quiet before what appears, but we allow appearance to make its appearance."⁴⁹ This phenomenological field is no longer a mere stream of experiences, but a world-background, a vast horizon of meaning that only manifests, shows and bring things to presence:

A universal structure of appearance that is not reducible to what appears, in its singular being, is what we call *world*, which we have the right to name, since it is found in the *epoché*. However, it is neither negated nor doubted by the *epoché*, but brought into the light, and out of anonymity, by it.⁵⁰

Thanks to an *epoché* void of reduction, appearances as such can be unfolded, showing itself as a proto-horizon of the world "in an infinity that cannot be updated. Perception does not flow in a sequence of more and more perceptual donations, but, from the beginning, it rests on a totality that is present even when is not being perceived."⁵¹ In other words, a particular actualization of that horizon of totality does not account, on its own, for the fact that there is something. This, however, is already manifested by the fact that "the universal totality of what appears, which Patočka sometimes calls 'unapparent immensity,' belongs to the own structure of appearance, which means that every appearance is necessarily a co-appearance of that totality."⁵² Every particular appearance presupposes this infinite world background as the condition of its possibility in such a way that one must conclude that this world is neither objective nor subjective, but a-subjective.

This way of conceiving the world allows Patočka to formulate an original conception of the subject. Patočka points to Descartes as the discoverer of the *cogito*, which is the subject revealed to itself by means of its own acts, through its existence.⁵³ Descartes

47 Ibid.

48 Ibid., 249.

49 Ibid., 247.

50 Ibid., 248.

51 Ibid., 29.

52 Barbaras, *Introducción a una fenomenología de la vida*, 139.

53 Jan Patočka, "The Natural World and Phenomenology," in *Jan Patočka: Philosophy and Selected Writings* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 247.

attempts to add a thing-like essence (a thing that acts, thinks, and wants),⁵⁴ in such a way that constitutes a special thing between other things that lack a self or ego. This introspectionalist⁵⁵ way of conceiving the object motivates him to consider the subject as something internal, a closed-in-itself ego to which external objects oppose is inherited by Brentano,⁵⁶ and, finally, by Husserl. Instead of this ego, Patočka will emphasize the *cogito*:

Without a doubt, the 'ego' as 'ego cogito' is proven to be immediately true. But this certainty lacks any content, except for this: it is that which appears that makes its appearance. The phenomenological field appears before this ego.⁵⁷

This does not mean, however, that the *cogito* is the foundational entity of appearance, because as we have already said, appearance cannot be reduced to any entity. What Patočka is trying to say is that the subject acts only as an organizational center⁵⁸ of this protohorizon of world. The subject is, in some way, the indexical of appearance—the 'here' of appearance.⁵⁹ It indicates the direction of the appearance, but appearance always ontologically precedes the subject and presents itself before him, not through him:

Showing itself in him is no human doing: man neither produces nor shows its own being (its own 'light') or its own transparency, the interest for it or its own comprehension. In one's own being, being in general is already in action.⁶⁰

Now, the essential features of the subject become available through phenomenological description. By means of this, we discover that the subject is an entity in the world whose fundamental ontological feature is that it "cares for its being and exists through time and in movement. This points even beyond the sphere of the self."⁶¹ This entity lives within the possibilities of appearance and clings to them in its existence, in such a way that its being is explained by the phenomenical field, but not the other way around.⁶²

Thanks to this conception of the subject and appearance, now Patočka can replace the Husserlian account of perception with his own corrections. In Patočka's account, it is not the case that different perspectives appear and then are unified by an act of

54 René Descartes, *Meditations on First Philosophy: With Selections from the Objections and Replies* (OUP Oxford, 2008), 20.

55 Ibid., 97-98.

56 Dermot Moran, "The Inaugural Address: Brentano's Thesis," *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society, Supplementary Volumes* 70 (1996): 2.

57 Patočka, *El movimiento de la existencia humana*, 129.

58 Ibid., 248.

59 Indexicals are terms that have a demonstrative function, namely, they indicate direction, place, position, etc, relative to a context or point of reference. Paradigmatic cases are "here" and "now". David Kaplan, "Demonstratives," in *Themes From Kaplan*, ed. Joseph Almog, John Perry, and Howard Wettstein (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 490.

