
EDITED BY
CHRISTOPH F. E. HOLZHEY
AND MARIETTA KESTING
SCALE
NEW CRITICAL ESSAYS
CULTURAL INQUIRY
ici
BERLIN PRESS

SCALE

# Cultural Inquiry

EDITED BY CHRISTOPH F. E. HOLZHEY
AND MANUELE GRAGNOLATI

The series 'Cultural Inquiry' is dedicated to exploring how diverse cultures can be brought into fruitful rather than pernicious confrontation. Taking culture in a deliberately broad sense that also includes different discourses and disciplines, it aims to open up spaces of inquiry, experimentation, and intervention. Its emphasis lies in critical reflection and in identifying and highlighting contemporary issues and concerns, even in publications with a historical orientation. Following a decidedly cross-disciplinary approach, it seeks to enact and provoke transfers among the humanities, the natural and social sciences, and the arts. The series includes a plurality of methodologies and approaches, binding them through the tension of mutual confrontation and negotiation rather than through homogenization or exclusion.

Christoph F. E. Holzhey is the Founding Director of the ICI Berlin Institute for Cultural Inquiry. Manuele Gragnolati is Professor of Italian Literature at the Sorbonne Université in Paris and Associate Director of the ICI Berlin.

# SCALE
## New Critical Essays

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# Diagrams

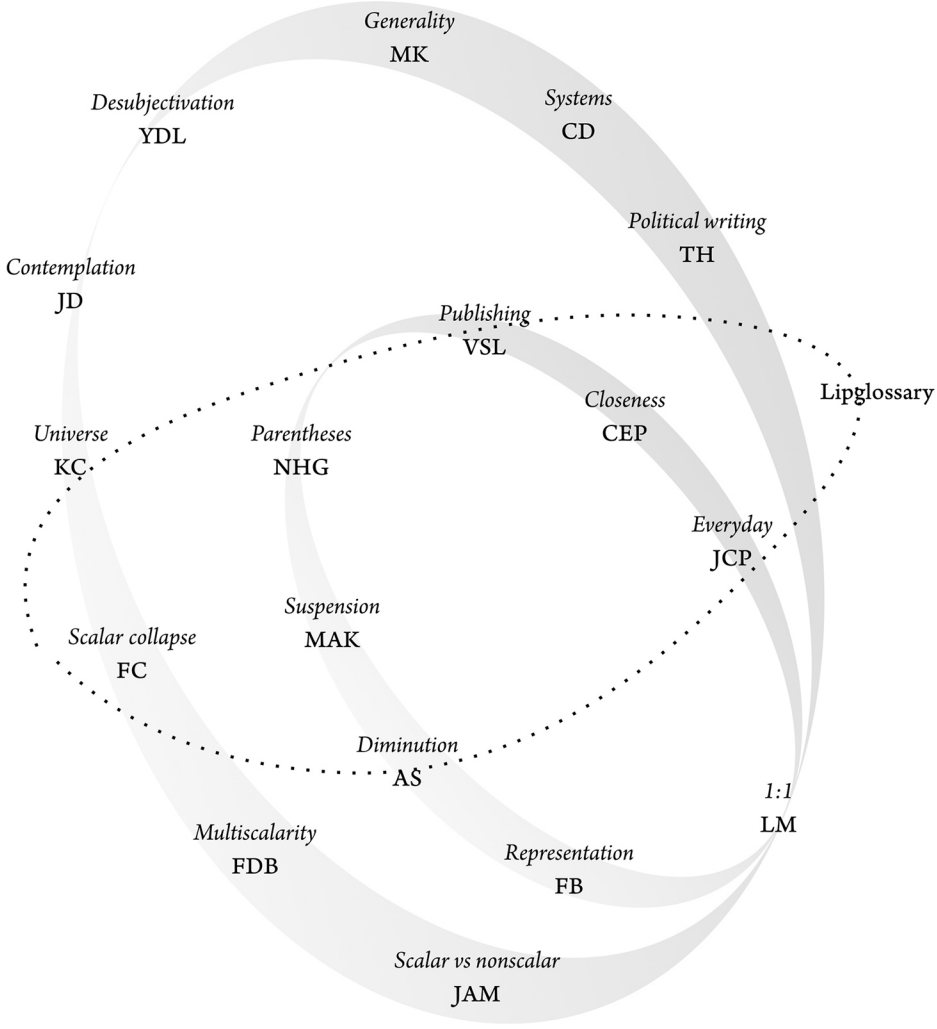


Diagram 1. Porous sequence knotting smaller and larger scales

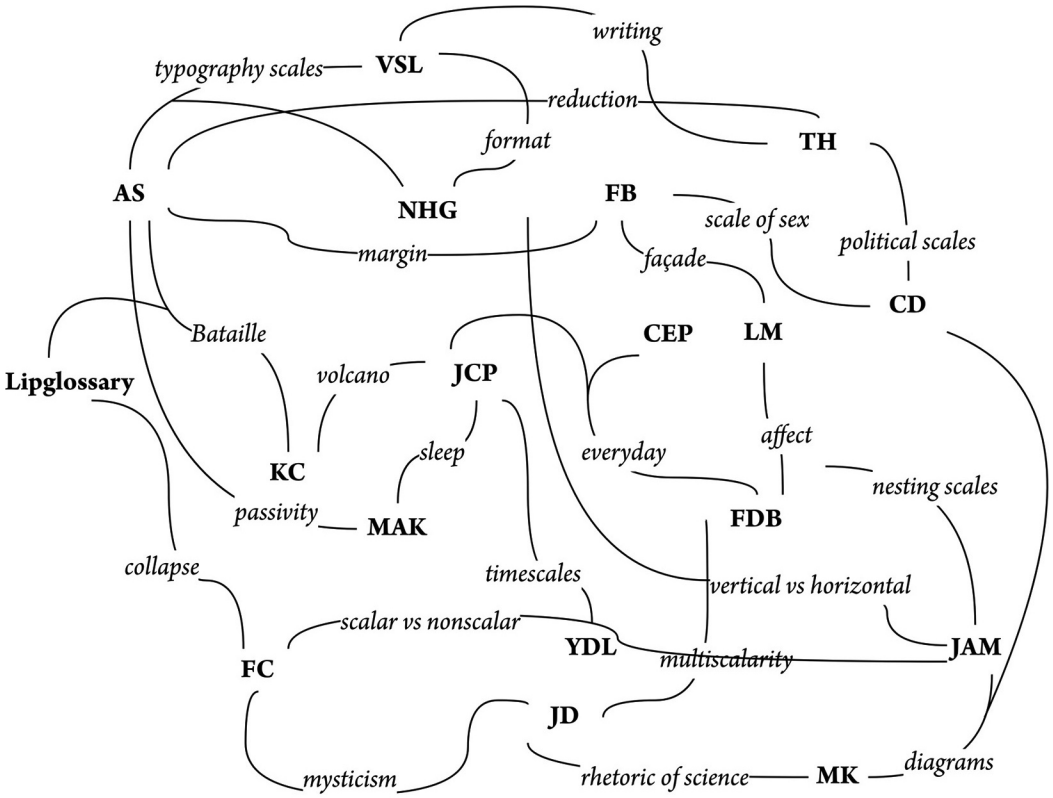


Diagram 2. Dynamic map of thematic links

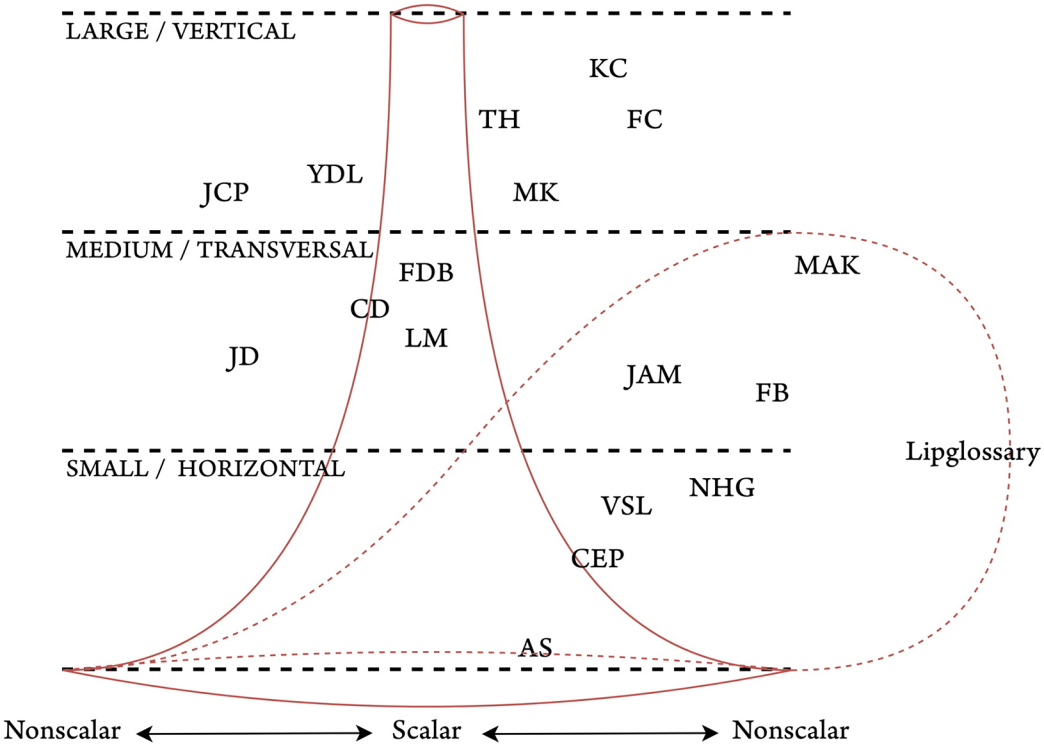


Diagram 3. Topology of scale, orientation, and scalarity

LEGEND

| | |
|---|---|
| FB | Filippo Bosco |
| KC | Kirill Chepurin |
| FC | Franco Costantini |
| CD | Cat Dawson |
| FDB | Federica Di Blasio |
| JD | Yuri Di Liberto |
| TH | Joshua DiCaglio |
| YDL | Tobi Haslett |
| NHG | Nicolas Helm-Grovas |
| MAK | Marietta A. Kesting |
| MK | Magdalena Krysztoforska |
| JAM | José Antonio Magalhães |
| LM | Lisa Messeri |
| CEP | Claudia E. Peppel |
| JCP | Jasmine Clotilde Pisapia |
| AS | Angelica Stathopoulos |
| VSL | Verónica Stedile Luna |

## NOTES

Much of the reflection about scale in this volume has to do with linear nesting and its limits — can something be said to be above or below something else, and under what conditions? For many of the contributors, during our two years of working on scales, diagrams and the practice of drawing them became important. We also had many conversations about the relationship between form and content, and specifically about the form of books and texts. When finally putting together the volume, it seemed to us important for the book to reflect on its form and contents, in their scalar and diagrammatic dimensions.

The three diagrams that open this volume together with the chapter list are meant as a dynamic table of contents that provides multiple approaches to the essays that follow the introduction. The texts themselves are organized alphabetically for neutrality and to avoid fixed sections and structures. Instead, the reader can explore the subject matter via the three diagrams, which provide different kinds of information and orientation.

The first diagram positions each paper in a linear sequence to suggest a possible reading order based on key concepts and a general understanding of scale. The sequence knots and divides itself into two strips, corresponding respectively to themes of large scales and small scales. The two strips should not be read as strictly nesting onto each other; on the contrary, they are porous and open to proximities and crossings. This is the case with the dotted line that pierces the reading sequence to collect the essays that directly refer to the work of Georges Bataille, who inspired the section of the book titled 'Lipglossary'.

The second diagram is a dynamic map that constellates the essays via thematic links captioned by a word. The links allow the reader to create various paths across the book and to follow ideas and concepts as they emerge and are treated from different perspectives by two or more authors. We encourage a non-linear exploration of scale and its porosity with many other subjects. The map therefore reflects the rich and unpredictable dialogue among disciplines and standpoints that took place throughout the past two years at the ICI Berlin, in the weekly colloquia, workshops, and conferences of our fellowship.

The third diagram explores the relationship between three axes: scale (large, medium, small), orientation (vertical, transversal, horizontal), and scalarity (scalar, nonscalar), placing the book's chapters in relation to these attributes. Its Klein-bottle-inspired shape suggests that it shouldn't be read as a Cartesian plane, but rather as involving more complicated, partly topological and often indeterminate relationships. There is a prima facie association of the large scale with verticality, the medium with transversality, and the small with horizontality. This is expressed by the bottle's shape, which is vertical at the top and becomes horizontal at the bottom. However, as we move from the top to the bottom and, therefore, from the vertical line to the horizontal plane, we also tend to drift laterally from the scalar centre towards the nonscalar periphery. The orientation axis thus does not simply correspond to the scale axis but mediates between scale and scalarity. At the very bottom, the bottle folds into a dotted line, which should neither be projected on a plane nor as a coherent shape (such as a tongue-shaped slope dislocated on the third dimension). It must rather be read as a line of flight or a non-orientable topology whose scalar relationship with the rest of the diagram is problematic and underdetermined. In that sense, the main difference between chapters that drift from the centre towards the left or towards the right is whether their positioning is meant to play with this shape or not.

In our discussions about diagrams, an important idea — present notably in Gilles Châtelet's *Figuring Space* — has been that diagrams, rather than communicating fully formalized and worked-out relationships, capture a gesture of thought still in the act.[1] As a consequence, these diagrams are not expected to be fully readable, but rather play with a margin of indeterminacy about the relationships they express.

We are thankful to artist and scholar Patricia Reed for joining our discussion and inspiring us to experiment and think with diagrams.

FILIPPO BOSCO
JOSÉ ANTONIO MAGALHÃES

1 Gilles Châtelet, *Figuring Space: Philosophy, Mathematics, and Physics* [1993], trans. by Robert Shore and Muriel Zagha (Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000).

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# Introduction

CHRISTOPH F. E. HOLZHEY AND MARIETTA KESTING

Scales are used to quantify properties such as length and temperature, or to measure popularity and affect. But as Alice discovers in Wonderland, a change of scale can also have dramatic qualitative consequences, disrupting customary ways of perceiving, acting, and being — Alice's changes feel as 'queer' to her as a caterpillar's metamorphoses.[1] Helped by the arguably inextricable intertwinement of different meanings and aspects of scale, Alice's experiences continue to provide apt metaphors for the disorienting importance and effects of scale and scaling at a time of hyperglobalization and of the so-called anthropocene.

Scale is indeed a highly ambiguous notion, even if one only considers the meanings deriving from the Latin or Italian *scala* (ladder). It simultaneously denotes the whole ladder, one of its steps, and the relation between two steps: the scale of a cartographic map is the ratio between a distance on the map and a distance on the ground, but any particular length also defines a scale, and the range of scales from the

1 Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland: Authoritative Texts of 'Alice's Adventures in Wonderland', 'Through the Looking-Glass', 'The Hunting of the Snark', Backgrounds, Essays in Criticism*, ed. by Donald J. Gray, 2nd edn (Norton, 1992). Alice is first 'shutting up like a telescope' (p. 11) and then 'opening out like the largest telescope' (p. 13), growing small and large after ingesting magical drink and food. On page 41, Alice is only three inches tall and in conversation with the caterpillar after having changed her size several more times. On page 43, she is finally her usual size again.

subatomic to the planetary is part of the spatial scale. Paradoxically recursive, scale combines and helps mediate quantity and quality, as well as subjective perception, objective material properties, and contingent construction.

The ladder has been criticized as a metaphor for the arrangement of scales insofar as it implies a vertical hierarchy. Other metaphors have been proposed, such as concentric circles, rhizomatic networks, or musical scales.[2] However, if hierarchy is problematized for privileging a scale to which all others can be reduced, the privileged scale is in fact ambiguous and depends on the field in question. Geographers, for instance, who have long discussed the social construction and politics of scales like the 'national' or the 'global', tend to worry that the large-scale is constructed as an imperturbable monolith, determining underlying scales and making local interventions or worldings futile.[3] Physicists and biologists, by contrast, regard small scales as more fundamental and generally explain large-scale phenomena by reducing them to phenomena at smaller scales.

If scaling — working with, at, or between any particular scale(s) — necessarily implies reduction, what does such reduction enable and what does it impede? What may be gained by shifting or jumping between scales, even if this enacts further reductions? How can binaries such as the local and the global, the particular and the general, the private and the public be made more fluid and entangled by situating them on a continuous (not necessarily hierarchical) spectrum of scales? And how can one also mediate between materialist and idealist, ontological and epistemological understandings of scale?

2 See Andrew Herod, *Scale* (Routledge, 2010), especially the section 'Metaphors of Scale', pp. 45–56 <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203641095>; and Richard Howitt, 'Scale as Relation: Musical Metaphors of Geographical Scale', *Area*, 30.1 (1998), pp. 49–58 <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-4762.1998.tb00047.x>.

3 For a critical discussion of scale in geography, see, for example, Sallie A. Marston, 'The Social Construction of Scale', *Progress in Human Geography*, 24.2 (2000), pp. 219–42 <https://doi.org/10.1191/030913200674086272>; Sallie A. Marston, John Paul Jones III, and Keith Woodward, 'Human Geography without Scale', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 30.4 (2005), pp. 416–32 <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-5661.2005.00180.x>; and, more recently, Joe Blakey, 'Scale', in *Introducing Human Geographies*, ed. by Kelly Dombroski and others, 4th edn (Routledge, 2024), pp. 33–47.

Increasing the distance reduces the apparent size of things, while optical instruments like the magnifying glass, microscope, or telescope make things larger or bring them closer. Such devices, which dramatically expanded the observable spatial scale, played a prominent role in the history of early modern science and also informed early speculative fiction narratives like Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726) or Voltaire's *Micromégas* (1752), which explore the fascinating, defamiliarizing, and critical potentials of scaling.[4] They could be called 'scale-shifting technologies', as long as one remembers that they change only an object's apparent size, not its actual physical dimensions. Similarly, time-lapse and slow-motion cameras shift perception along the temporal scale without accelerating or slowing down processes.

In Charles and Ray Eames's film *Powers of Ten* (1977), a so-called cosmic zoom presents a fascinating journey through scales, from the human up to the cosmic, down to the subatomic, and back to the human.[5] The cosmic zoom is often faulted for seducing the viewer into believing that things can actually be smoothly scaled up or down.[6]

4 Jonathan Swift, *Gulliver's Travels: A Voyage to Lilliput. A Voyage to Brobdingnag* (J. B. Lippincott, 1918); Voltaire, *Micromegas: Philosophical History*, trans. by Peter Phalen (Project Gutenberg, 2021) <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/30123> [accessed 11 July 2026]. Contemporary literature continues to be fascinated by scaling procedures; see, for instance, Will Self's short story 'Scale', in Will Self, *Grey Area* (Bloomsbury, 1993), pp. 89–123.

5 *Powers of Ten*, dir. by Charles and Ray Eames (USA, 1977) <https://www.eamesoffice.com/the-work/powers-of-ten/> [accessed 11 July 2026]. Both its prototype, *A Rough Sketch for a Proposed Film Dealing with the Powers of Ten and the Relative Size of Things in the Universe* (dir. by Charles and Ray Eames, USA, 1968), and the film *Cosmic Zoom* (dir. by Robert Verrall, CAN, 1968 <https://collection.nfb.ca/film/cosmic_zoom> [accessed 9 September 2026]) were inspired by the book Kees Boeke, *Cosmic View: The Universe in 40 Jumps* (John Day, 1957) <http://www.vendian.org/mncharity/cosmicview/> [accessed 9 September 2026]. For a critical re-enactment, see, for instance, the performance *Superpowers of Ten* by the architect Andrés Jacque and the Office for Political Innovation, presented at MEXTRÓPOLI 2016, Museo Jumex, 4–7 March 2016, documented on Vimeo <https://vimeo.com/162905806> [accessed 9 September 2026]; and the project *A Variation on Powers of Ten* by Futurefarmers (Amy Franceschini and Michael Swaine), documented on Futurefarmers <https://futurefarmers.com/powersoften/> [accessed 9 September 2026] as well as in the book *A Variation on Powers of Ten*, ed. by Futurefarmers (Amy Franceschini and Michael Swaine) (Sternberg Press, 2012).

6 See, for example, Vittoria Di Palma, 'Zoom: Google Earth and Global Intimacy', in *Intimate Metropolis: Urban Subjects in the Modern City*, ed. by Vittoria Di Palma, Diana Periton, and Marina Lathouri (Routledge, 2009), pp. 239–70 <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203890059>; Derek Woods, 'Epistemic Things in Charles and Ray

Disembodied vision — vision not situated in a body that provides the scale to measure distances through the parallax of stereoscopy or body movement — indeed cannot tell the difference between scaling actual objects and changing the scale of their appearance by moving or zooming in or out. This incapacity plausibly relates to the sense of power associated with playing what Donna J. Haraway calls the 'god trick' and enacting a 'conquering gaze from nowhere': one is led to believe that objects actually shrink when one moves away, or at least that they could be scaled to a manageable size.[7] But things do not scale as easily as one sees and imagines. More generous readings of the film take it as stressing this point, showing how differently things look and behave at different scales, how nature (and culture) seems to consist of separate and autonomous levels, requiring very different disciplines and methods for their understanding.

At times, scale differences also get short-circuited when some microscopic scales visually resemble macroscopic ones. The film thereby conjures up the scale invariance and self-similarity of fractals, which in the last quarter of the twentieth century elicited much excitement, not only on account of their aesthetics but also for their link to complexity and chaos theory and the cross-scalar butterfly effect.[8]

The possibility of small, local changes having huge global effects has always been as much a promise as a threat. With the anthropocene and its disjunction between the spatio-temporal scale of human action and that of its consequences, the threat has come to dominate. Also, the prospect that increasing connectivity, information, and interaction

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Eames's *Powers of Ten*', in *Scale in Literature and Culture*, ed. by Michael Tavel Clarke and David Wittenberg (Springer, 2017), pp. 61–92 <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-64242-0_3>; Bruno Latour, 'Anti-Zoom', in *Scale in Literature and Culture*, ed. by Clarke and Wittenberg, pp. 93–101 <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-64242-0_4>; and Zachary K. Horton, *The Cosmic Zoom: Scale, Knowledge, and Mediation* (University of Chicago Press, 2021).

7 Donna J. Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies*, 14.3 (1988), pp. 575–99 <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066>.

8 See, for example, James Gleick, *Chaos: Making a New Science* (Viking Books, 1987); and Heinz-Otto Peitgen, Hartmut Jürgens, and Dietmar Saupe, *Chaos and Fractals: New Frontiers of Science* [1992], 2nd edn (Springer, 2004) <https://doi.org/10.1007/b97624>.

in the World Wide Web and big data would lead to self-organized emergent properties now appears more ambivalent. Instead of leading to the emergence of a higher swarm intelligence, machine-learned artificial intelligence, or noosphere, scaling up the human and its communication data risks exponentiating rather than fixing structural biases and injustices, and may well lead to a regressive, hallucinating, or deeply fake subject, or to something altogether different, like an assemblage largely composed of more-than-humans.[9]

In other words, scalability, a notion that is curiously biased towards growth, is the exception rather than the rule, as in the case of scalable businesses that can grow exponentially without changing their organization, or scalable research projects that can apply to ever larger scales without changing their framework. As Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing emphasizes, 'scalability is not an ordinary feature of nature' but requires a lot of work and often violent reductions of diversity. If the scalability of the colonial sugarcane plantation provided a model of expansion for factories during industrialization, scalability has also become for her the 'hallmark of modern knowledge' and a demand of 'most of modern science'.[10] While Tsing calls for a theory of non-scalability to resist and counteract the ruinous lure of upscaling, this volume also explores other forms of scale, scaling, and scalar practices.

The question of how things and their properties scale goes beyond the binary alternative of non/scalability. While some properties scale linearly, others may just scale differently. For instance, a tenfold increase in length implies a thousandfold increase in volume and mass when the same proportions and material are retained. Upscaling objects therefore eventually makes them collapse under their own weight. Interestingly, Galileo Galilei addresses this at the very beginning of

9 See, for example, Derek Woods, '"Terraforming Earth", or Climate and Recursivity', *Diacritics*, 47.3 (2019), pp. 6–29 (especially p. 10) <https://doi.org/10.1353/dia.2019.0024>.

10 Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, 'On Nonscalability: The Living World Is Not Amenable to Precision-Nested Scales', *Common Knowledge*, 18.3 (2012), pp. 505–24 (pp. 507, 522) <https://doi.org/10.1215/0961754X-1630424>; and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton University Press, 2015), p. 38. Tsing had already written on scalar relations and procedures before, for instance in the chapter 'Natural Universals and the Global Scale' of her monograph *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton University Press, 2005), pp. 88–112.

his *Two New Sciences*, which draws on the expertise of artisans at the Venetian Arsenal, a large-scale industrial complex that developed methods for mass-producing ships.[11] He highlights: 'For every machine and structure, whether artificial or natural, there is set a necessary limit beyond which neither art nor nature can pass.'[12]

Conversely, downscaling may open new possibilities. Gravity becomes irrelevant, for instance, together with its hierarchical verticality, allowing insects to walk as easily on walls and ceilings as on floors. Strategies of close reading and thick description bracket the general and universal to give space to the singularity and particularity of cultural works and practices. Queer practices and aesthetics often engage with the downscale, small, and 'cheap' as forms of resistance against the normative, grand, upscale, and large. All these attempts evoke humbler, marginal perspectives that risk getting lost in macro-political templates, but — rather than veering towards parochialism — they share a potential for larger social transformation of the kind that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari theorize with their notions of the 'minor' and 'micro-politics'.[13]

If different disciplines, discourses, and dispositives each have their privileged scales to which they tend to reduce others, what may be gained by thinking them together, acknowledging both the relative autonomy of particular scales — each with their own affordances, limitations, rules, even laws and ontologies — and their interdependence — each affecting and being affected by other scales? What is the critical purchase of developing multiscalar architectures or patchworks of scale-specific, mutually inconsistent and irreducible descriptions,

11 The Venetian Arsenal nowadays hosts one of the most expensive — and in that sense 'upscale' — art exhibitions, the Venice Biennale. For this meaning of 'upscale' as 'relating to, being, or appealing to affluent visitors *also*: of superior quality', see the entry 'Upscale', in Merriam-Webster Dictionary <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/upscale> [accessed 8 July 2026].

12 Galileo Galilei, *Dialogues Concerning Two New Sciences* [1638], trans. by Henry Crew and Alfonso De Salvio (Macmillan, 1914), p. 3.

13 See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, trans. by Dana Polan (University of Minnesota Press, 1986); and Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, '1933: Micropolitics and Segmentarity', in Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* [1980], trans. by Brian Massumi (University of Minnesota Press, 1987), pp. 208–30.

theories, and models? How might the tensions be made productive where they overlap or come into contact?

These questions ended the description of the research focus 'Scale' that the ICI Berlin had formulated as part of its long-term core project 'Reduction' in the call for the 2024–26 fellowship programme. Twelve fellows were appointed, with projects both individually and collectively covering several disciplines, including art history, Black studies, critical, legal, and political theory, cultural, migration, and religious studies, literary and media studies, philosophy, psychoanalysis, publishing history, queer theory, and science and technology studies. During their fellowship, they dedicated themselves not only to their individual projects, but also to a joint research project, which took shape through weekly research colloquia, a lecture series, as well as numerous workshops, symposia, and conferences mostly conceptualized by smaller subgroups of fellows.

The project description was the starting point for the common project, and some readings within the rich literature on scale in science, geography, and anthropology helped to develop a shared understanding of the manifold and often ambiguous senses in which notions of scale as both noun and verb are used and critiqued within and across different disciplines.

For instance, Tsing's critique of scalability as deeply tied to colonial and capitalist expansion, exploitation, and ecological devastation was well taken, but its scope and basis remained rather ambiguous. The clarification that 'just because something is nonscalable does not mean that it is good' is helpful,[14] but does it suggest that, likewise, 'just because something is scalable does not mean that it is bad'? Or is it rather that nonscalability is a necessary but not sufficient condition for something to be good? Furthermore, is the devastating critique of scalability limited to the 'technical meaning of the term', that is, to 'projects [ … ] that can expand without changing',[15] or does it extend to other upscaling projects, which may well rely on the presence of tipping points at which new properties emerge? Should it also extend to downscaling projects, even if the (guarded) preference for nonscal-

14 Tsing, 'On Nonscalability', p. 521.

15 Ibid., p. 507.

ability seems to go along with a certain valorization of remaining small, diverse, and minor?

Associating scalability with the world's 'amenability' to 'precision-nested scales' suggests a further extension and radicalization of scale critique, namely to the very use of scale, even just for descriptive purposes. Here, at the latest, it is helpful to introduce another term, such as 'scalarity'. In some broad and rather minimally defined sense, nonscalability attests to the realization that things have a characteristic scale and therefore cannot be scaled easily, that is, they cannot be expanded or compacted without doing violence to them. This sense of nonscalability is related to, but different from, nonscalarity, where already the attribution of scale is in question and may be seen to limit and reduce possibilities, introduce distortions, and require force and coercion.

Scale most readily applies to spatial extensions — lengths, areas, and volumes — as well as time, especially insofar as it tends to be conceived as spatialized (as Henri Bergson famously objected in favour of an intensive conception of *durée* or duration).[16] More abstractly, scaling entities in the sense of placing them on a scale (rather than changing their scale) arguably presupposes or imposes a total order such that any two entities are either of the same scale or one is larger than the other. Intensities or intensive quantities are already scalar in this sense even as they are invested with great potential, virtuality, and qualitative difference.[17] However, scale is usually thought of in extensive terms as also involving a metric that makes different entities commensurable and their differences quantifiable.

Much about scale is clearly conventional, open to historical contingencies and arbitrary decisions, and there is no reason that everything should have a scale. But what makes scale so contested in many contexts is that the total order it implies is seen to function as a hierarchy in value and/or power. The notion of nonscalarity helps to dramatize the social construction of scale and the political dimension of all

16 Henri Bergson, *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness* [1889], trans. by F. L. Pogson (Dover Publications, 2001).

17 See the workshop 'Quantities without Scale and the Thought of Novelty', ICI Berlin, 2 March 2026 <https://www.ici-berlin.org/events/quantities-without-scale-and-the-thought-of-novelty/> [accessed 8 September 2026].

scalar projects. However, seeking to resist hierarchies by insisting on a nonscalar ontology appears itself ambivalent. Sallie A. Marston, John Paul Jones III, and Keith Woodward, for instance, call for a 'human geography without scale', following their argument that 'complexifying scale', in which the field has engaged for some time, is insufficient: a hierarchical scale, such as the global–local, functions like a 'classic case of form determining content',[18] and always imposes itself, even when it is augmented by other concepts, dialecticized in its verticality, and hybridized with horizontal network relations. At the same time, after presenting some notes for a 'flat ontology' inspired in parts by Deleuze's concept of the virtual and his preference for problematizing over solving, Marston, Jones, and Woodward conclude with just such strategies of complexification: against the overwhelming significance attributed to the global, they seek 'to recover the local as a site of significant practices' as well as 'the politically transformative potential of social reproductive practices', and thereby to fulfil 'the possibilities of dynamism and efficacy in everyday practice.'[19] As in the case of nonscalability, putative nonscalarity seems curiously associated with the low and the small even if the local is understood to be inextricably bound up with the global, and the everyday with the reproduction of the totality of capitalism.

Pushing this tension further, it would seem that scalarity is presupposed by nonscalability as much as by scalability: How could something be said to expand without comparing its initial and final scales? Conversely, how could something be said to resist scaling or be distorted by it if it doesn't have a scale of its own? Yet, paradoxically enough, the sciences of complexity and, more recently, the life sciences have developed a particular interest in phenomena that could be described as combining hyperscalability with nonscalarity: the scale invariance characteristic of so-called critical phenomena implies that an entity or system resembles itself and is essentially unchanged as its

18 Marston, Jones III, and Woodward, 'Human Geography without Scale', p. 422.

19 Ibid., p. 427. Among many other sources, the section 'Complexifying Scale' refers to Marston, 'The Social Construction of Scale', where Marston shows how discussions on the social construction of scale are preoccupied with 'capitalist production (and the role of the state, capital, labor and nonstate actors)' at the expense of any 'serious attention to the relevance of social reproduction and consumption' (p. 219).

scale is changed. While this sounds like an extreme case of scalability, the idea is not simply that an object retains the same shape and structure at a larger scale, but rather that at this very peculiar point, which is far from general and expected, the system contains the same kinds of shapes and structures at all scales, so that a change of scale does not change anything: the system is nonscalar insofar as it has no characteristic scale that could distinguish it from a rescaled version of itself. Somewhat more metaphorically, recent propositions for a 'scale-free biology' bracket scalarity in an attempt to integrate different biological subfields that historically have defined themselves through a focus on a characteristic scale, from the molecular via evolved species to the planetary.[20]

Thus, insofar as it denies a characteristic scale, such as the human scale, which would situate perception, experience, and knowledge, nonscalarity paradoxically promotes a certain universalism and a version of the 'god trick' or disembodied view from nowhere that is often associated with scalar views such as those in *Powers of Ten*. The self-declared 'nondisciplinary' scale theorist Joshua DiCaglio turns this paradox into a defining feature of scalar views:

> Scale confuses the notion of the god trick because scale relates a perspective dislocated from the human body with the perceptual form of that body. Thus, scalar views ['such as satellite imagery and Google Earth'] are both situated and not; more properly, they are situated dislocations.[21]

The paradoxical formula of 'situated dislocations' has proved productive in discussions throughout the project as it suggests scale's critical potential of mediating between contrary poles, such as maintaining

20 See the ICI Berlin symposium 'Scales of Life: From Basal Cognition to Planetary Intelligence', ICI Berlin, 14–15 May 2025 <https://doi.org/10.25620/e250514>; and the work of Michael Levin, who participated in the symposium — for example, Chris Fields and Michael Levin, 'Scale-Free Biology: Integrating Evolutionary and Developmental Thinking', *BioEssays*, 42.8 (2020), article 1900228 <https://doi.org/10.1002/bies.201900228>.

21 Joshua DiCaglio, 'Scale Tricks and God Tricks, or The Power of Scale in *Powers of Ten*', *Configurations*, 28.4 (2020), pp. 459–90 (p. 463) <https://doi.org/10.1353/con.2020.0021>. The formula of a 'situated dislocation' produced by scale is also highlighted in his book *Scale Theory: A Nondisciplinary Inquiry* (University of Minnesota Press, 2021); see, for example, pp. 32, 35, 121, and 137.

a certain anthropocentrism implied by an insistence on situated, embodied knowledges at the same time as decentring — dislocating — the subject and/or the human. 'Dislocation' here refers not just to a change of location in physical space, moving closer or farther, and changing the apparent size of things, with 'scale' indicating the magnification or reduction factor. It is also understood as a displacement and disruption within a more abstract order, including the total order implied by scale. That is, DiCaglio's formula effectively identifies scale with interscalarity and its own disruptions: with scalar shifts, jumps, collapses, and mismatches.

Many of the issues raised by the initial readings were picked up and developed further as the fellows' individual projects were discussed and smaller clusters formed: 'The New Cosmists', 'The Marginals', 'The Everyday', and 'The Escalation Committee'. Moving across scales was important for most, even as some look more towards the large — such as the planetary and cosmic, or militant escalations — and others towards the seemingly small — such as the everyday and the marginal.

The New Cosmists, for instance, explored possibilities of decentring Western Man through notions of the planetary and planetary intelligence, through Sylvia Wynter's account of the co-constitution of the 'human' and the 'global' in modernity, or through alternative cosmologies in the work of Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro.

The Marginals were particularly interested in form, which is arguably nonscalar, if not small, while enabling scalability without ends (as the experiment with a voluminous hundred-page reader performing questions of margins and the format of the book vividly demonstrated). If hierarchical scale is a 'classic case of form determining content',[22] the Marginals were rather concerned with form's potential to unsettle from the margins, through internal gaps and intervals, and from what lies invisibly off-screen.

The cinematic notion of an invisible off-screen could also provide a metaphor for the gendered dynamic of social reproduction in the everyday, which Marston has foregrounded, albeit in an ambiguous gesture, as a solution to the problem of the formative power of hierarch-

22 Marston, Jones III, and Woodward, 'Human Geography without Scale', p. 422.

ical scales. Also interested in experimenting with form, the Everyday cluster explored the ambivalent ways in which everyday experience relates to scalar processes such as globalization. They were stimulated by, among others, the book *Border as Method*, in which Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson highlight that globalization processes of the past decades have proliferated rather than diminished borders, making geographical scales less stable but no less influential: 'at stake is the tendency for scale to become at once more volatile and determining — the intensification of its contradictory capacities to contain social activity and to shift and mutate as a result of social activity.'[23]

The strong connection between the different clusters and their scales is evidenced by the fact that the everyday of unrecognized female social reproductive labour was actually introduced by the Escalation Committee through the report 'Grassroots Women Learning to Count their Unwaged Work' by Guyanese socialist feminist and political activist Andaiye, who was associated with the Global Women's Strike, among other groups and movements.[24] The Escalation cluster explored activist practices intensifying towards militancy, a strand of critical political economy conceiving growth through sabotage, and the conjuncture of activism and mysticism in the writings of Simone Weil.

New constellations and another form — that of the atlas — were explored in the second year with the workshop 'Scale: A Fragmentary Atlas for the Humanities', which was composed of the panels 'Space', 'Time', 'Form', and 'Spirit'.[25] Many contributions to the present volume emerged from papers presented at this workshop. Others come out of other workshops and related activities that informed the research colloquium.

The Scale Lecture Series enriched the collective project by providing further depth and breadth to the discussions. While the talks are all

23 Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, *Border as Method, or, the Multiplication of Labor* (Duke University Press, 2013), p. 63.

24 Andaiye, 'Grassroots Women Learning to Count their Unwaged Work: Summary Report on a 2001–2002 Trial [2009]', in Andaiye, *The Point Is to Change the World: Selected Writings of Andaiye*, ed. by Alissa Trotz (Pluto Press, 2020), pp. 117–20 <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvzsmdr2>.

25 See the workshop 'Scale: A Fragmentary Atlas for the Humanities', ICI Berlin, 6–7 October 2025 <https://doi.org/10.25620/e251006>.

available in the ICI's video archive,[26] we are glad to be able to include interviews with two of the lecturers, Joshua DiCaglio and Lisa Messeri, in this volume.

A reading group dedicated to the work of Georges Bataille, which was initiated and guided by the fellows Angelica Stathopoulos and Verónica Stedile Luna, turned out to be very inspiring and productive for the two-year-long reflections on scale. One of the ways in which Bataille's writing engages with scale is through its persistent reversal of hierarchies and values, from his notion of general economy, which foregrounds the problems of excess and expenditure rather than scarcity and need, to the eroticization of the base and abject, such as the 'big toe'.[27] His formal reflections and experiments were also of particular interest, such as the short piece 'Formless' and the *Critical Dictionary*, which contains it alongside entries such as 'Dust', 'Eye', 'Mouth', and 'Spittle'. Bataille, the readings, and communal discussions have informed many essays in this volume, but the group also decided to put forth a small collective glossary. The critical dictionary of the secret society Acéphale served as a source of inspiration for this glossary, where the concrete and the abstract, the base and the ephemeral converse, with the effect of dimming the self-certainty of those very coordinates. The title 'Lipglossary' conjures up such conversations, as lips are involved in speaking and eating, smoking and kissing, and much more.

From 3 December 2025 to 21 January 2026, the ICI Berlin Library hosted the exhibition 'The Everyday in Dramatic Closeness', which was curated by several fellows and staff and presented photographs and paintings by fellows and staff exploring the social, political, and aesthetic implications of scale in daily experience. Some of the works are included in this volume, especially in the essay by co-curator Claudia Peppel.[28]

26 See 'Scale Lecture Series 2024–25', ICI Berlin <https://www.ici-berlin.org/series/scale-lecture-series-2024-25/> [accessed 8 September 2026]; and 'Scale Lecture Series 2025–26', ICI Berlin <https://www.ici-berlin.org/series/scale-lecture-series-2025-26/> [accessed 8 September 2026].

27 Georges Bataille, 'The Big Toe', in Bataille and others, *Encyclopædia Acephalica*, ed. by Robert Lebel and Isabelle Waldberg, trans. by Iain White and others (Atlas Press, 1995), pp. 87–93 (p. 92).

28 Some images also appear in the essay by Jasmine Clotilde Pisapia, 'Dust, Death, and the Body of the Earth: Notes on the Scales of Ecological Disaster', in this volume, pp. 405–27.

Many more activities, workshops, conferences, and symposia have informed this book in one way or another,[29] but to conclude this introduction we will return to the diagrams with which the volume opens. As mentioned in the 'Notes' on the 'Diagrams', many contributors have found the use of diagrams important. In terms of scale, the reason is both that diagrams are helpful to illustrate aspects of scale, such as scaling practices or interscalar relations, and that — similar to models and perhaps also maps — there is something doubly scalar about the medium of the diagram itself: it reduces the complexity of its putative referent, but as an intermediary between imagination and knowledge, image and text, it can also expand what is known and gesture towards an insight that cannot be formally grasped, at least not yet. As Gilles Châtelet poetically stated:

> A diagram can transfix a gesture, bring it to rest, long before it curls up into a sign, which is why modern geometers and cosmologists like diagrams with their peremptory power of evocation. They capture gestures mid-flight; for those capable of attention, they are the moments where being is glimpsed smiling.[30]

In a series of workshops guided by Filippo Bosco and on one occasion also by artist and scholar Patricia Reed, contributors experimented with diagrams for their individual projects as well as for the collective volume as a whole. As already mentioned in the 'Notes' on the 'Diagrams', using several diagrams as alternative tables of contents is meant to evoke the manifold ways in which the essays, emerging out of two years of intense conversation, relate to one another without settling on the form of a single scale — a form that would establish a 'total order' of linear succession and possibly further nesting through the introduction of sections that mediate between the scalar levels of essay and volume.

29 For a full list of events related to the project 'Scale' at the ICI Berlin, see 'Scale: ICI Focus 2024–26', ICI Berlin <https://www.ici-berlin.org/projects/scale/> [accessed 8 September 2026].

30 Gilles Châtelet, *Figuring Space: Philosophy, Mathematics, and Physics* [1993], trans. by Robert Shore and Muriel Zagha (Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2000), p. 10. This quote was also used in the announcement of the symposium 'Diagrams: Between Gestures and Spaces', organized by Filippo Bosco and Yuri Di Liberto, ICI Berlin, 22 June 2026 <https://doi.org/10.25620/e260622>.

While it is difficult to avoid a sequential order in a printed book, an alphabetical order was chosen to arrange the outcome of the two-year conversations on scale. It is perhaps less ironic than telling for the critical, ambivalent function of scale that this arrangement connects several conversations even as it seeks to sever such connections: the Marginals chose the alphabetical order for their hundred-page reader in reference to a quote from Roland Barthes, which turned out to come from the Bataille reading group, namely from Barthes's introduction to 'Outcomes of the Text', which assembles his fragments on Bataille's text 'The Big Toe':

> These fragments will be in a more or less emphatic state of severance with each other: I shall not attempt to link, to organize these 'outcomes'; and in order to be sure of frustrating any liaison (any systematizing of the commentary), in order to avoid any rhetoric of 'development', of the developed subject, I have titled each of these fragments, and I have put these titles in alphabetical order — which is, of course, both an order and a disorder, an order stripped of meaning, the degree zero of order. It will be a kind of dictionary (Bataille supplies one at the end of *Documents*) which will deal obliquely with the sustaining text.[31]

While the alphabetical order of the Lipglossary follows titles (as it does in Barthes and Bataille), the volume at hand follows last names. However, in presenting a short overview of the essays, we will follow the reading sequence suggested by Diagram 1 (p. v) and seek to connect their abstracts accordingly.

Diagram 1 can be read as placing the contributions on a single strip that both folds back on itself to form a closed loop and touches itself to form two ellipses. As the 'Note on the Diagrams' insists, the differently sized ellipses corresponding to smaller and larger scales should not be read as strictly nested, but rather as porous and open to crossings. In addition to the intersecting dotted loop for the Bataille-related essays, such openings are suggested by the contact zone of the ellipses veering ambiguously between the intersection or bifurcation of a single strip and the tangentiality of two strips, as well as by the possibility of seeing

31 Roland Barthes, 'Outcomes of the Text', in Barthes, *The Rustle of Language*, trans. by Richard Howard (University of California Press, 1989), pp. 238–49 (p. 238).

the strips as non-orientable Möbius strips, akin to the Klein bottle evoked by Diagram 3 (p. vii).

While closed loops have no beginning or end, the diagram does single out the point of contact or bifurcation between smaller and larger scales as an obvious starting point. Addressing 'The Pleasure of the 1:1 Scale', the interview with science and technology anthropologist Lisa Messeri touches upon the limits of scale. In a sense, the 1:1 is unscaled: neither enlarged nor reduced. At the same time, it most literally corresponds to the formula 'situated dislocation', which DiCaglio indeed coined in response to Messeri's work on putatively situated planetary knowledge. As the pleasures of real-life simulations or reproductions — whether to experience being on the surface of Mars or being in another body through virtual reality (VR) technologies — indicate, simulated dislocations are far from indifferent even if they involve no change in scale. At the same time, and especially as the more terrifying use of artificial intelligence (AI) surrogates for doing research on human subjects makes clear, 1:1 simulations can also be understood as the limit case of massive upscaling: the world presented by VR may look the same physical size as the real world, but it will invariably prove limited when explored, and for AI surrogates, 1:1 would suggest that they could not be distinguished from humans in their abilities. However, even the largest AI models will at best approximate human laboratory participants, which Messeri argues to have themselves become 'simplified simulations' or 'purposely downscaled humans'.

Moving clockwise along the outer ellipse, José Antonio Magalhães's essay explores another conflict between the scalar and nonscalar. Titled 'Scale and World-Orders: An Effort at Diplomacy between Prometheans and Gaians', it problematizes scaling discourses from a South American position informed by Viveiros de Castro's writings on perspectivism. It employs the conceptual figures of 'Gaian' bricoleurs and 'Promethean' engineers to think through contrasting approaches to scale: the Gaians proceed by examples and are associated with small scales and nonscalability, whereas the Prometheans construct models to apply and upscale them. Rather than theorizing these cosmopolitical tendencies as political and aesthetic binary opposites, Magalhães explores their interfaces in order to limit scalarity to contingent world-orders.