60 Patočka, *El movimiento de la existencia humana*, 110.

61 Ibid., 111.

62 Barbaras, *Introducción a una fenomenología de la vida*, 157.

consciousness. What is actually the case is that *before* me appear characteristics that “I attribute to the thing itself as its own notes and others that, although they are also there, they are not there as belonging to the thing, but, in some way, as helping the thing appear.”⁶³ Some of the data exist as a property of the thing and belongs, and the rest of the data lack reference to that thing, which is not a property of the thing itself. This means that two types of data, which are equally objective, appear to me, at least in the sense that they are different to me. However, some of it appears with confusing traits, or lacks reference to its object. Characters that appear as belonging to a thing are *thing-like* traits, and the ones that lack reference to its object are *non-thing-like* traits. Thing-like and non-thing-like traits are just as objective, and for non-thing-like characters to become thing-like characters, an act of the subject is not necessary. Patočka compares this to the image of awakening from a dream, in which even “before what is being lived shows contours of things to me, sensations overwhelm me as I am passively taken by them. Does not something very different to things appear there; namely, a chaos, a fog, but all of that in an objective way?”⁶⁴

Finally, the noesis/noema scheme is also corrected. As we saw before, this scheme implies putting beforehand an empty signification (noesis) that needs to be corresponded by an intuition (noema). The mistake here is to consider this empty signification as an act of the subject, instead of as a structure of a-subjective appearance. What is actually the case is that there is a universal structure of emptiness/fulfillment that is not limited only to perception, and is not an act of any subject, but always operates every time a negative meaning is asking to be completed: “it can also happen that any object, existent thing, or thing-like process fails to appear.”⁶⁵

Conclusion

I have demonstrated that Patočka's critique (and many of the subjectivist accusations made towards Husserl) can be held, since they reveal many presuppositions that operate in the background of Husserlian theories of appearance. The fundamental conclusion from this critique is that the *epoché* does not imply reduction. Thus, we can envision an a-subjective phenomenology that reveals the independence of a world-horizon without restarting the natural attitude towards the world.

Nonetheless, this correction to Husserl's project is not a mere disregarding, but is, rather, a correction that keeps and shows the true aspect of many of Husserl's theories. In a certain way, we can see Patočka as an inheritor who critically continues the task started by the first phenomenologist. Patočka expresses this intent, saying that:

⁶³ Patočka, *El movimiento de la existencia humana*, 126.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 132.

Maybe the last will of the creator of phenomenology should be considered: effecting the catharsis of the phenomenological and giving back to phenomenology its original sense of an investigation of appearances-as-such.⁶⁶ ♦

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⁶⁶ Ibid., 109.

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REVIEW OF *DISCOMFORT AND MORAL IMPEDIMENT* (JULIO CABRERA)¹

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Julio Cabrera opens *Discomfort and Moral Impediment* by announcing his intention to cohere into a single philosophical system two regions of investigation that are often sequestered from one another in ethical treatises: a structural analysis of the human situation within the world, and the investigation into “the very possibility of morality and of a morality of procreation in particular,” these investigations informing, respectively, Cabrera’s bifurcation of the book (viii). The first part presents a structural and ontological framework, out of which Cabrera can derive, and ground, the practical and moral conclusions that he defends in the second. Cabrera believes that this move places his articulation of antinatalism on surer footing than those of other antinatalist authors—in particular, David Benatar—and as being more capable of responding to objections from both pro-natalist and “affirmative-ethical” theorists. Cabrera’s overarching project throughout the book is to dislodge procreation from what he claims to be “its usual position as a mere ‘natural act,’ or as an obviously ethical act, or even as the most ethical of all acts” (*ibid.*).

Methodologically, Cabrera freely utilizes various aspects of the “Continental” and “analytical” traditions of Western philosophy. From just a cursory glance at the book: in the first part’s structural analysis of the human situation, Cabrera draws on Heidegger, Schopenhauer, Sartre, and Nietzsche, placing them into dialogue with the Hispanophone

¹ Julio Cabrera, *Discomfort and Moral Impediment: The Human Situation, Radical Bioethics, and Procreation*, (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019), 280pp., £61.99(hbk), ISBN 9781527518035.

philosophers, José Ortega y Gasset, Enrique Dussel, and Fernando Savater. Throughout his work, Cabrera manages to tactfully appropriate these existential arguments within an unmistakably “analytic” organizational structure, making use of “informal logic” (as Cabrera, himself, remarks) in deducing his ontological and normative conclusions. These conclusions are, in turn, in contradiction to those of Benatar, Kant, Singer, Dworkin, Tooley, and Nagel (to name just a few).