A quite different kind of mediation is at issue in Federica Di Blasio's essay. Rather than recasting upscaling and downscaling tendencies in terms of incommensurable (but similarly all-encompassing) world-orders, she explores the 'Affects of Multiscalarity' that a 'Rhetorics of the Too Big and Too Small' generates. Insisting on the dramatic gap between the small and the large, she argues, can lead to a form of scalism that consists in a loss of resolution and disorientation at the intermediate scale. This applies, for example, to Fredric Jameson's use of the local/global binary, which the essay places in the historical context of geographical scale debates. Invoking Dipesh Chakrabarty's distinction between the global and the planetary in terms of their ability to either centre or decentre the human, Di Blasio shows that this form of scalism and affective disorientation cuts across both and risks implying a dismissal of genuinely political scales from the bodily via the national to the global.

Instead of mobilizing intermediate scales against a disorienting dramatization of scalar oppositions, Franco Costantini's essay is interested in scalar collapses such as occur when a subject is said to unite with the divine through a mystic vision. Titled 'The Scale of Love', it brings medieval treatises into dialogue with poetic texts in vernacular languages (mainly Dante's *Paradiso*) through the concepts of analogy (Simone Weil) and 'human cosmo-morphism' (Max Scheler). The essay demonstrates the capacity of lyric poetry to convey a heterodox ontology and disrupt the hierarchical order of the *scala naturae*. An open space is instead configured in which angels and flowers, human souls and animals coexist on the same ontological plane.

Mysticism also plays a role in the next essay in the diagram, labelled 'universe' and entitled 'Solar Figuration: Thinking the Human at the Scale of the Universe with Georges Bataille'. The vision presented by Kirill Chepurin is, however, considerably bleaker, with a flat ontology appearing as an entropic final state rather than as a promising starting point. Chepurin resists the 'common image of Bataille as a thinker of transgression for transgression's sake' and reads him instead as a thinker of thresholds, crossings, and ephemeral solar forms. His essay traces figures of chance in Bataille's writing, from the wildflower to the volcano to humanity as a planetary and cosmic movement. Dwelling with terms such as 'figuration', 'precipice', 'threshold', 'sig-

nal', and 'voiding', it probes what provisional obstacles and cross-scalar mediations can briefly refract or delay the Bataillean pull towards dissolution.

One impetus for the ICI Fellows to conduct an interview with Joshua DiCaglio after hearing his talk in the lecture series at the ICI, reading his texts on scale, and discussing them in an internal seminar, was his fascinating and in many ways unexpected discussion of mysticism and contemplative practices. DiCaglio notes in the interview that contemplative philosophies highlight the need to resist both dislocations from the here and now and an overemphasis on experience, identifying the pull in either direction with the ego. Nonetheless, the stress seems to lie on promoting situatedness — in particular, on the now that contemplative philosophies emphasize 'as the kind of zero point of conscious attention' — and dispelling the dislocations associated with the risk of distraction and overreaching one's scale of action. Cautioning against scalar assumptions in demands for political practice — such as conceiving it in terms of an emergent larger-scale aggregate that can be managed and controlled — DiCaglio suggests that contemplation in relation to political practice would 'be about letting go of the managerial assumption, of allowing the larger reality to enter, to yield to the higher power (which is not a political structure) beyond human control'. The interview furthermore reflects on how framing scale as a 'situated dislocation' can help reorient our preconceived notions of 'agency' and 'the human', as well as of science in its scalar division into different disciplines and its relation to alternative epistemologies.

As if responding to DiCaglio's suggestion concerning the contemplation of the political, Yuri Di Liberto's essay is interested in larger-scale processes that are beyond human control but affect human actions. Titled 'Scale and Discourse: On the Seismographic Connections between Processes', it examines relationships between processes of different scales — especially time scales — such as economic or climatic processes on the one hand and specific, individual acts or discursive events on the other. The macro-micro relationship decentres the human, dislocates agency, and even amounts to a desubjectivation insofar as Di Liberto attributes agency to the material, larger-scale processes in facilitating, constraining, or preventing specific human

acts. Significantly, it is not a case of being fully determined by larger-scale processes: what appears to the individual an intentional act is rather understood as the result of a statistically determined chance occurrence within a larger and longer-scale process.

Moving away from spatiotemporal scales, Magdalena Krysztoforska critically examines the measuring scales used for the evaluation of artificial intelligence (AI) technology. As her essay 'The Measure of Generality: On the Scalar Dynamics of AI Model Evaluation Practices' notes at the outset, the notion of 'generality' has featured prominently in recent discourse around AI, where the technology is increasingly presented as general-purpose, or as showcasing general intelligence. In order to interrogate the purported scientific basis for such claims and their rhetorical currency, Krysztoforska examines practices of model evaluation and benchmarking in AI through the critical lens of scale. In particular, she conceives of generality as 'scalar politics' (involving, for instance, the widespread but contested belief that scaling up AI models will make them more general, which has material consequences and makes companies invest in larger models), as 'scalar synecdoche' (using, for instance, narrowly defined tasks to gauge very broadly conceptualized capabilities), and as 'scalar collapse' (homogenizing, for instance, a wide spectrum of measured capacities into a single scale).

Cat Dawson's essay '"A Subtle System of Feints": Gender, Medical Photography, and the Essential Void of Sex' is labelled 'system' in the diagram. It engages with the system of sex and gender, which is general and large-scaled in a rather different sense than in the two preceding essays. While this system cannot be properly situated in space, time, or scale, its differential effects on human individuals are certainly enormous in scope — even if it results, as Dawson highlights, from an incoherent series of effects constructed across multiple scales. The essay takes the visual practice of the pioneering sexologist Magnus Hirschfeld as a concrete example to illustrate Foucault's notion of the essential void lying at the core of representation in general and of regulatory projects related to sex and gender in particular. Unfolding the shifting and mutually inconsistent categorizations of sex and gender across multiple scales, from the molecular (such as the hormonal) via the embodied human scale to the juridical scale, Dawson explores how

strategies to curtail trans life and rights can be appropriated to not only redress transantagonisms but also to contribute to broader struggles for justice.

Struggles against large-scale systems of injustice are also the explicit subject of Tobi Haslett's essay, which investigates 'writing' as a motif in Frantz Fanon's heterogeneous textual oeuvre. From the critique of *négritude* and of Jean-Paul Sartre in *Black Skin, White Masks* to the figure of the native intellectual in *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon's writing both possesses an elevated class character and dramatizes the antinomies of racial existence. The native petty bourgeoisie, equipped with 'intellectual and technical capital' bestowed upon it by the colonizer, must redirect those capacities towards emancipatory ends. Fanon's own texts, which synthesize psychiatry, existentialism, phenomenology, political economy, and literary criticism, issue from precisely the petty bourgeois stratum that he subjects to ruthless examination. Starting with Fanon's private resignation letter during the Algerian Revolution, Haslett shows how Fanon's writing performs its own historical predicament, as well as the various spatial and temporal scales at which anticolonial revolt transpires.

Titled 'Fanon Degree Zero', Haslett's essay is placed close to the point where the outer and inner ellipses touch. The focus on writing indeed resonates with the interest in form that characterizes many of the essays in the inner loop. While writing manifests itself on a small scale, it seems to have no proper scale and to be, for that very reason, highly scalable: a choice of form that can characterize an author's entire oeuvre.

Returning to the 1:1 scale and bifurcating from it into the inner ellipse, the first essay, by Filippo Bosco, explores the marginal and critical function of spatial representations drawn to scale in art and architecture. Titled 'The Hurricane in the Room: Drawing, Marginality, and Scale in Monica Bonvicini's *75 mph*', it focuses on the drawings Bonvicini made for her installation consisting of two fans blowing air at an unbearable speed in a white-cube space built within a commercial gallery. Bosco proposes that the drawings provide a way of reading the strategies of expansion, compression, and multiscalarity in Bonvicini's installation. Featuring collages of advertisements, standard architecture manuals, and critical texts, they deploy scalar frictions

and manipulations of figurability that reverse outside and inside, visibility and exclusion, perspective and opacity. Invoking Carl Linfert's understanding of architectural drawings as hybrid spatial representations situated at the margins of both architecture and painting, Bosco develops a broader notion of 'marginal drawing': if drawing is traditionally perceived as the authentic origin within a linear sequence from project and planning to realization, it now provides scalar disjunctures, disruptions, and detours with respect to the spatial work it addresses. Furthermore, setting Bonvicini's work in dialogue with theories of gender and domesticity, Bosco highlights her non-dominant and deconstructive approach to space and architecture.

In a similar vein, but moving back from the visual and spatial to the textual, Angelica Stathopoulos's essay 'sweet nothings' meditates on the relation between minoritarian beings and minor forms. By way of thematically engaging minor points — the i, the tittle, the dot, the period, the atom — Stathopoulos argues that small things can unveil and deconstruct large structures. They furthermore contend that queer, racialized, feminine, and other minoritarian beings profess a privileged relationship to minor forms and often tend towards smaller cases rather than accept the premises of the capital 'I'. Aligning form, content, and subject, the essay sketches a diminutive ethics modelled on diminutive life.

A particular state of diminution is at the centre of Marietta Kesting's essay: sleep and related states of reduced activity, consciousness, and metabolism, when life is effectively suspended. Titled 'Scaling Sleep: Modes of Suspension, Reduction, and Intensification', it explores fictional and real, historical and current experiments with intensities, variations, and durations of sleep in humans and animals. Starting out with an analysis of the potent trope of 'Sleeping Beauty', of one hundred years of sleep or suspension, the essay inquires into the connections between sleep experiments and assumptions about certain bodies and the actual vulnerability of sleepers in semi-conscious or unconscious states. While capitalist societies and the military have considered sleep a useless and passive state to be downscaled or eliminated, Kesting highlights the increasing interest in extending sleep. In particular, the ability of some mammals to hibernate during periods of cold temperatures and scarce food conjures up the possibility of enacting

interscalar jumps between animal and human scales, and using hibernation as a model to reduce energy consumption on crewed interstellar flights.

A different kind of suspension — by typographical and rhetorical rather than medical means — is at issue in the essay by Nicolas Helm-Grovas, who, like Stathopoulos, explores the nexus of form, content, and subject in a minor key, while taking it in a different direction. Titled '(subject in parentheses)', the essay takes the figure of brackets or parentheses as a starting point for reflecting on links between form, social relations, and the subject. Beginning from a minor detail of textual infrastructure, it thinks across scales, from the grammatological one of the tiny mark to discursive, psychological, and social scales. Written in dialogue with Rebecca Comay, Hollis Frampton, Yvonne Rainer, Ian White, Theodor Adorno, Jacques Derrida, Doris Lessing, Roland Barthes, Georges Bataille, Marina Vishmidt, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, Alex Farrar, and others, the essay is an extended formal experiment that seeks to enact and perform its content through its form. Not only is the title placed in parentheses, as in some of the works discussed, but so are long, italicized paragraphs, which often cover several pages and offer meta-reflections on parentheses, punctuation, gaps, and infrastructure, as well as on metalanguage itself and the question of its verticality and bracketing of the subject.

Verónica Stedile Luna closely links the form of writing to the material production of books as she asks what insights small-scale publishing projects can bring into the conditions of contemporary large-scale publishing. Developing the notion of 'editorial writing', where 'editorial' is intended to include its Spanish meaning of 'publishing', her essay 'Editorial Writings from a Scalar Perspective: Reduction and Expansion as Publishing Procedures' analyses a series of recent Latin American artistic publishing projects that develop scalar operations of expansion and reduction in relation to both the book as a material format and writing itself. Her case studies, which include Oficina Perambulante, DocumentA/Escénicas, and *Líneas Móviles*, show how procedures of enlargement and miniaturization, excess and scarcity can be understood as active responses to contemporary conditions of overproduction and destruction in the publishing industry.

The final two essays explore scalar paradoxes of the everyday, which seems small-scale only as long as it remains barely perceptible in its overwhelming ordinariness. Claudia Peppel's essay presents some of the manifold questions that the contradictory experience of the everyday elicits and that account for the interest the everyday has received in twentieth-century avant-garde art and theory. Asking how the perception of the everyday changes when it is presented from an unusual perspective through scalar shifts, Peppel explores the effects and potential transformation of common domestic objects as their size is enlarged or reduced in relation to the viewer. Titled 'The Everyday in Dramatic Closeness', the essay presents a selection of works from the aforementioned exhibition of the same name, held at the ICI Berlin, and shows how they question perceptions and expectations of everyday life. In particular, Peppel highlights how the works presented produce uncanny moments in which the everyday is perceived as unfamiliar or weird.

The final essay, Jasmine Clotilde Pisapia's 'Dust, Death, and the Body of the Earth: Notes on the Scales of Ecological Disaster', explores the paradoxes at the heart of the everyday and of situated perspectives by examining the everyday of dust, from regular domestic dust to toxic fallouts from hazardous steel factories and volcanoes. It follows dust as a way of moving across scales — spatially, from particulate matter to volcanic magnitude, and temporally, from the slow accumulation of toxic exposure to the sudden force of catastrophe. Through a wide constellation of images, texts, and ethnographic encounters, the essay reflects on how different timescales of disaster come to coexist in zones of environmental crisis. Drawing on long-term anthropological fieldwork in southern Italy's toxic and volcanic environments, it follows the relations between the slow sedimentation of environmental violence and moments of catastrophic rupture, and the paradoxes of inhabiting unstable worlds. Dust becomes the medium through which these relations emerge, moving between satellite views of industrial landscapes, flash-lit digital photographs, gravediggers' testimonies, archival images of eruption, and the unsettled worlds opened by André Masson's volcanic painting and Georges Bataille's writings on dust and the subterranean abyss. Here, particulate matter emerges at the threshold

between the living and the dead, the visible and the invisible, the infinitesimal and the cosmic.

As is evident from this final description alone, there is a dense web of connections between the essays, which emerge from an intensive, two-year long collaboration. Readers are invited to explore the manifold links by reading the essays in any order, but may refer to Diagrams 2 (p. vi) and 3 (p. vii) for further orientation and guidance.

# The Hurricane in the Room

## Drawing, Marginality, and Scale in Monica Bonvicini's *75 mph*

FILIPPO BOSCO

### 1. THE SCALES OF INSTALLATION

In March 1998, two high-powered ventilators circulating 40,000 cubic metres of air per minute welcomed visitors within a purpose-built white cube in Monica Bonvicini's solo exhibition at Galerie Mehdi Chouakri on Gipsstraße in Berlin (Figure 1). One reviewer reported their experience of the exhibition: 'It is pleasant to bathe your hair in it and let the wind blow in your face, but it is unbearable in the long run.'[1] Another wrote: 'When you stepped into it, you felt either encouraged to just stupidly let yourself go or a violent compulsion to resist the pressure. [...] No discreet small talk, no idle fondling of wineglasses, no nervously smoked cigarettes. Instead, heavy metal — nothing but roaring sound and blowing hair.'[2] The extreme conditions of wind and noise challenged the habits of the art audience. The work caused a stir, marking the first international recognition for the Italian artist, who had been living in Berlin for a decade.

1 Peter Herbstreuth, 'Der freie Flug einer Junggenialen', *Der Tagesspiegel*, 4 April 1998, p. 28; my translation.

2 Jörg Heiser, 'Monica Bonvicini: Galerie Mehdi Chouakri, Berlin', *Frieze*, 41 (1998), p. 81.



Fig. 1. Monica Bonvicini, *A Violent, Tropical, Cyclonic Piece of Art Having Wind Speeds of or in Excess of 75 mph*, 1998, aluminium studs, drywall panels, white paint, two axial fans, 350 × 600 × 400 cm. © Monica Bonvicini and VG Bild-Kunst. Photograph: Jens Ziehe. Courtesy of the artist and Museum Neues Weimar. Creative Commons license terms for re-use do not apply to this picture and further permission may be required from the right holder.

*A Violent, Tropical, Cyclonic Piece of Art Having Wind Speeds of or in Excess of 75 mph* encourages a scalar reading, pointing in three directions. On a phenomenological level, the work *expanded* into an environment, entering the much-debated category of installation art. At the same time, Bonvicini literally *compressed* a hurricane into an indoor experiment. The miniaturization occurred by isolating an index, namely air speed, from among the characteristics listed in the dictionary definition of 'hurricane',[3] drawing the work's title from this by

3 See *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language*, ed. by Stuart Berg Flexner, 2nd edn (Random House, 1987), p. 934: 'A violent, tropical, cyclonic storm of the

replacing the word 'hurricane' with 'piece of art'. The experience of the work inverted Immanuel Kant's classic example of the dynamical sublime: a hurricane observed from 'a safe place'.[4] In Berlin, this overwhelming force of nature was paradoxically enclosed in a room, and relief could only be found by getting out and leaving the space.

A second reading concerns a metaphorical scale jump. One reviewer of the show compared the axial fans to the wind machines of film sets,[5] and considered the installation's effect on visitors according to a cinematic cliché: the wind scene thus represents the turbulence of the soul and scales up personal feeling to planetary sufferance, as in Michael Jackson's 'Earth Song' music video.[6]

A third scalar reading encompasses the first two to examine Bonvicini's practice from within. Like most artists who create installations, Bonvicini devotes a great deal of time to drawing and planning — a daily paper-based activity that ensures continuity between the site-specific works created in galleries and museums and her ephemeral interventions in public spaces. The artist has described her early drawing practice as copious, occurring in various, sometimes improvised places ('during an institute meeting', 'in an airplane from NYC to Amsterdam'),[7] though mainly at home: 'my apartment looked a lot like a studio. I can't cook anyway.'[8] She would work out her ideas through annotated readings, notes, studies, sketches. To coalesce these into a coherent work, Bonvicini turned to more structured and complex drawings, often in quite large formats, that were usually finished in a single session. Sometimes, the drawings would serve to present her ideas to galleries and museums, as well as to apply for funding and schol-

western North Atlantic, having wind speed of or in excess of 72 mph (32 m/sec). [...] [1545–55; < Sp *huracán* < Taino *hurakán*]'. Bonvicini uses the speed '73 mph' in some drawings.

4 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. by Werner S. Pluhar (Hackett, 1987), p. 120.

5 Too noisy to be used in film production, the axial ventilators were in fact loaned from a factory. I am thankful to Monica Bonvicini for her help and sharing of information about her work.

6 Herbstreuth, 'Der freie Flug'.

7 Monica Bonvicini, 'A Lonely Conversation', interview by Bettina Steinbrügge, in Harald Falckenberg and others, *Monica Bonvicini: Disegni* (Distanz, 2012), pp. 319–21 (p. 319).

8 Ibid., p. 319.

arships: 'Back then, I went to the workshop with a drawing just like that, and it would be built just like that. There weren't any computer graphics back then, or at least we didn't have any.'[9] The more finished drawings present a layered materiality and sophisticated orchestration of collage, superimpositions of paper fragments, photocopies, and tracing papers, and crayon and watercolour.

With few exceptions,[10] Bonvicini's graphic oeuvre remained private during her early career, until its large-scale presentation in Mönchengladbach and Hamburg in 2012. A related extensive catalogue groups these materials according to the three-dimensional work or exhibition to which they refer. However, the status of the drawings in relation to the installations cannot be reduced to that of preliminary study or project work. In the case of the twenty-six works on paper associated with the 1998 hurricane work, functionally titled *Drawings to 75 mph*,[11] they do not clearly collocate before or after the invitation from Mehdi Chouakri; rather, they present variations, collateral developments, and hypotheses on the work, and include textual references, staging a theoretical reflection on her practice.

Looking at the drawings, scale appears as an operational device of fundamental importance. Conceiving and developing the hurricane installation, Bonvicini had to 'draw to scale', that is, represent it on small portable supports. She made use of plans, prospects, and three-point perspective, a basic architectural vocabulary that is recognizable in its virtual function to project onto a larger scale. The operation exercised by scale is a virtual shift or jump, and can be best understood by considering the etymology of the term 'project'. *Pro-iacio*, to throw forward, implies a movement of expansion as well as a distance to be 'thrown over', a material and theoretical gap between paper sheet and (imagined or realized) spatial work. Recent theories of scale have precisely highlighted its dynamic or relational nature, reading scale

9 Ibid., p. 320.

10 Some early drawings were included in group exhibitions, including 'Construction Drawings' at Kunst-Werke Berlin, 22 January to 4 April 1999 <https://www.kw-berlin.de/de/ausstellungen/1999-construction-drawings> [accessed 15 April 2026]; or else exhibited in series, as with the *Bedtimesquare* collages at Galleria Emi Fontana in Milan in 1999.

11 See Falckenberg and others, *Monica Bonvicini: Disegni*, pp. 60–75.

variance not as a continuum but rather as an articulation of 'disjunctures',[12] and as 'jumps and discontinuities' in scale variance:[13] scale itself is visible and critical only when imagined as a shift between at least two sizes or levels of observation.

*A Violent, Tropical, Cyclonic Piece of Art Having Wind Speeds of or in Excess of 75 mph* also declared a 'gap' in regard to its own reception, by assaulting visitors with its upscaled wind force and causing them to leave. As the critic Peter Herbstreuth put it, 'the wind installation is not suitable for visits' (Die Wind-Installation eignet sich nicht zum Schauen).[14] 'Nicht zum Schauen' can be read in two ways, denoting either the inaccessibility of this anti-exhibition on an institutional level,[15] or a phenomenological appreciation of the installation's obstruction of vision.[16] Such hostile conditions are its actual subject and eventually limited the display of the work itself: the industrial ventilators required that the electrical system be modified with higher-capacity cables; originally intended to run constantly during gallery hours, their activation was reduced to five minutes every half hour, following complaints from neighbours.

Before deepening my inquiry into the forms and meanings of a hurricane in a room, and showing how shifts in scale articulate both its anti-phenomenological and anti-institutional character, in the next section I will provide a working definition of drawing as marginal in order to frame the relationship between Bonvicini's practices on paper and in space.

12 Derek Woods, 'Scale Critique for the Anthropocene', *The Minnesota Review*, 83 (2014), pp. 133–42 (p. 135) <https://doi.org/10.1215/00265667-2782327>.

13 Timothy Clark, 'Scale', in *Telemorphosis: Theory in the Era of Climate Change*, ed. by Tom Cohen (Open Humanities Press, 2012), pp. 148–66 (p. 149).

14 Herbstreuth, 'Der freie Flug', p. 28; my translation.

15 See *The Anti-Museum: An Anthology*, ed. by Mathieu Copeland and Balthazar Lovay (Walther König, 2017).

16 In 1996–97, Bonvicini explored such an obstruction in a series of drawings for a possible exhibition where visitors would be forced to bend over in order to enter a gallery space, due to a lowered ceiling height (achieved by a horizontal drywall panel hung on aluminium studs). Among its provisional titles were 'Low short expectations', 'Bend your mind to my work', 'Submit', 'Go round the bend', the latter meaning to be unable to act in a reasonable way. See Falckenberg and others, *Monica Bonvicini: Disegni*, pp. 84–86.

## 2. MARGINAL DRAWING

Drawings for installation engage with space in a way that modifies traditional understandings of the medium. While a comprehensive study of this vast category of post-war Western art has yet to be undertaken, with drawing eloquently absent in most theorizations of installation art, we could approach some basic questions by returning to an early art-historical discussion of drawing for architecture. The German art historian and critic Carl Linfert's *The Foundations of Architecture Drawing* (1931) offered a detailed study of architectural drawing in eighteenth-century France, proposing a new formal and theoretical framework to address the specificities of this mode of draughtsmanship. Walter Benjamin, who was close to Linfert, praised the study for its attention to an overlooked subject, as an example of an art history 'at home in marginal domains': 'it is precisely in the investigation of the marginal case that the material contents reveal their key position most decisively.'[17] Benjamin's review was republished fifty years later in the art journal *October*, and Susanne Titz has suggested its significance as a contribution to the theoretical context of the 1980s and 1990s that was to be essential for Bonvicini herself. It was above all Benjamin and Linfert's idea that drawings do not reproduce architecture but produce it in the first place ('a production which less often benefits the reality of architectural planning than it does dreams'[18]) that resonate with debates on the visual mediation and deconstruction of architecture at this time.[19]

17 Walter Benjamin, 'Rigorous Study of Art', trans. by Thomas Y. Levin, *October*, 47 (1988), pp. 84–90 (p. 89) <https://doi.org/10.2307/778983>. See Lutz Robbers, 'Without Pictorial Detour: Benjamin, Mies and the Architectural Image', *Footprint*, 10.1 (2016), pp. 27–50 <https://doi.org/10.7480/footprint.10.1.976>.

18 Benjamin, 'Rigorous Study', p. 88.

19 Susanne Titz, 'Drawing Spaces', in Falckenberg and others, *Monica Bonvicini: Disegni*, pp. 313–18. The exhibition 'Deconstructivist Architecture' at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1988 collected the work of Frank O. Gehry, Daniel Libeskind, Rem Koolhaas, Peter Eisenman, Zaha M. Hadid, Coop Himmelblau, and Bernard Tschumi. See Philip Johnson and Mark Wigley, *Deconstructivist Architecture* (Museum of Modern Art, 1988); and Mark Wigley, *The Architecture of Deconstruction: Derrida's Haunt* (MIT Press, 1993).

Linfert defines architectural drawing as *Grenzfall* and *Zwitter* ('limit case' and 'hybrid'),[20] a visualization of space at the edges of architecture and painting — or at the margins of the two. These two media are radically opposed in their approach to spatial representation. On the one hand, architecture shapes three-dimensional space in discrete units that are experienced by moving bodies; it 'requires more than the eye to be fully grasped. The eye must see less than it must sense structures'.[21] On the other hand, figurative painting limits space to a single point of view and a unified vision with coherent perspective, shadowing, and other mimetic qualities. Standing in between the two, architectural drawing shares with painting a vocabulary of two-dimensional signs. However,

> the actual sensual, or rather figurative or representational skill is lacking. The drawn details do not have the drive and ambition to lead to a fully illustrative sensualization on their own. The expressive language is immediately conditioned by the *constructive* nature of each *individual* architectural object.[22]

Linfert stresses the negative qualities that define architectural drawing, as serving the 'structural, anti-image character of architecture' (tektonisch-unbildlichen Charakter der Baukunst). While correct in terms of measures and constructive proportions, it makes use of a perspectival clumsiness (*Ungeschicklichkeit*); it does not represent buildings as objects (images of objects) and often privileges schemes, diagrams, and topographical symbols.[23]

This mode of drawing (*Zeichnungsweise*) is ascribed to a 'building, not forming, eye' (bauenden, nicht [ … ] bildenden Auge). Its practical and visual qualities indicate a 'very different meaning of drawing in rela-

20 Carl Linfert, 'Die Grundlagen der Architekturzeichnung', *Kunstwissenschaftliche Forschungen*, 1 (1931), pp. 133–246 (p. 153); my translation.

21 Ibid., p. 143.

22 Ibid., p. 135.

23 'In topographical representations, the schematizing power of the object (whether architecture, trees, or something else) is so strong and important that it becomes impossible to recast it into the pictorial object. Consequently, what is perceived as unnatural in painting is posited at the core of architecture drawing, as a non-pictorial "objectivist remnant" and a "representational rigidity" [*Darstellungshärte*]. [ … ] What is lacking, circumscribes [*grenzt*] the essence of architecture drawing' (ibid., pp. 144, 230).

tion to production and to the single work which the drawing serves'.[24] This last point is particularly important for locating the meaning of drawing and to displace it from the centrality, primacy, and continuity traditionally assigned to the medium. From Giorgio Vasari to recent scholarship,[25] drawing has been acknowledged and valued at/as the core of pictorial expression, the site of intimate style, the artist's hand, and direct, sincere autography. These traditional features are encapsulated by the essentialist, almost genetical paradigm behind the Vasarian definition of *disegno* as the 'father of the arts', which entails the linear sequence of conception-planning-realization. Linfert delineates a different conceptual position: 'architectural invention is not carried over into "execution" by way of "drawing" (as artistic invention is), but interrupts this path.'[26] This detour in the process of creation complicates definitions like 'preparatory drawing' and challenges the linearity underpinning the traditional concept of planning (from the project to the building). Removed from the centre, drawing is displaced to a conceptual position where it operates a critical detouring with respect to the spatial work it addresses. This position is therefore lateral, liminal, marginal. From this perspective, and in the case of Bonvicini's *75 mph*, drawing provides a material site to explore the relation between scale and marginality.

## 3. COLLAGE: FRAGMENTATION, INTERRUPTION, SEPARATION

The idea of working with air and architecture first came to Bonvicini during her student exchange at the California Institute of the Arts (CalArts):

> In 1992 I made a series of photographs of the air-conditioning system in the main building of CalArts, where I was studying. [...] Fantastic rooms, insane. I had never seen so many filters before. Rooms filled with nothing except dirty and clean air. The air was so strong I could barely hold onto the tripod.[27]

24 Ibid., p. 143.

25 See Deanna Petherbridge, *The Primacy of Drawing: Histories and Theories of Practice* (Yale University Press, 2010).

26 Linfert, 'Die Grundlagen', p. 231.

27 Bonvicini, 'A Lonely Conversation', p. 319.

Born in Venice in 1965, Bonvicini had moved to Berlin in 1986 to study painting at the Hochschule der Künste (HdK). Her interest in the functional aspects of buildings in general, and in air conditioning in particular, may be read in relation to the teaching context of CalArts (where Michael Asher and Allan Sekula were professors) and the broader return of Conceptual art in the critical agenda of the early 1990s.[28] Susanne von Falkenhausen early on highlighted Bonvicini's relationship with Minimalism and Conceptual art, as models to draw inspiration from and to overturn. Both Asher and Bruce Nauman had created wind rooms in the late 60s and 70s, producing subtle estrangements of the sound and air conditions of indoor environments.[29] Without exception, however, they left the sources of ventilation hidden. Bonvicini's hurricane is a polemic against Conceptual art's 'rhetoric of the immaterial', as it turns 'from soft to loud, from invisible to extremely conspicuous, from immateriality to a brutally staged material presence. In its effect, however, the concept becomes a gesture — loud, theatrical, and full of itself'.[30]

An analogous lineage may be discerned in Bonvicini's early works on paper. After repudiating her painting education at the HdK, she turned to drawing, but mostly to anti-pictorial and sculptural examples: 'I was very much into the drawings of Donald Judd [...] because he cannot draw. I love it when artists cannot draw, but they draw.'[31] While

28 See Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, 'Conceptual Art 1962–1969: From the Aesthetic of Administration to the Critique of Institutions', *October*, 55 (1991), pp. 105–43 <https://doi.org/10.2307/778941>.

29 See Kavior Moon, 'From Air to Architecture: Michael Asher's Early Air Works', in *Conceptualism and Materiality*, ed. by Christian Berger (Brill, 2019), pp. 57–87; and the notes on Nauman's 1970 *Wind Room* in Leontine Coelewij, 'Bruce Nauman at the Stedelijk Museum: An Exhibition and Collection History', Stedelijk, 25 May 2021 <https://www.stedelijk.nl/en/digdeeper/bruce-nauman-stedelijk-museum> [accessed 15 April 2026].

30 Susanne von Falkenhausen, 'From Concept to Gesture: Bonvicini's Play with the Strategies of Modernism, or How to Turn Minimalism from its Head onto its Hands', in Dan Cameron, Susanne von Falkenhausen, and Allesandra Pace, *Monica Bonvicini: Bau* (Hopefulmonster, 2000), pp. 75–85 (p. 79).

31 'In Conversation Monica Bonvicini / Hamburger Bahnhof', Hamburger Bahnhof – Nationalgalerie der Gegenwart, 6 December 2025 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R-fbOuWjCi0> [accessed 15 April 2026]. See also Bonvicini's comment that 'Donald Judd was just as bad with drawing in perspective as I am', in Bonvicini, 'A Lonely Conversation', p. 319.




Fig. 2. Monica Bonvicini, *Drawing to 75 mph*, 1998, graphite, oil crayons, and correction liquid on printed paper, 29.5 × 42 cm. © Monica Bonvicini and VG Bild-Kunst. Photograph: def image. Courtesy of the artist. Creative Commons license terms for re-use do not apply to this picture and further permission may be required from the right holder.

Asher commissioned architects to execute his plans,[32] Nauman's drawings for installations offered a fascinating model for a basic architectural vocabulary (planimetries, axonometries, prospects) appropriated by an instinctive touch and rich materiality.[33] Both approaches can be

32 See Michael Asher, *Writings 1973–1983 on Works 1969–1979*, ed. by Benjamin H. D. Buchloh (The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1983).

33 See *Bruce Nauman: Zeichnungen 1965–1986*, ed. by Dieter Koepplin (Kunstmuseum Basel, 1986).

seen in Bonvicini's *Drawings to 75 mph*, especially those executed in proximity to the exhibition: the detailed plan and axonometry on millimetre paper that is now in the collection of the Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin as a gift from Paul Maenz and Gerd de Vries;[34] and three views of the gallery installation in a large street scene.[35] Among the latter is a photocopied paper sheet reworked with oil crayons and white correction fluid (Figure 2). It presents the gallery in quite dramatic perspective and removes the roof, revealing the structure of the installation. The drywall panels are also shown from the back, revealing the supporting aluminium studs and mounting holes for the fans (electrical cables ran through the cavity between the temporary walls and the gallery walls). A door opens from the room into a second space in the gallery, which is not detailed in the drawing. Bonvicini devotes special attention to the urban setting of the street onto which the gallery faces, its exterior walls rendered in heavy strokes of yellow pastel. Sketched with a dexterous fading effect are a parked car and a truck, and two signs on the buildings adjacent to the gallery, which read *Hure* ('whore') and *Bierhaus* ('brewpub'). Together with the vehicles, they seem to allude to a distinctly masculine sphere of consumerism.

A group of eight drawings are numbered as a sequence and share their materials and dimensions (55.5 by 72.5 cm). Formally, they evince an original visual strategy that questions both style and the function of planning. Interior views of the hurricane installation are juxtaposed with various images and texts, either collaged or retraced, in a layout that recalls the format of an artist's proposal. In one drawing, a questionnaire-like presentation is introduced by the question, 'What is [it] about?':

> A corner of the museum will be closed by two walls. In the inside two big ventilators will be mounted on the preexisting walls of the institution. The ventilators will blow cold air from the air conditioning central system into the constructed room. No room thermostat will be needed. The — already cleaned

34 Two sketches with graphite, white pastel, and coloured ink on millimetre paper, each 29.6 × 42 cm (GGB 725-2022,1-2), Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.

35 See Falckenberg and others, *Monica Bonvicini: Disegni*, pp. 68, 72 (bottom right), pp. 74–75.

> — air will be blow[n] with the maximum speed permitted. The two ventilators will be positioned opposite each other. The jet of air will meet in the middle of the space producing a 'collision of ventilation' (also suitable for offices & public/private spaces in general.[36]

The text reveals an aspect of the work that was possibly overlooked in the installation itself, namely, the cleaning of air brought to a paroxysmal ventilation. This technical focus expands in the collage drawings via the insertion of various illustrations from manuals such as the *Architectural Graphic Standards* or the *Complete Fix-It-Yourself Manual*.[37] With striking meticulousness, Bonvicini retraced the typologies of ducts and outlets, accompanying these with captions and numerals that are ultimately unreadable out of context, together with schemes and plans concerning the possible circulation of air in specific rooms. Immersion in the technical structure of the institutional context (an unnamed 'museum') is a trope of institutional critique; however, in these drawings it appears compromised not only by the randomness of the sources (as if Bonvicini were trying out disparate models of air circulation), but also by the marketing language clearly drawn from advertising — in one drawing, the words *Kunsthalle* and *Kaufhalle* overlap.[38] Taglines selling the hurricane installation are spread across the drawings: 'money-back guarantee! / eine gute Lösung und verursacht in jeder Hinsicht die geringsten Beanstandungen' (a good solution and causes the fewest complaints in every respect); 'it's new, it's clean, it's p.[olitically]c.[orrect], it's easy!'; 'there is nothing to understand about it, just try it!'.[39] Such contrasts in register culminate in ironic titles that are matched with images proclaiming an avant-garde attitude as if it were a commercial product: the imperatives 'Don't be middle-class! Don't be reactionary! Don't be nice!' appear on a picture of traditional painting tools; the phrase 'Support the products of proletarian's [*sic*] sweat' is written on one of the photographs of filters in the ventilation

36 Ibid., p. 67.

37 Charles G. Ramsey and Harold R. Sleeper, *Architectural Graphic Standards* (Wiley, 1988); and *Complete Fix-It-Yourself Manual*, ed. by Katherine Zmetana (Prentice Hall Press, 1989), from whose chapter 'Heating and Cooling Systems' (p. 162) Bonvicini retraced an axonometric.

38 Falckenberg and others, *Monica Bonvicini: Disegni*, p. 62.

39 Respectively, ibid., pp. 67, 66, and 65.

room at CalArts.[40] Most of the texts have been typed in various Microsoft Word fonts, then printed and collaged, so as to suggest the feel of anonymous voice-overs and impersonal discourse, amid which it is difficult to situate Bonvicini's own (ironic) position.

Another source that has undergone the fragmentation of collage is Jeff Wall's *A Sudden Gust of Wind (After Hokusai)* (1993). Bonvicini photocopied the famous photograph and fragmented it multiple times,[41] disposing of the original composition (itself the result of a careful photomontage) and inserting the cut-out characters (the oscillating tree, the off-balance man) rather prosaically as shocked visitors to the hurricane installation.[42]

In one image, a theoretical text appears to be taken seriously as a reading that is key to the drawings. It is a quote from *Space and Sexuality*, a 1992 volume edited by Beatriz Colomina, which greatly influenced Bonvicini's practice in the early 90s and alimented her feminist reflection on architecture as an instrument of power over bodies and sexualities. The quotation merges two passages from a dense essay by Mark Wigley, 'Untitled: The Housing of Gender', a detailed analysis of Leon Battista Alberti's fifteenth-century treatise *De re aedificatoria* (*On the Art of Building*) and the construction of the female subject in the theorization of domestic architecture:

> Before it can defend the body, architecture must defend itself against the body in ordering it… Architecture is established as such a purification. It must be sited, organized, and maintained with technical strategies like drains, windows, and cremation, which preserve the 'purity of the air'. The body itself emerges as a threat to the purity of space, the 'cleanliness of building'.[43]

Bonvicini's original fascination with the compressed strength of the ventilation room at CalArts and the insistence of the decontextualized

40 Ibid., p. 63.

41 Wall's work was illustrated on two pages on the Swiss magazine *Parkett* in 1997.

42 On Wall's technique, see Fosco Lucarelli, 'Jeff Wall, Study for "A Sudden Gust of Wind (After Hokusai)", (1993)', *Socks*, 28 June 2017 <https://socks-studio.com/2017/06/28/jeff-wall-study-for-a-sudden-gust-of-wind-after-hokusai-1993/> [accessed 15 April 2026].

43 See Falckenberg and others, *Monica Bonvicini: Disegni*, p. 62. The original passages are from Mark Wigley, 'Untitled: The Housing of Gender', in *Sexuality and Space*, ed. by Beatriz Colomina (Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), pp. 327–89 (p. 344).

and incomprehensible technical details from architectural manuals are both readable as reflecting this impulse of a paroxysmal cleaning of the '— already cleaned — air', an obsession foundational to house architecture. In subsequent paragraphs, Wigley specifies that 'this disciplining of the body is an extension of the traditional disciplining of the cultural artifact "woman", authorized by the claim that she is too much a part of the fluid bodily world to control herself'.[44]

In the drawings, Bonvicini hints at gender discrimination in the form of fictional, humorous newspaper strips reporting the comments of two male visitors, Mister Sauer and Mister Blauimmer,[45] who lament that they have caught a cold from the installation wind, to which the artist replies, 'The power of art is unpredictable', and, reversing a sexist cliché on appropriate dressing, '[you] should wear a different kind of shirt'. Another picture shows a men-only committee of the association 'Beautiful Art Is Good for Us' approving the hurricane installation.

In 1998, Gwen Raaberg recapitulated the recent history of collage as a feminist strategy. Her lineage of theories and practices since the 70s included several references of relevance to Bonvicini's practice on paper, such as Barbara Kruger's image/word combinations, Martha Rosler's insertions of war images into domestic interiors, and Miriam Schapiro's category of 'femmage'.[46] While femmage functions as a claim for the fragmented cultural past of women and for the legacy of gestures historically devalued as female (from sewing and cutting to appliqué and cooking), Bonvicini intervenes in the dominant male discourses of making. Her strategy can be thought alongside Lucy Lippard's aesthetic of collage as a form of 'positive fragmentation' that frames women's artistic agency within the logic of the house:

44 Wigley, 'Untitled', p. 345.

45 *Sauer* translates as 'sour, irritated'; *Blauimmer* means 'always blue', that is, drunk. It also seems to echo the famous architecture collective Coop Himmelb(l)au, which represented Austria at the Venice Architecture Biennale in 1996.

46 Melissa Meyer and Miriam Schapiro's essay 'Waste Not Want Not' (1977–78) is key here. For the original, collage-like layout of the text, see Melissa Meyer and Miriam Schapiro, 'Waste Not Want Not: An Inquiry into What Women Saved and Assembled', *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art & Politics*, 1.4 (1978), pp. 66–69 <https://leaf.bucknell.edu/node/461/> [accessed 15 April 2026]. Schapiro taught at CalArts in the early 1970s.

> It is supposed to be men who are 'handy around the house', men who 'fix' things while women 'make' the home. This is a myth, of course, and a popular one. There are certainly as many women who do domestic repair as men [...]. The fact remains that when a woman comes to make something, it more often than not has a particular character — whether this originates from role-playing, the division of labour, or some deeper consciousness. The difference can often be defined as a kind of 'positive fragmentation' or as the collage aesthetic — the mixing and matching of fragments to provide a new whole.[47]

These reflections echoed the Wages for Housework campaign of the mid-1970s, which was animated by many Italians, including Mariarosa Dalla Costa and Silvia Federici, among others.[48] Bonvicini literally refers to the feminist struggle when, in the drawings, her 'bauenden Auge' (building eye), in Linfert's expression, appropriates the language of *Fix-it-yourself* manuals and its gendered dimension.

One drawing, the second of the series, eloquently recapitulates the elements of Bonvicini's strategy on paper (Figure 3). It juxtaposes, from right to left: a numbered set of outlets, retraced from the latest edition of *Architectural Graphic Standards*;[49] three pieces of ventilation duct collaged onto satellite images of low-pressure areas identified by female names, cut out from a 1997–98 Mercedes Benz advertisement; and, below these, a quote from the same advertisement that captures its sexism: 'In Germany, low-pressure areas carry the names of women. Ever since, drivers know: Antje means "caution"!'.[50] At the left, above some schemes of air circulation represented as arrowed vectors, the product to be sold is presented: a 'portable' version of the hurricane fan ejecting air (materialized as thin strips of tracing paper) from a tiny box with a lid held in a lightly traced hand.

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47 See Lucy R. Lippard, 'Making Something from Nothing (Toward a Definition of Women's "Hobby Art")', *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art & Politics*, 1.4 (1978), pp. 62–65 <https://leaf.bucknell.edu/node/360/> [accessed 15 April 2026].

48 See Silvia Federici, *Wages against Housework* (Power of Women Collective and Falling Wall Press, 1975).

49 See Ramsey and Sleeper, *Architectural Graphic Standards*, p. 628.

50 'In Deutschland tragen Tiefdruckgebiete Frauennamen. Seitdem wissen Autofahrer: Antje heißt "Vorsicht"' (advertisement text), *EU Magazine*, January 1998, p. 16.

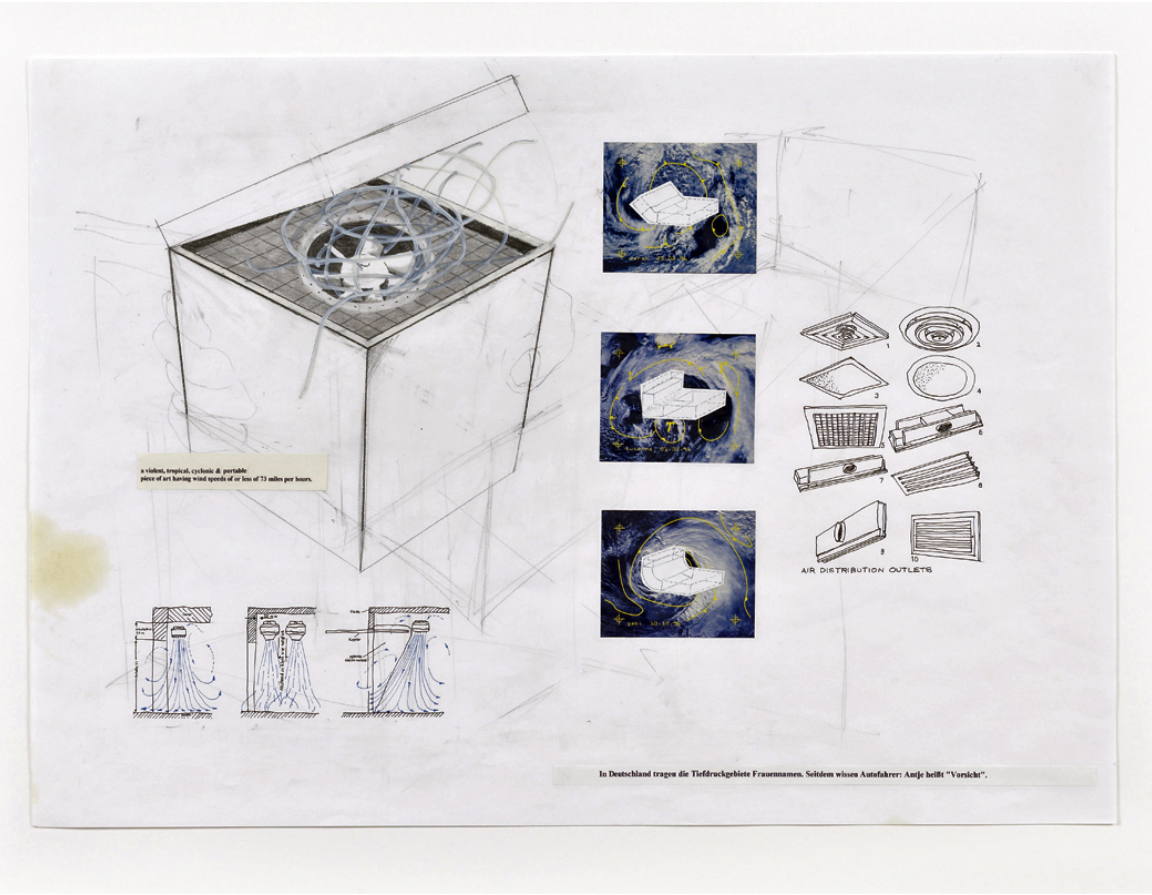


Fig. 3. Monica Bonvicini, *A Violent, Tropical, Cyclonic Piece of Art Having Wind Speeds of or in Excess of 75 mph #2*, 1997, cut-out and pasted printed paper, permanent ink pen, wax crayon, graphite, correction liquid on paper / collage, 42 × 59 cm (unframed). © Monica Bonvicini and VG Bild-Kunst. Photograph: def image. Courtesy of the artist. Creative Commons license terms for re-use do not apply to this picture and further permission may be required from the right holder.

The absence of a strict planning logic directs the observer's attention to the overarching meta-contextual references, in an open and continuous oscillation of registers. Three main repertoires merge on the page: advertising, which includes the mass-mediatic reproduction of art history; technical standards; and architecture and gender theory.

The political result of this mix, which I will explore in the next section, relates to Lippard's understanding of collage as

> born of interruption and the healing instinct to use political consciousness as a glue with which to get the pieces into some sort of new order (though not necessarily as new whole, since there is no single way out, nobody who's really 'got it all together'; feminist art is still an art of separations).[51]

## 4. REPRESENTING SCALES: FRICTION, FIGURABILITY, FAÇADES

The advertisement's scalar jump between women and low-pressure areas — based on a sexist association of both with danger — resonates with a key argument in Wigley's essay. Alberti's Renaissance theory drew on a Greek text, Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*, which identified the male with the exterior and the female with the interior on the basis of sexuality:

> The woman on the outside is implicitly sexually mobile. [...] In Greek thought women lack the internal self-control credited to men as the very mark of their masculinity. This self-control is no more than the maintenance of secure boundaries. These internal boundaries, or rather boundaries that define the interior of the person, the identity of the self, cannot be maintained by a woman because her fluid sexuality endlessly overflows and disrupts them.[52]

The house literalizes such boundaries, in particular through its filters of purification from the body, like air cleaning (and conditioning). Bonvicini explores this theme of excess and containment, threat and surveillance, in one of the most striking drawings for *A Violent, Tropical, Cyclonic Piece of Art Having Wind Speeds of or in Excess of 75 mph*, peppered with quotes from *Space and Sexuality* (for instance, 'to control the body by isolating it from the building becouse [*sic*] it literally threatens the structure of the building, both its physical structure and its abstract order') (Figure 4).[53] On the left is the plan

51 Lucy Lippard, quoted in Gwen Raabger, 'Beyond Fragmentation: Collage as Feminist Strategy in the Arts', *Mosaic*, 31.3 (1998), pp. 153–71 (p. 157).

52 Wigley, 'Untitled', p. 335.

53 Ibid., p. 344.

of an L-shaped gallery (similar to Mehdi Chouakri), in which the installation is visualized from above, while on the right it appears in a perspectival rendering. There, the figure of a naked woman stands in the room, her womb and genitals coinciding with the ventilators on the wall. The hybridization of the female body with the structures of her containment (air conditioning) recalls another image, Louise Bourgeois's 1947 *Femme maison*, a woman whose torso is substituted by a house. In Leslie Kanes Weisman's *Discrimination by Design* (1992), another important source for Bonvicini's architectural reflections, the Womanhouse figure is read as expressing 'containment, anxiety, and the frustrated desire to escape'.[54] A reproduction of Bourgeois's drawing hung in Bonvicini's studio at the HdK,[55] and in 1997 became the direct motif of her video-performance *Hausfrau Swinging*, in which a nude woman with a cardboard house over her head repeatedly bangs against the white walls of a room corner.[56] The figure also expresses a scalar paradox: the house looks like a portable model, too small for the female body, the device of her oppression; but at the same time, the woman's womb and legs achieve monumentality. Bonvicini's strategy insists on a similar ambivalence of scale: the ventilator is inscribed in the woman's body that it contains and purifies, but it is turned into a hurricane and produces a 'collision of ventilation'. The architectural limits of female identity are breached for a moment, and the installation imagines a freed, unbearable sexuality that 'endlessly disrupts the boundaries of others, that is, men, disturbing their identity'.[57] A tiny man seen from behind appears at the woman's feet, making her look like a giantess in the space.

54 Leslie K. Weisman, *Discrimination by Design: A Feminist Critique of the Man-Made Environment* (University of Illinois Press, 1992), p. 17. *Femme maison*'s influence within second wave feminism spans from Miriam Schapiro and Judy Chicago's Womanhouse space in Los Angeles (1972–74) to its appearance on the cover of Lucy R. Lippard, *From the Center: Feminist Essays on Women's Art* (Dutton, 1976). For a different, positive reading, see Mignon Nixon, *Fantastic Reality: Louise Bourgeois and a Story of Modern Art* (MIT Press, 2005), pp. 53–82.

55 Bonvicini, 'A Lonely Conversation', p. 320.

56 See Monica Bonvicini, 'Hausfrau Swinging', n.d. <https://monicabonvicini.net/hausfrau-swinging/> [accessed 20 April 2026]; and Falckenberg and others, *Monica Bonvicini. Disegni*, pp. 240–42.

57 Wigley, 'Untitled', p. 335.

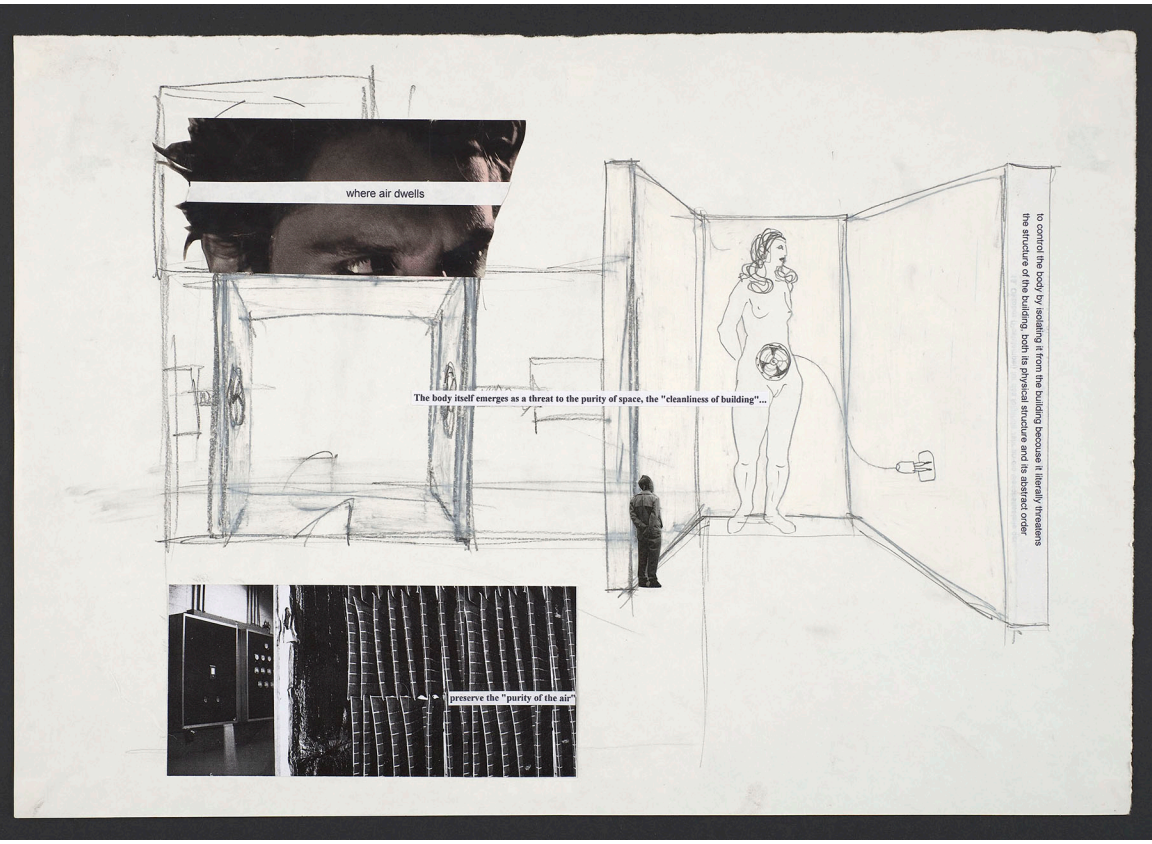


Fig. 4. Monica Bonvicini, *Drawing to 75 mph*, 1997, cut-out and pasted printed paper, graphite, wax crayons on paper / collage, 34.7 × 50 cm. © Monica Bonvicini and VG Bild-Kunst. Photograph: UMJ, N. Lackner. Courtesy of the artist and Neue Galerie Graz. Creative Commons license terms for re-use do not apply to this picture and further permission may be required from the right holder.

Collage is instrumental to this (multi)scalar strategy. A cut-out is extracted from its original scale, that is, the relationship between the viewpoint and the represented object (for instance, a view from below looking up, low-detail resolution, or wide-angle distortion that conveys a sense of closeness) only to interact to other fragments. Cut-outs are materially non-scalable; they can't be enlarged or reduced, only glued — just as retracing maintains a 1:1 relationship with the original. A composition can be arranged around them to produce coherent

proportions and perspectival foreshortening, or they can create scalar effects, for purposes both conceptual and expressive. Such effects can be analysed using two terms from a recent formal theory of scale developed by Glenn Adamson and Joshua Stein, originally in relation to sculptural examples. They define *friction* as 'resistance to a scale shift that is imposed by the tool, the material, or both'.[58] Being imported material, collaged images produce more or less friction depending on the extent to which they accommodate the perspective and size proportions already on the paper sheet. Their materiality brings with it a scale that clashes with or short-circuits the drawn-to-scale architectural project. Adamson and Stein's second concept is *figurability*, the quality of legibility and coherence that representations maintain or lose in scale shifts. The authors observe that 'representational images possess this property of figurability, while abstract forms do not. Geometrical solids and amorphous blobs have no referent; they are actually "natural" at any size, or, more accurately, are denatured with respect to scale'.[59] Architecture drawing tends to be reduced to geometry and abstraction (axonometries, plans, diagrams, and so on) in order to maximize the scalability from project to building. The cost is the exclusion of that which materially occupies and makes space, like walls, bodies — and air, which has to increase in (speed) scale to become perceptible. With the scalar shocks of collage, Bonvicini reintroduces what is not figurable anymore into the reduction of paper.

Drawing obviously belongs to the sphere of representational scales, which are set aside in Joshua DiCaglio's theory of scale. While observational scale relies on a constant account of measure (and perspective),

> In representation, scale retains the measure as the statement of a relationship to normal experience. The ratio on the map or image says not just 'this object is *x* times smaller than the landscape' but 'the view you are having of this object bears *x* relationship to your usual experience of the landscape'. It is the latter observation that permits us to use a map to maneuver through a landscape. However, this is again why we must

58 Glenn Adamson and Joshua G. Stein, 'Imprints: Scale and the Maker's Trace', in *Scale*, ed. by Jennifer Roberts (Chicago University Press, 2016), pp. 28–64 (p. 35).

59 Ibid., p. 36.

> distinguish cartographic scaling from scale here: representations inevitably have other alterations, filters, or distortions that are a product of the representation rather than the shift in observational scale.[60]

Bonvicini's drawings display such alterations, filters, and distortions, only to point out the same devices in architecture — based on theories of space and sexuality. While DiCaglio's observational perspective accounts for a mostly visual 'normal experience' of *Homo sapiens*, scalar friction and figurability can trace and represent political tensions and questions of visibility, access, surveillance, and gender difference that shape the experience of marginalized subjects. Architecture constructs the woman as a controlled, limited, reduced subject: the house is 'too small' for the captured woman in Bourgeois's *Femme maison*; and Bonvicini's paroxysmal air cleaning is too intense for dwelling in. Next to the giant woman, two collages unfold as if peeling back the ceiling of the room: at the bottom, a photograph of air filters, perhaps those photographed at CalArts; at the top, a man's eyes, perhaps cut out from an advertisement. The two devices of surveillance of the house, the male 'watchful eye' and the purification of air,[61] correspond to the vertical axis of the architecture plan.

Wigley's essay links woman and air as each escaping representation, or, rather, being only representable through their systems of control. Typical devices of architecture drawing, like axonometries, plans, and perspectives, all display a virtual transparency,[62] as if one could see through walls and around corners. The political question obliterated by this visual economy, the inside/outside division, is central to Bonvicini's practice. One complex drawing of *A Violent, Tropical, Cyclonic Piece of Art Having Wind Speeds of or in Excess of 75 mph* presents views of Galerie Mehdi Chouakri from outside, with two large windows through which the purpose-built room and the ventilators of the hurricane installation are visible (Figure 5). In the top half, two small prospectuses with white and black external walls surround a view

60 Joshua DiCaglio, *Scale Theory: A Nondisciplinary Inquiry* (University of Minnesota Press, 2021), p. 32.

61 Wigley, 'Untitled', p. 338.

62 Alberti and Xenophon's condemnation of feminine makeup 'in favor of masculine transparency' is discussed in ibid., p. 355.

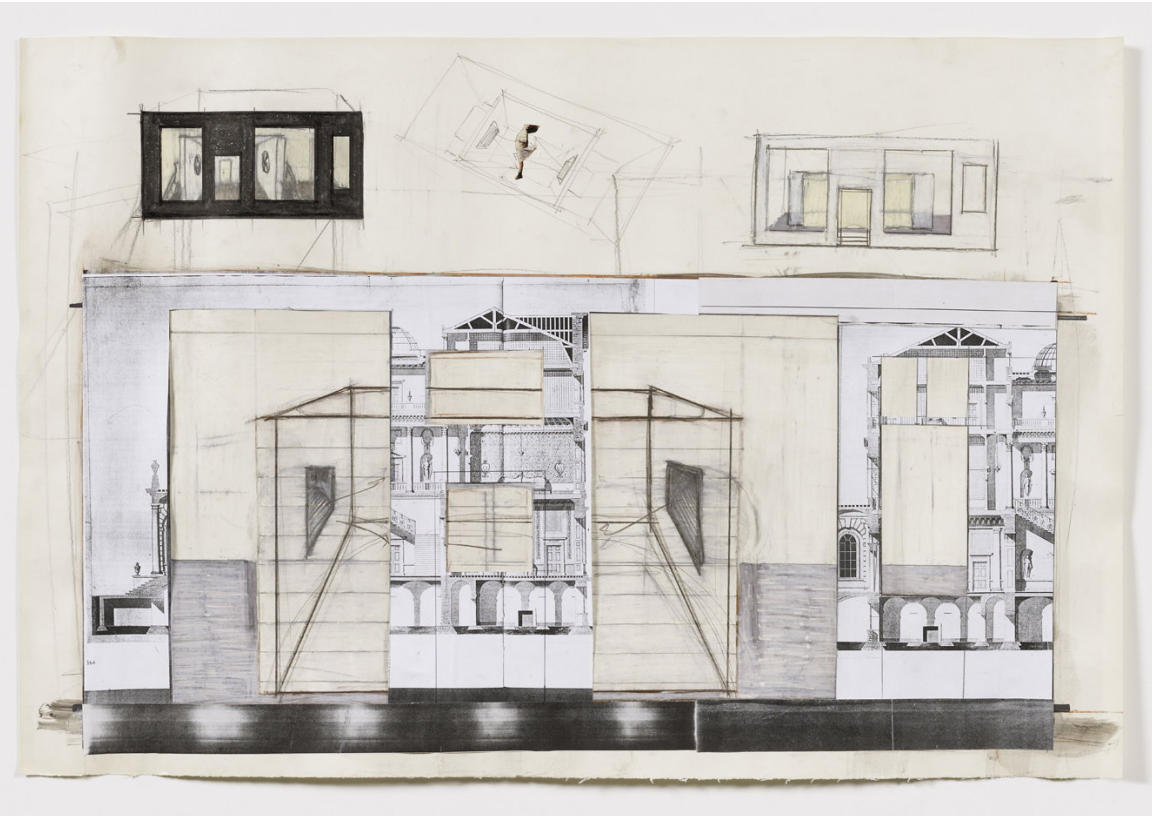

Fig. 5. Monica Bonvicini, *Drawing to 75 mph*, c. 1997/98, cut-out and pasted printed paper, graphite, colour pencil, oil, wax crayons, acrylic paint, and permanent marker on paper / collage, 50 × 75 cm. © Monica Bonvicini and VG Bild-Kunst. Photograph: def image. Courtesy of the artist. Creative Commons license terms for re-use do not apply to this picture and further permission may be required from the right holder.

from above on a collaged cut-out of a girl blown away by the wind. In the larger central image, two identical photocopies of a section of a townhouse are collaged on the external wall of the gallery, a typical Palladian and bourgeois design with furniture in a neo-Egyptian style.[63] The interior is now displaced outside, inverting private and

63 John Yenn RA (1750–1821), *Design for a town house: section, c.1775*, Royal Academy of Arts <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/art-artists/work-of-art/design-for-a-town-house-section> [accessed 15 April 2026].

public by making a formerly transparent prospectus opaque through collage. Similarly, the installation itself reverses the functional position of the ventilation backroom at CalArts into the hurricane space.

In a group of thirteen small-format drawings dedicated to an early proposal for the hurricane installation to occupy the corner of a room, Bonvicini repeatedly collaged cut-outs of façades of windows on the purpose-built drywalls. The photographs were taken by her of buildings and skyscrapers in New York and Berlin, those of the latter in the years of the major redevelopment of Potsdamer Platz.[64] In scalar terms, the geometrical appearance of façades requires a specific distance to be looked at, and to maintain the promise of access and transparency — the opposite function of separating walls. The introduction of scale friction on the white-cube walls in Bonvicini's drawings jeopardizes the traditional view of museum spaces, that which Brian O'Doherty called 'the sanitized installation shot', where 'the eye is the only inhabitant':

> Installation shots are generally abstract works; realists don't go in for them much. In installations shots the question of scale is confirmed (the size of the gallery is deduced from the photo) and blurred (the absence of a Spectator could mean the gallery is 30 feet high). [...] The Eye maintains the seamless gallery space, its walls swept by flat planes of duck. Everything else — all things impure, including collage — favors the Spectator. The Spectator stands in space broken up by the consequences of collage.[65]

## 5. PLANNING AGAINST THE WALL

Bonvicini's exhibition at Mehdi Chouakri had a curiously barred title printed on its invitation card: '~~To wall up: ecstasy~~'. An etymological contrast opposes the two terms: while 'to wall up' expresses restraint, 'ecstasy' literally means 'standing outside of oneself' (*ek-hístēmi*). The title captures the artist's twofold practice of built walls and limited spaces, only to situate there an excessive experience that threatens those limits: in this case, the wind overwhelms visitors with a tactile and auditory sensation that makes them either forget about the space

64 See Emily Pugh, *Architecture, Politics, and Identity in Divided Berlin* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2014), pp. 283–327.

65 Brian O'Doherty, *Inside the White Cube* (The Lapis Press, 1986), p. 42.

or leave (or dance, as did the artist in front of a visiting critic).[66] I read the barring accordingly, not as an erasure but as a sign of negation that still looms over what has been deconstructed. How does Bonvicini's drawing reflect this ambivalent attitude towards creation and destruction, architecture and catastrophe? How or where does her feminist theoretical position displace her practice of planning?

A strongly Derridean argument in Mark Wigley's 'Untitled: The Housing of Gender' implies that Alberti's text on domestic architecture theorizes space and at the same time positions itself within it. Although the woman is limited to the interior of the house, she does not occupy its centre. The headquarters is instead the studio, a men-only space that controls the economy and order of the building. The studio produces the figure of the architect himself, superior and detached from the dissimulating worlds of politics and sexuality. Such a centralist perspective is underpinned by the very act of planning, that is, drawing on a blank, white page.

> [Alberti's architecture] theory is bound to the ideology of the white surface [...].[67] And it is this construction of a look at a white surface which is written into each of the institutions that frame architecture in the following centuries, whether it is the white surfaces of classical statues that produce the art historical eye, the walls of the gallery space that sustain the aesthetic eye, the white coats of the student in the Beaux-Arts Academy, the white walls of 'modern' architecture, or even the white surface of the pages on which the theoretical eye is produced.[68]

It is not by chance that Bonvicini, after electing the white drywall as her signature material, disrupts it or intervenes with graffiti.[69] In the back room of Mehdi Chouakri, the video work *Hammering Out (An Old Argument)* was screened, its rhythmic sound clashing with the

66 Herbstreuth, 'Der freie Flug', p. 28.

67 For a recent reprise of this subject, see Mark Wigley, 'Chronic Whiteness', in *Sick Architecture*, ed. by Beatriz Colomina, special issue of *e-flux Architecture*, 2020 <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/sick-architecture/360099/chronic-whiteness> [accessed 20 April 2026].

68 Wigley, 'Untitled', p. 365.

69 See Elena Zanichelli, 'Die Wand als Störgröße: Monica Bonvicini', in *Gegen die Wand: Subversive Positionierungen von Autorinnen und Künstlerinnen*, ed. by Julia Boog-Kaminski (Neofelis, 2021), pp. 241–80.

hurricane roar in the front space: 'it depicts the artist hitting a white wall with a sledgehammer, slowly and rhythmically. The wall starts to crumble and plaster trickles down, but it doesn't fall.'[70]

Correspondingly, Bonvicini's drawings displace the central position of the planning architect in front of the blank page. On a material level, collages, photocopies, and overlapping paper layer and obtrude the surface, often contradicting the images' illusion of depth; glue stains and cuts remain visible. She describes an unconventional taste for materials, such as 'a bar of soap' or 'watercolor paint made from cigarette ashes [which] really doesn't smell good'.[71] Her preference for tracing paper seems to depart from Linfert's remarks on parchment as

> the most rigorous — or, if you will, the most abstract — way to prepare the objective space of architecture, to design it by delineating its boundaries [...]. It is, in a sense, even like a transparent veil and gives the impression that the lines of the drawn architecture are floating in the air, unanchored by any foundation.[72]

Instead, in Bonvicini's drawings, tracing paper creates a thickness and ambiguity of overlappings. Even her use of white crayon is a function of obsessive and opaque thought: 'when you are really deeply depressed, you draw so that you can barely see the drawing. [...] You draw white on white or something similar.'[73]

As we have seen, Bonvicini draws into her practice on paper many languages that cannot be identified with her own. She refuses to act as an architect, as a 'form-giver, creator of hierarchical and symbolic structures characterized, on the one hand, by their unity of parts and on the other by the transparency of form to meaning'.[74] In most of the drawings for the hurricane installation, one cannot find measures or procedures for the actual realization of the purpose-built ventilator structure. Rather, her gestures are a free and compulsive mix of cutting, fragmenting, retracing, posing behind others' voices, and dissimulating

70 Heiser, 'Monica Bonvicini', p. 81.
71 Bonvicini, 'A Lonely Conversation', p. 319.
72 Linfert, 'Grundlagen', pp. 152–53.
73 Bonvicini, 'A Lonely Conversation', p. 319.
74 Bernard Tschumi, 'Disjunctions', *Perspecta*, 23 (1987), pp. 108–19 (p. 110).

her own position. Theory is juxtaposed to sexist advertisements, technical manuals to dexterous art styles, like Nauman's or Wall's. Many of these sources account more-or-less directly for the active marginalization of women in architecture. By entering this discourse, Bonvicini positions herself towards planning in a way that is similar to Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's self-positioning towards 'explanation' in cultural production. Just as 'all explanations [ … ] claim their centrality in terms of an excluded margin that makes possible the "can" of the "can be expressed" and allows "is" to be quietly substituted for it',[75] planning delineates and determines spaces by locating their margins, incorporating and obliterating them (the aforementioned shared invisibility of woman and conditioned air). Fragmenting the operative linearity of the project, Bonvicini activates the 'irreducibility of the margin in all explanation [to] displace the distinction between margin and center'.[76] Hence the artist still 'walls up', creates space, and operates within it. She once posed to a reviewer an open question that encapsulates this reciprocity: 'Does air belong to architecture or art?'[77] In Spivak's words, the strategy is 'implicating myself in that center and sensing what politics make it marginal'.[78]

> I'm constantly drawing. Sometimes I can't believe what I've done because some are messy and others are detailed and perfect; sometimes I can concentrate and sometimes not. The drawings are indeed much closer to me.[79]

The proximity of Bonvicini's practice on paper to her identity does not restore the cliché of drawing as an immediate and sincere medium. 'Identity theory is necessarily spatial theory,'[80] as Wigley suggests: in the drawings, the appropriation of images of women from popular

75 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Explanation and Culture: Marginalia', in *Out there: Marginalization and Contemporary Cultures*, ed. by Russell Ferguson and others (MIT Press, 1987), pp. 377–93 (p. 380).

76 Spivak, 'Explanation and Culture', p. 381.

77 Peter Herbstreuth, 'Monica Bonvicini: Sexual Architecture', *Flash Art*, Summer 1999, p. 119.

78 Spivak, 'Explanation and Culture', p. 381.

79 Monica Bonvicini, 'IV. Wallfuckin', Revisited', interview by Andrew Maerkle, *ART iT*, 21 October 2011 <https://www.art-it.asia/en/u/admin_ed_feature_e/j5hq8bot7bdwxmgi6l1n/> [accessed 19 June 2026].

80 Wigley, 'Untitled', p. 388.

culture, or the essentialist, monumental appearance of the ventilator woman, is functional for the spatial inquiry of interiority, from the margin to the centre. 'Living on the periphery of power, marginalized by male-dominated institutions, women have learned to see the world from the outside looking in.'[81]

Marginal drawing, in the case of Bonvicini's draughts*wo*manship, aligns with recent propositions of non-dominant architecture theory: from Georges Bataille's 'opposition to the idea of project', which inspired a formless concept of planning,[82] to Gordon Matta-Clark's 'anarchitecture' and its recent expansions in trans studies.[83] Ann Bergren and Catherine Ingraham have pointed to an alternative architectural intelligence, named after the Greek term *mētis*: 'Metis works by continual shape-shifting, turning the morphe of defeat into victory's tool. [...] The mistress or master of metis knows how to manipulate the circular reciprocity between what is bound and what is binding.'[84] Bonvicini's intervention in architecture standards and theory, like metis, 'does not completely revise architecture out if its dependence on foundational concepts but alters the ground upon which this foundationalism rests — the ground for example of "exact knowledge", which metis troubles with the problems of reversal, twisting, and knotting.'[85]

To include scale in such reflections, as operating in the various material and theoretical strategies of multiscalarity in Bonvicini's drawings, is to account for the shift from paper to space, a gap opened and occupied by critical moves that allow a reflection on and critique of architecture as planning. For those who did not experience the hurricane in 1998 (but also for those who did and were repulsed by its

81 Weisman, *Discrimination by Design*, p. 171.

82 See Andrew Benjamin, *Architectural Philosophy* (Athlone Press, 2000), pp. 22–35.

83 See *Cutting Matta-Clark: The Anarchitecture Investigation*, ed. by Mark Wigley (Lars Müller, 2018); and Jack Halberstam, *Anarchitecture After Everything: A Trans Manifesto* (MIT Press, 2026).

84 Catherine Ingraham, *Architecture and the Burdens of Linearity* (Yale University Press, 2014), p. 43.

85 'Metis is, not incidentally, a woman's art, and it can often be located in the working of the proper and the nonproper in the oikos, the economy of the domestic, the house. [...] Metis architecture is a provocation to the habitual [...] connections between domesticity and gender; to habitual oppositions between movement and stasis, insides and outsides; to the habitual understanding of the architectural object; to the straight line and linearity' (Ingraham, *Architecture and the Burdens of Linearity*, p. 44).

unbearable wind), the drawings are a way to think the installation, to imagine it and reflect critically on it. Their sources and theoretical insights reveal something that was impossible to detect within or outside the space; however, they do not 'explain' the work or stand as its conception or project.

Drawing to scale is not merely a smooth reduction or expansion in representation that sustains ideation in a linear sense (from the idea to the project to the spatial installation). Against this smoothness, and the linearity of explanation, scalar disjunctures provide interruptions and detours in Linfert's non-genetic reading of the relationship between drawing and the three-dimensional space of architecture. The scalar detour allows a critical positioning that supports the displacement from the centre to the margin. Architecture produces margins that, in bell hooks's terms, are political locations where radical resistance and openness can be thought and developed. Historically scaled down by male systems of representation and spatial control, the female body lacks figurability on what appears as the neutral level of observation. Gender difference entails a scalar difference: Bonvicini's practice distorts and brings excess to architecture, starting from its 'planning' dimension, a proliferation of drawings that operates on the representation of the installation, using the multiscalarity of collage to bring architecture's visual standards to an incoherent paroxysm.

# Solar Figuration

## Thinking the Human at the Scale of the Universe with Georges Bataille

KIRILL CHEPURIN

C'est l'infirme soleil en moi
qui veut naître de *ce qui est*.

Paul Claudel

Terre où je m'endors, espace où je m'éveille,
qui viendra quand vous ne serez plus là? (*que deviendrai-je* m'est d'une chaleur presque infinie).

René Char

### TO WRITE ABOUT BATAILLE

Taking a book off the shelf at random can be an act of divination. So, too, can joining a reading group. It seems in retrospect a kind of bibliomancy, at once chance and willed, that in January 2025 I decided to sign up for the Georges Bataille reading group at ICI Berlin. I had known Bataille only second-hand before. It is now May 2026, and I am writing this essay on Bataille — something I could not have foreseen. To engage in divination is to accept chance, to welcome it, to let it puncture you. And so I allowed my encounter with Bataille to



Fig. 1. André Masson, lithograph from Patrick Waldberg's *Une étoile de craie*, 1973. © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2026. Creative Commons license terms for re-use do not apply to this picture and further permission may be required from the right holder.

chart a new trajectory in and for me. In the Bataillean spirit, I want to acknowledge the condition of community that made this encounter possible. Angelica, Filippo, Franco, Jasmine, Marietta, Nicolas, Tobi, and Verónica, as the core members of the reading group, have been no less than Georges himself part of this essay's inspiration.

The thrust of this inspiration, born from our critical discussions as a group, has been for me in part to *resist* Bataille, not to let myself be simply consumed by his terms, even while acknowledging his pull on me. Bataille is a cosmic thinker, and his gravitational pull, I feel, is that of the modern universe itself, of the indifferent, decentred void of solar radiation, entropy, and galactic swirl. The movement of this infinite universe, with which Bataille seeks to write, cannot but overwhelm the confines of one's discourse and one's self, even of discourse and selfhood as such. Choosing to write about Bataille for a volume on scale seemed natural: his thinking is strikingly cross-scalar, approaching the human 'at the measure of the universe'.[1] His texts move playfully, with ease between erotic desire and solar force, the spider and the volcano, the human body and the celestial body. For him, the dark abyss of the heart is one with the geocosmic depths of the Earth and the skies, and desire *within me* erupts, flares up with the intensity of the sun *above me*, leaving the same desert in its wake.[2] Humanity, as Bataille writes of it, emerges at once as a terrestrial and an extraterrestrial, solar being. This figure of the human speaks to me; it *communicates* with me, that is, in Bataillean vocabulary, it charges me with its fever. It resonates, too, with the traditions of thought that have occupied me for some time, from Gnosticism and mysticism to Romanticism and Russian Cosmism.

Yet, due to his cosmic pull and sheer contagious power, it is not easy to write about Bataille constructively, to do things with him, without either becoming a 'Bataillean' or repeating the obvious critiques of him. I want to resist, especially, the common image of Bataille as a

1 *L'économie à la mesure de l'univers* is the title of Bataille's 1946 working notes for *The Accursed Share*, in English in Georges Bataille, *The Limit of the Useful*, trans. by Cory Austin Knudson and Tomas Elliott (MIT Press, 2022).

2 Oxana Timofeeva, in her analysis of violence in Bataille, relatedly links 'Bataille's enterprise' to 'finding an inhuman element within the human, which will connect me to the serpent, to the volcano, or to the sun'. See Oxana Timofeeva, *Solar Politics* (Polity Press, 2022), p. 58.

thinker of transgression for transgression's sake, of the mere sweeping-away of prohibitions and boundaries in festive or erotic violence. Perhaps this transgressive dimension simply speaks to me less right now, as I try to escape the violence in my home country. Perhaps I want this essay, too, to set however small a boundary, an obstacle, to the movement of transgression associated with Bataille. I think it is clear from his texts that, drawing on philosophy and anthropology of his time, he envisions a broader, more dialectical double movement in which human being and desire are defined equally by the (centripetal) setting up of limits and borders and the constant (centrifugal) temptation of their overstepping or violation. This is ultimately a runaway dialectic, as no boundary can withstand the forces of desire and death, and as the outside seeps into the circle of orderly life and unsettles it, while the inside tends ecstatically to erupt or spill out onto the outside. Transgression itself functions in Bataille as an unstable, fleeting bridge to the infinite — and my impulse here is to linger at this porous border, this threshold between order and disorder, profane and sacred, life and death, as well as terrestrial and extraterrestrial or divine.

The Bataille of this essay, then, is a thinker of thresholds and crossings, of what is vanishing and evanescent, of punctures, signals, and divinatory events that, while opening onto the measureless divine or cosmic abyss, appear as finite — momentary, ephemeral — forms. These forms, as I conceive of them here, complicate the dichotomy between the small- and large-scale, since even planetary-scale movement, such as that of humanity as it encircles and technologically mediates the Earth, can be said to trace a figure of transience.[3] I view André Masson's drawing, placed as a visual epigraph above (Figure 1), as a symbol for the ambivalent, interim space this essay inhabits. The drawing evokes a state of transition or metamorphosis, which could be a star taking on a human form, or a human body emitting a radiance that transforms it into a star or an angel. The colours appear significant. Against the darker dotted background — the cosmic depths? — the star radiates yellow and white, the colours that our sun can appear to

3 Throughout this essay, I capitalize 'Earth' to distinguish the planet from 'earth' as ground, while leaving 'sun' and 'moon' uncapitalized so that they can remain at once astronomical and figural.

take when seen from Earth and from outer space. Green, too, though our eyes cannot perceive it in the sun, corresponds to the peak of the sun's visible emission, even as, in the opposite direction, it also invokes cool paradisal shade. Blue, the colour of heaven but also the hottest stars in the universe, hints at transcending even the heat of the sun, approaching René Char's 'almost infinite heat' (*chaleur presque infinie*). Something radiant is taking shape here, yet the direction and outcome of this process are uncertain. What are the forms and figures — poetic, geometric, spectral, angelic, human — that dwell in this uncertainty?

This moment of hesitation and transition, of infirm solar figuration or the feeble sun yet struggling to be born, might be the rare moment out of which one can write about Bataille if one is not simply to dissolve in him. In the following sections, what I want to do is set up some terms that are not necessarily Bataille's own but that capture that fleeting moment — terms such as 'figuration', 'precipice', 'threshold', 'signal', or 'voiding' — and set them free along the trajectories of the Bataillean cosmos, tracing the turns they take and the scales they cross. The essay's first part stays closer to the figures of chance in Bataille's writing at the level of the fragment or the line; the second retraces these figures at the scale of humanity as a planetary and cosmic movement. Across both parts, I want to probe what provisional forms and cross-scalar mediations can briefly refract or delay the ultimate Bataillean movement towards dissolution. One can think of the vignettes that follow as small makeshift dams one might put in the way of a river, which briefly form vortices or divert the water's course before being washed away. This is, in fact, what human life and writing are for Bataille, as they appear on this strange speck of a planet orbiting a merciless sun lost in the endless expanse: the human is at once an excessive cosmic addendum and a temporary obstacle to the death-bearing forces of the universe — 'this obstacle that you are' (v, p. 113).[4]

4 Unless otherwise indicated, all references are to Georges Bataille, *Œuvres complètes*, 12 vols (Gallimard, 1970–88), with volume followed by page number. Translations are mine, but references to the existing English translations for select quotations are provided in the notes. Here the reference is to Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. by Stuart Kendall (State University of New York Press, 2014), p. 98.

## PART 1. THE WRITING OF CHANCE

> Écrire est rechercher la chance.
>
> La chance anime les plus petites parties de l'univers : le scintillement des étoiles est son pouvoir, une fleur des champs son incantation.
>
> La chaleur de la vie m'avait quitté, le désir n'avait plus d'objet : mes doigts hostiles, endoloris, tissaient toujours la toile de la chance.
>
> À donner à la chance une angoisse si malheureuse, j'avais le sentiment de lui porter le fil qui manquait.
>
> Heureux, j'étais joué, j'étais sa chose, ELLE était le soleil dans la brume étendue de mon malheur.
>
> Je l'avais perdu mais connaissant les secrets des mots je maintiens entre elle et moi le lien de l'écriture.
>
> La pointe de la chance est voilée dans la tristesse de ce livre. Elle serait inaccessible sans lui.
>
> (To write is to search for chance.
>
> Chance animates the smallest parts of the universe: the scintillation of the stars is its power, a wildflower its incantation.
>
> The warmth of life had left me, desire no longer had an object: my hostile fingers, aching, still wove the web of chance.
>
> By giving to chance such a wretched anguish, I had the feeling I was supplying it with the missing thread.
>
> Happy, I was being played, I was her thing, she was the sun in the vast mist of my unhappiness.
>
> I had lost her, but knowing the secrets of words I maintain the bond of writing between her and me.
>
> The peak [also: summit, tip] of chance is veiled in the sadness of this book. It would be inaccessible without it.)
>
> Georges Bataille, 'Un peu plus tard'[5]

5 Georges Bataille, 'Un peu plus tard', in Bataille, *Le Petit*, III, pp. 33–69 (p. 69). For a different translation, see Georges Bataille, *Louis XXX: The Little One and The Tomb of Louis XXX*, trans. by Stuart Kendall (Equus Press, 2013), p. 47.

*Figuration*

In the impossible condition of writing that pulls you into the abyss, one may glimpse the tension between form and formlessness (*l'informe*) within which Bataille's thought unfolds. To write in and with the modern universe, this universe of contingency in which stars and worlds are born and destroyed without end, is to attend to the perishability of all form. In a line from the fragment in *The Little One* (1943) quoted above, 'Écrire est rechercher la chance' ('To write is to search for chance'), *la chance* invokes at once *fortuna*, or lucky chance, and chance as cosmic contingency, though these two dimensions are generally hard to separate. 'Chance', the next line continues, 'animates the smallest parts of the universe: the scintillation of the stars is its power, a wildflower its incantation' (III, p. 69). The writer seeks, pursues, investigates chance, looking to chance upon an appropriate form, yet there is no predetermined scale or model for the lucky chance of writing, for the moment when a form shines forth out of the elemental disorder of words.

Bataille's own writing thus coalesces into many scalar forms: from short poems and diary entries to novellas and attempts at systematic treatises. If the latter attempts, such as the multi-volume *The Accursed Share* or the *Summa atheologica*, remain unfinished or fragmentary, this, too, can be filed under searching for cosmic chance. This universe repeatedly creates and annihilates star systems or cosmic worlds, as though they were but sketches of a desired, completed world never to come, in fact coming apart at the seams, expanding, dissipating. This likewise holds for life on Earth, itself a chance event. The system of human life as it is currently being written, too, might be cut short at any time, flare up or fizzle out, be left without a narrative conclusion or culmination of the kind traditionally imagined by philosophies and eschatologies of history.

The shifting scales at play in the juxtaposition of the star and the wildflower in Bataille's fragment seem to trouble their joint classification under 'the smallest parts of the universe'. The stars are brought down to earth, their immense scale encountering that of a wildflower. But while the stars are big, it is their scintillation that here appears small, a minor event. As an everyday phenomenon, stars twinkle as

their light is distorted by our planet's atmosphere — and this, too, alongside the invocation of the wildflower, places the writer squarely on the Earth. The fragment may invoke *looking* at the stars, yet in doing so, it stages an encounter between extraterrestrial space and the space of writing, which, as human, is also terrestrial, conditioned by the planet's atmosphere. The fragment enacts a complex movement. It crosses the threshold between the Earth and outer space, the wildflower and the star, terrestrial life and cosmic nonlife; it scales up to the universe to offer a cosmic view of the wildflower's chance blooming, while bringing the stellar scale down to earth, to the everyday human scale, as the human chances upon a flower in the field. At the same time, this bringing-down entails an upscaling of terrestrial writing, which pursues, beyond the terrestrial orbit, chance that is cosmic in nature. The slipping of scales prepares, too, the shift to the condition of the embodied I, almost extinguished like a dying star, with which the next line confronts us: 'The warmth of life had left me, desire no longer had an object: my hostile fingers, aching, still wove the web of chance [*la toile de la chance*]' (III, p. 69).

The universe traces figures of chance in the void as so many configurations of energy destined for dissipation, and Bataille's writing attends always to this cosmic figuration. One may, of course, say that it is a mere play of metaphor that, in his writing, condenses into one figure the blaze of desire, the radiance of a flower in bloom, and the star's hydrogen burning; or, in another Bataillean thread of figuration, the burst of laughter (*éclat de rire*), volcanic eruption, and the blinding splendour (*éclat*) of the sun. Yet for him, that is the play of the universe itself, the play of chance that the writer pursues, of which writerly forms are at once instances and retracings. To seize cosmic chance in writing is to let shine forth how chance configurations and movements, within disparate physical and mental processes in the universe, constellate transiently, fleetingly into shared figures, resemblances, and flashes, scintillating jointly across infinite distances.

Writing thus becomes incantation: a binding of cosmic figures, if only for a moment, if only, immediately, to give them back to chance, into whose web writing itself and the writer's body are woven. One still discerns the glow of the star (*étoile*) in the cosmic web (*toile*) of chance, the same web that 'my hostile fingers' weave — hostile not least

because, without desire, my fate is alien to me yet I cannot undo it, no more than the Moirai could unweave their thread. One hears an echo of astrological binding here, too, so that the figure of the star — the figure that I am — seals my fate and spells my end, as in one of the poems from Bataille's mystical treatise, *Inner Experience* (1943):

> Étoile
> je la suis
> ô mort
> étoile de tonnerre
> folle cloche de ma mort. (V, p. 187)[6]
>
> (Star
> I am it / I follow it
> o death
> thunderous star
> mad bell of my death.)

There is an absence, dissipation, loss at the heart of form, a shared figure of death. All things are marked by a void, an unmediatable nothingness that ungrounds their stability, pointing to the ineffable inherent in everyday objects no less than in objects of mystical ecstasy. To follow this figure is to discern in all forms, of writing as of being, the principle of the undoing of form, an announcement of its coming apart, its unravelling. All form is form-in-disappearance, and I want to call 'figuration' the fleeting pursuit of form as that which passes over into formlessness, like the comet's tail thinning and fading into darkness. The modern universe, as it is refracted in Bataille's writing, is ever in the process of exhausting or expending itself, an expenditure that is as violent and eruptive as it is transient, vanishing, almost spectral: a voiding.

### *Voiding*

In its search for chance in a universe without any pregiven model or form, Bataille's writing enacts the simultaneous tracing and undoing of form, or a tracing of form as destined for undoing. *Formlessness*, for him, is an operation. His 1929 critical dictionary entry titled 'Formless'

6 Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 163.



Fig. 2. The Veil Nebula: the weave left by a stellar explosion. ESA/ Hubble & NASA, Z. Levay (potw2113a), 2021, CC BY 4.0.

(*Informe*), theorizing that operation, has been the object of so much theoretical attention that all I want to add here is a passing emphasis on its scalar, cosmic dimension.[7] 'For academic men to be happy,' Bataille writes there, 'one would have to have the universe take on form. [...] To affirm on the contrary that the universe resembles nothing and is only *formless* amounts to saying the universe is something like a spider or a spit [*comme une araignée ou un crachat*]' (I, p. 217).[8]

The compressed form of the dictionary entry, whose full text is only 127 words long, seems mirrored in the compression of the universe, in its unfathomable immensity, to two further 'smallest parts' of it, possessing a counter-sublime mimetic quality (marked by the preposition 'like'). We may be repulsed by spiders or by spit, but does not the gob of spittle resemble a galactic nebula? And is not the web of cosmic chance akin to the spider-web (*toile d'araignée*), in turn recalling the tapestry of signs that the writerly self strives to weave — as Bataille describes it, 'the impossible spider, not yet crushed, that I am, so poorly concealed in its own web [*toile*]' (V, p. 149)?[9]

The image of a cosmic web or weave (Figure 2), like a cotton ball pulled apart, is also a cosmological trope.[10] What is the shape of the universe anyway? In Bataille's claim that it is formless and 'resembles nothing', I see a playful reworking of popular texts on cosmology such as Arthur Eddington's, whom Bataille cites elsewhere. In *The Nature of the Physical World* (1928), Eddington warns against any dogmatic assertions about the universe's shape beyond the general notion of its being without boundary, and in *The Expanding Universe* (1932), as though echoing Bataille's entry, he quips that, for all we know, 'the universe may be pear-shaped or sausage-shaped', since the observable

7 See Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss, *Formless: A User's Guide* (Zone Books, 1997); and Georges Didi-Huberman, *La Ressemblance informe*, 3rd edn (Éditions Macula, 2019).

8 Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927–1939*, ed. and trans. by Allan Stoekl (University of Minnesota Press, 1985), p. 31.

9 Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 129.

10 See, for example, Richard J. Bond and others, 'How Filaments of Galaxies Are Woven into the Cosmic Web', *Nature*, 380 (1996), pp. 603–06 <https://doi.org/10.1038/380603a0>. I take the cosmological image of a cotton ball from Lisa Messeri, *Placing Outer Space: An Earthly Ethnography of Other Worlds* (Duke University Press, 2016), p. 22.

horizon is but 'a small fraction of the whole extent of space'.[11] No matter how far into its depths we penetrate, the modern universe refuses to take on form, while producing so many forms of which each one, however lowly or abject, equally refracts the (absent) whole.