Thematically, Part I begins with a brief outline of what Cabrera contends to be the most basic principle of traditional ethics, the “minimal ethical articulation (MEA).” The MEA is operative as the most basic, yet ultimately non-binding, aspect of the traditional ethics and acts as a “minimal demand” to consider, in the planning of our own life projects, the interests, feelings, and life projects of others, only insofar as these others, too, consider the interests, feelings, and projects of others (2-3). This demand of the MEA, Cabrera argues, has priority over respecting the autonomy of others, helping, and refraining from harming others because we may encounter another whose interests, feelings, and projects are such that we should not respect their autonomy and should actively impeded the fulfillment of their projects (4-5). Cabrera then turns to more ontological considerations of human being, in chapters 2 and 3, to articulate his concept of “negative ethics,” the question of discomfort, and the status of “value” in human life.

The concept of “negative ethics,” in contradistinction to what he calls the “affirmative ethics” of traditional moral philosophy, is integral to Cabrera’s book, and this distinction is concomitantly developed alongside his structural arguments regarding the human situation in the first part, and presented as an alternative ethical framework in his arguments against procreation in the second. Cabrera’s articulation of “negative ethics” in chapter 2 serves as a prolegomenon to his antinatalist theses throughout Part II, and contends that it cannot be taken as *self-evidently true* that there is inherent value to human life—its truthfulness can only be established through a “slow and careful process of argumentation” (10). If it is not self-evidentially true, and has not been defended through rigorous argumentation, Cabrera argues that he is licensed to advance the opposite thesis: “[...] human life carries something like an initial structural *disadvantage* [...] that human life *initially* presents a valueless character or a ‘lack of value,’ not in the agnostic sense of not being ‘good or bad’ but in the sense of carrying from the outset an *adverse value*” (10-11). The remainder of the second chapter presents a series of easily refutable, foil arguments in support of the adverse value of human.²

The inconclusiveness of these approaches necessitates Cabrera’s ontological framing arguments in chapters 3-5. At the beginning of the third chapter, Cabrera presents

2 In brief, the five non-structural arguments are the following: [1] that people suffer on a daily basis, both in mundane (e.g., a heartburn) and severe (e.g., torture) ways; [2] that many in the history of philosophy have portrayed the human life and the world as something degenerate that, through moral struggle, we can restore or overcome; [3] that humans, through metaphysics and religion, have often imagined an idyllic world to make suffering their current one bearable; [4] that a human life is not irreplaceable and that we can, in time, ‘forget’ about a deceased loved one; [5] that humans, generally, need the value and recognition of others in order to have a sense of self-worth, rather than produce it endogenously, demonstrates only an extrinsic value to life, and not an intrinsic one (11-21).

human being as having a non-exhaustive trifold structure—[a] human life, from birth has a “decaying” structure that can end at any point; [b] human life’s decaying-being is characterized by three kinds of “frictions”—physical pain, discouragement (i.e., the possibility of “lacking the will” to continue to be), and “exposure to the aggressions of other humans”; [c] the ability to *react against* the two aforementioned structural aspects by “positive value creation” (23). Cabrera calls this trifold structure of human being the “Terminality of Being” (24).