One can also discern here, half-concealed under the form of the abject, an allusion to William Blake's formula: 'To see a world in a grain of sand | And a heaven in a wild flower'.[12] Bataille translated Blake's poetry, and it is hardly a coincidence that *The Little One* invokes the wildflower as an incantation of heavenly chance, beneath what a later poem calls 'the spider-webbed sky':

> j'ai vomi
> par le nez
> le ciel arachnéen
> mes tempes amenuisées
> achèvent de l'amincir
> je suis mort
> et les lis
> évaporent l'eau distillée
>
> les mots manquent
>
> et je manque enfin. (III, p. 373)
>
> (I vomited
> through the nose
> the spider-webbed sky
> my thinned temples
> finish thinning it down
> I am dead
> and the lilies
> evaporate distilled water
>
> words are lacking / words fail
>
> and at last I am lacking / absent.)

11 Arthur Eddington, *The Expanding Universe* [1932] (University of Michigan Press, 1958), p. 34. On the influence on Bataille of the physics and cosmology of his time, see Lysa Hochroth, 'The Scientific Imperative: Improductive Expenditure and Energeticism', *Configurations*, 3.1 (1995), pp. 47–77 <https://doi.org/10.1353/con.1995.0001>; Gavin Parkinson, *Surrealism, Art, and Modern Science: Relativity, Quantum Mechanics, Epistemology* (Yale University Press, 2008), pp. 117–44; and Cédric Mong-Hy, *Bataille cosmique. Georges Bataille: Du système de la nature à la nature de la culture* (Nouvelles Éditions Lignes, 2012).

12 William Blake, 'Auguries of Innocence' (1803). On other Blakean motifs in Bataille, see Joseph Albernaz, *Common Measures: Romanticism and the Groundlessness of Community* (Stanford University Press, 2024), pp. 188–202.

Taken to its limit within Bataille's 'base materialism', Blake's cross-scalar Romantic vision implies seeing heaven not only in a wildflower, but in spit, vomit, and snot. In 'Formless', Bataille advances *informe* as an operation that knocks all high, sublime forms down, off their pedestal: it is 'not just an adjective [...] but a term that serves to *déclasser*' (I, p. 217), suggesting both declassification or dis-ordering and denigration (including the social class-related sense of *déclassé*).

Similarly, in the scene of death staged by the above poem, abject physiology becomes a medium of cosmic declassification: a reduction of the sky, the cosmic web, to the dying speaker's snot coming out violently ('vomited') in filaments or strings, possibly blood-threaded. Formally and symbolically, the poem enacts a voiding. The compressed lines and harsh, unstable enjambments characteristic of Bataille's poetry — as though evoking at once a body losing control and a fall or tumble down the *scala naturae* to the level of base matter, and ultimately into the void — string together a series of operations of expelling, thinning, evaporating, vanishing. The abundance of nasal and liquid consonants makes the writing itself feel runny, leaky.[13] By the final lines, we face a terminal lack. Words run out, and with that the speaker vanishes, as though into the stanza gaps like the dying gasps coinciding materially with the death-figure of writing. It is an almost grammatical enactment of dying, as absence consumes language and, finally, the self.

The line 'et les lis' marks the poem's moment of high lyricism, pointing to white lilies' association with solemn funerary rites as well as purity and resurrection (the line comes after 'je suis mort', as if attempting to ascend). Yet resurrection is foreclosed as the poem converts purity into a chemical process ('evaporate distilled water'), suggesting a clinical setting and a finality of death. 'Distilled water' makes purity sound emptied of contents, soulless, *formless*, declassifying its transcendent associations. Placed in distilled water, the funerary lilies turn even this (still tangible, substantial) purity into vapour, becoming further a figure of voiding.

13 Cf. another poem by Bataille, where the eyes and the language or tongue are running, flowing out: 'j'éclate je hais le ciel | qui suis-je à cracher les nues | [...] | mon cœur est de l'encre noire | [...] | je pleure et ma langue coule' (III, pp. 87–88).

In Bataille's writing, sublime imagery, such as the star or the flower, is always ambiguous. The star, for instance our sun, is a dual image of life and death: it may be life-giving, but it is also blinding, scorching, annihilating; it shines in the cosmic desert and might, in the end, make a desert of the Earth itself. Bataille emphasizes the solar origin of life, which feeds on energy from the sun. At the same time, to quote from his poetry collection *The Archangelic* (1944), 'The sun is nothing but death' (III, p. 81).[14] The flower in its 'flight of angelic and lyrical purity', as Bataille dissects it in his essay 'The Language of Flowers' (1929), is a symbol of love, beauty, and striving towards the sun (is not the corolla itself like a star?). Yet 'after a very short period of brilliance [*éclat*] the marvellous corolla rots indecently in the sun' — and, in another instance of *informe* as operation, Bataille retraces the figure of the flower's collapse, the bankruptcy (*faillite*) of transcendence, of ascent. Flowers 'die ridiculously on stems that seemed to carry them to the clouds', and what we take to be 'the most ideal is rapidly reduced to a wisp of aerial manure', exposing again the frailty of form (I, p. 176).[15]

Looking back at the line from *The Little One* — 'chance animates the smallest parts of the universe: the scintillation of the stars is its power, a wildflower its incantation' — we glimpse in it, likewise, a 'death drama endlessly played out between earth and sky' (I, p. 176). Even before *The Little One*'s next line invokes the loss of life, this line already carries a whiff of death (as though unsettling the verb 'animates'). As the Earth accumulates dead beings, so writing accumulates dead signs, and the dead, the ancestors, the lost, at once animate the living and weigh on the fingers struggling to weave them into a cosmic web. The whole history of humanity, in its movements of ascent and fall, is a death drama that unfolds at the threshold between the Earth and solar wasteland, in the thin magnetic and atmospheric layer, this obstacle to solar wind and deadly high-energy radiation.

14 On the sun's duality, see Bataille's essay 'Rotten Sun' (1930), in Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, pp. 57–58. Cf. George Gamow, *The Birth and Death of the Sun* (Viking Press, 1940), on a future where solar radiation burns up the Earth's surface, making life impossible.

15 Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, p. 12.

*Threshold*

When does chance become destiny? At what point does destiny turn into loss? A series of chance developments, reinforced in a violent feedback loop, can lock humanity itself onto a fatal trajectory, as we see with technological modernity and the climate crisis, whose accelerating, swirling movement leads to loss on a planetary scale. I write this out of my own, smaller-scale sense of loss: what feels like the loss of a country I considered my home, and of a possible future I had once imagined. It can be the loss of a loved one, too. The death of his lover, the writer Colette Peignot, known as Laure, in 1938 shatters Bataille, and his grief resonates across his texts. He imagines himself writing as one who is already dead, or who inhabits the liminal zone between life and death. A line from *The Hatred of Poetry* (1947), 'I throw myself among the dead' (*je me jette chez les morts*), implies a willed fall, even a suicidal plunge, by someone who is still alive, hurling himself across the threshold to the underworld.[16] It also carries a hint of chance become destiny, evoking 'les dés sont jetés', the French rendering of *alea iacta est*, that classic expression of irreversibility and boundary crossing. The speaker now dwells in the house of the dead, *chez les morts*. In an unpublished 1940 note intended for *Guilty* (1944), a text in which death at the personal scale merges with the upscaling of loss during World War II, Laure's death is explicitly figured as a threshold event for the writer: 'I have just told the story of my life; *death* had taken the name LAURE' (V, p. 530).

In the fragment from *The Little One* translated above, too, SHE (*ELLE*), as if through the very act of capitalization, transcends the reference to the feminine noun *la chance* and evokes, without naming her, a woman the writer mourns:

> The warmth of life had left me, desire no longer had an object: my hostile fingers, aching, still wove the web of chance.
>
> By giving to chance such a wretched anguish, I had the feeling I was supplying it with the missing thread.
>
> Happy, I was being played, I was her thing [*sa chose*], SHE was the sun in the vast mist of my unhappiness. (III, p. 69)

16 Georges Bataille, *La Haine de la poésie* (Les Éditions de minuit, 1947), p. 39.

Here, *sa chose* can still refer to a plaything of chance, but the typographic eruption of ELLE — a scalar operation — points to a deeper layer of memory and grief, and to a more personal relation, resonating intertextually with the capitalization of LAURE in the 1940 note. The spectre of a dead woman, the longing of love, the scintillation of chance at the border of the beyond: one repeatedly finds this combination in Bataille's poetry as well, where minor events such as a feeling of cold on one's lips may appear as a phantom kiss, a material signal to be divined from across the threshold. 'I find you in the star | I find you in death | you are the frost on my mouth' (III, p. 85).

The association between the sun or the star and loss points to a paradox at the heart of Bataille's so-called general or solar economy. The sun, as he puts it, 'gives without ever receiving' (VII, p. 35), but even for the sun that means ultimate exhaustion and death.[17] The solar figure of wealth, excess, and expenditure beyond gain (motifs typically associated with Bataille) is at the same time, inescapably, a figure of evanescence and loss. In this sense, too, 'the sun is nothing but death', and the lost lover merges with the lost sun. The task then becomes, for the living, to mediate this loss and all the layers of loss on which the edifice of humanity is erected. And if *The Little One*'s speaker compulsively keeps writing, if his fingers keep weaving the web of signs, it is because writing itself functions as a link to the dead, the lost: 'I had lost her, but knowing the secrets of words I maintain the bond of writing between her and me' (III, p. 69). Writing threads together the realms of the living and the dead; as a calling to and binding of the dead, it possesses an incantatory, ritual character. Like a shaman or priest, the writer can perform the ritual by virtue of knowing 'the secrets of words'. As such, writing appears as a technique of boundary crossing, of assembling the dead, of holding what has been lost within the circle of the present. Attuned to the beyond and divining its signs, the Bataillean writer reaches across the threshold to gather traces, spectral absences, and gaps and punctures left by loss, weaving them into figures and

17 Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, trans. by Robert Hurley, 3 vols (Zone Books, 1988–92), I: *Consumption* (1988), p. 28. The sun's death occurs on a radically different timescale compared to that of humanity's existence. Still, if we shift our view to this cosmic scale, the sun itself appears as a figure of voiding, not just of endless excessive giving, as it often does in Bataille. I thank Marietta Kesting for her remarks about this scalar discrepancy.

layers within the stubborn persistence of humanity under the life-giving and death-bearing sun. Writing gives *form* to loss, of an almost geological complexity, which serves as an obstacle to dissipation. This ritual brings no salvation or reconciliation; it serves only to access the void, the abyss, and to hold it close.

In *The Little One*, it is as though the loved one's death, spun by the writer into his web, somehow completed the writing of chance, offering it 'the missing thread': as though, without the wound inflicted by loss, the summit of chance could not be glimpsed. 'The peak [*la pointe*] of chance is veiled in the sadness of this book. It [*elle*] would be inaccessible without it', goes the fragment's last line (III, p. 69), where *elle* likewise oscillates between the dead lover and the summit or tip (*pointe*) of chance.[18] Only by writing this book, it seems, could Bataille himself attain a fleeting unity with Laure or with the void of chance that took her from him. In his other writings, too, the experience of death is presumed to open our narrow preoccupations onto the universe, onto the free play of the heavens, of cosmic chance. Hans Blumenberg has argued that, in the modern age, infinite cosmic contingency or chance becomes a figure of omnipotence, 'reoccupying' the position of divine omnipotence.[19] The ascent to a summit as a path to the divine is, moreover, a mystical motif.[20] The *pointe* of chance, as the peak one scales and the tip of a needle by which one is punctured, creates an aperture through which one can leap into the divine play of the skies.

18 Compare also the identification of 'summit' (*sommet*) and 'tip of a needle' (*la pointe d'une aiguille*) in *Method of Meditation* as the location of sovereignty understood not as power, but as slippage, laughter, and birdsong ('the way a bird sings') — and thus as oneness with cosmic chance as well (V, p. 222). Georges Bataille, *Method of Meditation*, trans. by Stuart Kendall, in Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 197.

19 See Hans Blumenberg, *The Legitimacy of the Modern Age*, trans. by Robert M. Wallace (MIT Press, 1983).

20 One may recall St John of the Cross's *Ascent to Mount Carmel*, with its affirmation of the divine void at the mountain summit, or Petrarch's conversion experience atop Mont Ventoux, where he reflects on God and his unfulfilled love for Laura.

*Summit*

> MEDITATION II
>
> *I find a glowworm between two graves.*
>
> *I place it, in the night, in my hand.*
>
> *The glowworm looks at me from there, penetrates me to the point of shame.*
>
> *And we lose ourselves, both of us, in its glow: we merge, both of us, with the light.*
>
> *The marvelling glowworm laughs at me and at the dead, and I marvel likewise, laughing at being divined by the glowworm and by the dead.*
>
> Bataille, *Method of Meditation*[21]

On the margins of his corpus, in an unpublished diary entry written one year after Laure's death, in 1939, one finds an account of Bataille's own mystical experience of mountain ascent, undertaken together with Laure in 1937. Untitled in French, and known in English as 'The Ascent of Mount Etna', the text begins with the crossing of a threshold into what appears to be the realm of the dead: 'I went yesterday to visit Laure's grave, and as soon as I had stepped out of my door the night was so black that I wondered whether it would even be possible for me to find my way…'. Laure was buried in a cemetery on a hill. As the writer climbs up the hill and becomes increasingly lost, the moment of disorientation prompts a kind of negative conversion experience, when he is 'overturned' (*bouleversé*) by the memory of his and Laure's ascent of Etna (V, p. 499).[22]

In Bataille's account, the climb up the hill and the scaling of the volcano blend into one mystical scene. The blending takes place even at the level of language: Bataille first uses *la côte* to refer to the hill slope but then switches to *la pente*, the same word he uses for the slope of Etna. For someone so associated with disorder, Bataille strikes me as an almost structuralist writer, using carefully constructed binaries and parallelisms to pointed effect, in this case to unground linear narrative, and to merge the two episodes outside chronological time. His de-

21 Bataille, *Method of Meditation*, p. 176; italics in the original. French original in V, p. 200.

22 Georges Bataille, 'The Ascent of Mount Aetna', trans. by Annette Michelson, *October*, 36 (1986), pp. 103–05 <https://doi.org/10.2307/778557>.

scription of approaching the volcano, too, recalls crossing the liminal zone to the realm of death: 'we entered an infernal region', 'dread and desolate', as though beyond the Earth's habitable environment. 'We were, in a sense, thrown out of orbit [*exorbités*]' (V, p. 500).

The 'immense, bottomless' crater, opening onto the underworld, corresponds structurally to the grave, which acquires a strange abyssal dimension: in the cemetery, 'Laure's grave [...] formed, I do not know why, the only area [*étendue*] that was absolutely black'. The word *étendue* suggests a quality of extension or expansion, as if stretching towards the same darkness as death and the geocosmic abyss. Yet while the grave is dark, the crater glows with lava, exposing something of the planet's fiery interior and revealing the cosmic duality of darkness and stellar fire: Bataille speaks of 'the moment of rending when we are bent over the gaping wound, the fissure in the star [*astre*] whose air we were breathing' (V, p. 500). Multiple cross-scalar operations are at play here, including what one may call scalar dilation and scalar puncturing. In the former, the stretch of the grave extends towards the cosmic outside, and volcanic fire connects to the glow of the Earth turned stellar and to the glow of all stars; in the latter, a wound or crack becomes a minor aperture through which the solidity of a body is fatally broken and the abyss seeps in.

By the end of the text, the wound inflicted by death breaks into an ecstatic meditation where the image of Laure as 'my destiny advancing in darkness beside me' becomes a figure both of chance ('an ardent and uncertain destiny') and of love as 'burn[ing] down the prison walls that enclose each person'. Love, like death, connects one to the universe, yet unlike death, it is a solar communication that 'blazes from being to being through the night' (V, p. 501). What remains of this blaze when it burns towards death, and the lost loved one, again, merges with the lost sun?

There is another, more minor solar figure that haunts the cemetery scene: the glowworm (*ver luisant*), a tiny being often associated with spirits or the souls of the dead. 'Despite the extreme darkness,' Bataille writes, 'I caught sight of two glowworms' (V, p. 500), as though glimpsing himself and Laure in spirit form. Under conditions of loss, at the threshold of death, a faint glow (*lueur*) is perhaps what persists

as a kind of light-fragment, or what remains of solar figuration.[23] I am fascinated by the symmetry between this vision and the one from 'Meditation II' quoted above. Here, it is two glowworms and one grave; there, two graves (I am tempted to read them as those of Laure and of Bataille as one who had died with her) and one glowworm, a glimmer of the marvellous to which the writer abandons himself. In *Inner Experience*, transforming conventional practices of meditation, Bataille speaks of 'a point' with which one can unite and within which one can become abyssally lost (v, p. 141).[24] A point can be, as in 'Ascent', a 'breach through which two beings recognize one another' (v, p. 500), divining and penetrating one another in love or in laughter. The beetle's luminous dot is likewise such a point, 'the point of shame' from 'Meditation II', one with the 'unbearable shame' Bataille feels at Laure's grave (v, p. 500), the anguish one must traverse to reach the summit. 'One who loves beyond the grave', Bataille writes, 'has the right to release love within himself from its human limits' (v, p. 501). Freed from merely human form and given over to the free play of chance, love's glimmer may appear in various solar figures: a volcano, a star, or a glowworm.

## PART 2. PLANETARY WRITING

### *Surfacing and circling*

The play of solar figuration crosses forms and scales, tracing light-figures that blaze and glimmer through the night. This play precedes and exceeds the human, and is not beholden to it. The human is, rather, itself one of its forms. With and beyond Bataille, I want to think of 'humanity' as a cosmic movement, and of modern technological humanity in its surfacing and circling around the globe as a type of figuration,

23 I owe my interest in the figure of the glowworm to my conversations with Jasmine Pisapia, by whose work on fireflies and the glimmering thresholds between life and death and the visible and the invisible I am deeply influenced. See her essay in this volume and Jasmine Clotilde Pisapia, 'Poisonous Images: Taranto's Environmental Crisis between the Visible and the Invisible', *Cultural Anthropology*, 41.2 (2026), pp. 247–74 <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca41.2.03>.

24 Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 122. On the subject in *Inner Experience* as at once positing and losing itself, see Jean-Louis Baudry, 'Bataille et l'expérience intérieure', *Tel Quel*, 55 (1973), pp. 63–76.



Fig. 3. Technological modernity as light-figuration: glowworm-like lights of the Earth as seen from the International Space Station, 2024. Credit: NASA.

both brilliant and violent. One need only look at the Earth from above: at the swarm of satellites circling it; at the immense network of sensors, cables, data centres, power grids, railways, agricultural field patterns, cities, and numerous other technological signs and copulae that mediate and remediate the surface of the planet, its oceans, and its orbit. Paul Virilio speaks of digital, tele- and electro-technologies as technologies of indirect light, rivalling and substituting for the light of the sun;[25] and, as seen in images of Earth at night taken from orbit (Figures 3 and 4), many of these signs glow in the dark, making visible human

25 Paul Virilio, *Polar Inertia*, trans. by Patrick Camiller (Sage, 2000).




Fig. 4. Technological modernity as light-figuration: glowworm-like lights of the Earth as seen from the International Space Station, 2021. Credit: NASA.

activity as a fire-being, a light-being. What is this system of planetary writing and planetary self-reflection that modern technological humanity erects at the threshold of outer space, signalling into the cosmic wasteland?

To shift the frame slightly, I should clarify that, when I say 'modern humanity', I have in mind what Sylvia Wynter calls 'Man': the paradigmatic technological subject that imposes its own model of being human on the entire globe. Elsewhere, I have written about the edifice of modernity as that of *human upscaling*, and about the modern concept of 'humanity' as assembled, at once materially and conceptually,

in Man's colonial movement.[26] When Bataille, in his Eurocentrism, speaks of 'humanity' as a cosmic movement, I assume him to be referring to the process of Man's upscaling. Despite his criticism of modernity and his turn to non-modern examples, he remains dismissive of those forms of being human that his schema leaves below and behind the rising spiral of history.[27] Bataille is enthralled by this spiral — and I am fascinated by it, too, even as I try to resist its dazzling attraction. Suspending my own inclination to critique, I want to dwell here with the ambivalence of modernity's ascending trajectory, and to think with Bataille about the moments of brilliance and miracle, of eruption and divination, inherent *in* this trajectory itself. Man's very striving to scale the skies is eruptive, and in the signs that modern humanity obsessively inscribes into the planetary surface, through layer upon layer of the technological stack, one can see glyphs and signals to be divined, either by humanity itself or by imagined extraterrestrial others. The orbital image, too, is a medium of geo-bibliomancy, of reading for terrestrial flashes and signs.

In its iterative movement, technological humanity circumnavigates the globe and scales up to the skies, as if to represent to itself its own figure, to become conscious of its own surfacing — or as if to take some distance from itself, the distance necessary for self-reflection, and to view itself from above, from the skies, through the eyes of ancestors, aliens, gods, angels, or satellites. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, a twentieth-century mystic of technology, writes that, if hypothetical Martians were to scan our planet for its 'sidereal radiations', that is, the play of energy exuded by its surface, they would note 'not the blue of the seas or the green of the forests, but the phosphorescence of thought'. They would divine from the Earth's technosignatures that a still-infirm planetary light-consciousness is being born in 'this immense and growing edifice of matter and ideas'.[28] For Bataille, too,

26 See Kirill Chepurin, 'Cosmic Delegitimation: Toward a Political Theology of Scale', in *Political Theology Reimagined*, ed. by Alex Dubilet and Vincent W. Lloyd (Duke University Press, 2025), pp. 173–89 <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781478061144-012>.

27 For a critique of Bataille's own colonial assumptions, see Howard Caygill, 'Bataille and the Neanderthal Extinction', in *Georges Bataille and Contemporary Thought*, ed. by Will Stronge (Bloomsbury, 2017), pp. 239–63. I thank Nicolas Helm-Grovas for drawing my attention to this text.

28 Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man*, trans. by Bernard Wall (Collins, 1959), p. 183.

the movement of life across the globe, feeding on solar energy, is a 'movement of light'; humanity seeks to appropriate this movement while in fact being its 'most intense form' (VII, pp. 31, 41). He also regards planetary-scale technology, this 'immense industrial network', as 'express[ing] a circuit of cosmic energy' that modern humanity, vainly, strives to 'regulate' (VII, p. 33).[29]

Unlike some of his contemporaries, Bataille does not seem to react to the launch of Sputnik in 1957,[30] and he tends to lament the loss of solar glory and brilliance in the modern age, identifying modernity predominantly with greed, individualism, and instrumental rationality. I believe one can, however, reflect or meditate on the lights of the Earth from space as traces of the marvellous, of solar figuration, within technological modernity itself, which cannot be fully understood in instrumental terms. As in Bataille's 'Meditation II', does not the planet itself appear in these images like an artificial glowworm at whose brilliance one can marvel, as though an infirm sun were trying to be born from it? What can ultimately be more *useless*, more wasteful, more futile than this technological ascent towards the sun, through which humanity may burn itself out, sacrificing the planet's habitability?

On a cosmic scale, this artificial brilliance, too, becomes a tiny luminous dot, growing pale and vanishing. Yet one can become ecstatically united with this light-point and its promise: to illuminate the Earth, to make a star out of it. This promise is bound up with that of a new golden age of plenty and equality. One cannot subtract this equally mystical and political promise from technological modernity, and from what Wynter likewise calls, not without admiration, modernity's 'dazzling triumphs and achievements' conjoined with its 'negative underside'.[31] The promise of universal light resounds not only in Vladimir Lenin's emphasis on electrification as an integral part of communism or in Bataille's own solar communist vision, but already

29 Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, I, pp. 23, 26, 34.

30 These contemporaries include philosophers such as Günther Anders, Hannah Arendt, and Martin Heidegger.

31 Sylvia Wynter, 'On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory, and Re-Imprisoned Ourselves in Our Unbearable Wrongness of Being, of *Désêtre*: Black Studies Toward the Human Project', in *Not Only the Master's Tools: African-American Studies in Theory and Practice*, ed. by Lewis R. Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon (Paradigm, 2006), pp. 107–69 (pp. 123, 132, 161).

in Percy Shelley's Romantic image of a unity of science and poetry, which jointly allow emancipated humanity to transfigure the planetary surface, transcending the cosmic night through artificial light: 'And Science, and her sister Poesy, | Shall clothe in light the fields and cities of the free!'[32]

This glowing utopia, too, is what modernity — the world of Man — signals into outer space, wanting to assert itself, to be seen, to become a point of light shining, like a star, in cosmic darkness. Wynter herself invokes the 'revelatory' technological view of the Earth from space, alluding to images such as 'Earthrise' and 'Blue Marble' as emblematic of the achievements of modernity. Looking at our planet from the extraterrestrial vantage, she may also be said to glimpse the phosphorescence of thought: the brilliant promise of universal emancipation opened by the modern world. Yet, from within her deep ambivalence towards the 'Janus-faced' character of modernity, Wynter perceives at the same time Man's foreclosure of this promise; she sees modernity's light become catastrophic and blinding.[33] From the cosmic outside, the movement of Man appears at once as a glowing utopia and as a figure of unparalleled catastrophe: a sacrifice, a planetary voiding.

*Sacrifice*

Can the light of enlightenment and technological upscaling be disentangled from the fire and heat that scorch the planet? Modernity's glow from orbit appears soft and fragile, its violence concealed. Yet even indirect or soft electric light, or the buzzing of electric cables below the registers of human perception, constitutes an 'offering' to

32 Percy Bysshe Shelley, *Laon and Cythna* [1817], ed. by Anahid Nersessian (Broadview, 2016), p. 134 (Canto v, lines 536–37).

33 On the 'Janus-faced' entanglement within modernity of the 'dazzling series of cognitively emancipatory achievements' — including the 'revelatory, extraterrestrial perspectival view of our planet Earth' — with Man's racial-colonial negation of co-humanity and foreclosure of ecumenically human emancipation, see Sylvia Wynter, 'The Ceremony Found: Towards the Autopoetic Turn/Overturn, its Autonomy of Human Agency and Extraterritoriality of (Self-)Cognition', in *Black Knowledges/Black Struggles: Essays in Critical Epistemology*, ed. by Jason R. Ambrose and Sabine Broeck (Liverpool University Press, 2015), pp. 184–252 (p. 188).

what Bataille calls human-made 'conflagrations befitting the solar origin of life's movement' (VII, p. 43).[34] The same cross-scalar technical apparatus, the same cosmic circuit that makes possible the planetary self-reflection necessary for the human to grasp the planetary scale itself and to visualize the climate crisis, also accelerates the swirling movement of this crisis, scaling up death and environmental devastation. As Bataille notes, perhaps the destiny of humanity will have been simply to exhaust the energy of the planet, to burn itself out, as though sacrificing itself and vanishing just as it has grasped its own solar figure.[35]

The movement of planetary writing, from this perspective, serves both planetary self-reflection and the upscaling of the human as an obstacle to death. Surrounded by the abyss of death in a decentred universe, and exposed to the fiery depths of the planet, humanity mediates and remediates the globe, inscribing itself into the threshold between earth and sky as though to fortify itself, to assert itself against cosmic insignificance, to make its own light-figure more dazzling and lasting. Over and against the extraterrestrial void, the human persists as 'a challenge to this void', a rebellious obstacle to the power of dissipation (V, p. 86). At the same time, humanity rises upward 'like a challenge to the Earth, to the mud that engenders [humans] and that they are happy to send back to nothingness' — or, one might say, to sacrifice (V, p. 93).[36]

Nothingness above reaffirmed in the nothingness below: Man reduplicates the nothing at the planetary scale, seeking to mediate and fill the void that it itself reproduces. Is it any wonder that the figure of modern humanity is so eruptive and unstable, hurtling towards catastrophe? Planetary writing aims to stabilize the order of Man, weaving into its web the figures and layers of technological signs, not least as so many layers of loss — of ruins, ashes, death — on which this order is erected. Modernity is an age of an unprecedented proliferation of writing, now also in the form of large language models, this new

34 Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, I, p. 37.

35 See, for example, VII, pp. 509–10; *The Limit of the Useful*, pp. 321–22: Humanity's 'sole aim has been using up the terrestrial globe. [...] [Humanity's movement] derives profits from a planet being exhausted; nevertheless, it is grand and glorious'.

36 Bataille, *Inner Experience*, pp. 75, 81.

technology of planetary inscription, remediating the archive of signs and enveloping the planet in yet another semiotic and material layer. Of the 'prosthetic' technologies at the origin of human upscaling, fire and writing are among the most basic; it is ironic that, as the epoch of planetary writing par excellence, modernity contributes so much to the proliferation of heat and fires worldwide. It thus leads to the destabilization of the very ground that technological mediation is intended to regulate.

The ground, meanwhile, glows under our feet. 'Not a day passes', writes Michel Leiris in his essay 'Civilisation' (1930), published in the journal *Documents*, edited by Bataille, that we do not see new fissures that 'sunder the fragile skin of the earth's circumference and momentarily bare the fire at its centre'.[37] Some have argued that the story of humanity can be told as that of a fire-handling and fire-starting species whose activity amplifies planetary fires, and whose technology is itself volcanic in origin.[38] 'Our whole life, our very breathing,' Leiris continues, 'is in touch with lava flows, craters, geysers, and everything else to do with volcanoes, and, as a consequence, if we hold up to it a mirror [ … ] it must be capable of tracing vigorous sulphur-coloured lines upon it.'[39]

Like all writing, planetary writing is haunted by its relation to the dead. It is a writing of ash and flames. Its edifice is built on the ashes of the dead and their unequally distributed, often unwilling sacrifice — and it is as though this violence came back to unground the spiral of progress, and modernity itself were starting to become hell, drawn into the fiery underworld unfit for habitation. Large language models, too, trained on dead signs and the voices of the dead, dwell at and reach across the threshold, scaling up the circulation of death. Human upscaling, the upscaling of writing, and the upscaling of the

37 Michel Leiris, 'Civilisation', in *Encyclopædia Acephalica*, ed. by Alastair Brotchie, trans. by Iain White and others (Atlas Press, 1995), pp. 93–96 (p. 93).

38 See the writings of Nigel Clark, in particular Nigel Clark, 'PyroGaia: Planetary Fire as Force and Signification', *Ctrl-Z: New Media Philosophy*, 7 (2017) <https://www.ctrl-z.net.au/articles/issue-7/clark-pyrogaia/> [accessed 28 May 2026]; and Nigel Clark, Alexandra Gormally, and Hugh Tuffen, 'Speculative Volcanology: Time, Becoming, and Violence in Encounters with Magma', *Environmental Humanities*, 10.1 (2018), pp. 273–94 <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-4385571>.

39 Leiris, 'Civilisation', p. 93.

burden of death go hand in hand. In this drama played out between earth and sky, the entire Earth threatens to become a cemetery, a realm of the dead.[40] This planetary sacrifice would also be a mode of scaling up to the cosmic void, of becoming one with the free play of chance. It is entirely possible that the human species might succeed in becoming spacefaring and multi-planetary; it is equally possible that it will simply end, and that *nothing will remain of it* except ashes, traces, and extinguished signs, to be divined by non-human others or scattered into space. Either way, in a universe without an absolute above or below, humanity's ascent to the skies is indistinguishable from a fall into the geocosmic depths, as invoked in Bataille's 'The Practice of Joy before Death' (1939): 'I slowly lose myself in unintelligible and bottomless space. | I reach the depths of worlds. | I am devoured by death' (I, p. 555).[41]

Much has been written about modernity's supposed lack of connection to the cosmic. In Man's stubborn self-assertion against the post-Copernican abyss, however, does not modernity's accelerating swirling movement, contingent yet catastrophic, in which *tourner* (to turn) slips into *tournoyer* (to swirl, to whirl), begin to imitate the whirl of galaxies? In 'Celestial Bodies' (1938), citing Eddington, Bataille emphasizes that, although we fail to notice it in everyday life, cosmic rotation is an extremely fast, vertiginous movement that makes one dizzy if one tries to imagine it. Our galaxy is 'thrown into space like a whirling explosion' (I, p. 514).[42] Cosmic figuration is a universal dance of death: 'The Practice of Joy' also invokes this 'universe composed of innumerable turning stars [...] whose very movement requires that I die' (I, p. 557).[43]

In its upscaling of death, of loss, it is as if humanity were trying to become ecstatically one with this movement, with 'the fête of suns

40 On the ashes of the dead as an ethical problem, the Earth as cemetery, and modernity as hell, see Kirill Chepurin and Alex Dubilet, 'Out of the Cemetery of the Earth, a Resurrective Commons: Nikolai Fedorov's Common Task against the Biopolitics of Modernity', *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 23.2 (2023), pp. 259–93 <https://doi.org/10.14321/crnewcentrevi.23.2.0259>.

41 Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, p. 237.

42 Georges Bataille, 'Celestial Bodies', trans. by Annette Michelson, *October*, 36 (1986), pp. 75–78 <https://doi.org/10.2307/778552>.

43 Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, p. 239.

and spirals' (I, p. 520), as Bataille concludes in 'Celestial Bodies'. 'Humanity can regain, through loss, the free movement of the universe, it can dance and whirl with [...] the great swarm of stars,' he writes there, 'but in the violent expenditure it thus makes of itself, it must glimpse that it breathes in the power of death' (I, p. 520). Yet what does it mean to glimpse (*apercevoir*) this dance, to become aware of it? Is this to say that, through loss, modern humanity discerns the figure of its own ongoing sacrifice? Or is it — as Bataille seems to suggest in the first volume of *The Accursed Share* (1949) — a way to attain a higher consciousness of solar figuration, so as to *avoid* the catastrophe facing the planet?[44] Is there any way in which all this loss will have been worth it? Or does the question already amount to an attempt to justify or redeem the violent movement of modernity? However one responds, in the meantime the modern world keeps swirling.

*Precipice (Reflecting, obliquely)*

Bataille's 'The Practice of Joy before Death' is, among other things, an account of meditative practice. To meditate, the practitioner focuses on a point — 'this point being both the life and the death of the loved one' — imagined as the glowing 'geometric locus of all existence'. The scalar collapse between point and totality induces vertigo in the practitioner, a fall through the point as an opening into the depths where 'everything is profoundly cracked' (I, pp. 555–56).[45] In order to think with, but also to resist, this movement of voiding — this fall — I want to linger at the precipice, the brink of the abyss, and to tarry with the moment when one is gazing down, poised at the edge and almost slipping, yet maintaining a precarious balance. I want to suggest that this precipice can be imagined as a place for philosophical reflection to occupy: a place from which one registers and holds fleeting figures just long enough to reflect on them, to articulate them, before they vanish in the abyss.

While Bataille draws on mysticism, and while he composes poetry, he refuses the labels of mystic and poet. He does not, however, refuse

44 See VII, p. 47; Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, I, p. 41.

45 Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, pp. 237–38.

the title of philosopher.[46] This fact is significant, but here I can approach its significance only obliquely. We may recall how, in 'Ascent', Bataille and Laure — out of breath from the climb and 'thrown out of orbit' — experience a 'moment of rending' when gazing into Etna's crater, 'bent over [*penchés sur*] the gaping wound, the fissure in the star whose air we were breathing' (v, p. 500). In this sentence, too, everything is cracked. The operations of *wounding*, *rending*, and *fissuring* cut open all the bodies across scales: the humans, the volcano, and the celestial body. The whole scene blazes; it communicates with the solar outside beyond the terrestrial orbit.

Yet the movement stops there. The sentence's ending, invoking 'the star whose air we were breathing' or 'where we were breathing' (*où nous respirions*), grounds the scene, returns it to its terrestrial place (the 'where'), bringing the stellar scale down to earth, into the protective layer of the atmosphere. This abrupt stopping at the summit, this return of breath at the brink of asphyxiation and bleeding out from the cuts, signals for Bataille the heights of eroticism. As he writes in *Guilty*, 'eroticism is the brink of the abyss: I bend over [*je me penche au-dessus*] senseless horror' (v, p. 355), the horror of the depths.[47]

In these scenes of leaning over the abyss, I discern, however, something more distant than the blaze of eroticism and geocosmic terror. I see here a faint glimmer of philosophical reflection, like the scintillation of a star, invoked indirectly through echoes in the language. In *The Accursed Share*, Bataille calls for a new consciousness of the planetary condition, an expanded reflection able to grasp the eruptive figure of humanity and to do justice to the explosive condition of the globe. He gestures towards a *lucid consciousness of vertigo* one must,

46 See Bataille's lecture where he compares himself to Sartre (IX, pp. 325–30), in English in Georges Bataille, *The Cradle of Humanity: Prehistoric Art and Culture*, trans. by Michelle Kendall and Stuart Kendall (Zone Books, 2005), pp. 47–55. Importantly, there is no rigid dichotomy for Bataille between philosophy and mysticism. For accounts of Bataille and mysticism, see in particular Amy Hollywood, *Sensible Ecstasy: Mysticism, Sexual Difference, and the Demands of History* (University of Chicago Press, 2002), pp. 60–119; and Alex Dubilet, *The Self-Emptying Subject: Kenosis and Immanence, Medieval to Modern* (Fordham University Press, 2018), pp. 146–72.

47 Georges Bataille, *Guilty* [1944], trans. by Stuart Kendall (State University of New York Press, 2011), p. 97.

impossibly, attain: humanity's 'vertiginous movement', he writes, must 'appear clearly *in consciousness*' (VII, p. 47).[48]

The scenes on the precipice may point to this type of consciousness. In French, *se pencher sur* (to lean over or to bend over, but also to examine) has epistemic connotations. It is a figure of reflection: one bends one's attention, one's head and gaze, over something, taking it as the object of thought. Bataille's *se pencher au-dessus* shifts this from a neutral 'looking into' to a vertiginous operation — and in *On Nietzsche* (1945) he likewise speaks of the viewpoint that opens in the moment of 'leaning over [*se pencher sur*] the abyss' or 'the void' (VI, pp. 45, 72), as if perched above the crater and glimpsing the instability and perishability at the heart of things.[49] 'Philosophy', he writes elsewhere, 'cannot escape the perspective of the instant when the ground slips away' (XII, p. 519). Only from this position, as *Guilty* implies, can one call into question 'everything possible' (V, p. 355). The philosopher, then, should be capable of a kind of slanted double vision, keeping in view at once the world of possibility and the abyss that ungrounds it, so as to reflect on the figures and signals that cross between the two.

This vision of a philosopher suspended over the crater recalls for me another famous Bataillean image: André Masson's *Acéphale*, which depicts a human figure without a head, holding a flaming heart in one hand and a sacrificial dagger in the other. Inspired by Leonardo da Vinci's 'Vitruvian Man', that paradigmatic image of the human as cosmic measure, *Acéphale* served as the symbol of the secret society founded by Bataille. Masson drew multiple variations of this figure, one of which is reproduced in Figure 5; here, the figure is floating or falling into the abyss, surrounded by galactic swirls and oceanic waves, its head replaced by the volcano.

The volcano taking the place of the head may point to many Bataillean motifs, including eruptive passion that exceeds practical rationality. I wonder, though, whether one might also approach this as a philosophical figure. In this figure, an expanded volcanic reflection substitutes for the pragmatic bourgeois reason that shuns disorder and

48 Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, I, p. 40.

49 Georges Bataille, *On Nietzsche*, trans. by Stuart Kendall (State University of New York Press, 2015), pp. 34–35, 65.



Fig. 5. André Masson, *Acéphale*, Tossa de Mar, 1936. Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofia. © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2026. Creative Commons license terms for re-use do not apply to this picture and further permission may be required from the right holder.

leaves the bounded subject intact. By contrast, the eruption in this drawing gestures to the volcano as the 'proper' site of philosophy, and as a vertiginous aperture through which the head is drawn into geocosmic instability. In his early Surrealist essay 'The Pineal Eye' (1930), Bataille even imagines a third concealed eye at the summit of the

human head, which connects directly — eruptively, vertically — to the sun. It is perhaps this eye, overlooking the glowing abyss, that Bataille wants the philosopher to open.

My sense is that the philosopher need not, like Empedocles, jump into Etna's crater. While the figure of the philosopher I pursue here is broadly Bataillean, I also want to position philosophy as a precarious obstacle to the ecstatic fall into the abyss Bataille often embraces. The peculiarity of philosophical writing is that it is *reflective*; it does not merge with the glow but maintains a gap, a distance from it. This glow can be that of a volcano, a star, or an exploding bomb (catastrophic technological light being very much on Bataille's mind). But it can also be that of a luminous dot, a glowing beetle, the indirect light of electronic or satellite transmission, or the cold phantom glow of the lost loved one, the lost sun. Each of these may appear as a scintillation of cosmic chance.

Lingering at the threshold, at the precipice of the void, philosophical writing, too, is a writing of loss and recollection. If the philosopher gazes into the abyss, it is, Bataille writes in *On Nietzsche*, 'to have knowledge of the nothingness' — the void of chance — 'that is revealed in pain'. He continues: 'The most common operations of life require that we lean out over the abyss' (VI, p. 158).[50] We usually fail to notice the abyss that surrounds our everyday life. The philosopher's double vision, however, functions as a sensor attuned to the abyss, discerning and reflecting on figures of voiding across scales, from daily goings-on to the circling of humanity around the globe.

In its double vision, philosophy in this sense must reflect on planetary writing as well, insofar as this writing mediates the gap between earth and sky. Without technological mediation, how could humanity's movement appear clearly in consciousness? How else could philosophy become aware of this catastrophic movement, if not by reading cross-scalar processes, signs of instability, and atmospheric and seismic shifts? Philosophy needs to move not only across textual forms, but also across media, sensory registers, and geotechnologies of modelling, visualization, and formalization — across the whole apparatus of planetary self-reflection. So understood, philosophy cannot stand

50 Bataille, *On Nietzsche*, p. 140.

outside this apparatus. Philosophical reflection remains unstable and provisional, implicated in the very process it seeks to grasp, drawn into the planetary swirl even as it tries to resist its pull. In its own search for chance, philosophy needs to adopt at once a human and an extraterrestrial (Martian, post-Copernican) perspective: not in order to become a robotic posthuman intelligence coldly circling around the Earth, but to dwell within the interval, at the threshold of outer space, that humanity itself inhabits.

As Bataille writes in 'The Pineal Eye', the human is 'polarized by the sky' (II, p. 26),[51] and this tension is what defines the movement of humanity. In its double challenge to the Earth and to the cosmic void, the human strives, eruptively, to scale up to the sky, even as it always fails to ascend fully. The image of the pineal eye points to an ambivalence inherent in the human figure in Bataille. On the one hand, looking at itself rationally, in order to regulate its own circling and to fortify itself as an obstacle to death, the human sets up the borders that circumscribe for it the lawful circle of life — of laws and taboos — seeking to keep out, and hold at bay, the outside or 'the sacred'.[52] On the other, the human head, with the pineal eye, is an opening onto the solar essence that cannot be contained, and that irrupts through it. The human, as Bataille defines it, is a being of polarity, of the gap: a glowing fissure, a 'negative' wound in the body of nature. It figures a kind of cosmic addendum, and the main philosophical problem is 'that of the human itself, insofar as it adds humanity to the universe' (VIII, p. 26).[53] What the human adds *is* the gap, the interval, which does not exist in nature as such but marks nature's distance from itself. On the scale of the universe, this gap is perhaps minuscule, contingent, a minor crack. Yet it is precisely this vanishing interval that philosophy inhabits in its double vision, making possible a meditation on loss, perishability, and the fleeting forms of humanity's terrestrial and solar figuration. The human bends over the wound — over itself as wound — as over the crater, obliquely.

51 Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, p. 83.

52 See in particular volume II of *The Accursed Share*, which theorizes these borders in dialogue with the anthropological theories of Émile Durkheim, Marcel Mauss, and Claude Lévi-Strauss.

53 Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, II and III (1992), p. 31.

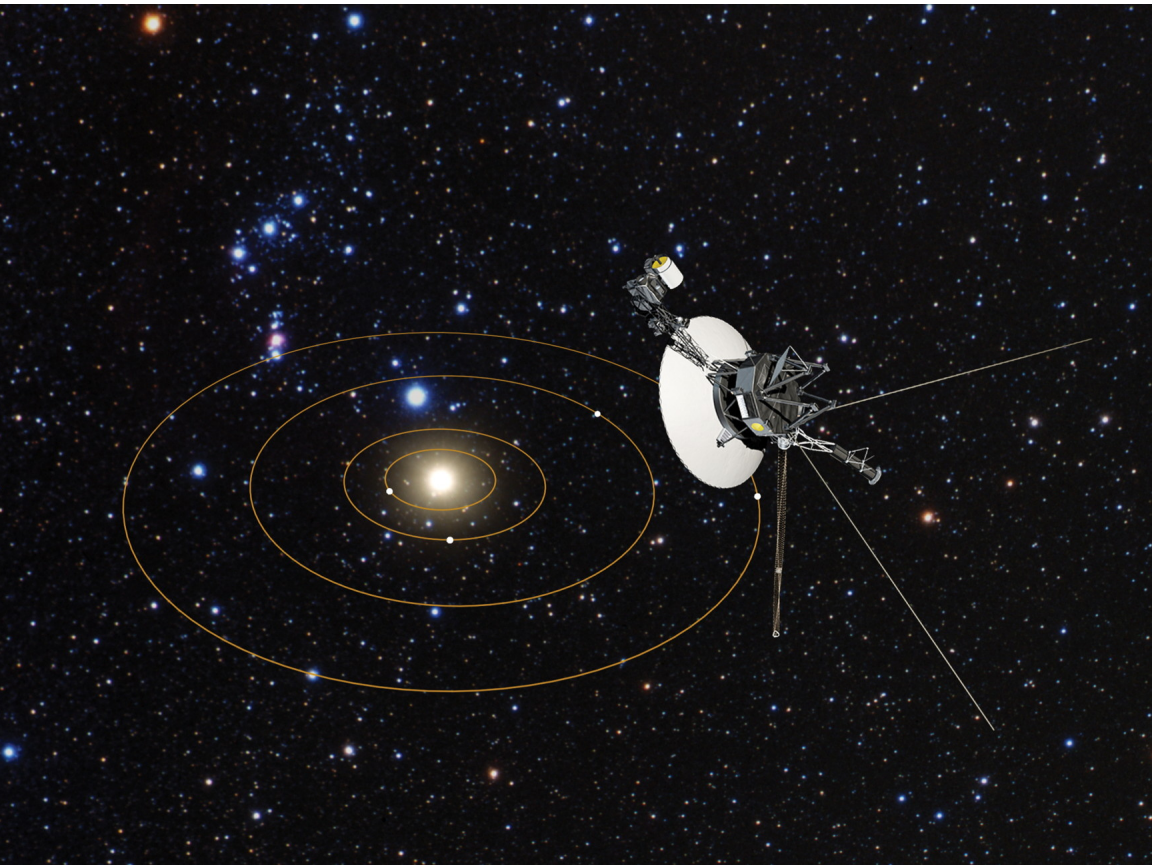

Fig. 6. Voyager 1 exploring outer space: a visualization. Credit: NASA.

*Communication*

I want to meditate on an artificial beetle drifting in the beyond. In 2012, the space probe Voyager 1 (Figure 6), launched in 1977 and now the most distant human-made object in the cosmos, crossed into interstellar space. It continues to this day to collect data and to communicate with the Earth through the faint indirect light of radio signals. As I was writing this essay, I saw the news that Voyager 1 was running low on power, destined in the end to fade into silence, becoming a dead sign, a vanishing trace of humanity consumed by the cosmic expanse.

Not unlike the orbital lights of the Earth at night, or the messages humans have sent outward in the hope of reaching extraterrestrial intelligence, Voyager 1 shows that modernity — the world of Man — wants above all to communicate, to announce itself, to be *seen*. The modern age figures itself as a solar epoch, an age of light (and Bataille himself is, in this regard, very much a modernist). In its self-assertion, Man does not want to hide in the dark cosmic forest or conceal the signs and technosignatures of its own presence. Hence Voyager 1 does not merely explore the interstellar medium, reading the beyond for measurements and signals. Launched by NASA within the horizon of Cold War and imperial cosmic ambition, it is also an artificial angel, a messenger, carrying the so-called Golden Record: a partial archive of the history and knowledge of the world of Man. Through this archive, moreover, Man wants itself and the Earth to be *heard*: the record contains greetings, music, and sounds of our planet, including laughter, birdsong, and thunder.

Meditating on this strange beetle on a cosmic scale makes me think of Bataille's concept of communication. He often connects communication to the blaze of love, the contagion of laughter, or the explosive solar community of festival or revolution. In *Inner Experience*, however, he also develops the concept in a direction that gestures, I would suggest, towards communication with the extraterrestrial beyond, or communication as a vanishing, runaway cosmic trajectory. In some passages, he reads the subject-object relation — when the subject reflects on an object — through what can be understood, somewhat anachronistically, as a proto-information theory: the subject sends a signal or request to the object, and the object sends back its response.

Let us call the subject 'A' and the object 'B'. Bataille's model of finite communication can be presented as 'A=B', where the linkage or copula marks the signal passing both ways. But what happens, he asks, when the object becomes the unknown and unknowable X, the immense cosmic abyss itself? 'Above all', he writes,

> *no more object*. [...] There is no longer subject=object, but a 'gapping breach' between one and the other and, in the breach, subject and object are dissolved, there is a passage, communication, but not from one to the other: *one* and the *other* have

> lost their distinct existence. [ … ] In the same way, no response remains possible (v, p. 74).[54]

Here, the signal from the subject — from Man — becomes a signal without response, a message into the void, the empty inhuman sky.[55] Instead of binding object to subject, the copula enacts a voiding that *unbinds*. Communication remains a passage without destination, a breach of the terrestrial threshold in which the very structure of exchange dissolves.

This move ungrounds both the standard model of communication and the figure of 'cosmic man'. Through technology, humanity attempts — in Bataille's description of communication — to 'be accumulated and charged like a storm, inscribing its point of night into the luminous order of things' (v, p. 443).[56] Space probes such as Voyager 1 are prostheses and light-extensions of the human, sent into the extraterrestrial expanse to measure and mediate it, and to carry the signs of Man beyond the Earth's orbit. In this, they recall the traditional conception of the human as a middle being or cosmic mediator, neither animal nor god, moving between earth and sky. But how is one to mediate the measureless universe? The task that the world of Man still strives to uphold, in its attempt to know all and become all, is constitutively impossible. Upscaling itself to the universe, modernity only increases the burden on the Earth, until the planet cries out.

Bataille's late essay 'The Encumbered Planet' (1958) opens, strikingly, with this cry: 'From the planet burdened with death and wealth, a cry pierces the clouds. Wealth and death enclose. No one hears this cry of wretched expectation' (xii, p. 475). Is this the cry that an extraterrestrial intelligence might in truth hear in the Golden Record, if it were to decipher its contents and origin? For Bataille, this cry can itself

54 Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 64.

55 Bataille's vision of the universe as an empty sky devoid of response seems aligned with Eddington's remark that, even if there is extraterrestrial intelligence, it is rare (with only 'a few rival earths dotted here and there about the universe'). These other earths may, moreover, be 'places where conscious life has already vanished or is yet to come'. All this makes communication with hypothetical extraterrestrials improbable. See Arthur Eddington, *The Nature of the Physical World* (Macmillan, 1928), p. 178.

56 Bataille, *Inner Experience*, p. 235.

be ecstatic.[57] I hear it, at the same time, as melancholic. It is hard for me to imagine how cosmic communication or, for that matter, cosmic philosophy, in their modern forms, could be free from melancholy. Bent over the planetary wound, the world of Man is burdened, perhaps despite itself, with a 'melancholic obligation': an obligation to an unknown, unknowable X, ultimately to the immeasurable universe itself, of which humanity is only a transient, chance configuration.[58]

Instead of a glorious solar blaze, a new golden age, I meditate on the melancholic obligation that space probes such as Voyager 1 carry into the beyond. I meditate on the pale glow of the moon, this other figure of uselessness, of 'useless eternity', and of gentle reflection, as it reflects the light of the sun.[59] (I wonder: Why is there no lunar condition in Bataille?) I meditate, finally, on the miracle, the marvel, that is the stubborn persistence of the manifold forms of humanity in the face not only of the geocosmic abyss, but also the escalating wars and devastations of the present. Lately, I find myself thinking less about all-consuming solar fire and more about a kind of fugitive glimmering bliss; about love as what Bataille calls in 'Ascent' his 'daily bread' (v, p. 501); and about the necessity of finding cracks in this world and building shelters from the world within them, perhaps in the hope of surviving its violent enclosure. The infirm light that glows in these cracks is a type of solar figuration, too.

57 I am also thinking of a line from *Guilty*: 'THE OBJECT OF ECSTASY IS THE ABSENCE OF A RESPONSE FROM THE OUTSIDE' (v, p. 320; Bataille, *Guilty*, p. 69; capitals in the original). Such is, perhaps, the ecstasy of a humanity conscious of being alone in the universe, or unlikely to reach other intelligent beings even if they exist: a specifically modern type of cosmic ecstasy.

58 I adapt the phrase 'melancholic obligation' from Elizabeth Povinelli, *Geontologies: A Requiem to Late Liberalism* (Duke University Press, 2016), p. 110.

59 On the moon's 'useless eternity', see the beautiful cosmic tale in François Hemsterhuis's *Alexis, or on the Golden Age* (1781), in François Hemsterhuis, *Dialogues, 1778–1787*, ed. and trans. by Jacob van Sluis and Daniel Whistler (Edinburgh University Press, 2022), p. 137. See also Kirill Chepurin, 'Theodicy across Scales: Hemsterhuis's *Alexis* and the Dawn of Romantic Cosmism', *Symphilosophie: International Journal of Philosophical Romanticism*, 4 (2022), pp. 263–93.

# The Scale of Love

FRANCO COSTANTINI

There exists a 'deifugal' force.
Otherwise all would be God.
Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*

## INTRODUCTION

What happens when we go beyond the limits of subjective experience and human knowledge and achieve, through mystical vision, what is traditionally called the union (*unio*) or conjunction (*coniuctio*) with the divine? In this essay, I present an analysis of some passages from the last cantos of *Paradiso*, the last cantica of Dante's *Divine Comedy*,[1] where philosophy, theology, and mysticism collapse into the lyrical depiction of the indescribable. I focus in particular upon experience in and of the Empyrean, the immaterial space which lies beyond the last heavenly sphere. I will examine some of the active tensions that structure the *Commedia* and reflect on the epistemic value that the poetic word can convey. Poetry has its own truth, as love does (according to the famous maxim of Gregory the Great: '*amor ipse notitia est*', 'love itself is knowledge').

1 I quote the *Divine Comedy* following the Italian edition of reference: Dante Alighieri, *La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata*, ed. by Giorgio Petrocchi (Le lettere, 1994); the English translation is quoted from *The Divine Comedy*, trans. by Robert and Jean Hollander, 3 vols (Doubleday, 2000–07).

I would like to explore the philosophical implications of the poet's otherworldly 'situated dislocation',[2] his being simultaneously in the 'over here' of the human poet's perspective and in the 'over there' of the pilgrim's transcendent perspective, by putting the Dantean text in dialogue with other medieval texts, but also with some modern and contemporary thinkers that have tried to meditate the relation between mystical experience, language, and the ontological structure of the world. The notion of scale therefore has several distinct meanings in this essay: as a marker of different levels of observation and understanding of an object, as a way to express a change in the resolution of the observation, but also as a hierarchical and taxonomical measurement, as in the medieval (but in a certain way still very actual) *scala naturae*, the great chain of being that orders living and non-living beings following a scalar ontology derived from Platonic emanationism and Aristotelian categories.[3]

## THE ASCENSION TO THE EMPYREAN

According to one fundamental law of physical movement in the medieval understanding, every creature has its own *pondus*, its own gravity, we might say, that naturally exerts its force. This gravity is a form of love, as William of Saint-Thierry (1085–1148) writes in his *De natura et dignitate amoris* (I, 1):

> Love is a power of the soul, leading her by a kind of natural gravity to her place or destination. Every creature whether spiritual or corporeal has both a place to which it is naturally led and a kind of natural gravity by which it is led there.[4]

2 I borrow here one of the definitions given by Joshua DiCaglio, *Scale Theory: A Nondisciplinary Inquiry* (University of Minnesota Press, 2021), p. 32. See also ibid., p. 121: 'Not only is the seeming paradox of this dissolution of the subject produced by scale, but scale provides some ways of renewing and re-examining the problems of subjectivity, identity, experience, and consciousness. Scale produces a situated dislocation [...]; it dislocates the perspective from the delimited structure of the body even as it accounts for this dislocation.'

3 See Arthur Lovejoy, *The Great Chain of Being* (Harvard University Press, 1933); and *L'être et ses degrés. L'histoire de l'ontologie scalaire*, ed. by Fabienne Baghdassarian and Kristell Trego (Hermann, 2023).

4 '[E]st quippe amor vis animae naturali quodam pondere ferens eam in locum vel finem suum. Omnis enim creatura sive spiritualis, sive corporea, et certum habet locum quo

As it was already manifest at least since the first ascension of the poet within his body from the terrestrial forest of Eden to the first heaven of the Moon (*Par.* 1), love works as an attractive, gravitational force for bodies and souls. This gravity does not necessarily pull down: the stone desires to reunite with the earth and is therefore naturally drawn downwards, while fire tends towards its celestial element. So too does the human soul, which is naturally drawn towards God.

Scale is, etymologically, a ladder (lat. *scala*), as well as the steps that compose it and the relations between these physical or conceptual steps or stages. Our journey therefore begins with a sort of ladder,[5] at the near end of Dante's itinerary in the physical universe. In the twenty-first canto of *Paradiso*, in the heaven of Saturn, the heaven of contemplative souls, Dante finds himself in front of a golden staircase that ascends upwards:

> di color d'oro in che raggio traluce
> vid' io uno scaleo eretto in suso
> tanto, che nol seguiva la mia luce.
>
> (The color of gold in a ray of sunlight,
> I saw a ladder, rising to so great a height
> my eyesight could not rise along with it.)
>
> (Par. 21.28–30)

This refers, as will be specified in the following canto (*Par.* 22.70–72), to the ladder mentioned by Jacob in Genesis 28. 12.[6] Through contemplation, a person can gradually reach divine vision. Many treatises take up this idea of a gradual approach to the divine, such as Bonaventure's *Itinerarium mentis in Deum*, Bernard of Clairvaux's *De gradibus*, and Richard of Saint Victor's *Benjamin minor*.

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naturaliter fertur, et naturale quoddam pondus quo fertur' (Patrologia Latina vol. MPL 184 (Migne, 1859, p. 379); William of Saint-Thierry, *On the Nature and Dignity of Love*, trans. by Thomas X. Davis (Cistercian Publications, 1982), p. 47.

5 Religious and philosophical writings using the image of the ladder are numerous; limiting ourselves to the medieval context preceding Dante, it is certainly worth mentioning the *Ladder of Divine Ascent* of John Climacus, and the *Book of Muhammad's Ladder* (survived only through two thirteenth-century translations in Latin and Old French, *Liber scalae Machometi* and *Livre de l'eschiele Mahomet*), which was probably known to Dante; see *Dante and Islam*, ed. by Jan Ziolkowski, special issue of *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*, 125 (2007).

6 'Viditque in somnis scalam stantem super terram et cacumen illius tangens caelum; angelos quoque Dei ascendentes et descendentes per eam.'

When the poet arrives in the *Primo mobile*, the last physical heaven of the nine that surround the Earth, we witness a vivid change of perspective: what seemed to be a destination, the 'top of the tree', turns out to be a beginning, the 'flowerpot' (*testo*) in which the roots of the tree of time reside ('How time should have its roots in a single flowerpot | and its foliage in all the others | may now become quite clear to you.' *Par*. 27.118–21). We are at a threshold between time and eternity,[7] physical space and God as universe's *locus naturalis.* In the *Primo mobile*, a homogenous and still inconceivably rapid heaven, the poet discovers 'another universe' above, mirror to the one he has just gone through, with nine angelic choirs corresponding to the nine spheres, turning at different speeds (the smaller circle being the fastest, in a symmetrical relation mirroring the movement of the physical spheres, of which the largest and outermost was the fastest). All the angels participate in the divine light,[8] following their respective capacities (in this regard, Dante departs significantly from the doctrine of the Pseudo-Dionysian source), and the *Primo mobile*, too, is moved by its love for the Empyrean (by the circle of the Seraphim specifically),[9]

7 For a definition of 'threshold' in scale theory: 'A threshold is a discontinuity in what is observed, a change in the kind and quality of information that can be perceived as one alters the scale of observation' (DiCaglio, *Scale Theory*, p. 21).

8 Through Ibn Gabirol's (known as Avicebron to Latin philosophers) *Fons vitae* and Grosseteste's *De Luce*, the so-called 'metaphysics of light' permeates all of Dante's *Paradiso*. I think that what Vincent Cantarino writes about Ibn Gabirol's cosmological doctrine is extendable to *Paradiso*'s metaphysics as well: 'a characteristic feature of any emanatistic system, namely, the lack of real distinction between the different degrees of being. Although all being is hierarchically structured by its participation in Light, from the Divine to the lowest manifestations of the Cosmos, there is no ontological distinction between the spiritual orders and the material, nor between the physical and the metaphysical' (Vincent Cantarino, 'Ibn Gabirol's Metaphysic of Light', *Studio Islamica*, 26 (1967), pp. 49–71 (p. 70) <https://doi.org/10.2307/1595232>); 'Light, therefore, [...] is not a symbol, but an expression of an ontological reality, namely, that of the Divine itself' (ibid., p. 71). On Dante's metaphysics of light, see Maria Corti, 'Metafisica della luce come poesia', in *Scritti su Cavalcanti e Dante. La felicità mentale. Percorsi dell'invenzione e altri saggi* (Einaudi, 2003), pp. 284–98; and Didier Ottaviani, *La philosophie de la lumière chez Dante. Du 'Convivio' à la 'Divine Comédie'* (Champion, 2004).

9 That Empyrean was the place where angels reside was declared by a majority of theological authorities. See, for instance, the very famous and widely read *Commentaries on the Sentences* by Peter Lombard: 'Ubi angeli mox creati fuerint: in empyreo scilicet, quod statim factum, angelis fuerit repletum. [...] appellatur hic [...] caelum splendidum quod dicitur empyreum, id est igneum, a splendore, non a calore, quod statim factum, angelis est repletum, quod est supra firmamentum' (*Sent.* II, d. II, c. 4, 1–2).

the heaven of intellectual fire, the divine mind, which is perfectly still and encompasses the entire cosmos.[10]

Beatrice, the beloved lady who guides and instructs the pilgrim in the last *cantica*,[11] explains that all the angels have a direct vision of God, and not a mediated and hierarchical vision whereby every circle sees the vision as 'reflected' by the circle above, as in the Pseudo-Dionysian treatise *De coelesti hierarchia*, which was the main medieval model for the conception and representation of angelic movements and functions ('E dei saper che tutti hanno diletto | quanto la sua veduta si profonda | nel vero in che si queta ogne intelletto'; 'And you should know that all of them delight | in measure of the depth to which their sight | can penetrate the truth, where every intellect finds rest', *Par*. 28.106–108). This seems to me a fundamental point, because to celestial hierarchies is applied the same principle that was enunciated about the other beings in the sublunar world: every creature has access to the world and to the divine illumination according to its own nature,[12] as is clearly stated in the very beginning of *Paradiso*, when Beatrice employs the metaphor of the 'sea of being' to outline the existence of individual qualitative differences within a common ontological ground.

> Ne l'ordine ch'io dico sono accline
> tutte nature, per diverse sorti,
> più al principio loro e men vicine;
> onde si muovono a diversi porti
> per lo gran mar de l'essere.
>
> (In that order, all natures have their bent
> according to their different destinies,
> whether nearer to their source or farther from it.
> They move, therefore, toward different harbors
> upon the vastness of the sea of being.)
>
> (*Par.* 1.109–113)

10 The comparison between heavenly movements and lovers' desire was quite common, and already present in the Arab commentaries on Aristotle. For instance: 'Primum caelum movetur ab isto motore secundum desiderium ut assimiletur ei secundum suum posse, sicut amans movetur ut assimiletur suo amato'; 'The first sky is moved by this motor according to the desire to be assimilated (likened) to it as it could, as the lover moves towards the assimilation of her/his beloved' (Averroes, *On Arist. Metaph.*, XII, 37; my translation).

11 In accordance with the conventions of Dante scholarship, I distinguish between Dante the pilgrim and Dante the poet, the *agens* and the *auctor*.

12 On this structure, see Susanna Barsella, 'Dante e la "machina mundi". Modelli cosmologici e l'Epistola XIII', *Studi Danteschi*, 84 (2019), pp. 205–65.

In a relative sense, there is a difference of intensity and 'size' in the beatitude that a Seraph, from the higher angelic choir, and an archangel can achieve (or, I might add, an oak, a fish, or a saint). Nevertheless, in absolute terms there is no sense in comparing the totality of different individual experiences, because even if for an external mensuration the full joy of an 'inferior' entity could quantitively seem lesser than the full joy of a superior one, still subjectively there is no way for any particular being to conceive or desire more than what they are experiencing, full existence and full joy.

After the last physical sphere, the largest one, cosmos ends. The ladder that the pilgrim had started climbing in the heaven of the contemplative souls brings him here:

> Ivi è perfetta, matura e intera
> ciascuna disïanza; in quella sola
> è ogne parte là ove sempr' era,
> perché non è in loco e non s'impola;
> e nostra scala infino ad essa varca,
> onde così dal viso ti s'invola.
>
> (There only all we long for is perfected,
> ripe, and entire. It is there alone
> each element remains forever in its place,
> for it is not in space and does not turn
> on poles. Our ladder mounts right up to it
> and thus its top is hidden from your sight.)
>
> (*Par.* 22.64–69)

What lies beyond the *Primum mobile* is not a larger sphere but a rather peculiar 'place' that cannot be considered part of the cosmos anymore. As Albert the Great already noted, without space and time, without a sense of before and after, cosmos (as *ordo*) cannot exist: 'For where there is no before and after, there cannot be order.'[13] What was clear to medieval thinkers, following Aristotle, was that the concept of time is intimately linked with space; the classical definition of 'objective' time was the number of motion with respect to the before and after ('hoc est enim tempus, numerus motus secundum prius et posterius', *Phys.*

13 '[U]bi enim non est prius et posterius, ordo esse non potest' (Albert the Great, *Commentary on the 'Liber de causis'*, ed. by Winfried Fauser (Aschendorff, 1993), 1.1, tr. 4, c. 5, p. 49).

IV, 10–14, 218a). The Empyrean is not in space nor a place (‘*non è in loco*’), and is not a sphere (‘*non s’impola*’); it is pure light,[14] and can be described with a particular *terzina*, that in a circular movement represents the interpenetration and coextension of luminosity, love, and pleasure:

> luce intellettüal, piena d’amore;
> amor di vero ben, pien di letizia;
> letizia che trascende ogne dolzore.
>
> (light intellectual, full of love,
> love of true good, full of joy,
> joy that surpasses every sweetness.)
> (*Par*. 30.40–42)

Dante had already provided a definition of the Empyrean some years before, in his philosophical treatise *Convivio*, where the Platonic influences were manifest:

> This is the supreme edifice of the universe in which all the world is enclosed and beyond which there is nothing; it is not itself in space but was formed solely in the Primal Mind, which the Greeks call Protonoe.[15]

The Empyrean is a strange place/substance: intellectual fire, love, pure light. We witness, as readers, the presence of the pilgrim-poet physically,[16] in a place that is not physical; we are in the divine mind, which encompasses everything that exists and is not encompassed by anything (‘*non circunscritto, e tutto circunscrive*’, *Par*. 14.30). It is not in

14 Most of Dante’s contemporaries thought of the Empyrean as a corporeal body or space in a certain matter, as Aquinas: ‘firmiter [...] credimus, quod idem locus corporalis, sc. coelum empireum, angelorum et animarum sanctarum erit et corporum glorificatorum’ (*Chartularium Universitatis Parisiensis*, I, 171). See Bruno Nardi, ‘La dottrina dell’Empireo nella sua genesi storica e nel pensiero dantesco’, in Nardi, *Saggi di filosofia dantesca* (La Nuova Italia, 1967), pp. 167–214.

15 ‘[L]o soprano edificio del mondo, nel quale tutto lo mondo s’inchiude, e di fuori dal quale nulla è; ed esso non è in luogo ma formato fu solo nella Prima Mente, la quale li Greci dicono Protonoè’ (Dante Alighieri, *Il Convivio (The Banquet)*, trans. by Richard H. Lansing (Garland, 1990), II, iii, p. 11). Empyrean is also mentioned in the Letter to Cangrande della Scala, whose attribution to Dante is still debated: ‘celum supremum, continens corporauniversa et a nullo contentum’ (par. 67).

16 Even if the subject was and is still debated, there is no doubt for me that Dante is making this journey within his body, as is recalled in numerous passages throughout the poem: for example, one of the last, *Par*. 27.64, where the poet’s ‘mortal pondo’ is mentioned.

space, yet it is accessible to the body and can itself contain bodies, since it already contains, in addition to Dante's, those of Jesus and Mary, and will then contain (but actually already does, since past, present, and future are here compressed, one and the same thing) the glorious bodies of all the blessed after the end of time. It is the foundation and ontological guarantee of all existence: if the Empyrean ceased to be, all reality would immediately cease to exist too. However, this causal relationship should not be understood as a cause-effect link in the modern sense. As Christian Moevs explains: 'Causality for the medieval world is less a temporal association between events than an ontological relation between things: an effect depends on its cause to the extent that it owes its existence to it.'[17]

## THE MYSTICAL VISION

Despite the fact that this is the site of the highest and uninterrupted 'thinking' of God, his own mind, or perhaps precisely for this reason, perception does not terminate here, and noetic contemplation is sensual experience. We find at the end of the poem, in canto 30, an example of what Teodolinda Barolini has famously defined as the 'jumping textuality' of *Paradiso*,[18] this kind of non-linear, metaphorical, and figurative textuality that tries to reflect the unity of the vision through the ineludible multiplicity of language. In this canto begins the last vision, the true beatific vision that will culminate in the discernment of the mystery of the Trinity:

> e vidi lume in forma di rivera
> fulvido di fulgore, intra due rive
> dipinte di mirabil primavera.
> Di tal fiumana uscian faville vive,
> e d'ogne parte si mettien ne' fiori,
> quasi rubin che oro circunscrive;

17 Christian Moevs, *The Metaphysics of Dante's Comedy* (Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 28.

18 Teodolinda Barolini, *The Undivine Comedy: Detheologizing Dante* (Princeton University Press, 1992), pp. 218–56. See also *A World of Possibilities: The Legacy of 'The Undivine Comedy'*, ed. by Kristina M. Olson (ICI Berlin Press, 2025).

(And I saw light that flowed as flows a river,
pouring its golden splendor between two banks
painted with the wondrous colors of spring.
From that torrent issued living sparks
and, on either bank, they settled on the flowers,
like rubies ringed in gold.)

(Par. 30.61–66)

Anche soggiunse: 'Il fiume e li topazi
Ch'entrano ed escono e 'l rider de l'erbe
son di lor vero umbriferi prefazi.
Non che da sé sian queste cose acerbe;
ma è difetto da la parte tua,
che non hai viste ancor tanto superbe'.

(Then she continued: 'The river, the topazes
that enter and leave it, and the laughter of the meadows
are all shadowy prefaces of their truth,
not that these things are in themselves unripe,
but because the failure lies with you,
your vision is not yet strong enough to soar.')

(Par. 30.76–81)

What the pilgrim sees is a torrent of light, or rather light in the form of a river, whose banks are flooded with the colours of spring; sparks — angels and blessed souls — move among the flowers, becoming like precious stones. This image of living, springtime beauty is strongly connoted in the choice of vocabulary, which refers to the landscape of the earthly paradise (*Purg*. 28) and to the lyrical and amorous roots of Dante's poetic experience. For the poet, the mystical vision begins under the sign of lyric poetry; for the pilgrim, the loving gaze makes ontological distinctions collapse into a single image/substance in constant motion. But how are such transformations possible in the immobility of Empyrean? It is as if the poet were constantly changing lenses, advancing from a blurred vision to an ever more defined one. Indeed, these modifications of the object of vision are described by Beatrice as changes in resolution within a shared frame.[19] Nonetheless, Beatrice also states that these things are not '*acerbe*' (unripe) in

19 As DiCaglio writes: 'To change resolution is to change scales even if you don't move' (DiCaglio, *Scale Theory*, p. 23).

themselves; that is, even though they are 'blurry visions' of the contemplating poet, their ontological status is not diminished for this reason. In the stillness and immutability of the intellectual fire, the changes of scales are changing in resolution, which means that in the divine mind the ontological distinction that constituted the steps of the *scala naturae* reveal themselves as simultaneously coexistent configurations of spiritual substance seen at different levels of observation or with distinct resolutions.

Indeed, there can be no becoming here, not even at the level of increasing or decreasing the pilgrim's physical capacities, because this would invalidate the perfect steadiness, the wholeness of the being in which (or through which) he is located. What is described as a passage, a transformation from sparkles to flowers to gems to angels, is not an ontological metamorphosis of the object, nor should be understood as an epistemological progression in the faculties' potency of the subject, but more as a shift in resolution, due to a different attention to the object.[20] At the scale of abstraction, from the standpoint of analytical reason's understanding of things unfolded in time, these images are '*umbriferi prefazi*' (shadowy prefaces),[21] and the change of reso-

20 I suggest that Dante may have had a fairly precise image in his mind, confirmed by the homonymy between a plant and a stone: the heliotrope. The lapidaries of Marbode of Rennes (1035–1123) and Thomas of Cantimpré's (1201–1272) *De natura rerum* mention this mottled stone, which, when immersed in a vase filled with water, causes the water to boil and creates a blood-coloured sun, similar to an eclipse. It is also specified that the stone and the plant share the same name, and that the flower of the heliotrope is called by some 'bride of the sun' (*sponsa solis*). It does not seem impossible to imagine that Dante, thinking about the changing simulacra of souls and angels, had in mind this superimposition of natural images and meanings, linked to the sun as a divine symbol, to light, and also to ecstatic rapture (Thomas of Cantimpré specifies that '*videntes rapiuntur extra se*') and prophetic vision; see Thomas Cantimpratensis, *Liber de natura rerum*, ed. by Helmut Boese (De Gruyter, 1973), pp. 361–62. It is worth mentioning that Derrida, analysing the triple relationship between subject, language, and reality, speaks of the cycle of heliotropism. The sun is the supreme metaphor and source of every other figure of speech: 'metaphor means heliotrope, both a movement turned toward the sun and the turning movement of the sun' (Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. by Alan Bass (The Harvester Press, 1982), p. 251).

21 As Bernard of Clairvaux wrote, this is not how the citizen (*cives*) of the eternal Jerusalem sees things but how exiled subjects (*exules*) see them: 'Sublimior iste praesentium ac dignior usus rerum, cum juxta sapientiam Pauli, invisibilia Dei, per ea quae facta sunt, intellecta conspiciuntur. Sane hac scala cives non egent, sed exsules. Quod vidit ipse hujus sententiae auctor, qui cum diceret invisibilia per visibilia conspici, signanter

lution seems to remain related to a scalar increase or decrease of the understanding due to the progressive improvement of the subject's psychophysical faculties. However, at the scale of existence, from the standpoint of a loving subject experiencing a mystical experience (in this case conveyed by lyrical language), these forms are juxtaposed, cohabit the same entity, and metaphor and metonymy acquire an ontological dimension. This is no longer the 'as-structure' that enables analogical reasoning to get closer to the thing itself by slowly advancing in symbolic affinities.[22] In the divine mind (as in any other mind), the image of a flower and the image of a ruby are made of, and share, the same 'matter'. The rank in the chain of beings is assigned to *quidditas* (the essence, the 'whatness'), but in the Empyrean's pleroma what is manifested is more similar, in Scotist terms, to *haecceitas* (thisness), the contingent, individual, empirical existence of things and thoughts. The Dantean subject, pilgrim and poet, discovers, in his 'transumweltic' voyage, the plenitude that lies behind each individuality.[23]

The *Commedia* unfolds along both a vertical and a horizontal ontology, two dimensions that constantly intersect and cannot be disentangled: by poetic means, Dante presents '*il mar de l'essere*' (the sea of being) as inherently uniform despite the *scala naturae*, which emerges less as a genuine ontological layering than as an epistemological device. By the end of the cosmic journey, even determining where the true centre lies becomes problematic: Is it the Earth or the Empyrean?[24] And which prevails — immanence or transcendence?

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posuit, a creatura mundi (*Rom.* I, 20). Et vere quid opus scalis tenenti jam solium? Creatura coeli illa est, praesto habens per quod potius ista intueatur. Videt Verbum, et in Verbo facta per Verbum' (Bernard of Clairvaux, *De consideratione ad Eugenium papam*, V, i, 1).

22 So called by Heidegger; see Martin Heidegger, *The Fundamental Concepts of Metaphysics: World, Finitude, Solitude*, trans. by William McNeill and Nicholas Walker (Indiana University Press, 1995), pp. 530–31; Martin Heidegger, *Die Grundbegriffe der Metaphysik. Welt-Endlichkeit-Einsamkeit* (Klostermann, 1983), p. 363.

23 For the concept of the 'transumweltic', see Gabriel Catren, *Pleromatica*, trans. by Thomas Murphy (Urbanomic/Sequence, 2023); and Gabriel Catren, 'The Trans-Umweltic Express', *Glass Bead*, 2016 <https://www.glass-bead.org/article/the-trans-umweltic-express/?lang=enview> [accessed 12 January 2026].

24 There is a constant tension on this subject during the Middle Ages, as Sloterdijk has identified: 'The discrepancy between theoperipheral and theocentric interpretations of the world, one could say between the Aristotelian ontology of majesty (God above) and the Platonic-Plotinic doctrine of emanation (God at the center)' (Peter Sloter-

Angels appear as separated substances, as the movers of the heavens, as a river, as flowers, as gemstones. They function unmistakably as mediators — much like language — and as principles of order. Their hierarchical distribution, described by the poet (*Par.* 28.22–39), rests once more on a purely 'intellectual' differentiation, given that they inhabit the Empyrean, where extensive quantities such as distance, length, or dimension have no significance. The roles assigned to the angelic orders by Pseudo-Dionysius (*De Coelesti Hierarchia* III, 1, 164d) — order (*taxis*), knowledge (*episteme*), and activity (*energheia*) — correspond strikingly to the functions of human language, which organizes reality, provides understanding, and performs actions upon it. Once the linguistic constitution of reality is acknowledged, even intellectual love and the immaterial Empyrean become permeated by the body of language. If the vertical *scala naturae* reflects the way we cognitively apprehend the world through language unfolded in time, poetic speech discloses reality as the synchronicity of the 'sea of being'.[25]

The metaphors scattered throughout *Paradiso* constantly bind entities located at incommensurable levels of existence: these 'scalar metaphors' do not naively humanize ineffable realities.[26] At this stage of the poem they are expressing the juxtaposition by analogy with objects that indeed share the same existential level; the affirmation of the equal plenitude of each individuality deactivates the very concept of commensurability, since no differentiating distinction persists on a quantitative level. Beatrice is literally Dante's 'sun' (*Par.* 30.75); flowers are 'the laughter of the meadows' (*Par*. 30.77) not simply in a figurative, ornamental sense but because meadows, plants, and grass truly laugh, and flowers are our understanding of this laughter. Furthermore, this reminds me of Plotinus's description of the sphere of noetic contemplation as 'being-all-faces' (*παμπρόσωπόν τι*), a commu-

dijk, *Spheres*, trans. by Wieland Hoban, 3 vols (Semiotexte, 2011–16), II, *Globes: Macrospherology* (2014), p. 450).

25 On the concept of reality in the third cantica, see Teodolinda Barolini, 'Dante and Reality / Dante and Realism', *Spazio Filosofico*, 8 (2013), pp. 199–208.

26 See Kellie Robertson, 'Scaling Nature: Microcosm and Macrocosm in Later Medieval Thought', *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies*, 49.3 (2019), pp. 609–31 (p. 624) <https://doi.org/10.1215/10829636-7724697>.

nity of persons.[27] Certainly, as Barolini has noticed, the end of the third cantica still alternates the lyrical mode and the narrative one, the need to convey the difference for explicative purposes and the attempt to express the fundamental unity of the divine mind. However, at this point the paradox is that there is no paradox anymore; or rather, from the point of view of an external observer (as we also are) the paradox is real, but this is not the case for the subject operating within the 'system'. Things just *are*. Beatitude is equally perfect for everybody although it is quantitatively different, because measurement as a category of thought has lost any sense. As Ludwig Wittgenstein wrote at the end of his *Tractatus*, 'Not *how* the world is, is the mystical, but *that* it is' (6.44).[28] After a profusion of propositions, enunciations, laborious and complex constructions of meaning, now the pilgrim — and the poem — must 'so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it. He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright' (6.54).

To reach the Empyrean, throughout the *Commedia*, Dante ascended also another kind of ladder — the one Richard of Saint Victor called the '*Scala similitudinum*',[29] the ladder required by those who do not yet possess the 'wings of contemplation'. Similes have already transformed into metaphors, and now, at the threshold of language, metaphor itself shifts into metonymy, since everything may be perceived in a metonymic relation with everything else, as parts or modes

27 'And so, if one likens it to a living richly varied sphere, or imagines it as a being-all-faces, shining with living faces, or as all the pure souls running together into the same place, with no deficiencies but having all that is their own, and universal Intellect seated on their summits so that the region is illuminated by intellectual light — if one imagined it like this one would be seeing it somehow as one sees another from outside; but one must become that, and make oneself the contemplation' (*Enneads* VI.7.15.25–33; Plotinus, *Enneads*, with an English translation by A. H. Armstrong, 7 vols (Harvard University Press, 1966–88); translation modified by Mateusz Strózyński). See also Mateusz Strózyński, *Plotinus on the Contemplation of the Intelligible World: Faces of Being and Mirrors of Intellect* (Cambridge University Press, 2024), p. 349 <https://doi.org/10.1017/9781009494854>.

28 Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* [1922], ed. Kevin C. Klement, trans. by C. K. Ogden and Frank P. Ramsey (UMass Amherst, 2018) <http://people.umass.edu/klement/tlp/> [accessed 20 December 2025].

29 *De trinitate* VI, 23: 'similitudinum scala libenter utimur ut habeant qua ascendere possint qui contemplationis pennas non dum acceperint'.

of existence of the whole.[30] In the end, what we witness is the collapse of the onto-taxonomy and the mutual penetration of a top-down and a bottom-up perspective.

## CONFLICTING SCALES?

At this point, I would like to make a terminological distinction to clarify how I differentiate between two levels of understanding of the poem and the reality it represents. What I have called the 'scale of abstraction' can be understood in a certain sense as the scale of scientific discourse. Working through reduction and categories, such as those of genre, species, or individual (or atoms, molecules, cells, celestial bodies), it has the explanatory purpose of making understandable features of reality that are physically or conceptually perceived as distant from one another. Scalar representations thus serve to grasp the world, as Beatrice states (*Par.* 4.28–42), explaining that everything the poet will see in Paradise, until Empyrean is staged for his coming, is pure didactic representation. The ladder was needed to ascend to the Empyrean; so was the *scala naturae*. When the poet arrives in the true place of the creation, the *locus naturalis* of the universe, these distinctions not only are not necessary, but they also truly make no sense anymore. Even the concentric angelic choirs are an illusion in their disposition, because no difference in size, length, or measure can subsist here. At the scale of abstraction, unfolded in linguistic categories linked with our perceptual sensitivity, levels exist, and the nine angelic choirs differ in magnitude and circumference, but at the scale of existence everything just *is* in the Empyrean. Everything, even all that can be said or thought, exists as a living image in the mind of God, perpetuating

30 If *metapherein* means to transfer a meaning, a signification, from one word to another, *metonomasia* means changing the name (*onoma*), implying the fact that the things that we are putting in relation are in a certain sense already factually the same. As Harry Berger Jr. writes: 'metaphors involve modifications of meaning produced by the rhetorical context, whereas metonymies involve analytic or descriptive changes of name that may illuminate but don't change the prior meanings of the things signified. Metaphors rhetorically challenge the similarity they grammatically claim to establish, in order to feature their departures from preexisting states of affairs. Metonymies present themselves as analogies that articulate or reaffirm preexisting states of affairs.' Harry Berger Jr., *Figures of a Changing World: Metaphor and the Emergence of Modern Culture* (Fordham University Press, 2015), p. 12.

its own individual perfect fullness. Lyrical language attempts to evoke this dimension through the accumulation and combination of signs conveying images linked to a loving body.[31]

What I call the 'scale of existence' is the scale of love (they are fully identified with one another, through the nexus of the *pondus amoris* that merges gravity as a physical principle and love as metaphysical ground of being). The philosopher Al-Ghazali (1058–1111) explained the difference between two registers of understanding of the same phenomenon: a drunk man cannot describe his own condition scientifically; a sober doctor could do it, but in turn he cannot access what it means, 'existentially', for the drunk man to be in this state.[32] This does not mean that everything the pilgrim has passed through was just illusion, dream, veiled reality, and that only now in the Empyrean the unveiling of the world takes place. It means, in my view, that the subject-object distinction was a scalar distinction, which can be passed over or dismissed once one has arrived in the place outside time and space.

Nevertheless, this does not imply the loss of individual passions. Distinctions still exist, but they are not differentiating ones. Even if we see the subject as a particular configuration or mode of existence of the cosmos in a specific dimension, that does not mean that individual love can be scaled up and considered 'only' as the instrument needed to ascend to a higher scale of love. The access to the universal is made through images that share a common ontological ground but are individualized by an irreproducible signature: subjective love. At the end of his journey, Dante does not finally see his love for Beatrice as the incomplete, figural, terrestrial version, at a human and smaller scale, of a cosmic divine love that would re-absorb and obliterate the

31 On the lyric not just as style and tradition but as a 'mode' or 'modality' of thought and representation, see Francesca Southerden, 'The Lyric Mode', in *The Oxford Handbook of Dante*, ed. by Manuele Gragnolati, Elena Lombardi, and Francesca Southerden (Oxford University Press, 2021), pp. 546–62.

32 Al-Ghazali, *Al-Munqidh min al-dalāl*, ed. by G. Salibā and K. Iyād (Maktab al-Arabi, 1939), p. 132; English translation in *The Faith and Practice of Al-Ghazali*, trans. by W. M. Watt (Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 57. See Taneli Kukkonen, 'Plenitude, Possibility, and the Limits of Reason: A Medieval Arabic Debate on the Metaphysics of Nature', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 61.4 (2000), pp. 539–60 <https://doi.org/10.1353/jhi.2000.0042>.

individual images of this sentiment, rooted in embodied experience. She appears magnificent at the beginning of the canto ('The beauty that I saw transcends | all thought of beauty', *Par*. 30.19–20) because all mediation ceases and the pilgrim's intellect and bodily faculties are overcome by the *lumen gloriae*.[33] Thus she is contemplated *sub specie aeternitatis*,[34] in the sense that Dante sees the present Beatrice, the Beatrice of the future, who will have regained her glorious resurrected body, but also, and maybe above all, the Beatrice of the past. Critics have often highlighted that Beatrice's withdrawal is necessary at the end of the poem, to permit the ultimate union with God, with Bernard of Clairvaux as a guide.[35] But again, how can Beatrice really withdraw in a place where space and distance do not exist, and in which, as Dante clearly states, one can see everything, quantity and quality ('il quanto e 'l quale'), simultaneously and without impediment ('my sight was not confused but shared | the full extent and quality of that rejoicing. | There, near and far do neither add nor take away', 30.118–120)? If one takes seriously the nature of Empyrean and its implications, Beatrice can never disappear from view.

There is another passage from William of Saint-Thierry's treatise *De natura et dignitate amoris* in which I believe we can grasp an alternative example of a distinction not far from that which I intend

33 Albert the Great describes this process, by which the divine essence can be contemplated without mediation: 'superadditur aliud lumen, scilicet gloriae, confortans intellectum, ut divinam ipsam essentiam videre possit sine aliqua specie mediante'. Albert the Great, *Quaestio De visione Dei in patria*, ed. by Albert Fries, Wilhelm Kübel, and Henryk Anzulewicz (Aschendorff, 1993), p. 99a, 27–99b, 29; cf. Aristotle, *De anima*, III, 5, 430 a 15.

34 Eternity is 'ipsa aeternitas successione caret, tota simul existens' (Aquinas, *Summa theologica*, 1, 10, 1), but also his adversary Siger of Brabant (*Comm. super liber de causis*, q. 8): 'in aeternitate non est aliqua successio, sed tota simul existit'. The common traditional reference for the definition of eternity was Boethius: by Eternity, the mystic does not mean endless time, nor, primarily, everlasting life, but the 'complete and perfect possession of unlimited life at a single moment' ('A eternitas igiiur est interminabilis vitae tota simul et perfecta possessio', *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, V, pros. 6). On medieval accounts of time and eternity, see Pasquale Porro, *The Medieval Concept of Time: Studies on the Scholastic Debate and Its Reception in Early Modern Philosophy* (Brill, 2001).

35 In the traditional allegoric interpretation of the *Commedia*, Virgil would represent human rationality, Beatrice theology, and Bernard mysticism. See, for instance, Lino Pertile, *La punta del disio. semantica del desiderio nella 'Commedia'* (Cadmo, 2005), pp. 235–46; and Steven Botterill, *Dante and the Mystical Tradition: Bernard of Clairvaux in the 'Commedia'* (Cambridge University Press, 1994), pp. 64–86.

between the scale of abstraction (or science) and the scale of existence (or love):

> The sight for seeing God, the natural light of the soul therefore, created by the Author of nature, is charity. There are, however, two eyes in this sight, always throbbing by a sort of natural intensity to look toward the light that is God: love and reason. When one attempts to look without the others, it does not get far. When together they help one another, they can do much [...]. In this they labor much, each in its own way, because one of them — reason — cannot see God except in what he is not, but love cannot bring itself to rest except in what he is.[36]

The two ways of questioning reality and understanding the world are not opposed, but ineluctably complementary. *Charitas*, William said, has two eyes, always tending towards the gaze of the divine light; but Reason (*ratio*) can only search for God in a negative way, in all the things in which God is not ('*in eo quod non est*'). This is what I have called the 'scale of abstraction' or science, and it is certainly the one that has been most successful in modernity. If God is in the plant, in the bird, or in the love between individuals, reason can only try to 'find him' in botany, zoology, psychology — that is, where he is not, in discourses abstracted from singular substances and phenomena. Love works in the opposite way: it can only find rest where God is found, in the here and now (and eternally) of the individualized particular entity, be it a mineral, a forest, or a smile.[37] Together, these two eyes allow us to focus on the *imago dei*, which is also *imago mundi*, and thereby to hold together two resolutions that are incompatible with each other, the zoom and the panoptic vision (*Par*. 30.118–123), the molecular structure of the vocal cord and the pleasure of the song. This is why analogy, understood not as similarity but as identity of relation, is a privileged tool, both poetic and scientific, for analysing a complex

36 'Visus ergo ad videndum Deum naturale lumen animae, ab auctore naturae creatus, charitas est. Sunt autem duo oculi in hoc visu, ad lumen quod Deus est videndum naturali quadam intentione semper palpitantes, amor et ratio. Cum alter conatur sine altero, non tantum proficit; cum invicem se adjuvant, multum possunt [...] in hoc autem plurimum laborant suo unusquisque modo, quod alter eorum, id est ratio, Deum videre non potest nisi in eo quod non est, amor autem non acquiescit requiescere nisi in eo quod est.' William of Saint-Thierry, *De natura et dignitate amoris*, VII, 21, p. 393; *On the Nature and Dignity of Love*, p. 77.