In support of his concept of the “Terminality of Being,” Cabrera formulates what he terms the “Ser/Estar Distinction”: both are Spanish infinitives for the verb, ‘to be,’ the former, however, denoting a more ‘essential,’ structural, permanent sense of ‘to be,’ pertaining to “*the being of life*,” whereas the former denotes the more particularized, impermanent, and circumstantially contingent ways of being *within* the ‘overarching’ structure of life (27-28). At this point, one would not be remiss to immediately call to mind Heidegger’s Ontological Difference, which Cabrera does reference, but subsequently attempts to differentiate from his *ser/estar* by citing the incongruity between the Spanish and German words for being (*ibid*). Cabrera’s insistence that the *ser/estar* distinction is not Heidegger’s Ontological Difference is, however, specious. In his discussion of the role of death, Cabrera formulates the dual concepts of “death-estar” and “death-ser” that serve functions to Heidegger’s ontical and ontological death (30).³ Further, in chapter 4, Cabrera conceptualizes the “intra-structural” (i.e., *estar*) “reactive” creation of positive values (35), which he later describes as a type of “flight” from the Terminality of Being (140), mirrors Heidegger’s analysis of the existential mode of Dasein’s being-in-the-world as “falling prey” or as “entanglement” [*Verfallen*] in §38 of *Being and Time*.⁴ The *ser/estar* distinction is, for Cabrera, a necessary condition for the structural discomfort argument, and for much of the remainder of the book. It allows him to maintain that, on the structural level of the being of human life (*ser*), there can be an “*adverse value*” to life, i.e., no positive value whatsoever, and yet, on the individuated level of *estar*, a human being can actively create positive values—a phenomenon that Cabrera describes as “living a double life” (30). Every activity and thing that does, or *can*, appear as valuable to a human being is only on account of this reactive activity of positive value creation on the *estar*-level of life.

Turning to consider ethics within this structural framework, Cabrera defines, in chapter 5, “moral impediment” as “the structural impossibility of acting in the world without harming or manipulating *someone* at some given moment (not, of course, *everyone* at every moment)” (52). He offers three classification types of moral impediment, but, most importantly, all forms of moral impediment are structured according to a

3 Cabrera describes death-estar as “the kind of death that happens to us on a certain date from which we ‘cease to exist,’” and death-ser as “more directly tied to birth,” and as “a kind of ‘structural death,’ the gradual death that encompasses our ‘lives,’ the structural decaying due to frictions (pain, discouragement, moral impediment), and finally DE [death-estar]” (30). Compare this with the Heidegger’s analysis of ontological death in relation to Dasein’s care, angst, being-toward-death, and finite transcendence and the parallelism becomes apparent.

4 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. Joan Stambaugh, ed. Dennis Schmidt (Albany: SUNY Press, 2010), p. 169 [S.Z., 175]: “Idle talk, curiosity, and ambiguity characterize the way in which Dasein is its ‘there,’ the disclosedness of being-in-the-world, in an everyday way. As existential determines, these characteristics are not objectively present in Dasein; they constitute its being. In them and in the connectedness of their being, a basic kind of the being of everydayness reveals itself, which we call the *entanglement* [*Verfallen*] of Dasein.”

complex, enmeshed web of actions wherein “many [ethical] wrongdoings are reactions to previous moral impediments within a web” and therefore cannot be taken in isolation (56-57). The Moral Impediment Thesis, perhaps the most significant argument of Part I, articulates the structural analysis of the Terminality of Being and the *ser/estar* distinction within the project of negative ethics. In brief, any act of positive value creation, at the *estar* ‘level’ of human being, is never an isolated activity but one whose situation is always enmeshed within a larger complex of other human actions, thereby making it impossible to consider *all* of the feelings, interests, and projects of *every* other (61). Therefore, Cabrera concludes, the human situation is structured such that moral impediment is not accidental, but necessary with respect to all intra-structural actions (62).

In Part II, Cabrera works to extend and apply the ontological work of Part I to the realm of normative ethics regarding the morality (or lack thereof) of procreation, childhood education, sexuality, abortion, and suicide. Though each chapter is thought-provoking, I will only focus on the question of procreation (in chapters 9-12), which Cabrera describes as “the primary ethical question,” due to its centrality, both within this book and Cabrera’s wider corpus of work (118). In defense of even calling to question the morality of procreation, Cabrera frames the issue being “deeply motivated by a very strong and responsible concern for potential children, and for the risk that their emergence into being is the consequence of constraining and aggressive actions against defenseless human beings” (*ibid*). The act of procreation, Cabrera maintains, is for the sake of the parents, and not the child, in order to give the parents some ‘good’—i.e., the joy, pleasure, or happiness of parenthood—which he describes as a mere act of *the progenitor’s* positive value creation, and one this is morally irresponsible given the aforementioned structures of the Terminality of Being and the Moral Impediment Thesis (120).