37 See *Par*. 27.4–5, 'riso dell'universo' (smile of the universe).

system, for accessing truth, as Simone Weil wrote in a letter to her former teacher, the philosopher Alain:

> There is only one way to conceive of a series without detaching it from terms, and that is through analogy. [...] Only analogy provides the possibility of thinking in a way that is both absolutely pure and absolutely concrete. We only think about particular things; we only reason about the universal; modern science has lost its soul by trying to resolve this contradiction through the artifice of reasoning only about conventional signs, which are particular objects insofar as they are black marks on white paper, and are universal by definition. The other solution would be analogy.[38]

Here Simone Weil seems to outline the contours of a distinction between thought and reasoning that only analogy can bridge. On the one hand, reasoning, the scale of science and abstraction, which uses categories and quantities; on the other, thought, the scale of existence and love, which knows only the particular and its qualities.[39] Similarly, the vertical and teleological hierarchy of the *Commedia* conveyed by the narration of the pilgrim's journey and the horizontal plane of simultaneity and coexistence are just two sides of the same coin. At the end of the vision, when the divine mind, *intellectus agens*, becomes the form of the individual intellect, and the mystical union with the principle of being is accomplished, a metaphor accurately describes this duality:

38 'Il n'y a qu'une manière de concevoir une série sans la détacher des termes, c'est l'analogie. [...] Seule l'analogie fournit la possibilité de penser d'une manière à la fois absolument pure et absolument concrète. On ne pense que des choses particulières; on ne raisonne que sur l'universel; la science moderne a perdu son âme en voulant résoudre cette contradiction par l'artifice qui consiste à ne plus raisonner que sur des signes conventionnels, qui sont des objets particuliers en tant que marques noires sur du papier blanc, et sont universels par leur définition. L'autre solution serait l'analogie' (Simone Weil, *Sur la science* (Gallimard, 1966), p. 112; my translation). On Simone Weil's sharp critique of modern science, see Vance Morgan, *Weaving the World: Simone Weil on Science, Necessity, and Love* (Notre Dame University Press, 2005); and Joseph K. Cosgrove, 'Simone Weil's Spiritual Critique of Modern Science: An Historical-Critical Assessment', *Zygon: Journal of Religion and Science*, 43.2 (2008), pp. 253–370 <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9744.2008.00921.x>.

39 In a certain sense, the distinction between two models of human knowledge, which take the form of two opposing and complementary images of the world, is reminiscent of that between the manifest and the scientific images of man-in-the-world outlined by Wilfrid Sellars. See Wilfrid Sellars, 'Philosophy and the Scientific Image of Man', in Sellars, *Science, Perception and Reality* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1963), pp. 1–40.

Nel suo profondo vidi che s'interna
legato con amore in un volume,
ciò che per l'universo si squaderna:
sustanze e accidenti e lor costume,
quasi conflati insieme, per tal modo
che ciò ch'i' dico è un semplice lume.

(In its depth I saw contained,
by love into a single volume bound,
the pages scattered through the universe:
substances, accidents, and the interplay between them,
as though they were conflated in such ways
that what I tell is but a simple light.)

(*Par*. 33.85–90)

Here, the metaphor of the book goes beyond the traditional metaphor of the 'book of nature', as already present in writers such as Alanus of Lille, Bernard Silvestris, or Bonaventure;[40] the book is the totality of the creation as it is seen in the *Nous,* the mind of God. It is not, however, the end of the subject, nor of his individual love. The object of erotic and memorial individual love survived and persisted through the ascension of the heavens, as clearly stated in canto 26.13–15 ('Io dissi: "Al suo piacere e tosto e tardo | vegna remedio a li occhi, che fuor porte | quand' ella entrò col foco ond' io sempr' ardo"'; 'And I said: 'As soon or as late as she wishes, | may the cure come to eyes that were the portals | she entered with the fire in which I always burn').[41] Beatrice is not the ladder that can be thrown away when you get to the top; she never was just an object of *uti* but always an object of *frui*,[42] and all the spiritual, theological, soteriological characterizations

40 On the metaphor of the book, see chapter sixteen of Ernest Robert Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask (Princeton University Press, 1990). Particularly interesting for us is the quotation from Bernard Silvestris's *Cosmographia* (1, 2), because he clearly posits the 'text of time' in the *Noys*: 'illic exarata supremi digito dispunctoris textus temporis, fatalis series, dispositio seculorum'; 'There, inscribed by the finger of the supreme arbiter, were the fabric of time, the chain of destiny, the disposition of the ages' (Bernard Silvestris, *The Cosmographia of Bernard Silvestris*, trans. by Winthrop Wetherbee (Columbia University Press, 1990), p. 74.

41 See also Regina Psaki, 'Love for Beatrice: Transcending Contradiction in the *Paradiso*', in *Dante for the New Millenium*, ed. by Teodolinda Barolini and Wayne Storey (Fordham University Press, 2003), pp. 115–30.

42 Recovering the Augustinian distinction between objects of the worlds as means (*uti*) to get to the only true enjoyment (*frui*) of God.

accumulating upon her never replaced nor modified her polysemic and corporeal nature.

The process of intellection is constituted by a progressive abstraction of the universal from the singular, towards the naked intelligible, freed of all sensitive images that accompanied it at its first imaginative perception. When the object of this intellection is the totality of the intelligible, the *Noys*, no further abstraction is possible, no division; furthermore, I am not thinking all the things, the totality is thinking itself through me. This is the end of narration, movement, science as abstraction, of the world as *uti*. As Georges Bataille puts it, writing upon the object of desire in his *History of Eroticism*:

> Nowhere do we find a totality that is an end in itself, that is meaningful as such, that doesn't need to justify itself by pleading its usefulness for some other thing. We escape this empty and sterile movement, this sum of objects and abstract functions that is the world of the intellect, only by entering a very different world where objects are on the same plane as the subject, where they form, together with the subject, a sovereign totality which is not divided by any abstraction and is commensurate with the entire universe (*et qui double l'univers entier*).[43]

In the final line, I think that the English translation edulcorates the sense of the original text. '*Doubler l'univers entier*' means to pass over but also literally to create another universe, a double universe.[44] This other universe can be seen as a 'place' or a state of consciousness that can be reached through mystical practices, in a state of *excessus mentis*, or as another way of looking at the most common things, as 'reality' but seen at a different scale of observation. The difference between Dante's lyrical mysticism and mysticism as it was commonly intended and practised in his time is that even if the drop disappears in the

43 Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, 3 vols, trans. by Robert Hurley (Zone Books, 1988–92), II: *The History of Eroticism* (1992), p. 112.

44 Empyrean is presented as another universe, parallel to ours, and has been seen by some critics as a hypersphere structure, though I prefer to visualize it more as a holographic representation of reality, in which each point contains information about the entire system. See Susanna Barsella and Vincenzo Vespri, 'Dante's Cosmos and the Geometry of Paradise', *Italianistica. Rivista di letteratura italiana*, 50.1 (2021), pp. 239–52 (p. 246). The two authors propose to consider Dante's universe as a stereographic projection; the article is very interesting and quite technical.

sea and the spark in the fire (widespread mystical images), through the lyrical element we never cease to perceive the traces of the single drop and the single spark. Like the Eagle of Justice who talked with one voice but was constituted by many faces (*Par*. 19.10–12), a sort of lyrical 'perspectivism' coexists with the unity of the All.

## LOVE, ETHICS, LANGUAGE

I would like to conclude by mentioning the 'practical' aspect of these reflections. Already in the *Timaeus*, cosmology was strictly bound to an ethical and political purpose. It is the same for Dante's cosmology; as written in the famous letter to Cangrande della Scala, the whole *Divine Comedy* was not written for the sake of pure speculation, but for practical purposes: ('*non ad speculandum, sed ad opus incoeptum est totum*'; 'not for speculation, but for practical effect was the whole work undertaken', *Epistola* XIII, 40). Every ontology implies and presupposes a political project and a vision of the world and of society.[45] The anthropomorphic nature of the cosmos (intended in the original etymological sense of the ordered universe, or the order of things) is the mirror effect of the cosmomorphic nature of human beings, as Max Scheler once wrote in his famous essay *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie* (1923):

> The cultivation of human nature (which includes the emotional side) must set itself against this 'scientific experts' view of Nature as an enemy to be overcome. Hence the first task of our educational practice must be to revive the capacity for identification with the life of the universe, and awaken it anew from its condition of dormancy in the capitalistic social outlook of Western man (with its characteristic picture of the world as an aggregation of movable quantities). We must dissociate ourselves, firmly and unreservedly, from the gross error of regarding the sense of unity with the universe as merely an 'empathic' projection of specifically human emotions into animals, plants, or inanimate objects — as sheer anthropomorphism, therefore, and a fundamental misapprehension of the real. On the contrary, it is man the microcosm, an actual

45 The bibliography on this point would be too extensive; I will only mention the recent essay by Giorgio Agamben, *The Unrealizable: Towards a Politics of Ontology*, trans. by Alberto Toscano (Chicago University Press, 2024).

> embodiment of the reality of existence in all its forms, who is himself cosmomorphic, and as such the possessor of sources of insight into all that is comprised in the nature of the cosmos.[46]

As Scheler points out, by recovering the medieval account of man as microcosm, the unity of the cosmos and the human is not a weak anthropomorphic projection but the truth of a common grounding. Simone Weil helps us again to conceive a way of merging knowledge and desire (or abstraction and existence, to retrieve the definitions provided previously) and thus escaping the reductionist circle of human beings as monads clinging to a picture of the world as an 'aggregation of movable quantities'. Attention is the bridge between the scientific apprehension of reality, which abstracts, isolates, and measures, and the contingent immanence of existence, which is grasped in its wholeness through love. Without attention, the 'purest form of love', no empathy is possible, no analogy, no knowledge, no possible escape from utilitarianism:

> The poet produces the beautiful by fixing his attention on something real. It is the same with the act of love. [...] The authentic and pure values — truth, beauty and goodness — in the activity of a human being are the result of one and the same act, a certain application of the full attention to the object.[47]

What is the connection between vision, intellection (intellectual knowledge), and love? All these acts are conceived and described by Stoic philosophy, Augustine, and late medieval scholasticism as forms of physical and spiritual tension, crystallized in the polysemic term *intentio*.[48] Knowledge is an act but also a union between the knower and

46 Max Scheler, *Wesen und Formen der Sympathie*, in Scheler, *Gesammelte Werke*, 15 vols (Francke and Bouvier, 1954–97), VII (Francke, 1973), p. 113. Translation from Max Scheler, *The Nature of Sympathy*, trans. by Peter Heath (Archon Books, 1970), p. 105. Recently, Graham Harman has appealed to Scheler's philosophy to propose an interesting reading of Dante's ethics and metaphysics; see Graham Harman, *Dante's Broken Hammer* (Repeater, 2016).

47 Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. by Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr (Routledge, 2002), pp. 119–20; original text in Simone Weil, *La pesanteur et la grâce* (Plon, 1947), p. 138.

48 For a detailed historical analysis of the common Latin root of *intentio* as desire and as intellectual attention, see Jean-Luc Solère, 'Tension et intention: Esquisse de l'histoire d'une notion', in *Questions sur l'intentionnalité*, ed. by Lambros Couloubaritsis and Antonino Mazzù (Ousia, 2008), pp. 59–124.

the known object; the subject receives the form of the observed object, not the natural form but the intentional form (*species intentionalis*, the immaterial representation, the likeness of the thing, that informs the subject). The broad semantic field covered by this word and its derivatives refers to the idea of an effort to 'direct towards', a significant tension between two poles.[49] Attention is this fusion of intellect and desire, of love and 'science'; the tension towards the object of love is a bodily tension of the soul, which expands and grows, in an almost visible way, as Beatrice declares to Dante during the vision: 'The deep desire that now inflames and prods you (*turge*) | to understand at last all that you see | pleases me the more the more it surges (*urge*)' (*Par.* 30.70–72). The cognitive process, like the act of love, is understood by medieval thinkers in terms of an effort towards likeness, in the sense of a constant striving towards the assimilation of the knower to the known, and of the lover to the beloved. In the affective and intellectual value of *intentio*, in attention as a cognitive effort and amorous impulse, I believe we find a convergence between Weil's pedagogy and Dante's lyrical mysticism.[50]

It is through attention that the various moments of discontinuity between the heavens in the *Paradiso* are each time overcome by the poet; from the first canto (64–72), from the moment of *trasumanare* onwards, fixed attention is essential to bring about the successive psychic and somatic transmutations that will allow access to divine vision. At other times, still using the metaphor of the adaptation of sight, the progressive growth of the pilgrim's physical and mental faculties to adapt to the changing environment of Paradise is always inaugurated by an act of attention focused on the object of desire, Beatrice. The

49 Duns Scotus enumerates four different acceptations of the word, as act of the will, as formal reason, as concept, and as tension of assimilation between two poles: 'Uno modo dicitur actus voluntatis intendo. Alio modo: ratio formalis in re, sicut intentio rei a qua accipitur genus differt ab intentione a qua accipitur differentia. Tertio modo dicitur conceptus. Quarto modo, dicitur ratio tendendi in obiectum, sicut similitudo dicitur ratio tendendi in illud cuius est' (*Ordinatio*, l. II. d. 13 q.). See also Katherine Tachau, *Vision and Certitude in the Age of Ockham* (Brill, 1988).

50 Weil's account of attention as a 'negative effort', a paradoxical passive action that prepares the subject for the reception of grace, corresponds also to the consensual and free subjection to divine and natural necessity expressed in *Purg.* XVI, 81, *'liberi soggiacete'*. On attention as a spiritual exercise in Weil, see Simone Kotva, *Effort and Grace: On the Spiritual Exercise of Philosophy* (Bloomsbury, 2020).

adaptation to an ever-changing *umwelt* is made possible by a systematic, attentive return to the object of love, which is the starting and finishing point of all cognitive operation.[51] This narrative device takes the form of a sort of objective correlate of the poet's creative-contemplative act. Of the various examples that could be given, perhaps this *terzina* from the last canto of *Paradiso* suffices:

> Così la mente mia, tutta sospesa,
> mirava fissa, immobile e attenta,
> e sempre di mirar faceasi accesa.
>
> (Thus all my mind, absorbed,
> was gazing, fixed, unmoving and intent,
> becoming more enraptured in its gazing.)
>
> (Par. 33.97–99)

Attention is love because it is rooted in desire, a self-perpetuating desire ('*e sempre di mirar faceasi accesa*') that cannot cease in rest but fuels an ever-renewed pleasure in the never-ending assimilation of the object of knowledge. Attention is perhaps the act in which love and reason, William of Saint-Thierry's 'two eyes', reunify: not love under the guardianship and control of reason (as since the *Vita nova* Dante tried to conceive their relationship),[52] but reason guided and assisted by love, 'affective cognition'.[53] Language generates structures, categories, and hierarchies, but it also provides the means to overcome all this and to give birth to new *Lebensformen*. Hierarchy (angelic, creatural) is, in a Dionysian sense, mediation. Language is the form of this omnipresent mediation, simultaneously proceeding, returning, and re-

51 Since their Sicilian origins, the discourses on amorous desire and on the act of cognition have been closely linked. The knowability of the object of love, of love itself, and of the world through it permeates the lyrical landscape in which Dante evolves from the outset, particularly in the poetic practice of his 'first friend', Guido Cavalcanti.

52 'And though her image, which remained constantly with me, was Love's assurance of holding me, it was of such a pure quality that it never allowed me to be ruled by Love *without the faithful counsel of reason*' (*Vita nova*, II, 9; Dante Alighieri, *Vita nova*, trans. by Mark L. Musa (Indiana University Press, 1973), p. 4; my emphasis).

53 I borrow here the notion of '*cognitio affectiva*' employed by Thomas Gallus (1200–1246), the last great member of the School of Saint Victor. See Boyd Taylor Coolman, *Knowledge, Love and Ecstasy in the Theology of Thomas Gallus* (Oxford University Press, 2017).

maining.[54] Lyrical language provides the sharpness and openness that translate this inescapable mediation into the intuitive grasping of the existential modes of being within the 'sea of being'. Such a form of attention is a goal and a reward in itself; in the end, what is the Empyrean if not a community? A community where the countless faces of beings drink the same light looking at each other, where above and below are confused to the point of losing meaning, where authority is expiated through the sovereignty of love in which every person withdraws from themselves by affirming their irreducible existence in the other's loving gaze,[55] the sea of being where the exact measure is the right word and every word is right. Lyrical Empyrean is therefore also the place of difference, or, better, of the totality of all the individual and qualitative differences that constitute the unity of reality, for in God 'everything is a subject, everything is a person.'[56]

54 As summarized by Bonaventure, probably influenced by the Victorines: 'this is the sum total of our metaphysics concerned with emanation, exemplarity, and consummation' (*Collations on the Six Days*, 1, 13, 17, v, 331–32). I think that the mystical theology of Thomas Gallus deserves to be investigated more deeply as a possible source for the Dantean account of Empyrean's metaphysics.

55 Inspired by Bataille, I mean that authority derived from hierarchy is expiated and somehow purified by love as flattened coexistence of the difference in unity; cf. Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, trans. by Leslie Anne Boldt (State University of New York Press, 1988): 'affirm of inner experience that it is authority (but all authority expiates itself)' (p. 102).

56 Simone Weil, 'Concerning the Pythagorean Doctrine', in Weil, *Basic Writings*, ed. and trans. by D. K. Levy and Marina Barabas (Routledge, 2024), pp. 239–88 (p. 279).

# ‘A Subtle System of Feints’
## Gender, Medical Photography, and the Essential Void of Sex*

CAT DAWSON

One of the most oft-cited origins of both the trans rights movement and the field of trans studies is the Institute for Sexual Science (Institut für Sexualwissenschaft), founded by Magnus Hirschfeld in Berlin in 1919 to establish a scientific basis upon which to build a case for the social acceptance and civil rights of individuals who today fall under the initialism ‘LGBTQ’.[1] Interwar Berlin was a particularly fitting city in which to open such a place; at the time, Berlin had both a law that prohibited cross-dressing and a licence one could apply for to be exempt from that law.[2] This incongruity anticipated some of the problems that would arise from trying to sort bodies into binary sex and gender categories over the following century.[3]

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1 In this article, the term ‘trans’ is, to borrow from Marquis Bey, ‘articulable by, but not reducible to, transgender’. See Marquis Bey, ‘Trouble Genders: “LGBT” Collapse and Trans Fundamentality’, *Hypatia*, 36 (2021), pp. 191–206 (p. 194) <https://doi.org/10.1017/hyp.2020.52>.

2 Joanne Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed: A History of Transsexuality in the United States* (Harvard University Press, 2004), p. 19.

3 For the purposes of this essay, while acknowledging these terms’ deep imbrication, I use the term ‘sex’ to refer to systems of classification at scales within the body, and ‘gender’ to refer to those same systems outside of the body.

Hirschfeld's patients included subjects with intersex conditions, some of whom he took photos of that were subsequently included in the many books he published over the course of his career.[4] One recurring trope in the photos that appear in Hirschfeld's publications is a three- or four-photograph series of a single subject that is intended to describe the relationship between the subject's genitals and their gender presentation. One example is *Pseudohermaphroditismus masculinus bei überwiegend männlichem Habitus*, which first appears in his 1905 book *Geschlechtsübergänge*. In the top left image, the patient seems to have a pronounced chest, suggesting the presence of breasts, and wears a skirt, cropped jacket, and veiled hat with a flower on it. In the top right image, the same subject appears to have a flat chest and is sporting trousers, a longer coat with collar and tie, and a bowler-style hat. In the bottom two images, the patient is nude, shown from the front on the left and the back on the right. Alone in three of the images, the patient is joined in the frontal nude photo by Hirschfeld, who stands perpendicular to the camera, his gaze directed at the patient's genital area so as to direct the viewer's gaze there as well.

In representing a single subject who can be read as either masculine or feminine, *Pseudohermaphroditismus masculinus* evidences the bleeding edge of sex research at the turn of the twentieth century, a moment in which biomedical science began studying variations in human sexuality with increasing attention and sophistication. The formal deployment of a two-by-two grid emphasizes the binary logic that structures the patient's body across the series — masculine-presenting and feminine-presenting, clothed and nude, front and back. The series also evidences the emergence of a strain of practitioners who were enfolding an understanding of the ethical stakes of their work into their practice: Hirschfeld obscures his patient's identity with a mask even in the image taken from behind, and, in the frame taken from the front, he uses his gaze, rather than a finger or a pointer, to direct the viewer's gaze towards the area intended to be understood as the locus of the subject's ability to present as either of two genders — and thus, by implication, their inability to normatively cohere to only one.

4 Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, p. 19.

*Pseudohermaphroditismus masculinus* invites the viewer to infer that this patient's ability to present convincingly as both male and female at the scale of the sartorial — which would have been understood as equivalent to the social — is implicitly indexed to genitals that, as the title of the series suggests, do not cohere to either of the two predominating sex categories. By using a set of binaries to structure this series, Hirschfeld suggests that the physiological expression of sexual characteristics — and, therefore, of sartorial expression and social roles — can, in most cases, be easily sorted into one of two sex categories, but that those expressions that cannot also pose no threat of disruption to the social order. One can also infer from the series that the patient's ability to pass socially as both masculine and feminine is the result of the subject's supposed intersex condition, a causality most directly suggested in the frame in which Hirschfeld joins his patient, a decision that draws the viewer in from the scale of the full-length body to that of the genitals.

But there is just one problem: the genitals themselves — the ostensible final term in this spectatorial chain — are entirely obscured by a dense profusion of pubic hair. Both the biomedical and spectatorial logic of the series turn on something that cannot be verified by the viewer, and that undermines the indexicality of gender to genitalia that the series was created to illustrate. *Pseudohermaphroditismus masculinus* introduces ambivalence into a biomedical attempt to sort bodies neatly into binary categories. This ambivalence is just one of many ways in which what Beans Velocci calls 'the incoherence of sex — its multiple, coexisting, conflicting meanings' shows up in twentieth and twenty-first century research and discourse about sex, gender, and the relationship between the two.[5] As Velocci observes, that incoherence 'was a feature, not a bug [ … ] a means of ensuring near limitless claims to scientific innovation' that turned on a 'tacit agreement to not look too closely at the contradictions contained within' biomedical science's 'struggle to make knowledge out of complex bodies'.[6] This heady mix of binary rigidity and 'built-in dexterity' facilitated the de-

5 Beans Velocci, *Sex Isn't Real: The Invention of an Incoherent Binary* (Duke University Press, 2026), p. 2 <https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478061779>.

6 Ibid., pp. 3, 19.

velopment of a scientific explanation for pre-existing social categories. These worked in tandem with other efforts to sort bodies — especially race — to further solidify a range of hierarchies.[7] Rather than supporting the argument it is intended to, *Pseudohermaphroditismus masculinus* exposes sex as a collection of effects that occur at multiple scales both within and on the body, produce sex in aggregate, and have a non-indexical relationship to gender.

This essay investigates the inheritance of the binary logic that *Pseudohermaphroditismus masculinus* was intended to support, beginning with one of its most consistently visible legacies: sex testing in sport. Sex testing initially gained authority in much the same way that the biomedical knowledge on which it relies did: by claiming to be able to see things at ever smaller scales. But eventually the search for a single and conclusive origin of sex hit a limit, producing the same asymptotic situation allegorized by Hirschfeld's series, in which a single locus for sex seems to draw ever nearer, but is never quite reached. Because no test at any single scale could produce a satisfactorily binary result, sex testing regimes began shifting among scales in a non-linear fashion. This produced, by the middle of the twentieth century, a regulatory system in the world of sport that purports to draw on and contribute to the perpetuation of a coherent and binary system but is instead a subtle system of feints. In sport, the banner of fair play is waved to distract from a broader agenda of reinforcing specious assertions of the existence of fundamental sexual difference and other systems of knowledge subtended by the binary logic of sex. A close reading of this history reveals how sex and gender binaries are constructed in aggregate and across multiple scales that contain the same incoherence today that the scientists who developed these systems long ago also found.

In what follows, I study two instances beyond sport in which similar systems of feints have been leveraged to resolve certain questions about political economy raised by trans life and rights. Both are examples of a conservative political initiative deploying scalar logic to bring heightened scrutiny to a group of persons or set of issues in order to subtly but substantively erode progressive institutions, including

7 Ibid., pp. 18, 19.

but not limited to intersectional coalitions such as labour unions. I then explore how a similar but inverse strategy can be mobilized to redress the effects of such attacks and buttress against them in the future.

Scale has played a substantial role in producing and disrupting ideological projects related to sex. As biomedical understandings of sex took shape and were deployed to explain a range of systems beyond reproduction, it came to seem as though sex could be found at multiple scales, creating the illusion of a cohesive sex system despite the incoherence of its constituent parts. Scalar discourse persists in being used to transantagonistic ends today, the material fact of the unruliness of bodies obscured in the service of cultivating a belief that sex and gender are binary, deviations from them are a novelty, and dominant culture will falter if their conventions are transgressed.

Transness is observed at few if any of the scales at which binary sex is purportedly found. But it is nevertheless a central term in the discourse about sex at nearly every scale and is therefore a key tool for disrupting ordering systems that rely on a trans-scalar logic of sex. To bridge this gap, I deploy a trans analysis, decoupling understandings of the body from binary sex categories, and deracinating gender from sex, to expose instances in which the trans-scalar relationships that underwrite systems of sex and gender also scaffold efforts to curtail trans life and rights. Explicating the scalar logic of sex from the molecular to the juridical using a trans approach elucidates the degree to which binary sex and gender categories are not ontological fact, but rather expressions of regulatory systems developed to sustain existing architectures of power.[8] This work also makes it possible to reframe vulnerabilities as sites from which to redress challenges to trans rights, and to demonstrate how questions about political economy raised by trans life and rights are urgently relevant to broader struggles for justice.

## SLEIGHTS OF HAND

Among its other definitions, scale is a way to measure and describe the relationship between related but distinct objects or concepts. Emanuele Lugli has demonstrated how the process of measurement has

8 Ibid., p. 14.

fundamentally shaped how subjects perceive the world around them, arguing for example that 'the abstraction of bodies through measurement was the first step in accessing the ideal world of beauty'.[9] But, Lugli continues, 'the harmful social and psychological repercussions of this delusion continue to affect us to this day.' Systems of measurement, in other words, may begin hyperlocally to serve a particular need, but they tend to foreclose on as many possibilities as they create. Measurement entails slicing between phenomena, which severs connections between related entities, and systems of measurement have regularly been exported from their origin and imposed elsewhere, resulting in their application to a greater heterogeneity of phenomena than those for which they were initially designed. An analytic developed at one scale superimposed onto other, even nearby scales orders subjects according to often ill-fitting logics, excluding or rendering invisible subjects or content that are present.

Scale routinely results in hierarchies that mirror and reinforce social norms derived from ideological projects.[10] Phenomena at different scales are linked together, using the supposed presence and dependencies of a concept at multiple levels as evidentiary support for extant hierarchies, as in the example of biomedical scientists' historical assertions that binary expressions of sex could be identified at the endocrinological, genetic, and gonadal levels. The further one moves away from the origins of a scale, the more abstract the system for which it was developed becomes, eventually expanding, like the concept of binary sex, to the point that it seems inescapable. When the origins of such a system are obscured enough, they can also come to be naturalized across scales, and put forth as systems of knowledge that promise objectivity. This strategy, which Donna J. Haraway calls the 'god trick',[11] is a sleight of hand that answers to what Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing calls the 'malevolent hegemony' of 'precision nesting', in which an order-

9 Emanuele Lugli, *Measuring in the Renaissance: An Introduction* (Cambridge University Press, 2023), pp. 59–60.

10 Londa Schiebinger, 'Skeletons in the Closet: The First Representations of the Female Skeleton in Eighteenth Century Anatomy', *Representations*, 14 (1986), pp. 42–82 <https://doi.org/10.2307/2928435>.

11 Donna J. Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies*, 14.3 (1988), pp. 575–99 (p. 581).

ing logic's claim to authority turns on the creation of an illusion of a smooth scroll across a range of scales.[12] The canonical example of this is the 1977 film *Powers of Ten*, by Charles and Ray Eames, which begins with a tight shot on a white, heterosexual couple picnicking on a red and white checked blanket before zooming out from the couple to the cosmos, then back in to the scale of quarks, at increments of powers of ten metres.[13]

But scalar precision, nesting, and smooth scrolls are incompatible with the heterogeneity of the world. Presenting the scope of human knowledge as accessible via an infinite scroll across a set of neatly nested scales, *Powers of Ten* is an example of the conventional application of scale, demonstrating not only that knowledge can be disciplined to an ordering system, but also that a tight fit between that system and the knowledge it purports to order is contingent on exceptions to its own rules. As Zachary Horton observes, the smooth scroll in *Powers of Ten* is made possible by a series of 'resolving cuts' used as 'explanatory [ … ] representations' that facilitate adherence to the powers-of-ten zoom conceit despite ontological barriers such as the surface of the skin.[14] The ability to subsume resolving cuts into neat jumps that obscure 'negotiations between ontological scalar difference and disciplinary resolution',[15] facilitated by the built-in dexterity of the form of film, echoes presumptions about race, class, and familial entailments implied by the couple with whom the film begins.

Similarly to the smooth scroll in *Powers of Ten*, sex is routinely presented as a binary native to each of a set of nested scales that are anchored within the body but applicable beyond it. To see the full range of ways in which the ordering systems of gender and sex co-create hierarchies requires a degree of permissiveness regarding the imperfect conjunction of the relevant scales — something that, as *Powers of Ten* demonstrates, is a foundational characteristic of scalar

12 Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, 'On Nonscalability: The Living World Is Not Amenable to Precision Nested-Scales', *Common Knowledge*, 18.3 (2012), pp. 505–24 (pp. 505, 507).

13 *Powers of Ten*, dir. by Charles and Ray Eames (USA, 1977) <https://www.eamesoffice.com/the-work/powers-of-ten/> [accessed 8 September 2026].

14 Zachary Horton, *The Cosmic Zoom: Scale, Knowledge, and Mediation* (University of Chicago Press, 2021), pp. 98, 135.

15 Ibid., p. 135.

logics. Not only can binary sex not be found at every scale where its presence is asserted, but one of the ways of defining scale also holds that it be constrained by 'a measured range of observation' — something that cannot hold true under the asymptotic conditions that define the search for sex on the body, which I have provisionally explicated in Figure 1.[16] Moreover, as feminist historians of science have documented extensively since the 1980s, sex research was often motivated by a desire for a scientific basis for existing social hierarchies that would reinforce both the social order and science's claims to authority. These efforts routinely impacted ordering systems beyond those they sought to shore up, including anatomical drawings derived far more from social gender norms than from actual skeletons; the pathologization of homosexuals in the course of developing a scientific excuse for racism; and hierarchies in the plant and animal sciences that resulted from the superimposition of human sex and race categories.[17] In each of these cases, the problem of abstraction is solved through the system's inherent dexterity; in other words, the incoherence of the system of sex is precisely what makes it such a productive tool to shore up other ordering logics.

The problem of abstraction inherent in scalarity is compounded when distinct scales are conjoined across ontological divides. In discourse around sex and gender, the body risks becoming — indeed often becomes — abstracted to the point that the material subject is obscured to a monolithic straw man that Beans Velocci calls a 'microcosm of patriarchal ideology and abstract scientific logics'.[18] One example of this is observed by Katrina Karkazis and Rebecca M. Jordan-Young, who describe how perceptions that testosterone provides a decisive and unparallelled competitive edge persist in determining official narratives about testosterone both within and beyond the world of sport despite research that clearly evidences testosterone's divergent and

16 Joshua DiCaglio, 'Scale Tricks and God Tricks, or The Power of Scale in *Powers of Ten*', *Configurations*, 28.4 (2020), pp. 459–90 (p. 461) <https://doi.org/10.1353/con.2020.0021>.

17 In addition to Schiebinger, see also Siobhan Somerville, 'Scientific Racism and the Emergence of the Homosexual Body', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, 5.2 (1994), pp. 243–66; and Banu Subramaniam, *Botany of Empire: Plant Worlds and the Scientific Legacies of Colonialism* (University of Washington Press, 2024), p. 52.

18 Beans Velocci, in conversation with the author, April 2026.

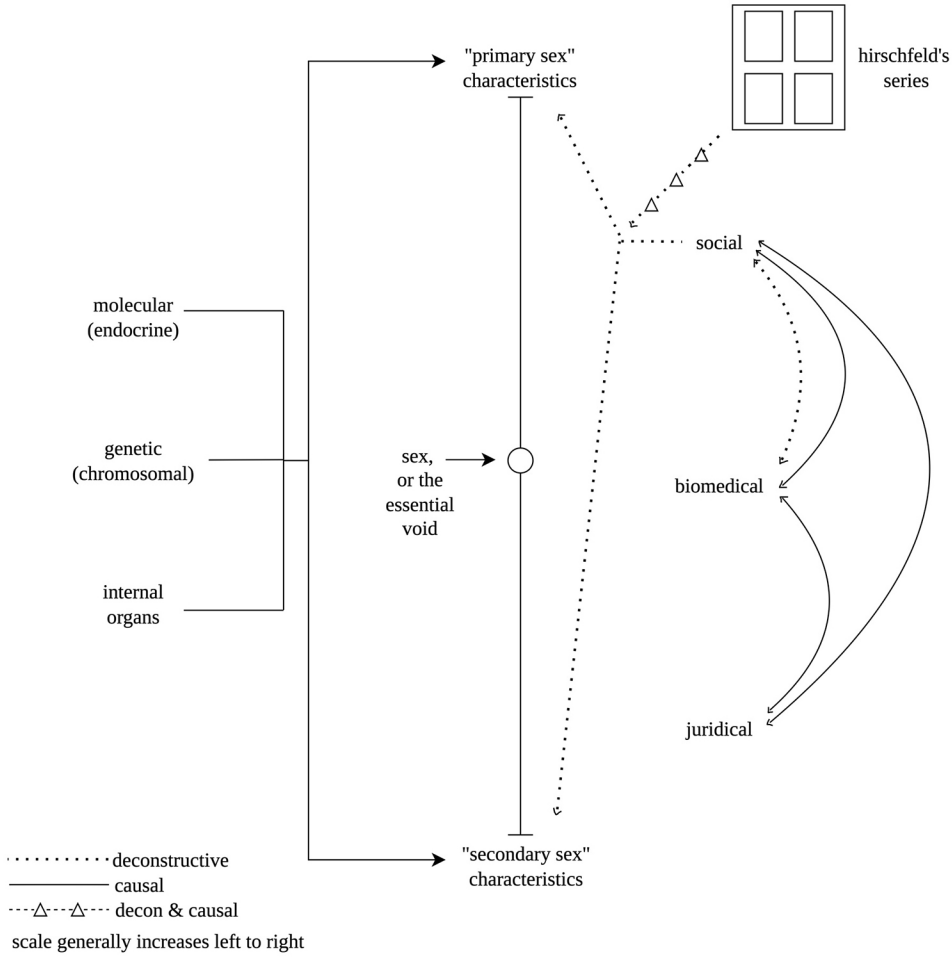


Fig. 1. Diagramming a subtle system of feints.

often diluted effects on performance, and comparably insufficient attention to the expansive network of entanglements of nature and culture that constitute competitive advantage.[19]

The trans-scalar effects of presenting sex as a binary that appears across a series of neatly nested scales are just some of the collateral damage caused by the subtle system of feints that continue to shore up sex and gender binaries. As Marquis Bey observes, 'classificatory systems demand that we remain within them, that we remain on this side of classification, [...] that we remain cis, the transing of which requires reprimand.'[20] Trouble also arises when scalar orthodoxy either precludes us from seeing, or provides a permission structure to not see, how power operates across otherwise disparate scales. Orthodoxies that insist on the clean separation of scales blinker us to the ways that power operates across otherwise incompatible scales. For example, because the scale of processes within the human body is framed as distinct from the scale of the jurisprudential, scalar convention may suggest they are unable to be studied together. But court decisions impact, regulate, and constrain the subject, while challenges to trans rights have consistently sought to control what happens within bodies. By the same token, narratives that stage systems like sex as linear and trans-scalar, despite little evidence that they are either of these, mimic and perpetuate the operations of power by constantly redirecting focus to different places where sex might be found, and leave little time to interrogate the motivations either for that constant movement or for finding a single locus in the first place.

The problems with leveraging scalar logics to underwrite arguments that sex is binary and can be found at multiple scales come into sharp relief when confronted with trans life. At the scales at which sex is regulated, transness is not actually visible. It is not possible to test for transness at the endocrinological or genetic levels, only to mark out deviation from the binary logic superimposed onto hormone levels or genetic markers in the form of implications about sex and the expectations about gender from which those expectations overwhelm-

19 Rebecca M. Jordan-Young and Katrina Karkazis, *Testosterone: An Unauthorized Biography* (Harvard University Press, 2019), p. 15.

20 Bey, 'Trouble Genders', p. 203.

ingly derive. For example, the regulation of clothing to sex assigned at birth has long been a vector of social control in the form of anti-cross-dressing laws, cases brought against subjects for violating them, and, as in the example of Berlin's regulations, the existence of public policies that created exceptions to them. But rebellion against those regulations has also been a crucial site of resistance to it.

*Pseudohermaphroditismus masculinus* demonstrates this ambivalence with precision by illustrating the presumed relationship between the sartorial and the genital while simultaneously undermining it. The series delineates the presumption that a larger-scale concept — the clothing a subject wears — is the product of a process that occurs at a smaller scale. What is suggested to be the patient's intersex condition is staged as the locus of their inability to conform sartorially, and thus by implication socially, to only one of two binary genders. At the same time, this series can be read as a deracination of the indexicality of genitalia from sartorial expectation: because the viewer is presented with images of the patient in attire that convincingly answers to two distinctly gendered sartorial expectations but only verbal information about the patient's genitalia, genitalia is implied to have little or nothing to do with the sartorial or social in this series or the theories it underwrites.

As a photograph of a scalar chain of causality that turns on something that is present only by inference, *Pseudohermaphroditismus masculinus* is an illustration of what Michel Foucault calls the 'essential void' at the core of any project of representation.[21] Foucault develops this theory of the 'necessary disappearance of that which is [representation's] foundation' in a close reading of Diego Velázquez's *Las Meninas*, in which he argues that representation and perception are co-created and thus irreducible to a single origin.[22] This impasse is allegorized by Velázquez, who places a mirror at the centre of the painting, which, in reflecting only the king and queen where the viewer and the painter should also be, exposes what Foucault calls a 'subtle system of feints' that is present but elided in more conventional representational pro-

21 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (Random House, 1970), p. 18.

22 Ibid.

jects.[23] *Pseudohermaphroditismus masculinus* positions the locus of sex and gender as a site that, like Foucault's mirror, 'enables us to see what it is supposed to show' — if not, perhaps, what Hirschfeld intended.[24] The binary disposition of, and visual zoom within, the series reveal little other than their own systematization, illustrating most evidently the subtle system of feints on which sex, and thus gender, rest. Meanwhile, the obscured genitalia on which the logic built upon the series rests presents the scientific basis of sex as its own essential void that confounds representation: the obscured genitalia becomes the mirror at the back of the painting at which all lines of sight converge, but which does not reflect back what the viewer expects it to. This is the black hole that yawns wide at the core of any project that rests upon the binary logic of sex and gender: there is no true nature of sex, only a series of effects aggregated across a range of scales, and the ontological barriers between them, such as distinctions between humans and animals, can only be disciplined to a binary conceit as a function of the built-in dexterity of sex itself.

Taken in 1906, *Pseudohermaphroditismus masculinus* antedates biomedical innovations in gender-affirming surgery including vaginoplasties, interspecies gonadal transpositions, and exogenous and synthetic hormones. These became available in the 1930s and contributed to an understanding of transness that Talia Mae Bettcher calls the 'wrong body model', which would continue as the predominant understanding of transness until the 1990s.[25] Around the same time, women began to compete in international sporting events, starting with track and field in 1928.[26] The International Amateur Athletic Federation (or IAAF, now World Athletics) passed the first sex testing rule in 1936, inaugurating efforts to regulate women's bodies in sport that Katrina Karkazis and Rebecca M. Jordan-Young call 'a scientific fix to the perceived problem of some women outperforming their peers'.[27] Such

23 Ibid., pp. 3, 9.

24 Ibid., p. 7.

25 Talia Mae Bettcher, 'Trapped in the Wrong Theory: Rethinking Trans Oppression and Resistance', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 39.2 (2014), pp. 383–406 (p. 383) <https://doi.org/10.1086/673088>.

26 Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, pp. 19–21.

27 Jordan-Young and Karkazis, *Testosterone*, p. 19.

efforts also took place against the backdrop of changes in women's social roles in interwar Europe, which spurred anxieties about women's bodies.[28]

Sex testing in the world of women's sport followed biomedical science's progression to being able to 'see' at ever smaller scales before pivoting to a series of testing strategies that jumped around scales in a far from linear fashion: genital inspections of athletes under suspicion; asking athletes under suspicion to provide letters from a doctor affirming they have been 'diagnosed' as female; nude parades for all athletes; chromosomal testing (which is linked to, but not definitively determinative of, the development of reproductive cells) for all athletes;[29] a reversion to suspicion-based (and vaguely defined) 'health checks'; testing for the SRY gene (which is linked to, but not determinative of, testes development); extra tests for athletes under suspicion; hormone-level-based testing for all athletes (with no specified ceiling for testosterone); the removal of all International Olympic Committee (IOC) and IAAF testing regulations altogether; and, finally, the reinstitution of a complex regulatory frame that includes a new and universally lower testosterone ceiling.[30] This brief history reveals a regulatory system cobbled together from different scales of arbitration that, like sex itself, are perhaps better defined by their shared degree of incoherence than they are by their binarism.

As with Foucault's retracing of the infinitely refracting lines of sight that structure the pictorial space of *Las Meninas*, the rotation among scales at which sex is tested for in sport reveals the logic that undergirds that testing to be structured through a subtle system of feints that scaffold an essential void whose presence is enunciated by its very obfuscation. At the same time, the greater the distance between scales supposedly connected both by and to sex, the more visible the mismatch between such inquiries and the goals they are deployed to achieve. As a result, the logic that underwrites those relationships becomes abstracted, and other factors that contribute to competitive

28 Meyerowitz, *How Sex Changed*, p. 21.

29 See Sarah S. Richardson, *Sex Itself: The Search for Male and Female in the Human Genome* (University of Chicago Press, 2013).

30 For a more thorough account of this history, see Lindsay Parks Pieper, *Sex Testing: Gender Policing in Women's Sports* (University of Illinois Press, 2016).

advantage — such as the convergence of the right strength training at the right age, the familial and socioeconomic support to focus wholly on sport, and various psychological resiliencies — further cloud the purportedly easy causality of sex.

Meanwhile, at each scale at which sex is supposedly found, we learn little about what constitutes a woman. Yet sex testing was never designed to confirm status as a woman, but rather to deny or disprove it. It is this fact, perhaps more than anything else, that draws sex testing most closely to Foucault's analysis of *Las Meninas*: just as the painting is a representation of the process of representation, rather than of the royal family that is the ostensible subject of the painting, so too is sex testing about the process of sorting bodies to patriarchal ends, rather than the outcome of that sorting.

## SCALE AGAINST TRANSANTAGONISM

The introduction and evolution of sex testing in sport stoked the flames of a pre-existing moral panic about gender equality that hindered progress towards that goal. Central to that effort was a scalar strategy in which phenomena at one set of scales — in this case, scientific discoveries within the body — were used to explain and perpetuate hierarchies at other scales — specifically that women are naturally weaker than men. But the long-standing fixation on establishing a definitive locus of sex has also repeatedly been a vector through which to secure a range of other hierarchies by way of their mobilization in the service of the construction of what Stuart Hall calls 'an authoritarian consensus' within dominant culture that is secured through the creation or exaggeration of a correlation between a category of minoritized persons and a new or particularly concentrated set of social phenomena.[31] Those strategies also often have implications that exceed their target. Serena Bassi and Greta LaFleur observe that 'ongoing litigation surrounding what constitutes legitimate womanhood [ … ] has been conscripted into the service of forms of structural power that we would do well to work against — white supremacy, xenophobia and nativism, ableism and

31 Stuart Hall and others, *Policing the Crisis: Mugging, the State, and Law and Order* (MacMillan, 1978), pp. vii–viii.

eugenics'.[32] Rhetoric around protecting women — usually limited to cis-identifying women and girls — also overwhelmingly serves ideological projects whose most substantial contribution is the erosion of women's rights. Paisley Currah shows how contemporary struggles over the definition of feminism — ongoing since the term's very inception and perhaps most visible today in efforts to exclude trans women from that category — leverage rhetoric around protecting women that undermines the very rights that those who weaponize it against trans women seek to claim for themselves.[33] This is just one example of how TERF discourse is uniquely seductive to a subset of people who are themselves disenfranchised by misogyny but see in such rhetoric the illusion of progress as a function of curtailing rights for someone else. TERF discourse is the Bataillean big toe, the purest form of hegemonic oppression, the mechanism through which one believes oneself to be propelling oneself forward but which in fact is just grinding one down further into the earth.[34]

Currah's analysis of the misogynistic implications of TERF discourse shows how a contest over categories within a single scale can underwrite projects at another. Currah looks to Naomi Schoenbaum, who shows that, since the nineteenth century, 'when the [Supreme] Court's justices have struck down laws that discriminate on the basis of sex, with few exceptions they have [...] relied on the social phenomenon of sex *stereotyping*' — something Currah defines as gender — rather than a 'biological' definition of sex.[35] This practice, Currah argues, 'results in the very kind of sex stereotyping that this tradition of law has long opposed',[36] such that sex has come to mean something different jurisprudentially than it does scientifically, despite the fact

32 Serena Bassi and Greta LaFleur, 'TERFs, Gender-Critical Movements, and Postfascist Feminisms', *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly*, 9.2 (2022), pp. 311–33 (p. 327) <https://doi.org/10.1215/23289252-9836008>.

33 See Paisley Currah, 'The Anti-Trans Playbook', *The New York Review*, 18 December 2025, pp. 26–30 <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/2025/12/18/the-anti-trans-playbook-paisley-currah/> [accessed 8 July 2026].

34 I am indebted to Tobi Haslett for this framing; see Georges Bataille and others, *Encyclopædia Acephalica*, ed. by Robert Lebel and Isabelle Waldberg, trans. by Iain White and others (Atlas Press, 1995), p. 87.

35 Currah, 'The Anti-Trans Playbook', p. 30.

36 Ibid.

that the former purports to be indexed to the latter. The near complete pivot in definition from the biological to the juridical when the latter is ostensibly indexed to the former is as clear a sign as any of the logical incoherence of this category at any scale.