In chapters 10-12, Cabrera develops what he calls the “PROC Thesis,” by recourse to two “minimal demands” of the MEA. Cabrera finds traditional ethical theory to contain the “do No Harm Demand” (NHD) and the “do Not Manipulate Demand” (NMD) (126).⁵ Cabrera’s PROC Thesis argues that, if the NHD and the NMD are indeed ethical demands, then procreation, as an intentional or unintentional act, is not ethically justifiable as it violates both the NHD and the NMD (121). He argues, first, that procreation is a manipulative activity, because procreation is an act of the progenitors’ creation of positive value, wherein the child is a means for that act’s satisfaction (129-130). Cabrera then argues that procreation is an inherently harmful act because: [1] the structure of life is terminal, and therefore birth is a structural “disadvantage;” [2] in flight from the terminal structure of their beings, humans inevitably cause harm to others in order to survive; and [3] there is no structural guarantor of successful reactive value creation, and, in fact, many humans fail in this endeavor (139-140).

5 Roughly, Cabrera explains the NHD and NMD as: Assuming the reciprocity of consideration under the MEA, we ought to pursue our projects, feelings, and interests only insofar as they do not harm any other, obstruct another’s own projects, or place any other in a situation of possible harm or constraint—when possible, we should actively try to rescue others from their situations of harm and constraint. Further, we should not manipulate any other in service of our own ends.

Cabrera considers a variety of objections to the PROC thesis, but directs most of his argumentative force against the position advocating an intrinsic value to life. Here, again, he invokes the *ser/estar* distinction, arguing that the majority of these “affirmative” arguments “forget” this very distinction, and consequently mistake *estar*-level value *in* human life to be demonstrative of structural, *ser*-level value *to* human life (143-151). Further, Cabrera argues that these same objectors erroneously conclude, from the impetus for survival driving the process of positive value creation, that there is a structural vitality to human being, rather than regarding it as “a mere question of animal impulse” (147). Thirdly, even for “sensitive progenitors”—i.e., those who are cognizant of human life’s terminality, yet decide to have a child, in hopes that their child succeeds in positively resisting terminality(149-150)—procreation remains “one of the most powerful mechanisms of intra-world value creation, and therefore of postponing and distancing the terminal structure of being” (155). This, Cabrera concludes, raises the fundamental question for ethics: Do we have the *right* to procreate for the sake of our own resistance to our own inevitable decay of being (156)?

Though Cabrera’s arguments in Part I, and what has been discussed of Part II may appear to be formally valid, the project as a whole appears to be contingent upon the success of, or the reader’s assent to, the structural argument for the Terminality of Being and the incommensurability of positive value on the ‘*estar*-status’ to its ‘*ser*-status.’ At least as how I understand it, it would seem that the possibility for positive value creation at the level of a particularized human being is not operative at the structural level, and is therefore created *ex nihilo* in all individuated human beings. In the development of his PROC Thesis, Cabrera states that he “agree[s] substantially” with the approach of “existential metaphysics,” in the tradition of Schopenhauer, Nietzsche, Sartre, and Heidegger, only insofar as they endorse the “idea that there are constant and regular structures of human life, and that it is not true that every human birth begins from nothing” (152). Yet, here, there seems to be an explicit structural irregularity, or, at least, incongruity between the *ser* and *estar* designations of human being: how could it be the case that every human being is “forced” to engage in the creation of positive values without having any structural condition for the possibility of valuation, at all.

On this question, Heidegger, whose ontological work features prominently all throughout Cabrera’s text, examines the fundamentally holistic being of human-being through its inseparable and non-distinct “multiplicity of constitutive structural factors,” which he calls “existentials.”⁶ Above, I indicated the similarity between Cabrera’s analysis of positive value creation and Heidegger’s existential of falling prey [*Verfallen*]. However, falling prey is the ontical modality of (i.e., *estar*-level), and presupposes, Dasein’s ontological structure of *Sein-bei*, translated as either “being together with” or “rendering things meaningfully present” in the world.⁷ In order to commit ourselves to the project of intra-structural (or innerworldly) positive value creation, there must first be, ontologically, the structural ability to encounter *any*-thing within the world

6 Heidegger, *Being and Time*, pp. 53-54 [pp.53-54].

7 The former translation appears in the Stambaugh translation of *Being and Time*, whereas Thomas Sheehan offers the latter. See Sheehan, *Making Sense of Heidegger: A Paradigm Shift*, (Lanham: Rowan and Littlefield Pub., 2014), p. 150.

as something that has been *made* meaningfully present to us, before we are able to appropriate these innerworldly beings into our projects. Cabrera, in discussing the *ser/estar* distinction, defined a third term, “estanes,” as the “beings that ‘are there’ (material things, ideas, films, animals, institutions or numbers),” that we use for the purposes of positive value creation (27).