Kay Gabriel describes a similar strategy in her close reading of efforts to radically curtail the ability of public-school teachers to discuss gender with students in an accurate and contemporary manner. Gabriel observes that 'anti-trans panic [...] inflames feelings of suspicion and protectiveness among people who actually have good reasons to feel powerless to change their conditions and gives them clear, though terribly wrong, targets for their fury and blame'.[37] Suspicion of the fungibility or nonconformity of sex has long been a powerful tool for regulating subjects to binary gender norms and, by association, for the perpetuation of misogyny. But, Gabriel argues, the intended target of such attacks in the contemporary context is neither women nor trans people, but rather the 'multiracial organizations of [...] unionized educators' that comprise a powerful bloc of the labour movement. This is, in Gabriel's analysis, the opening salvo of a broader effort aimed at 'destabilizing bulwarks of working-class power, obliterating free and universal public education, privatizing critical elements of social life, reinforcing racial segregation, and pulverizing institutions that can and often do produce oppositional political consciousness' — a project, in other words, to secure an authoritarian consensus by realigning working-class voters with the right through a politics of fear and grievance.[38]

The analyses by Hall, Currah, and Gabriel, who study situations in which a particular population is zoomed in on and held up as exceptional for purposes that extend well beyond that group, exemplify one approach to explicating the malevolent application of scalar logic. Another is identified by Kadji Amin, who observes that work being done in queer studies on subjects such as homonationalism and pinkwashing 'analytically shifts the scale of the political within which queerness operates, bringing the large-scale technologies of biopolit-

37 Kay Gabriel, 'Inventing the Crisis', *n+1*, 47 (2024), pp. 37–48 (p. 43) <https://www.nplusonemag.com/issue-47/politics/inventing-the-crisis/> [accessed 8 July 2026].

38 Ibid., pp. 40, 45.

ics, necropolitics, racialization, and global neoliberalism into focus for Queer Studies' to demonstrate how queerness is coopted for ideologies that seem fundamentally out of step with queerness's more radical promises.[39]

As readily as scalar vocabularies lend themselves to obscuring ways in which science is over-indexed to social convention, they also offer rhetorical positions from which to construct rejoinders to the detrimental effects thereof. At least two approaches taken by trans political projects have relied on scalar logic. The first is grounded in an assertion that trans people have always been here. Transhistorical in nature, these projects often call attention to pre-Columbian cultures — such as the Hijra in India, or the Joya in Spanish California — in which gender non-conforming subjects were held in esteem as part of mythology or spiritual practice before the arrival of European colonizers, who used the regulation of gender to binary norms as a tool for religious coercion and social control.[40] They also or alternatively highlight evidence of subjects in the US and Europe dating back to the eighteenth century who lived in the gender opposite their sex assigned at birth and who are recorded primarily in juridical contexts in which they were discovered and penalized, sometimes under cross-dressing laws.[41] Narrating history in this way provides trans subjects in the present with a sense of place not available in conventional histories, and proposes that attacks on trans life are nothing new because trans people are nothing new. This strategy is executed with incantatory frequency, as if mentioning the historical presence of trans people enough times will itself afford trans subjects the rights and privileges they are routinely denied.

39 Kadji Amin, *Disturbing Attachments: Genet, Modern Pederasty, and Queer History* (Duke University Press, 2017), p. 146 <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822372592>.

40 Shashi Tharoor, *Inglorious Empire: What the British Did to India* (Hurst, 2017), p. 129; Deborah A. Miranda (Ohlone-Costanoan Esselen Nation, Chumash), 'Extermination of the *Joyas*: Gendercide in Spanish California', *GLQ*, 16.1 (2010), pp. 253–84 <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-2009-022>.

41 For an extensive citation of the scholarship on this subject, see Kate Redburn, 'Before Equal Protection: The Fall of Cross-Dressing Laws and the Transgender Legal Movement', *Law & History Review*, 40.4 (2022), pp. 679–723 (p. 680, n. 3) <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0738248022000384>.

Another scalar approach asserts that what is happening today is different, worse, or taking place on a larger scale than in the past. This line of argumentation usually characterizes the last decade or several decades as a period of progress, but also of backlash and increasing danger. Dominant culture has become more aware of trans people, gender dysphoria has to some degree been de-pathologized, the number of people identifying openly as trans or nonbinary has increased, and some of the barriers to entry for gender-affirming healthcare and legal services have been lowered, at least in some places. At the same time, there has been an uptick in regulatory efforts to write trans people out of professional life, and in policies that revoke privileges or seal off barriers to entry for identity documentation and gender-affirming medical care. These changes extend beyond the rollback of recently conferred protections to the abrogation of processes that had been in place for several decades, as in the example of gender markers on US passports, which individuals had been able to change since 1992, but as of 2025 cannot.

Both lines of argumentation make their meaning through scale. The first proposes the presence of a single all-encompassing scale to create the illusion of a continuous condition across epochs. The second uses changes in scale to distinguish between what is and what has been. The antinomies of temporal progression and transtemporal consistency, and the equivalent applicability of scale as a tool of both repression and resistance, echo tensions that structure contemporary discourse around transness from within trans and trans studies communities. These tensions — including those between the binary and nonbinary, and between the biomedical and non-biomedical — have given rise to distinct analytics that are, like the Supreme Court's reliance on a social rather than scientific definition of sex, grounded in social perceptions of the presence of distinct material conditions of embodiment. These analytics contribute to the construction of discrete categories of transness that, as in the case of conventional binary sex categories, serve primarily to shore up binary hierarchical understandings of sex and gender.

Working anti-trans strategies in reverse is another scalar avenue to redressing some of the lines of attack on trans life and rights while nurturing and expanding progressive political solidarities. The strategies

that Hall, Currah, and Gabriel identify are akin to what, in the security sciences, is called a 'hybrid threat'. These usually manifest as an act of political violence that has a narrowly defined overt target, but also has a broader and more covert goal of spreading 'uncertainty, fear, [and] distrust' in the state or political apparatus — often in the service of the consolidation of an authoritarian consensus.[42] Ideological projects that deploy anti-trans rhetoric to erode other coalitions constitute a hybrid threat, overtly targeting a minoritized group whose very existence presents a challenge to key ordering logics of the social fabric while covertly eroding sociopolitical architectures that encourage equity.

In his analysis of *Powers of Ten*, Horton asks how to 'keep [...] knowledge production supple enough for' the task of describing the relationship between related concepts without shading over into a malevolent scalarity.[43] Mobilizing the scalar logics of the hybrid threat in reverse is one way to redress both transantagonism and efforts to mobilize trans life and rights as a political wedge, while deflecting attention from terms and subjects that have become objects of particular fixation on the right. One example of this strategy in action is Bassi and LaFleur's investigation of how to evolve the regulatory climate in sport: 'moving away from the category girls and women — assumed, too often, to also mean *cis*', in favour of, for example, 'weight and height classes', 'would also benefit all who identify as girls and women, as well as participants of all other genders, too'.[44]

While such a strategy, following Horton's caution, invites overcorrection to a situation in which trans subjects swing from being disenfranchised through hypervisibility to being disenfranchised through invisibility, it nevertheless creates space for a substantive paradigmatic shift in the application of categories. This strategy has already been tested, and to great effect: in a 2016 campaign to thwart state and local bills regulating bathroom use to sex assigned at birth in North Carolina, lawyers for the American Civil Liberties Union and Lambda Legal argued that the bill both constituted federal overreach into local

42 Joshua Yaffa, 'To Build a Fire', *The New Yorker*, 2 February 2026 <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2026/02/09/to-build-a-fire> [accessed 19 June 2026].

43 Horton, *The Cosmic Zoom*, p. 135.

44 Bassi and LaFleur, 'TERFs, Gender-Critical Movements, and Postfascist Feminisms', p. 325.

issues and caused economic harm in so doing. This is an example of a reverse-engineered hybrid threat, where an overt attack on a narrowly tailored subset of the population is mobilized as a synecdoche for a broader but more subtle attack that implicitly curtails the rights of all constituents in a particular jurisdiction.

Yet another example of this approach is the analysis of the photo series with which this essay began. Hirschfeld was using medical photography — a genre most closely associated, then and now, with objectification — against its conventional deployment to argue for the acceptance of a particular category of subjects. In this essay, however, the series is revealed to channel the plasticity of sex itself to expose an ambivalence inherent in the overarching logics of binary sex and gender that challenges rather than subtends the rigid lines that have been drawn between or around those categories at so many scales. My close reading also models the deracination of physiological characteristics from social 'stereotyping' to intervene into projects that encourage a retrenchment to identitarian stances, as in the example of Gabriel's account of the use of wedge issues to rupture solidarities or keep them from forming in the first place. To expand these discrete instances into a broader movement would require both non-juridical strategies to erode anti-trans sentiment, and a coordinated legal effort to refocus some energy away from the Supreme Court of the United States — which at present is fixated on a return to antiquated norms — and towards lower courts and local elections. Among other possible avenues, such a process would create space for a thorough examination of the uneven ways in which sex testing has been applied, and an honest look at the subjective nature and weaponization of the concept of fairness in sport.

This is not a call for the deflation of the relevance of trans politics or issues, or their subsumption into other movements or questions of political economy. Rather, it is an invitation to attend more closely, and in a manner that is networked — Tsing might call this 'nonscalar' — to the ways in which issues framed as pertinent to trans subjects are also a vector for right-wing attacks on civil liberties more broadly. Trans people are, after all, members of other constituencies as well; they are working-class people and unionized labour and members of countless other identitarian communities and cultural ecosystems that

suffer from blows to intersectional solidarities and are buoyed by windfalls to them. An approach that repurposes strategies used against trans life to buttress its persistence can also be applied to grappling with the implications of the essential void of sex. To understand sex as a system build on a sleight of hand affords space for an understanding of sex whose built-in dexterity underwrites a more nuanced and critical approach to other categorical imperatives as well. This includes the myriad disparate and mutually exclusive ways that subjects stand under the sign 'trans' — a reality that, as of 2022, is reflected in the World Professional Association for Transgender Health (WPATH) Standards of Care, the global gold standard clinical guidelines for health professionals who serve trans and gender-diverse individuals. Expanding that approach beyond WPATH and the clinicians who form and follow its guidelines could create the conditions for resonances that weave biomedical, social, and juridical scales together in ways that, contrary to the present emphasis on defining and ill-defining categories, enable us to uncover the rich political potentialities of a trans-scalar approach to categories.

# Affects of Multiscalarity

## Rhetorics of the Too Big and Too Small across the Global and the Planetary

FEDERICA DI BLASIO

### INTRODUCTION

Thinking of scale as a rhetorical 'apparatus' implies thinking 'generally' about what scale can do within heterogeneous discourses.[1] This is Joshua DiCaglio's proposition; however, in this essay I wish to develop the same proposition in an alternative direction. A primary question addressed here is how we can think about scale in general, multidisciplinary terms by integrating an awareness of scale emerging from discussions of geographic scales, in contrast with DiCaglio's focus on the invariance of measuring scales and his tangential take on geographic scales as 'layers'.[2] I build on this approach while appropriating DiCaglio's notion of 'scalism' to think about the rhetorical effect that an emphasis on the gap between the 'too big' and 'too small' creates in different discourses.[3]

1 Joshua DiCaglio, *Scale Theory: A Nondisciplinary Inquiry* (University of Minnesota Press, 2021), p. 11.

2 Ibid., p. 49.

3 Ibid., p. 26.

Inspired by the scalar manipulations in Mina Gorji's poetry on scale, I will argue that dramatic juxtapositions of big and small scales generate a sense of confusion and disorientation, and a loss of resolution at the level of intermediate scales, which, in theorizations of the planetary such as Dipesh Chakrabarty's, but also in DiCaglio's own *Scale Theory*, happen to coincide with the scales of the human.[4] I develop my reflections by bridging the theoretical debate on the planetary and the Anthropocene that has grown around the work of Chakrabarty on the one hand, and the multidisciplinary reception of Fredric Jameson's take on globalization on the other.[5] The global and the planetary are two instances of 'scalar projects' (Gabrielle Hecht) that Chakrabarty keeps distinct — or develops 'in parallax' — as he theorizes the planetary.[6] This essay proposes, instead, to connect them formally through the apparatus of scale.

The theoretical implications of the essay are threefold: first, a rhetorical understanding of scale that crosses discursive boundaries between theory and poetry, as well as within theory, points towards an affective dimension that enriches our awareness of the scale apparatus and increases the portability of this analytical tool across different scalar discourses; second, by prioritizing the affective dimension of scale, it is possible to maintain a hold on geographic scales as scales proper while addressing the physical multiscalarity of the planetary, notwithstanding the instability of their object, or, rather, on account of it; third, rhetorical patterns across different scalar discourses suggest that the intermediate scale is often overlooked when the emphasis is placed on the too big and the too small. This tendency should be kept in mind when, in planetary discourses, the intermediate scale happens to coincide with the scale of the human, and the political is presented as suddenly insignificant. Overall, the essay suggests that embracing the

4 Mina Gorji, *Scale* (Carcanet, 2022); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (University of Chicago Press, 2021).

5 Fredric Jameson, 'Cognitive Mapping', in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 347–57; and *The Cultures of Globalization*, ed. by Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi (Duke University Press, 1998).

6 Gabrielle Hecht, 'Interscalar Vehicles for an African Anthropocene: On Waste, Temporality, and Violence', *Cultural Anthropology*, 33.1 (2018), pp. 109–41 (p. 111). <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca33.1.05>.

multiscalarity of the planetary does not necessarily imply losing sight of the political; multiscalar theorizations of the global can teach us to refine our understanding of the rhetorical apparatus of scale to avoid this misstep.[7]

## SCALE RHETORICS

> SCALE
>
> The map reveals
> so many stars —
> two constellations
> in the shape of bears,
> a peacock, Pavo,
> in the southern hemisphere,
> the spaces between galaxies,
> the emptiness,
> the not-quite emptiness
> it doesn't show,
> the single
> atom
> H
> in every cubic meter —
> the atom
> that is
> not quite
> still —
> how cold it is
> between galaxies,
> the snowdrops in the garden
> the morning after frost.[8]

Mina Gorji's poem 'Scale' visually creates the illusion of a descent from an extremely big scale to an extremely small scale, by juxtaposing galaxies and constellations with an atom, nested at the centre of the poem

7 This contribution originated as a set of notes on the relevance of geographic scales for transnational Italian studies presented at the American Association for Italian Studies Conference in 2021, and the Modern Language Association Convention of 2025. The notes were later expanded into larger theoretical reflections fuelled by discussions and events at the ICI Berlin. The project has benefited from the generous feedback of the ICI academic staff and co-fellows; among them, I particularly thank Filippo Bosco, Kirill Chepurin, Manuele Gragnolati, Marietta Kesting, Magdalena Krysztoforska, Tobi Haslett, Christoph F. E. Holzhey, and Claudia Peppel.

8 Gorji, *Scale*, p. 15.

in the form of a bare 'H'. Cartographic representations and scalar units make the 'out-of-reach' scales of stars, galaxies, and atoms accessible to human imagination, but in the poem, they are associated with a sense of partiality, abstraction, and possible imprecision ('the map reveals [...] it doesn't show'; 'the emptiness, the not-quite emptiness; the atom | that is | not quite | still'). In the second part of the poem, rapid scalar shifts bring us back from the atom to the galaxy, then from the galaxy to snowdrops, cold creating a smooth transition in between. At the end of the poem, through the framework of a human-made space (the garden) and a human timescale (the morning), the poet brings this multiscale imaginative trip back to a terrestrial point of view.

In 'Scale' — both this poem and elsewhere in the homonymous collection — Mina Gorji dramatizes distances and the need to be attuned to a world extending beyond the limits of the human 'I'. As she plays with the readers' perception and invites them to see the natural world from different angles, scale is at the same time an object of the imagination and an essential trick in the poet's toolbox:

> I very deliberately created, I hoped, a kind of narrative starting with the red door opening [first poem of the collection], moving through and shifting scale between poems, small to large space to smaller insect [...] I did think very hard about the juxtaposition of poems to create certain kinds of effect through the book [...] Zooming effects can be productive and poetic [... when they are used to call] something into question.[9]

Gorji's scalar poetic practice purposely shifts from big to small scales and vice versa to question assumptions about the world — an alleged hierarchy of beings, and the distances between them. Through her poetic praxis, Gorji challenges Bruno Latour's admonition that 'good artists do not believe in zoom effects'.[10]

Gorji gestures towards a rhetorical dimension of scale where scale, as a rhetorical tool, can produce effects that are specific and possibly

9 Mina Gorji, explaining the juxtaposition of scales large and small, both within the same poem and between poems. See Mina Gorji, 'Poetics of Scale', lecture, ICI Berlin, 29 September 2025, video recording, mp4, 01:37:16 (1:02:38, 1:04:52, 1:23:20) <https://doi.org/10.25620/e250929>.

10 Bruno Latour, 'Anti-Zoom', in *Scale in Literature and Culture*, ed. by Michael Tavel Clarke and David Wittenberg (Springer, 2017), pp. 93–101 (p. 94) <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-64242-0_4>.

predictable. Moreover, in Gorji, scale is invested with a transformative potential in regard to the reader's self-awareness and knowledge. Similar terms are used to place the rhetorical dimension of scale centre stage in Joshua DiCaglio's 2021 *Scale Theory*, where scale is 'inevitably rhetorical in the sense that it is about and requires a transformation or reconfiguration of our understanding of reality'.[11] DiCaglio's book develops a scalar terminology not tied, in principle or at least ambition, to any specific discipline. It defines scale as a 'situated dislocation' that reveals the practice of observation and clarifies that difference lies not at the level of the objects observed but at the level of the observer's perspective.[12] Whereas rhetoric is intended by DiCaglio in 'a more philosophical sense as the study of the effects, constraints, and possibilities of communication', assuming scale as a rhetorical apparatus implies navigating 'its own rules, conditions, and possibilities'.[13]

DiCaglio's investigation encompasses an impressive range of scalar discourses and succeeds in facilitating a conversation about scale across disciplines.[14] However, DiCaglio's theory relies heavily on the invariance of measuring scales, and how their invariance, despite their conventional nature, can help coordinate various scientific disciplines.[15] The number of 'scale domains' considered to offer a significant scalar shift are limited to the quantum, atomic/molecular (nanometres), cellular/unicellular (micrometres), bodily/normal (metres), planetary/ecological, solar system, galaxy, and observable universe, with geographic scales from the body to the planet being

11 DiCaglio, *Scale Theory*, p. 9.

12 Ibid., p. 32.

13 Ibid., pp. 12, 27.

14 See ibid., p. 14. For a cross-disciplinary approach to scale, see also *Scale: Discourse and Dimensions of Social Life*, ed. by E. Summerson Carr and Michael Lempert (University of California Press, 2016), pp. 1–21.

15 DiCaglio acknowledges that objective measurements are the result of social convention but takes a stand against theories of scale as 'constructed', arguing that those theories, while significant in their own terms, are not about scale per se. See DiCaglio, *Scale Theory*, pp. 64–65, where scale domains are charted according to powers of ten, and also p. 161: 'The products of scale are indeed variant: at one moment we rally around bodies as products of DNA, at another as parts of an ecosystem, at another we tie the two together through multinational corporations manipulating the flows of genes. But scale itself is not variant; if it were, again, we would be unable to track what we are even talking about.'

reconfigured as 'layers' or 'scalar relations' and not recognized as scales proper.[16]

DiCaglio's study aims to be inclusive of different approaches to scale, but its normalization of the bodily-to-planetary scale makes it difficult for social scientists and cultural critics to sit with a model where geographic scales are thought to bring epistemic 'limitations' to the very understanding of scale, with human-to-national-to-global scales — with all their complex and conflicting social and political tensions — remaining, quite literally, out of focus.[17]

That said, DiCaglio's theory can be brought both constructively and critically into a conversation that thinks of scale as a rhetorical tool that connects, rather than separates, different scalar projects. If one agrees to 'think as generally as possible' about how scale works in heterogeneous discourses, looking, if not for rules, then at least for patterns of how scales are articulated in such discourses, then the bringing to bear of an awareness of scale within narratives of the global and planetary may also yield some form of cross-disciplinary scalar literacy.[18]

Specifically, I am interested in DiCaglio's notion of scalism, which, in conversation with Derek Woods, he defines as the 'privileging of any given scale'.[19] While, for DiCaglio, a prime example of scalism is

16 Ibid., p. 49.

17 Joshua DiCaglio, 'Scale Tricks and God Tricks, or The Power of Scale in *Powers of Ten*', *Configurations*, 28.4 (2020), pp. 459–90 (p. 479) <https://doi.org/10.1353/con.2020.0021>: 'While geography has perhaps the most extensive conversations about scale, geographers import into their conception of scale three additional delimitations. First, their conception of scale is largely based on human activity, a limitation that may be attributed to the fact that the conversation arose primarily within human geography. [...] Second, their schema of scale domains is largely based on human concerns: the body, the local, regional, national, and global. I'd argue that this represents only one shift in scale domain: from the body to the global. [...] Third, geographers seem to largely agree that scale is socially constructed [...] In the conception of scale I am outlining here, scale is socially constructed only in the sense that it is a tool used by *Homo Sapiens* for identifying, accounting for, and comparing their observations in a consistent way. In contrast, ideas about scale, including ways that *Homo Sapiens* articulate their own actions, the way they might prioritize or designate scales of relevance, and the ways they attempt to mobilize, resist, or interact with other scales, may or may not align with this scalar accounting.'

18 DiCaglio, *Scale Theory*, p. 11.

19 Ibid., p. 26. On scalism, see also the work of Derek Woods, who uses the term to indicate 'the ontological privileging of one scale domain, with its specific qualities and

the privileging of the metre-scale reality of humans, I use the concept oppositionally and propose to look at a different type of scalism, where the emphasis lies instead on the very big and the very small — and the hyperbolic gap between the two — at the expense of intermediate scales. I would argue that this particular form of scalism comes with specific rhetorical effects, which condition different discourses in comparable ways. Specifically, the present essay points at feelings of confusion, disorientation, and even states of paralysis associated with discourses that conflate the too big and the too small. These effects need to be clearly spelled out when the medium scale happens to coincide with the dimensions of the human and the emphasis on the too big versus the too small generates a politically problematic oversight.

Affect intersects with the rhetorics of scale in a variety of ways. Lisa Messeri emphasizes, in her interview elsewhere in this volume, how her ethnographic research on the 1:1 scale model finds in pleasure a 'telling heuristic' to identify different degrees of knowledge.[20] DiCaglio himself reconducts the 'disorientation provided by scale' to the realm of mysticism and the 'horror' or 'acceptance' that come with 'connecting the vast to the here'.[21] In DiCaglio, where, incidentally, disorientation correlates with the loss of focus on human-to-global scales, there is an emphasis on the transformative potential of scale in relation to the human subject; however, subjectivity is mostly articulated in the singular form: 'mysticism helps clarify the rhetorical elements of scale by accounting for how scale transforms the one who scales.'[22] By removing geographic scales from the picture, what is lost is precisely an understanding of how the transformative power of scale acts upon a plural subjectivity which can take the form of a nation, a village, or the globe. Reintroducing geographic scales as scales proper, and not as

constraints, as a model for all the others'. Derek Woods, 'Epistemic Things in Charles and Ray Eames's *Powers of Ten*', in *Scale in Literature and Culture*, ed. by Clarke and Wittenberg, pp. 61–92 (p. 79). In my take on scalism, I think more in terms of scalar resolution than about modelling.

20 See Lisa Messeri, 'The Pleasure of the 1:1 Scale', interview by Filippo Bosco, Federica Di Blasio, and Marietta Kesting, in this volume, pp. 375–82 (p. 382).

21 DiCaglio, *Scale Theory*, pp. 14, 103.

22 Ibid., p. 20. See also p. 243: 'While the rhetorical tradition has primarily focused on convincing other people, this rhetorical task is a matter of persuading oneself — or what one thinks one is — of a radically different configuration toward existence.'

derivative elements of scalar discourse, seems to be a productive way, in my view, to enhance our awareness of scale as a rhetorical apparatus. Moreover, focusing on specific affects correlated to the scalism of the too big and too small enhances our understanding of how affect operates within and through the apparatus of scale.

## SCALE AWARENESS AND THE PLANETARY: THE 'FALLING' OF THE POLITICAL

*Pace* Latour, zooming effects are popular not only in art but also in theoretical discussions, especially those, from the global to the planetary, where an awareness of multiscalarity is presented as key to grasping the complexity of contemporary existence and knowledge. A prominent example can be found in Chakrabarty's essays collected in the 2021 volume *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age*, where he draws on the category of the planetary, previously introduced by Gayatri Spivak, to suggest that we are now living 'on the cusp of the global and the planetary'.[23] Centring the question of anthropogenic climate change, and the implications of the Anthropocene — a concept that he theoretically embraces — Chakrabarty confronts the need for 'thinking on very large and small scales at once, including scales that defy the usual measures of time that inform human affairs'.[24] For Chakrabarty, the cipher of the Anthropocene lies in the everyday 'awareness that what seems "slow" in human and world-historical terms may indeed be "instantaneous" on the scale of earth history'.[25] While, as a historian, Chakrabarty thinks of scale mostly in temporal terms, his observations embrace all scales of the non-human from viruses and microbes to the macro scales of deep geology.[26] What is central to his inquiry is the disproportion between small and big scales — a disorienting, hyperbolic scale-gap that Chakrabarty associates with the idea of falling:

> The conscious conjoining of different scaled chronologies produced in me a feeling that I have often likened to that of falling.

23 Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History*, p. 204.

24 Ibid., pp. 50–51.

25 Ibid., p. 179.

26 Temporal scales are also central to Gorji's poetry. See, for example, 'In Ice', the second poem of the collection *Scale*, in Gorji, *Scale*, p. 10.

> It was as though as a humanist historian interested in political issues of rights, justice, and democracy, I had fallen into 'deep' history, into the abyss of deep geological time. This falling into 'deep' history carries with it a certain shock of recognition of the otherness of the planet and its very large-scale spatial and temporal processes of which humans have, unintentionally, become a part.[27]

In Chakrabarty, much like in Gorji's poem, dramatically different scales are juxtaposed. When read together, however, one notices that Gorji purposely introduces this (dis-)orienting effect in her poem, whereas in Chakrabarty the falling sensation caused by the hyperbolic gap in scale is the starting point that needs to be conceptualized, the springboard from which to rethink the place of the human *vis-à-vis* the deep history of the planet.

Especially at its early stage, much of Chakrabarty's theorizing of the Anthropocene goes hand in hand with his insistence on the limitations of the political. This explains why scale, despite appearing conceptually minimal, can harbour deep theoretical controversies. Critics of the idea of the Anthropocene have been very quick to warn of the danger of approaches that, as in the case of Chakrabarty, question the value of humanism and political thinking. While, for Chakrabarty, the political 'keeps acting as an anxious prohibition on thinking of that which leaves us feeling "out-scaled"', Jason Moore attacks the Anthropocene as a 'fundamentally bourgeois concept' which attempts to create a universal 'Anthropos' to be blamed for the disastrous environmental effects of capitalism.[28] Similarly, Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg flag the concern that 'species-thinking on climate change is conducive to mystification and political paralysis'.[29]

It is due to the scalar nature of these discourses that critics of the concept of the Anthropocene often recentre the diversity of human perspectives and the human body. Kathryn Yusoff, for example, unveils

27 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History*, p. 15.

28 Ibid., p. 179; Jason W. Moore, 'The Capitalocene, Part I: On the Nature and Origins of our Ecological Crisis', *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, 44.3 (2017), pp. 594–630 (p. 598) <https://doi.org/10.1080/03066150.2016.1235036>.

29 Andreas Malm and Alf Hornborg, 'The Geology of Mankind? A Critique of the Anthropocene Narrative', *The Anthropocene Review*, 1.1 (2014), pp. 62–69 (p. 67) <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053019613516291>.

the connivance between racism and geology — and how the boundaries of the 'inhuman' have been drawn at the expense of Indigenous and Black communities by negating their own 'Anthropocenes'.[30] Recalling that feminism is by definition a 'war on scale', Claire Colebrook presents Anthropocene narratives as a shift 'from indifference to difference' and asks what alternative forms of existence could keep humans in the realm of scalar unreadability, or of the indifferent — or, in other words, could resist the exceptionalism of humans in their ecosystem.[31] Though, in the light of these as yet unresolved debates, Chakrabarty takes note of these concerns and admits that 'the political question, What is to be done in a climate emergency?' remains 'for humans alone', his conclusion holds that the global and the planetary coexist 'in parallax'.[32]

## SCALE AWARENESS CONNECTING THE GLOBAL AND THE PLANETARY

I want to draw attention to multiscalarity and the 'awareness of scale' raised by discourses on the Anthropocene to suggest that this scalar awareness connects — more than divides — discourses on the global and the planetary. In her 2000 article 'The Global Situation', Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing similarly brought an awareness of scale centre stage, writing: 'We live in a time of self-consciousness about units and scales: Where shall we draw the boundaries of regions? How are local communities composed? And, most important [ … ], what is this thing we call the globe?'[33] The global and the planetary — distinguished, by Chakrabarty, for their ability to either centre or decentre the human

30 Kathryn Yussof, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018); and Kathryn Yussof, *Geologic Life: Inhuman Intimacies and the Geophysics of Race* (Duke University Press, 2024) <https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478059288>. See also Janae Davis and others, 'Anthropocene, Capitalocene, … Plantationocene?: A Manifesto for Ecological Justice in an Age of Global Crises', *Geography Compass*, 13.5 (2009), e12438 <https://doi.org/10.1111/gec3.12438>.

31 Claire Colebrook, 'We Have Always Been Post-Anthropocene: The Anthropocene Counterfactual', in *Anthropocene Feminism*, ed. by Richard Grusin (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), pp. 1–20 (p. 9).

32 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *One Planet, Many Worlds: The Climate Parallax* (Brandeis University Press, 2023), p. 12.

33 Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, 'The Global Situation', *Cultural Anthropology*, 15.3 (2000), pp. 327–60 (p. 327) <https://doi.org/10.1525/can.2000.15.3.327>.

— are in fact both examples of what Gabrielle Hecht calls 'scalar projects'.[34] They are distinguished for their situatedness and historicity, but comparable inasmuch as they 'reveal or hide'.[35] I am also receptive to Hecht's suggestion that scalar projects, such as the Anthropocene, should be 'reflexively assembled' with the purpose of identifying 'interscalar mechanisms for keeping the planet and all of its humans in the same conceptual frame'.[36] How can a certain awareness of scale, championed in discourses of both the global and the planetary, serve us once we establish that scales can be generative of heterogeneous and even possibly conflicting discourses?

While rebutting universalizing narratives of the Anthropocene with the idea of the 'Capitalocene', Moore sketches a suggestive comparison between the academic debates generated around the Anthropocene and globalization. His comparison is based on the interdisciplinary appeal of these two concepts: 'Like globalization in the 1990s, [the Anthropocene] has come to mean all things to all people.'[37] Behind this broad appeal, I would add, is the fact that both discourses solicit articulations of scale, where scale, following Tsing, is not 'a neutral frame' but rather 'a way of seeing the world', arising from epistemic and practical conditions of multiplicity and contingency, and as such susceptible to being 'brought into being: proposed, practiced, and evaded as well as taken for granted'.[38]

Debates on globalization and the Anthropocene are comparable inasmuch as they activate the scale-making rhetoric of discourse — in relation to the global and the planetary scale, respectively. And if it is true that scale as a rhetorical apparatus travels across disciplines and discourses (DiCaglio), the semantic multiplicity of scale can hopefully be brought into use without stumbling into the incompatibility of physical (conventionally invariant) versus social definitions of scale.[39]

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34 Hecht, 'Interscalar Vehicles', p. 111. Hecht uses this formula for the Anthropocene; I extend it to both the Anthropocene and globalization to propose a rhetorical investigation of patterns of scale-making.

35 Ibid., p. 114.

36 Ibid., p. 135.

37 Moore, 'The Capitalocene, Part I', p. 5.

38 Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton University Press, 2005), p. 58.

39 On the social construction of scale in DiCaglio, see n. 15 above.

While distinguishing between physical and social scales is necessary and consequential, focusing on the rhetorical handling of the relational gap between big and small scales can, I suggest, be one way to mediate between different orders of scale. Thus, a formal comparison between scalar projects relying on different definitions of scale can be predicated on the activation of similar scalar dynamics. This possibility of formal comparison rests on the fact that multiplicity is embedded in the very idea of scale — either physical *or* social — since, as Derek Woods notes, one needs at least two scales to even see what scale is about.[40] Scalar multiplicity facilitates a formal comparison between theorizations of the global (relying on a social definition of scale) and the planetary (relying on a physical definition of scale) inasmuch as both discourses have dramatically extended the range of scales for which our 'awareness of scale' needs to account.

## SMALL AND BIG SCALES OF GLOBALIZATION: LOCAL/GLOBAL 'STRUCTURES OF FEELING'

To develop the comparison between discourses of the Anthropocene and globalization to which Moore alludes, I now turn my attention to specific instances within debates on globalization where, I argue, we can see local and global scales activate scalar dynamics that formally resonate with the tension between the too small and the too big that I have identified in Gorji's scalar poetics and Chakrabarty's theorization of the planetary. To be sure, this is *one* interpretation of the local-global plurisemantic nexus, but the tension between macro and micro that I wish to point out here is significant enough to be at the heart of the pro-/anti-scale debate that preoccupied geographers in the 2000s.[41] My point is that rhetorical scalisms, such as the emphasis on the gap

40 As he writes, 'You need two scales to talk about scale at all' (Derek Woods, 'Scale Critique for the Anthropocene', *The Minnesota Review*, 83 (2014), pp. 133–42 (p. 133) <https://doi.org/10.1215/00265667-2782327>).

41 As Sallie A. Marston, John Paul Jones III, and Keith Woodward write, 'over the past 20 years, political and economic geographers have tended toward macro pronouncements that assigned the global more causal force, assumed it to be more orderly (if not law-like) and less contingent, and, by implication, relegated its other to the status of case study' (Sallie A. Marston, John Paul Jones III, and Keith Woodward, 'Human Geography without Scale', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 30.4 (2005), pp. 416–32 (p. 421) <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-5661.2005.00180.x>). For an introduction to this debate, see John Paul Jones III, 'Scale and Anti-Scale', *The*

between the big and the small, can be observed in different contexts (generalizing and simplifying enough to abstract comparable formal scalar models from their specific semantic implications).[42] While the work of Fredric Jameson and its reception will be the focus of my analysis, I will first provide a brief historical contextualization of globalization discourses and weigh the ontological and epistemic instability of local and global scales, contending that this instability does not stand as an impediment to their scalar rhetorical expressivity.

Scholarship on globalization has evolved in the wake of major events of recent decades — the 2007–08 financial crisis and Covid-19 pandemic, among others — and with the growing geopolitical instability fuelled by a context of war. While terms such as 'deglobalization' or 'slowbalization' have been introduced to describe a turning point in the evolution of neoliberalism, Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson's work is particularly useful for my purposes as it centres the thresholds touched by a new phase of open transition in global capitalism, while also stressing the continuity of deep processes of change.[43] Their 2024 volume *The Rest and the West*, for example, presents the current geopolitical instability fuelled by a transition towards multipolarity and war not just as a concatenation of crises but also as a new stage in the history of capitalism, wherein conflicts intensify for control over the spaces and flows of globalization.[44] Their 2013 book *Border as Method* already described a scenario in which borders have proliferated worldwide to exclude, and at the same to selectively (but still

*International Encyclopedia of Geography*, ed. by Douglas Richardson and others (Wiley, 2017) <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118786352.wbieg1104>.

42 I will identify intermediate or medium scales relationally, as whatever stands between the smallest and biggest scales emphasized in the discourse (that is, not as big as x, not as small as y). While I speak below of nations or cities as medium/intermediate scales in relation to the individual or the global, I am not advocating for a 'nested scale' philosophy here (this pertains to the specificity of the geographic debate on scale, some conclusions of which I also report in this essay); rather, I limit myself to observing how multiscalarity is handled rhetorically.

43 See, for example, Adam Tooze, 'Chartbook #192 On Deglobalisation and Polycrisis', *Chartbook*, Substack, 1 February 2023 <https://adamtooze.substack.com/p/chartbook-192-on-deglobalisation> [accessed 14 July 2026]. For Mezzadra and Neilson, I draw on Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, *Border as Method, or the Multiplication of Labor* (Duke University Press, 2013); and Sandro Mezzadra and Brett Neilson, *The Rest and the West: Capital and Power in a Multipolar World* (Verso, 2024).

44 Mezzadra and Neilson, *The Rest and the West*, chapters 1 and 2 (pp. 31–123).

violently) include, contrasting sharply with the emphasis on flows, hybridization, post-nationalism, and smooth space that had characterized the early 1990s, in the aftermath of the fall of the Berlin Wall.[45] The historical conjuncture illustrated by Mezzadra and Neilson offers a vantage point from which the specific moment of globalization debates identified by Moore, to which I shall return, appears to have ended. In that context, the utopia of a borderless world was still circulating, though it was contested, in a way that contrasts with the wary tenor the debate has assumed today. Moreover, in contrast with the current emphasis on multipolarity, earlier debates conceived globalism as 'nearly synonymous with American power'.[46]

In the debates that proliferated from the 1990s to the early 2000s, notions of the local and global were used contrastively — in formulas such as 'the local-global nexus', or in the condensed formula 'glocalization' — to describe processes of change brought by the increase in transnational communications and financial investments, as well as international technological standards, cultural exchange and hegemony, labour movement, travel, and so on, and, more specifically, to articulate the *tension* between the different poles invested in such processes.[47] It should also be noted that the more that theoretical debate has advanced in the direction of seeking to define what 'local' and 'global' mean, the more the two concepts have appeared undefined:

45 Mezzadra and Neilson, *Border as Method*, p. 61.

46 Quinn Slobodian, *Globalists: The End of Empire and the Birth of Neoliberalism* (Harvard University Press, 2018), p. 89. On the utopia of a 'borderless world', see also Jameson and Miyoshi, eds, *The Cultures of Globalization*, p. xiii.

47 See, for example, Roland Robertson, *Globalization, Social Theory and Global Culture* (Sage, 1992); Roland Robertson, 'Glocalization: Time–Space and Homogeneity–Heterogeneity', in *Global Modernities*, ed. by Mike Featherstone, Scott Lash, and Roland Robertson (Sage, 1995), pp. 25–44; *Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary*, ed. by Wimal Dissanayake and Rob Wilson (Duke University Press, 1996); *Geographies of Power: Placing Scale*, ed. by Andrew Herod and Melissa W. Wright (Blackwell, 2003) <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470773406>; Erik Swyngedouw, 'Neither Global nor Local: "Glocalisation" and the Politics of Scale', in *Spaces of Globalization: Reasserting the Power of the Local*, ed. by K. R. Cox (Guilford Press, 1997), pp. 137–66; Stuart Hall, 'The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity', in *Culture, Globalization, and the World System*, ed. by Anthony D. King (University of Minnesota Press, 1997), pp. 19–39; Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 63; and Arif Dirlik, 'Place-Based Imagination: Globalism and the Politics of Place', *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)*, 22.2 (1999), pp. 151–87.

the local and the global are never given, but have to be made (Latour); the global is always anchored to and expressed through localized contingencies (Latour, Saskia Sassen, J. K. Gibson-Graham, Sallie A. Marston, and others); no local exists without a larger network of connections to the outside world (James Clifford), which makes each instance of locality virtually lean towards the global (Doreen Massey); the local and the global are defined on the basis of what they are not, or might as well even be overlapping (Arif Dirlik).[48]

The local and global are thus rather unstable epistemic categories, but this is not to the detriment of their scalar expressivity. Indeed, the currency of local/global discourses remains persistent — in theory and in everyday use — even though closer theoretical scrutiny has called for their dismissal. Thus, for example, Tsing recommends ethnographers not to rely on local/global binaries while also admitting: 'I find myself doing it.'[49] Ursula Heise has commented on the articulation of multiple scalar environmental discourses, arguing that the 'advocacy of local, national, or global forms of identity, given the impasse these discussions have reached, may no longer make much sense at a very general and abstract level'.[50] However, she also concludes that this theoretical impasse does not mean that these categories have stopped making sense in particular cultural and historical contexts.[51]

Similarly, I argue that we can cast a historicizing look on the rhetorical multiscalarity found in scalar projects attempting to give shape

48 See Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford University Press, 2005), pp. 186, 176 <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780199256044.001.0001>; Saskia Sassen, *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo* (Princeton University Press, 1991); James Clifford, *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Harvard University Press, 1997); Doreen Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Polity Press, 1994), pp. 146–56; and J. K. Gibson-Graham, 'Beyond Global vs Local: Economic Politics outside the Binary Frame', in *Geographies of Power*, ed. by Herod and Wright, pp. 25–60 (p. 32) <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470773406.ch1>. See also Manuel Castells, 'Toward a Sociology of the Network Society', *Contemporary Sociology*, 29.5 (2000), pp. 693–99; Alan Latham, 'Retheorizing the Scale of Globalization: Topologies, Actor-Networks, and Cosmopolitanism', in *Geographies of Power*, ed. by Herod and Wright, pp. 115–43 <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470773406.ch4>; Marston, Jones, and Woodward, 'Human Geography without Scale'; and Dirlik, 'Place-Based Imagination', pp. 152–60.

49 Tsing, *Friction*, p. 58.

50 Ursula K. Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global* (Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 7–8.

51 Ibid.

to processes of globalization through the local and the global, despite the fact that these categories are epistemically and ontologically unfixed. Within this framework, the tension between the local and global (which I signal typographically with the use of the slash: 'local/global') can be seen as operating between the regimented form of 'world-views' or 'ideologies' and the more fluctuating affective dimension of 'structures of feeling', as an attempt to give shape to changes still in the making, which can be traced both in theoretical discourses and cultural texts. Here, I use Raymond Williams's notion of structures of feeling to emphasize both the ongoing processes of social and cultural change that the binary category of the local/global has been employed to describe, as well as the ambiguity of scales in their susceptibility to reconfiguration but also their tendency to take on a real — institutional, political, or symbolic — social form.[52] In this tension between the constraints of established forms and constant openness towards transformation and generation, I also see how the local and the global channel what Mezzadra and Neilson call the 'volatile and determining' nature of geographic scales, which they see, echoing Neil Smith, as an expression of geographic scales' malleability, intensified by globalization.[53]

Instability seems to be the quality of geographic scales that emerges most firmly from debates on globalization, contrasting with the (conventional) invariance of measuring scales foregrounded by DiCaglio. This instability is also at the core of the deep connection that geographic scales maintain with the sphere of the political. Perceptions of the 'small' and the 'big' connected with the local

52 Raymond Williams, 'Structures of Feeling', in Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 128–35 (p. 132).

53 For Mezzadra and Neilson, globalization intensifies the 'contradictory capacities' of scales 'to contain social activity and to shift and mutate as a result of social activity' (Mezzadra and Neilson, *Border as Method*, p. 63). Smith writes: 'Scale distils and expresses the oppressive as much as the emancipatory possibilities of space, its deadness as much as its life' (Neil Smith, 'Scale Bending and the Fate of the National', in *Scale and Geographic Inquiry*, ed. by Eric Sheppard and Robert B. McMaster (Wiley, 2004), pp. 192–212 (p. 197) <https://doi.org/10.1002/9780470999141.ch10>); and elsewhere: 'however fixed these scales are made, they are subject to change, and it is through the continual determination and internal differentiation of spatial scale that the uneven development of capitalism is organized' (Neil Smith, *Uneven Development: Nature, Capital, and the Production of Space* (Blackwell, 1984), p. 181).

and global activate the expressive potential of the apparatus of scale to describe a constantly changing social landscape defined by hierarchical structures of power and the ongoing struggle to reverse them. Rather than being derivative or secondary to our understanding of the rhetorical apparatus of scale, geographic or socially defined scales are revelatory when it comes to weighing the transformative potential of scale in relation to our knowledge and experience of the world.

## SCALE AWARENESS AND THE GLOBAL: A DISORIENTING MULTISCALARITY

With a historicizing approach in mind, I turn now to the scholarship of Fredric Jameson as a scalar articulation of globalization wherein the local/global binary is particularly apparent, and where a dramatic gap between small and big scales inferred by this binary creates rhetorical effects that resonate with the destabilizing effects I have noted in Chakrabarty and Gorji. I begin my observations with Jameson's contribution to a collective volume on the cultures of globalization that he co-edited in 1998, 'Notes on Globalization as a Philosophical Issue', published at a time when, again, optimistic outlooks on globalization were still on the table for some and globalism was for the most part seen as equivalent to a process of standardization pushed by US geopolitical influence.[54]

Jameson's direct comments on globalization draw on his very matter-of-fact observations of the effects of the GATT and NAFTA agreements on the national cultural industries of Western European countries, among others, which he sees as having been severely compromised by the export of American film and television.[55] He clarifies that his observations are mainly relevant for the direct area of influence of the Anglo-Saxon world and takes note of contrasting evidence of the state of affairs in Latin America, as well as in diasporic cultures

54 Fredric Jameson, 'Notes on Globalization as a Philosophical Issue', in *The Cultures of Globalization*, ed. by Jameson and Miyoshi, pp. 54–78.

55 Ibid., pp. 60–63. The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), signed in 1947, and the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), which came into force in 1994, were international agreements instrumental to the liberalization of trade, the latter specifically addressing trade in North America.

(his reference is to Stuart Hall).[56] In the end, Jameson is prompted to draw a model articulating a tension between the global force of Americanization and localized differences threatened by this force. The role of the nation-state in this paradigm is not fixed, since it can operate either as the site of a despotic identity (*vis-à-vis* internal minorities) or as a positive site of the resistance of local particularity (against Americanization). The model changes according to the 'level' from which globalization is observed:

> everything depends on the level at which a malign and standardizing or despotic identity is discerned. If this is to be found in the existence of the State itself, as a national entity, then to be sure, a more micropolitical form of difference, in markets and culture, will be affirmed over against it as a force for the resistance to uniformity and power [...] However, when one positions the threats of Identity at a higher level globally, then everything changes: at this upper range, it is not national state power that is the enemy of difference, but rather the transnational system itself, Americanization and the standardized products of a henceforth uniform and standardized ideology and practice of consumption.[57]

Jameson does not exclude the 'intermediate' scale of the nation, but the binary local/global logic that he applies to his model renders it such that the role played by the nation is not clearly defined, whereas the extremely small scale of localized differences and the extremely large scale of the homogenization set in train by Americanization both are. The intermediate scale as such does not have full theoretical consistency in Jameson's model because he is thinking in one-on-one oppositional terms, driven by the threat of a 'malign and standardizing or despotic identity'. The general 'small' and 'big' characterizations of scales applicable to the local and global function here to express a disproportion in power, agency, and influence (as emphasized by the capital 'I' in 'Identity').