Cabrera did not, however, locate the ontological possibility of our having these estanes as something meaningfully present and available to us, in the first place, nor, presupposing their meaningful presence, did he discuss *why* these estanes are even taken up within the process of positive value creation. On this account, then, it seems particularly odd that Cabrera dismisses human being’s “animal desire” to live as something wholly incidental in relation to the structural determination of human being, and therefore lacking in any intrinsic value (161). On further consideration, this “animal desire” appears to be the only possible way of reconciling the problematic spontaneous generation of human being’s entire familiarity with the notion of “value” and relevance at the *estar*-level. Yet this would cut against Cabrera’s thesis that life is structurally valueless by admitting of an apparent structural regularity of organic vitality. If admitted, this structural feature would ground the human capacity for positive value creation in an original, value-laden relation that one has toward the being of one’s own life, which, therefore, hardly appears to be intrinsically valueless. This, however, appears to challenge Cabrera’s original thesis—*viz.*, that no thorough argumentation has been offered in support of the intrinsic value of human life—insofar as, now, the being of human life is the *principle* of value, or in other words, human life is structurally *en-valuation*, on which all consequent acts of particular value creation are contingent. Thus, given the ontological structure of Cabrera’s negative ethics, the aforementioned questions likely problematize Cabrera’s normative ethical conclusions about procreation, without, of course, amounting to complete rejection thereof. ♦

ΔΙΑΝΟΙΑ

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Natasha Beaudin Pearson is a soon-to-be graduate of McGill University, where she completed a joint honours B.A. in philosophy and art history. While her philosophical interests are wide-ranging, she has a particular fondness for the continental tradition, especially phenomenology, existentialism, feminist theory, and psychoanalytic theory. For her philosophy thesis, Natasha examined Freud's seminal paper "Mourning and Melancholia" through the lens of existential anxiety, as it is conceived by Heidegger in *Being and Time*. The aim of her essay was to problematize the reasons Freud gives for positing a clear ontological distinction between "normal" mourning and "pathological" melancholia (the old term for clinical depression). In doing so, she sought to interrogate the bases on which our conceptions of mental health (and mental illness) are founded. A proud Montrealer, she is currently having the time of her life travelling across Argentina and Chile.

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Peter Gavaris is a senior at Boston College finishing up a B.A. in English with a minor in film studies. Over the course of his studies, his primary focus has been on modernist thought and expression across visual and literary arts, and accompanying critical theory from the likes of Benjamin, Agamben, and Derrida. He has, likewise, developed an interest in cinema, with a particular infatuation with the films of Abbas Kiarostami. Peter contributes regularly as the film critic for *The Heights*, the independent student newspaper of Boston College, and he supplements his journalistic endeavors with significant coursework on non-fiction writing and literature. This past summer, he worked with filmmaker Rachel Boynton on the production of a documentary on how the Civil War and Reconstruction are taught in American schools. He continues to remain interested in the role of aesthetic representation in both narrative and nonfiction works.

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Brendan Chambers is currently a senior at Boston College studying English and Secondary Education. His focus is in twentieth century American literature, and he is particularly interested in its intersection with philosophy and linguistics. He has recently completed a thesis that investigates how Jack Kerouac's development and implementation of the spontaneous prose method laid the ideological foundation for the New Journalism as a movement. Brendan will be attending the University of North Carolina Chapel Hill in pursuit of his PhD in English in the fall, looking to continue and deepen his studies at the nexus of the language and philosophy.

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Max Wade is an undergraduate senior at Rutgers University graduating in May 2019 with a BA in philosophy and political science. His research interests include Marxism and communization theory, history of philosophy, and philosophy of religion with a specific focus on Jewish and Christian mysticism. His thesis was on the historical reception and interpretation of Nietzsche's eternal return from Heidegger to the present. After graduation he plans to pursue a PhD in philosophy at Boston College.

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