Jameson's take on globalization is a coherent development of his previous remarks on late capitalism as the era of the 'multinational network' in the renowned essay 'Cognitive Mapping'.[58] The gap be-

56 Ibid., pp. 71–72.

57 Ibid. p. 74.

58 Jameson, 'Cognitive Mapping', p. 350.

tween small and big scales in the theorization of cognitive mapping is particularly dramatic as Jameson here emphasizes the individual's disorientation in understanding their class position *vis-à-vis* the global scale of the social totality. The concept of cognitive mapping adapts to a global level a concept previously modelled by Kevin Lynch at the urban level.[59] But because the emphasis is on the 'incapacity to map socially', and the 'disorientation of the saturated space', the extremely localized experience of the individual and the global scale of the social totality are pushed to the fore in a binary articulation that leaves the intermediate scales of both the city and the state behind: 'late capitalism' appears as

> a moment in which not merely the older city but even the nation-state itself has ceased to play a central functional and formal role in a process that has in a new quantum leap of capital prodigiously expanded beyond them, leaving them behind as ruined and archaic remains of earlier stages in the development of this mode of production.[60]

Jameson's use of geographic scales relies on his interest in 'quantum leaps' to describe the enlargement of capital as generating distinct types of spaces at different historical stages: from the Cartesian organization of space, through the Enlightenment, to the remote colonial fronts of imperialism, and finally to the saturated space of late capitalism. In this context, the city and the nation are thought less as intermediate scales and more as historically alternative (or *temporally* intermediate) stages in the evolution of capitalism. To the extent that the global comes to coincide, rhetorically, with the 'too big' of the social totality, in relation to which the individual's attempt to understand their phenomenological reality — the scale of the individual — comes, implicitly, to be seen as 'too small', a pedagogical aesthetics and scaled-up political strategy is needed, in Jameson's view, to oppose a socialist 'counterform' to the 'form' of capitalism.[61]

Looking at the interdisciplinary reception of Jameson's texts (where it is easier to spot different approaches to scale), one notices

59 Ibid., p. 353.
60 Ibid., p. 350.
61 Ibid., p. 356.

responses, such as that of J. K. Gibson-Graham, calling against the rigidity of his binary model as well as the gendered 'domineering' tone with which he characterizes the global, at the cost of disempowering or invalidating the local.[62] Alternative models have since moved in the direction of emphasizing contingency and the plural coexistence of different, often contrasting, globalist visions. Thus, for example, Tsing (as previously recalled) warns against falling into the trap of easy dichotomies, whereby ethnographers might find sufficient data to articulate a tension between local consumption and global circulation, or between local resistance and global capitalist structures and visions: 'By letting the global appear homogeneous,' she argues, 'we open the door to its predictability and evolutionary status as the latest stage in macronarratives.'[63] In her later work, Tsing goes so far as to challenge the very idea of scalability.[64] The big/small scale dynamics contested here therefore concern a power differential that brings epistemic limitations to the very possibility of envisioning a world outside capitalism.

What I find most revealing about Jameson's local/global scalar vision is that his neglect of the intermediate scale (or its complete absence) is particularly apparent when contrasted with coeval or later approaches, where multiscalarity is embraced without negating the role of intermediate scales within the process of globalization. An explicit theorization in this direction comes from Saskia Sassen, for whom the global should not be defined as that which is outside or in contest with the nation, but rather as endogenous to it. According to Sassen, globalization occurs through a process of selective denationalization, where only a few sectors of government begin operating at a global level, while others remain strongly in the grip of the national authority as a way to bolster the globalization process itself. Moreover, Sassen works against the fixity versus mobility binary that implicitly operates

62 J. K. Gibson-Graham, *The End of Capitalism (As We Knew It): A Feminist Critique of Political Economy* (University of Minnesota Press, 1996), p. 125. Against the 'macro', see also Marston, Jones, and Woodward, 'Human Geography without Scale'.

63 Tsing, *Friction*, p. 58.

64 Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, 'On Nonscalability: The Living World Is Not Amenable to Precision-Nested Scales', *Common Knowledge*, 18.3 (2012), pp. 505–24 <https://doi.org/10.1215/0961754X-1630424>.

in Jameson's model. Attending to the infrastructures and channels that moderate flows of circulation, and mediating between small and large scales, she outlines a complex architecture that sustains globalization or contests it in different ways.[65]

Other approaches, such as Stuart Hall's, develop the ambiguity of the nation's position diachronically, predicting a resurgence of rampant nationalisms in the immediate future. A passage from Hall's article 'The Local and the Global: Globalization and Ethnicity', from 1997, reads thus:

> The erosion of the nation-state, national economies and national cultural identities is a very complex and dangerous moment. Entities of power are dangerous when they are ascending and when they are declining and it is a moot point whether they are more dangerous in the second or in the first moment. The first moment, they gobble up everybody and in the second moment they take everybody down with them. So when I say the decline or erosion of the nation-state, do not for a moment imagine that the nation-state is bowing off the stage of history. 'I'm sorry, I was here for so long. I apologize for all the things that I did to you — nationalism, jingoism, ferocious warfare, racism. I apologize for all that. Can I go now?' It is not backing off like that. It goes into an even deeper trough of defensive exclusivism.[66]

65 Sassen writes: 'The global is endogenous to the national rather than a formation that stands outside and in opposition to the national'; and: 'The global is not simply defined as that which is outside and in contestation to the nation, nor is the global only that which is part of a space of flows that cuts across borders. There are components of globalization that we keep coding in national terms, and there are global actors whom we think of as local because they are immobile and do not move across borders, thus lacking the markers of what have become dominant representations of the global for both the supporters and the critics. If we understand the global as indeed partly endogenous to or endogenized into the national, we expand the range of actors who are conceivably global. We can then include even those who are immobile, resource poor, and not able to travel global circuits' (Saskia Sassen, 'The Many Scales of the Global: Implications for Theory and for Politics', in *The Postcolonial and the Global*, ed. by Revathi Krishnaswamy and John C. Hawley (University of Minnesota Press, 2007), pp. 82–93 (p. 82)). The centrality of global cities in Sassen's work can also be highlighted here, although it could be argued that, in her view, global cities challenge the very idea of intermediate scale, on account of 'their capability for producing global control', and the non-nested, multiscalar reach she attributes to locality proper (Sassen, *The Global City*, p. 6). Still, Sassen's model deploys a complex, multilayered multiscalar vision that multiplies the sources of tension shaping a plural global network.

66 Stuart Hall, 'The Local and the Global', p. 25.

Both Sassen's and Hall's interpretations of globalization embrace the ambiguity of the nation-state but grant enough resolution to the intermediate scale to recognize a certain dynamism at the national level; the strength of their models lies in the fact that they each highlight how nation-state sovereignty performs different functions within the same geopolitical context and acts differently upon different subjects, generating different levels of subordination, inclusion, and exclusion.[67]

Jameson's insights on the way in which postmodern disorientation creates fertile ground for the thriving of conspiracies are no less relevant today than Stuart Hall's warnings concerning the defensive return of nationalisms.[68] My aim in recalling and contextualizing Jameson's take on globalization, however, has been to show that his scalar narrative insists on the small and the big — and the disorienting gap between the two — whereas other scalar takes, either somehow in conversation with Jameson's, such as Hall's, or coming from other disciplines, such as Sassen's, use different scalar approaches, where the dynamism and functioning of the whole scalar process hinges upon the active involvement of the intermediate scale.

Jameson's emphasis on the too small and the too big, and their association with a sense of disorientation and confusion, replicates a correlation that we have seen in formally comparable, although qualitatively different scalar discourses (Chakrabarty, Gorji, and even DiCaglio). Moreover, Jameson's leading critical texts exemplify why the local/global binary has been so pervasively adopted 'in the present tense' of globalization, and why this binary, as analytically misleading as it might be, is so productive when scale is used, methodologically, as a cultural lens.[69]

67 On the importance of the intermediate scale in overcoming the paralysis of the political, see also Rodrigo Nunes, *Neither Vertical nor Horizontal: A Theory of Political Organization* (Verso, 2021), p. 33. I thank Lindsay Caplan for pointing out this reference to me.

68 See Jameson, 'Cognitive Mapping', p. 57.

69 On culture in the present tense, see Williams, 'Structures of Feeling', pp. 129, 132.

## CONCLUSIONS

My aim in this essay has been to compare the ways that different discourses manage multiscalarity, in order to understand recurrent patterns in scalar rhetorics. From Mina Gorji's unsettling scalar shifts from galaxy to atom, to the falling sensation that motivates Dipesh Chakrabarty to write about big and small physical scales, and to Fredric Jameson's discussion of the disorientation of the individual faced with the increasing complexity of the global scale of capitalism, we can discern comparable rhetorical scalar practices juxtaposing the too big and the too small, and relying on the destabilizing effect, or affect, that these zooming rhetorics provoke.

While social scientists from Bruno Latour to Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing have taken stances against the zoom, or versions of the small/big binary, it remains noteworthy that vertiginous contrasts between scales big and small are used in heterogeneous discourses despite or perhaps because of their destabilizing effects. At the same time, awareness of the 'apparatus' of scale equips us to see what specific articulations of scale can either reveal or hide. The emphasis on the too big and the too small can be seen as a form of 'scalism' — in the cases I have examined here, and plausibly beyond — inasmuch as it predictably correlates with a loss of focus at the level of intermediate scales.

Such formal patterns in the management of multiscalarity should be kept in mind especially where the loss of resolution at intermediate scales might imply the dismissal of the political domain where scales from the bodily to the global are articulated. In the humanities, theorizations of the planetary such as Chakrabarty's have, at least in their original formulations, steered the interpretation of scales towards the physical realm, but with the risk of establishing the irrelevance of human/social scales, now 'outscaled' by larger transformations and phenomena; similarly, Joshua DiCaglio's theorization of scale, while operating cross-disciplinarily, *de facto* excludes the relevance of geographic scales.

The disorienting perception of scale that accompanies these perspectives, I have argued, is not accidental. When emphasis is on the big and the small, with a loss of resolution at the intermediate scale,

disorientation can be expected. Supportive of this thesis is the fact that poets like Gorji consciously create these effects in their verses, while social accounts of scales, as we find them, for example, in Jameson, present similar scalar articulations despite speaking of different objects of observation and activating a different (strictly social rather than physical) 'order' of scales.

Drawing a formal comparison between global and planetary discourses, I second Gabrielle Hecht's recommendation that social and physical scales should be kept in the same framework when discussing the planetary. Moreover, *contra* DiCaglio, I have argued that geographic scales should be considered proper scales, regardless of the instability of their object — in fact, this very instability is essential for understanding how the apparatus of scale can be transformative for the plural subject, whereas DiCaglio's focus seems to be on the individual observer. Rather than being limited in their understanding of scale, geographic debates, especially those related to the local/global, offer a model to observe how the small-scale/big-scale binary, or, we might say, the too small/too big binary, is a privileged scalar formula for expressing disorientation, as expressively effective as it can be analytically misleading.

As much as the poet's, the theorist's toolbox can count on the apparatus of scale to create certain rhetorical effects. When an emphasis is placed on the contrast between big and small scales, it is worth asking: 'What about intermediate scales?' A way to rethink the mission of the humanities within a planetary framework could spring from this question, not to legitimize the exceptionalism of humans above other beings or scales (the scalism DiCaglio talks about, and which Gorji's poetry goes against), but to grant appropriate resolution to the intermediate human scales (from the bodily to the global) that scalar projects building on the idea of the 'human species' abstract as the neutral starting point from which to measure other scales, big and small.

# Scale and Discourse

## On the Seismographic Connections between Processes

YURI DI LIBERTO

### INTRODUCTION

Starting from its Galilean formulation, and more precisely the first day of his *Dialogue on the Two World Systems*,[1] the concepts of *scale* and *scalability* have become, as is well known, fundamental in the sciences (such as physics), in technology, and in economics. Beyond its technical-scientific use, the concept of scale has profound philosophical, speculative, and anthropological repercussions, as evidenced by the rich literature this concept has generated. My aim in this essay is to examine its applicability within a specific philosophical domain, namely that pertaining to theories of discourse (Pêcheux and Foucault) and the idea of social change. The core of my argument is that the appearance of *enunciative events* in the social field might be the local manifestation of interactions between processes unfolding at broader scales. The term 'enunciative' in 'enunciative events' is to be taken in the broadest sense, indicating any production of either speech, artistic

1 Galileo Galilei, *Dialogues Concerning Two New Sciences* [1638], trans. by Henry Crew and Alfonso De Salvio (Macmillan, 1914).

form, bodily gesture, and so on.[2] In this regard, then, both the appearance and production of articulated discourses and corporeal acts (both intended and cognized or escaping control, such as *acting out*) qualify as enunciative events. My hypothesis is that these events not only have a local reality, that is to say, an ontological legitimacy that makes them uniquely describable events, but also that their regularity and distribution allow us to take them as local offshoots of more general trends. This second aspect, which makes use of the concept of scale, points to the idea that, although local description of the agencies of individual actors is legitimate, the view 'from above', so to speak, allows us to see the broader constraints and regularities in which these actors move, often unbeknownst to themselves. Through this type of scalar dislocation, we are able to see the agency of the *whole* (process) in shaping the *part*. In fact, I propose to consider the concept of scale as a useful ally in repeating the theoretical and philosophical gesture of the 'decentring' of the human. Put differently, I consider scale arguments as an essential component of the philosophical lineage that goes (at least) from Freud to Lacan, from Marx to Foucault, from Althusser to Lévi-Strauss. Scalar dislocations of agency allow us to see how enunciative events are not just the product of local know-hows and articulations at the scale of the individual actor or the group, but also — in their distribution in space and time — of forms of regularities and logics that escape the dimension of the actors themselves.

That the idea of heterogeneous spatio-temporal scales is itself powerfully posthuman, insofar as it relativizes our existence in the cosmos, is a recurring topos. As Diann Bauer puts it:

> [T]here is such a divergence between our lived experience of duration and how time functions when looking at scales beyond what we can perceive directly, either at the quantum or cosmological scales, that the question of time can stop making sense altogether.[3]

2 I take this broader meaning of 'enunciation' from Maria Giulia Dondero, 'Geste de la pensée, gestualité picturale: le diagramme chez Peirce, Deleuze et Goodman', *Metodo*, 9.1 (2021), pp. 67–95 <https://doi.org/10.19079/metodo.9.1.67>. See also Maria Giulia Dondero, *I linguaggi dell'immagine* (Meltemi, 2020).

3 Diann Bauer and Suhail Malik, 'Xenotemporality and Time-Complexes: Recomposing Time for Non-Experiential Risks', in *Catastrophe Time!*, ed. by Gary Zhexi Zhang (Strange Attractor Press, 2023), pp. 215–25 (p. 211).

In this regard, it is useful to mention the concept of *xeno-temporality*, proposed by Suhail Malik.[4] We are immersed in temporalities that are alien to us but that nonetheless have the power to push us in different directions, a condition that modern complex societies have only exacerbated.

Of course, the types of macroscopic processes that can have an overarching effect on more human ones can be both non-human, such as the geological or climatic, or human-made, such as global economic crises, wars, or a combination of both. What is important is that, independently of the type, these processes spread and propagate, covering distances and timeframes which eschew local 'small-scale' detection by the actors involved, so that effects of realization occur often with a significant delay.

In other words, I propose to hypothesize that these spatio-temporally larger processes — climatic, economic, social — play a role in shaping more authentically human processes, exerting forms of pressure and constraint that are often recognizable only a posteriori, in that their patterns become visible only in retrospect and often with specific analytical tools. Following certain concepts from the continental philosophical and linguistic tradition, by 'human processes' I mean *discourses*, an umbrella term encompassing spoken and uttered discourse, statements deposited in archives (understood as surfaces of inscription in a general sense), or performed gestures and acts (both spontaneous and conventionally codified or trained).

Discourses and material processes (natural or otherwise) are not at all isolated from one another. Although a certain 'operational closure' can be ascribed to the two domains, meaning that the rules of one can be explored in partial isolation from the other (linguistics on one side, hard sciences on the other), I believe there exists an interactive dimension between them, and that it can be explored through consideration of scale. In short, it is a matter of hypothesizing how processes spread across temporal scales incommensurable with human scale can play a role in 'prompting' or 'facilitating' the precipitation of human symbolic forms and discursive events. The interaction between

4 Ibid., p. 219.

processes of different scales would allow us to see, in Karen Barad's terms, the 'entanglements' between materiality and discursivity.[5]

'Discourse' is a crucial term for many continental philosophers, philosophers of language, linguists, and psychoanalysts. My idea is that of a power (or agency) of macro- and micro-scalar processes (where 'meso-scalar' is understood as the human scale) that *prompt* or *facilitate* the appearance of certain statements or discourses, that is, that activate historically contingent discursive formations. Ultimately, our discourses and our gestures are not only directed towards other humans but also towards the very conditions that *make us speak and act*. Enunciation, then, is something that seethes beneath processes like a subterranean stream, of which we see, ex-post, only the final deposit. What is recorded as an event leaves behind it a trail of statements. It is a matter of investigating 'the historical existence of the statement', to borrow Jean-Jacques Courtine's expression, thinking of it as a trace.[6] The transient islands of coherence and monotony in which statements and gestures can appear can thus be framed as *effects* of processes spread across scales heterogeneous to the human one.

In proposing a scalar vision concerning discourses, I do not necessarily intend to draw on distributionalist hypotheses in discourse analysis, although such approaches have been attempted.[7] Rather, I intend to position myself in a median dimension, an intermediate theoretical space between what is properly non-human and what, through discursive activity, becomes so.

If there are material processes on temporal and spatial scales of magnitudes incommensurable with human processes, which neverthe-

5 Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Duke University Press, 2007).

6 Jean-Jacques Courtine, 'Quelques problèmes théoriques et méthodologiques en analyse du discours, à propos du discours communiste adressé aux chrétiens', in Courtine, *Analyse du discours politique*, special issue of *Langages*, 62 (1981), pp. 9–128 (p. 52) <https://doi.org/10.3406/lgge.1981.1873>.

7 For a distributional reading of Michel Foucault's *The Archaeology of Knowledge* in relation to digital humanities, see, for example, Henning Schmidgen, Bernhard J. Dotzler, and Benno Stein, 'From the Archive to the Computer: Michel Foucault and the Digital Humanities', *Journal of Cultural Analytics*, 7.4 (2022), pp. 1–14 <https://doi.org/10.22148/001c.55795>. See also Jacques Guilhaumou, Denise Maldidier, and Régine Robin, *Discours et archive. Expérimentations en analyse du discours* (Mardaga, 1994).

less have the power to create conditions (necessary but not sufficient) for the emergence of certain discourses, then thinking in terms of scale means thinking of a form of temporality analogous to what Quentin Meillassoux defines as an *ancestral temporality*, that is, thinking 'without inconsistency what there is when thought is not'.[8] To paraphrase, it is about thinking 'what there is when *discourse* is not *yet*'. Scale allows us to see the material preconditions that actualize certain discursive events. In this regard, we are embedded in an always self-reproducing ancestrality which silently shapes our agency as humans. A similar invitation is made by Zachary Horton regarding scalar thinking, which is said to have been born tainted by a form of 'pan-scalar humanism'.[9] If, on the one hand, the idea of scale has relativized and decentred the human scale in relation to all others — micro and macro, cosmic and cellular — then, on the other hand, it still thinks of 'all trans-scalar encounters as either extensions of the human into analogous scales' or as 'the beneficent extension of the human lifeworld into frontier scales'.[10] Horton's critical remark aligns with the argument by Meillassoux regarding an ancestral temporality operating before (human) thought. The intermediate link connecting the two arguments has to do with the fact that scale, if taken not simply as an extension of the human towards the non-human, can be precisely the antidote to the all-too-human view of temporality. Put more simply, scale views that focus on what happens 'around' the human — either above or below its scale — allow us to see the agency of processes shaping the human itself from the 'outside', so to speak.

As noted by Marie-Anne Paveau, in her enumeration of the occurrences and uses of the term 'pre-discursive' (*pré-discursif*) in Foucault, there is, according to the French philosopher, 'no pre-discursive providence' (il n'y a pas de providence prédiscursive).[11] With this incisive and forceful expression, Foucault means that 'there are no pre-existing

8 Quentin Meillassoux, 'Metafisica, Speculazione, Correlazione', *Iride*, 1 (2009), pp. 87–106 (p. 90).

9 Zachary Horton, *The Cosmic Zoom: Scale, Knowledge, and Mediation* (University of Chicago Press, 2021), p. 3.

10 Ibid.

11 Michel Foucault, quoted in Marie-Anne Paveau, *Les prédiscours. Sens, mémoire, cognition* (Presses Sorbonne Nouvelle, 2006), p. 8.

meanings since discourse is not prior to the human practice that elaborates it'.[12] Paveau, less radically than Foucault, admits the existence of 'pre-discursive givens' (*données prédiscursives*) which, although devoid of any providentialism, have the power to preconfigure discursive constructions. According to Paveau, the pre-discursive would be the set of knowledges and practices shared by a particular community (knowledges, encyclopedias, techniques, and so on). Following Paveau's theoretical suggestion, I propose to extend this reasoning on the pre-discursive and to propose the *non-discursive*, namely the set of (climatic, economic, social, geological, et cetera) processes on macro- and micro- scales which, while not yet being either pre-discursive or (much less) discursive, can function as systemic preconditions for the emergence of phenomena related to pre-discourse or discourse. More precisely, their effects lie in affecting the probability of discourse emerging from pre-discourse.

## FROM COSMIC AWE TO WITCH-HUNTS: ON PROCESS SYNCHRONIZATIONS

In their 2022 article 'The Social Effects of an Awesome Solar Eclipse', Sean Goldy, Nickolas Jones, and Paul Piff attempt to describe the social impact elicited by the 2017 solar eclipse in the USA.[13] Specifically, they try to determine the effect of the eclipse in terms of the emotions it aroused in the population. They focus on awe and prosocial emotions such as a sense of unity with humanity, altruism, feelings of connection with others, and so on.

Their hypothesis is that such a cosmic phenomenon could elicit these types of affects. To assess this possibility, they examine a rich corpus of data from the Twitter platform, specifically those comments ('tweets') from the two million users who were located in the part of the country where it was possible to observe the eclipse in its entirety. While the emotional experiences themselves of course remain inaccessible, the authors infer these on the basis of the users' statements and

12 Paveau, *Les prédiscours*, p. 8.

13 Sean P. Goldy, Nickolas M. Jones, and Paul K. Piff, 'The Social Effects of an Awesome Solar Eclipse', *Psychological Science*, 33.9 (2022), pp. 1452–62 <https://doi.org/10.1177/09567976221085501>.

expressions, focusing on both the frequency of the use of the pronoun 'we' compared to the singular 'I', and on phrases such as 'I experienced one of the coolest things I've ever seen'.

The platform comment, the tweet, is therefore used as an archival trace that allows for 'a direct window into individuals' thoughts and feelings via the words they use'.[14] Furthermore, these comments are 'archival, enabling the capturing of ephemeral states at levels of granularity often inaccessible by traditional research methods across an extended time frame'. Finally, they can be 'either directly or indirectly connected to users' locations'.

To explore the phenomenon of awe and the prosocial psychological effects presumably elicited by viewing the eclipse, the authors use the aforementioned indices, namely the occurrence in tweets of specific words, such as the use of the plural pronoun 'we'. In summary, all those verbal indicators that would signify 'a more interdependent, socially cohesive sense of self' are relevant.[15]

The scholars conclude their study by stating that the 2017 eclipse was associated with an increase 'in awe and social processes that are core to collective life'.[16] Specifically, the likelihood of expressing awe, humility, prosociality, affiliation, and a sense of collectivity was higher among individuals located in the path of the total eclipse compared to those who only had access to a partial eclipse.

Goldy, Jones, and Piff further add that their data indicate how astronomical events that inspire a sense of wonder, such as a total solar eclipse, can stimulate tendencies vital to collective life, such as greater attention to one's own group, attention to caring for others, less selfishness, and so on. Also increasing in frequency was the occurrence of linguistic markers indicating openness 'for ambiguity in one's views and openness to alternative viewpoints', such as 'maybe' or 'perhaps'.[17]

One aspect that must be emphasized, and that directly touches upon the concept of scale, is the interaction between a cosmic phenomenon, the eclipse, and the deposition of specific expressive forms.

14 Ibid., p. 1453.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid., p. 1460.
17 Ibid., pp. 1454–55.

Statements and signifiers linked to specific affects appeared and were deposited in the areas where the eclipse was most visible, and particularly where it was visible in its totality. What I wish to highlight is that we could frame all of this as a form of interaction between cosmic and social dimensions: the eclipse phenomenon triggers a series of discourses linked to specific affective modes. The presumed psychological authenticity of the human subjects involved in those utterances is not important here, that is, whether or to what degree the speaker can actually distance themselves from the discourse fragments they appropriate. Rather, what matters is that a series of affective artefacts — that is, heard, learned, repeated discourse fragments linked to prosociality and typical topoi like 'the unity of all humans' — appeared in coincidence with a cosmic event.

The interaction left traces of this contingent interpenetration. We can imagine the idea of leaving traces as a deposit of things said and done, in their pure and empirical appearance. Let us also imagine a non-human intelligent being who, after the extinction of our species, thousands of years from now, manages to access the database of things written and circulated in the media sphere of Twitter or other platforms, as well as online databases and libraries.

Scouring these digital spaces far and wide, this fictional non-human archaeologist suddenly finds themselves contemplating an anomalous peak around the year 2017, and distributed in the vicinity of a specific region of the globe, of statements invoking ideas of wonder, brotherly love, a sense of humanity, amazement, and so on. They observe this strange and sudden cluster, distributed in a delimited spatio-temporal region, of similar things said, of related and associated symbols piled up in a delimited portion of human history.

In another case, rather than interactions between different scales (cosmic and human), we can see an interaction of economic processes — in terms of food prices — with the social field, in the form of a facilitation of social instability. In a 2011 article, Yaneer Bar-Yam and his team ask if there is a single numerical value that could predict the likelihood of riots and social unrest on any inhabited continent.[18] The

18 Yaneer Bar-Yam, Marco Lagi, and Karla Z. Bertrand, 'The Food Crises and Political Instability in North Africa and the Middle East', SSRN, 16 August 2011 <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.1910031>.

researchers focus mainly on North Africa and the Middle East. In their article, they confirm their initial suspicion: the main parameter for predicting the outbreak of unrest and social instability in a country is neither the dominant religion nor the ruling government, but rather the price of food. Based on the UN Food Price Index, they discovered that the threshold value of 210 per cent — just over double — is the critical point beyond which any further increase in commodity prices leads to dissatisfaction and social disorder. Of course, it is reasonable to doubt that this is the *necessary* and also *sufficient* condition. However, the price of basic commodities remained the most reliable value for predicting the likelihood of social disorder and uprisings.

If we consider how events in our hyperconnected and globalized world can result in disruptive effects that pop up and propagate in remote areas, we have a picture of how the global and the local are intimately connected. It is indeed reasonable to suspect that, under conditions of globalized social reproduction,[19] events occurring in a specific part of the world can rapidly reverberate globally, creating destabilizing local effects even in places very far removed.

There is another case I wish to focus on. Unlike the cosmic wonder surrounding the 2017 eclipse or the social instabilities linked to price explored by Bar-Yam and his team, the far more serious and extensive phenomenon of the witch-hunt represents a particularly important case study for the attempt to explore interscale interactions. This is for two reasons: firstly, due to its severity, in terms of the number of victims claimed by witch-hunts in Europe; and secondly, because it has been the subject of numerous historical and anthropological studies.

To explore the presence of interscalar connections in the case of this particular phenomenon, I draw on Wolfgang Behringer's historical analysis of the witch-hunt phenomenon, in which he observes and

19 I borrow the term from Tim Di Muzio, who uses it 'as a heuristic to imagine the ways in which the production, consumption and reproduction of our lives and livelihoods have become ever more internationalized and interconnected so that few people in this world can reproduce their lives and lifestyles without depending on global markets and the labour power of strangers' (Tim Di Muzio, 'Historicizing Capital as Power: Energy, Capitalization and Globalized Social Reproduction', in *The Capitalist Mode of Power: Critical Engagements with the Power Theory of Value*, ed. by Tim Di Muzio (Routledge, 2014), pp. 19–35 (p. 19)).

describes a clear correlation between cyclical agricultural crises and the resurgence of persecutions against witches.[20]

Specifically, both violence against women accused of witchcraft and peaks of interest in demonology correspond to dramatically poor harvests caused by particularly adverse climatic conditions. The period we must refer to is the so-called Little Ice Age, a particularly cold period in climatic history spanning from the mid-fourteenth to the mid-nineteenth century. As Behringer explains, witchcraft, as a social construct, began to spread during the fourteenth century precisely in parallel with the Little Ice Age. In Central Europe, the witch-hunt reached its peak in precise coincidence with the worst years of this era, namely in the two decades immediately before and after the year 1600. The crime of witchcraft itself disappeared at the end of the glaciation, when new and more plausible theories about harvest crises began to be proposed.[21]

In other words, there exists a 'seismographic connection', to use Behringer's expression,[22] between particularly harsh climatic conditions, inflation, and the intensification of persecutions against women accused of witchcraft. The peak of the violence in Europe occurred in 1628, the moment when the prices of primary goods skyrocketed.

If we imagine superimposing, on one hand, the curve indicating the prices of primary and derived harvest goods, and, on the other hand, the curve indicating the killings over time of women accused of witchcraft, we would see that the peaks of one roughly coincide with those of the other. At least for the long period of the Little Ice Age in Europe, the best way to predict whether there will be a resurgence of violence against witches is to observe the temperature: the major episodes of violence against women accused of witchcraft are strongly correlated with the low temperatures of the harshest winters.

We are witnessing a climatic process spread across much broader temporal scales, manifesting its effects locally in the outcomes of particular human acts. Persecutions of witches, accusations, and even

20 Wolfgang Behringer, 'Weather, Hunger and Fear: Origins of the European Witch-Hunts in Climate, Society and Mentality', *German History*, 13.1 (1995), pp. 1–27.

21 Wolfgang Behringer, *Storia culturale del clima*, trans. by Corrado Bertani (Bollati Boringhieri, 2016), p. 176.

22 Behringer, 'Weather, Hunger and Fear', p. 17.

interest in specific signifiers belonging to the code of demonology intensify precisely around the coldest years of the Little Ice Age. If we zoom out from local communities to broader regional scales, we see the mechanism repeating almost monotonously across Europe. The pattern is: poor harvests, a theory of a punishment sent by God as a result of a witch's dealings with the devil, identification of the suspect as a witch, and a killing.[23]

Before moving on to more properly scalar theoretical reflections, I want to dwell on some aspects of the witch-hunt phenomenon. The fact that similar episodes could occur in these ways is the result of the combined action of several elements. The interaction between climate and systematic violence against women accused of witchcraft has an intermediate link in the fact that they, the victims, underwent what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari call an 'incorporeal transformation' (or semiotic transformation).[24] The material process — harsh winter, poor harvests — becomes a social event because an incorporeal or semiotic transformation of the woman takes place, as she suddenly finds herself identified as a witch. Not by chance, Deleuze and Guattari, in their *A Thousand Plateaus*, give a similar example drawn from economics. The galloping inflation in Germany after 1918 is a 'process affecting the monetary body, and many other bodies', but it is only 'the set of "circumstances" that suddenly makes possible a "semiotic transformation"' which turns this material condition into a series of political-economic decisions.[25]

Incorporeal transformations have the power *to make things happen*; they are intrinsically normative and exhortative. If I say, using another example from Deleuze and Guattari, 'Tu n'es plus un enfant…' ('You are no longer a child…'), I am not only saying something about your body, but I am also automatically giving a series of implicit norma-

23 The phenomenon of the witch-hunt is of course also present in other periods and contexts (including non-European ones). What interests me here, however, is the way in which it can create forms of synchronization or regularity by linking to other (in this case, climatic) processes. For a historical examination of the phenomenon, see Wolfgang Behringer, *Hexen. Glaube, Verfolgung, Vermarktung* (C. H. Beck, 2024).

24 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Mille plateaux. Capitalisme et schizophrénie* (Les Éditions de minuit, 1980), p. 102. See also Brydie Kosmina, *Feminist Afterlives of the Witch: Popular Culture, Memory, Activism* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2023).

25 Ibid., p. 103.

tive implications, such as, 'you should think about getting married', 'you must be more mature', and so on. Similarly, incorporeally transforming a woman into a witch has a whole series of implications for the community and for herself. The interaction between climate and local communities is not enough; therefore, a set of pre-circulating discourses is also required. Not only that: as Silvia Federici has clearly shown, one cannot overlook the fact that such climate-violence *entanglements* were also made possible thanks to the new legal and social preconditions that shaped the relations between men and women in the workplace and the domestic sphere. In fact, things like the progressive and general *decriminalization* of violence against women belonging to the lower classes, and their subjugation to the reproduction of the labour force, prepared the conditions, throughout the fourteenth century and in many different regions, for those process 'synchronizations' (or seismographic connections) to manifest with such frequency.[26]

## TIMESCALE BETWEEN THE NON-DISCURSIVE AND THE DISCURSIVE

What Behringer calls 'seismographic connections' between climate and witch-hunts, and which we might also call, in this specific case, *pernicious synchronizations* — given their violent outcomes — can be explored thanks to the fact that, at least in the case in question, we have a series of data (harvests, temperatures, local population archives) allowing us to move from one process to the other and to see how they interact.

In other words, the interscalar nexus is describable because we can map, even while admitting margins of imprecision, events occurring at the level of one process onto events occurring at the level of the other process, that is, climate and social behaviour. In this regard, it is useful to recall Joshua DiCaglio's concept of 'scalar relations' (that is, impacts across scales), which he deploys to describe how action on

26 Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (Autonomedia, 2004), pp. 47–49.

one scale might influence action on another scale.[27] When possible, as in the case of the witch-hunt phenomenon, we are able to dissect the causal relationship because we have access to the entire chain of scalar relations. We can thus describe the phenomenon in terms of inter-translatability from one scale to another, and follow the causal thread leading from entities on one scale to those on another. It is a matter of reconstructing a cascade of interscalar agencies that, starting from cold climate and passing through poor harvests, inflation, and discourses on demonology, leads all the way to the stake.

What is central, however, is not only the idea of spatial scale — the large or the small — but also the idea of *temporal scale*, an aspect perhaps not considered sufficiently. As Marcia Bjornerud suggests:

> Most humans, including those in affluent and technically advanced countries, have no sense of temporal proportion — the durations of the great chapters in Earth's history, the rates of change during previous intervals of environmental instability, the intrinsic timescales of 'natural capital' like groundwater systems.[28]

I suggest conceiving the difference between the two temporal scales in terms of how relevant or significant the same level of granularity might be in the two cases. For example, when measuring an era or a climatic period like the Little Ice Age, being off by two or three years, or even a few decades, is not very relevant. Relative to the object of study in question, these are non-significant portions of time. A part or 'phase' of it is identified with relatively loose margins. Conversely, for a human being, a difference of two or three years is not insignificant: within that period, many significant things can happen, for an individual as for humanity in a general sense. For these reasons, it makes more sense to measure a climatic era or a geological period in multiples of ten years, whereas the same criterion for a human life would prevent the capture of many significant events or phases. In other words, the degree of temporal granularity changes from entity to entity. The implication of

27 Joshua DiCaglio, *Scale Theory: A Nondisciplinary Inquiry* (University of Minnesota Press, 2021), p. 77.

28 Marcia Bjornerud, *Timefulness: How Thinking Like a Geologist Can Help Save the World* (Princeton University Press, 2018), p. 7.

this difference is that there is a dislocation of agency: what appears as a thought-out, intentional act, that is, the result of a rational deliberation (namely, persecuting witches), is also, zooming out to the broader picture, the result of a form of constraint and regularity exerted from *above and below*, so to speak — in other words, by processes which condition our human contexts for action without us always being aware of them. Of course, this does not make episodes of human violence as neutral as a natural phenomenon. Rather, it means that the first-person, local, and presumably *cognized* justification given by the perpetrators of such violent acts (relying as it might on things like the influence of demons, sinful behaviours, divine punishment, and so forth) is only one ingredient of this complex social outcome, with the others being the contextual processes relating to climate and economic ebbs and flows.

As I have said, the scalar relations in this case are possible because there exists a series of intermediate mediations, social elements that functioned as unstable precursors so that extremely harsh temperatures could transform into violence against a scapegoat. It is here that I propose to deploy the useful notion, proposed by Marie-Anne Paveau, of the *pre-discourse*. In the definition given by Paveau, pre-discourses are 'a set of collective pre-discursive frameworks (knowledges, practical beliefs, practices, prejudices), which provide instructions for the production and interpretation of meaning in discourse'.[29]

The pre-discursive indicates 'discursive organizations available for the production of discourses, which guide them in a more or less binding manner'.[30] The pre-discursive indicates that level of knowledge, practices, and encyclopedias which, for a given group, constitute shared self-evidences. There are several properties of the pre-discursive. They are: (1) *collective*, because they are appropriated more-or-less unconsciously (or naturally) by members of a community; (2) *immaterial*, because they are not material like actual discourses, but can leave traces within them; (3) *transmissible*, in the sense of being communicable between different members of the same community and from one generation to the next; (4) *experiential*, because they are 'organizers of

29 Paveau, *Les prédiscours*, p. 85; my translation.
30 Ibid.

experience' that construct and preconstruct the 'individual perception of the world';[31] and (5) *temporal*, in the sense that they are temporally anterior to discourse on the diachronic axis of their production, while being 'located in the relations between the subject and their social, cultural, historical, and technological environment'.[32]

The pre-discursive actually has a very close relationship with the discursive, that is, with what is actually said and done, and this in at least two senses. Firstly, the pre-discursive can always potentially materialize and become discourse. Secondly, every pre-discourse is actually always the 'sediment' of a discourse made *earlier* and *elsewhere*.

Similarly, although Michel Pêcheux does not distinguish, as I am proposing, between a systemic-material non-discursive and the discursive, nevertheless, for him, what comes before discourse, that is, the set of perceptions and experiences, is actually always already traversed by an 'already heard' and an 'already said'.[33] In other words, the perceptual and experiential dimensions are imbued with previously sedimented discourses that become a presumed shared self-evidence.

For example, when harvest conditions and inflation reached the peak of their crises, the reaction was to impulsively turn to demonology and its network of significations. In his treatise on witches from 1592, the bishop of Trier, Peter Binsfeld, called for particularly severe measures against them: 'Witches are traitors to the homeland, because they secretly conspire, as experience shows, to destroy wine crops, make fruits rot, and raise grain prices.'[34] Furthermore, as noted by Silvia Federici in her historical reconstruction of the witch-hunt in relation to primitive capital accumulation, one cannot underestimate the appearance of an entire plethora of new typifications of women in theatrical dramas, comedies, and other works, such as the characters of the 'disobedient wife', the 'scold', the 'witch', the 'whore', and so on.[35]

I propose, then, to think of scalar relations as the propagation of effects that traverse the non-discursive, the pre-discursive, and the

31 Ibid., p. 88.

32 Ibid., p. 92.

33 Michel Pêcheux, *Analyse Automatique du Discours* (Dunod, 1969), p. 22.

34 Peter Binsfeld, *Tractat von Bekanntnus der Zauberer und Hexen* (1592), quoted in Behringer, 'Weather, Hunger and Fear', p. 15.

35 Federici, *Caliban and the Witch*, p. 101.

discursive. Given this conceptual framework, we can say that, in the case of the witch-hunt, a non-discursive process (temperature variations related to climate) activates the pre-discursive and discursive dimensions.

The non-discursive constitutes the reservoir of material and systemic processes of which we are a part, often suffering their consequences in a sudden manner. In the jargon of dynamic systems, a 'tipping point' is a moment in the history of a system when a drastic change occurs that modifies it. According to Marten Scheffer, these sudden changes do not occur exclusively in natural systems. On the contrary, they can also take place in human or social systems: 'social systems are notorious for periods of relative inertia with occasional rapid transitions *on scales varying from locally held opinions and attitudes to massive shifts such as the collapse of states and civilizations*.'[36] In the specific case of climate and local communities, the sudden shifts in locally held opinions and attitudes are the result of scalar relations between the non-discursive (temperature fluctuations in the Little Ice Age), the pre-discursive, and the discursive (the production of discourses that draw upon other pre-discourses).

## SCALE, CHANCE, AND DESUBJECTIVATION

As DiCaglio has pointed out, 'scale radically reworks our notion of the "I"' because it 'reconfigures not just "subjects" but one's own sense of being-a-subject as a clear entity tied to a discernible structure'.[37] In the case of synchronizations between climate and witch-hunts, this reconfiguration of being-a-subject does not so much consist in saying — through zooming in and out — that we are made of cellular tissues, themselves made of cells, then molecules, atoms, and so on. Rather, the crisis of our being-a-subject consists in discovering how there exist pre-subjective or pre-personological agencies that are capable, in a certain sense, of *making* us do or *say* something. There is a kind of tragic discovery, often only possible in hindsight, regarding the fact that a process has led us to act in one way or another. The reworking

36 Marten Scheffer, *Critical Transitions in Nature and Society* (Princeton University Press, 2009), p. 1; my emphasis.

37 DiCaglio, *Scale Theory*, p. 121.

of our notion of the 'I' is then to be thought of as the bracketing of a presumed individual, first-person rationality as the sole altar for verifying our actions. Our identification with any object, such as our 'body', 'is dissolved to make way for the multitude of new objects (cells) and connections (ecological relations to the planet)'.[38] This is the second aspect I want to emphasize here. More than the well-known arguments about levels of emergence, the concept of scale evokes the idea of a *dislocation* of our very agency.

Alongside this dislocation of agency, the processes described in the case of the witch-hunt involve another aspect of scalar relations, namely their statistical nature. The tipping points that led to the exacerbation of violence against women and the consultation of demonology do not tell us exactly *who*, *where*, and *when* will be executed following a witchcraft trial. Rather, we observe a general proliferation of similar events (in practices and discourses) and their more-or-less coherent distribution relative to the inhabited centres of Europe at the time. This, however, does not diminish the ontological legitimacy of the objects we are observing. Although we are not talking about singular entities clearly definable by distinct and neat boundaries or membranes, like a living organism, scalar arguments also apply to statistical processes, that is to say, to cases where particular trends can be detected. As DiCaglio emphasizes,

> [in] terms of scale, statistics provide descriptions of patterns that emerge in the aggregate while still retaining reference to the smaller components. Therein lies the conceptual difficulty but also rhetorical power: statistics provide a means of redescribing how objects on a smaller scale relate to a larger one.[39]

Statistical reasoning tells us something about broad trends or tendencies, while always keeping in mind that 'statistics do not annihilate the diversity on the scale below; they identify patterns within that diversity'.[40] This type of reasoning, although it does not eliminate the ontological legitimacy of entities on smaller scales, encapsulates

38 Ibid.
39 Ibid., p. 168.
40 Ibid.

very well the idea of the dislocation of agency. 'Think of patterns, not people', says Mark Buchanan.[41]

We can borrow the concept of a 'statistical macro-event', as proposed by Dave Elder-Vass.[42] An example of a statistical macro-event is the divorce rate in a specific country. There is no single actor who produces all the divorces considered. Rather, 'each [divorce] is an independent micro-social event and their aggregation into a summary statistic is an artefact of the statistician.'[43] However, as Elder-Vass rightly notes, this does not mean we cannot offer explanations for these statistical macro-events, but rather that 'explanations need not be a simple aggregation of the explanations of the micro-events'.

Many of what Elder-Vass then calls *historical* macro-events are similar to statistical macro-events. In cases such as the French Revolution or the Watergate scandal, we are dealing with aggregations of micro-social events where the actors do not belong to a closed totality. What we qualify as, for example, the French Revolution is the result of a multiplicity of smaller (that is, micro) events that, by happening in a spatio-temporal proximity, constitute the macro-event we now know as the French Revolution. In other words, a set of micro-social events collectively constitutes 'a change or episode of historical significance'.[44]

Statistical macro-events are fascinating because they necessarily lead us back to considerations of scale and different levels of observation. The case of divorce frequency is paradigmatic. We can place ourselves at the level of the statistical macro-event itself, but we can also zoom in on individual cases to see what happens in each of them. Looking closely at individual cases shows us a unique story in all its detail. However, shifting our perspective to statistical macro-events leads us to dilute that uniqueness and make it a *typical case* of a larger-scale process. The dislocation of our gaze between the two scales produces a bifurcation of perspectives: if we get closer, we see a unique case,

41 Mark Buchanan, *The Social Atom: Why the Rich Get Richer, Cheats Get Caught, and Your Neighbor Usually Looks Like You* (Marshall Cavendish, 2007), p. 5.

42 Dave Elder-Vass, *The Causal Power of Social Structures* (Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 181.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid., p. 182.

with irreplaceable people who said and did certain things; if we move away, we see a macroscopic process spread across different areas and developing over a specific period. Neither dimension is more true than the other.

By way of conclusion, I wish to propose a suggestion that returns to the initial question regarding discourse, the statement, and the non-discursive dimension. In a passage from *L'ordre du discours*, Foucault mentions the idea that we 'accept the introduction of *aléa* [*chance*] as a category in the production of events', then immediately adds that 'we feel the absence of a theory enabling us *to think the relations between chance and thought*'.[45] Perhaps one way to fill this theoretical absence of which Foucault speaks is precisely to think in terms of the relations between processes across different scales and the (statistical) effects that these scalar relations can cause, as we have seen in the case of the witch-hunt. Perhaps the *chance* behind the events that Foucault mentions can be thought of as what emerges from the propagation of effects from the non-discursive to the discursive, passing through the pre-discursive.

45 Michel Foucault, 'The Order of Discourse', trans. by Ian McLeod, in *Unyting the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, ed. by Robert Young (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 48–78 (p. 69; my emphasis).

# Contemplating Scale
## An Interview with Joshua DiCaglio

Joshua DiCaglio's monograph *Scale Theory: A Nondisciplinary Inquiry* (2021) took on the ambitious task of theorizing 'scale itself'; in other words, rather than simply examining how the notion of scale operates within a particular discipline, register, or discourse, DiCaglio proposes a broader exploration of the transformative role of scale for both knowledge and experience.[1] As such, *Scale Theory* offers a wide-ranging discussion of scale's various affordances and misuses — including the philosophical status of scale, the rhetorical operations and assumptions underpinning the use of scale in scientific discourses, and the numerous scalar conflations and distortions prevalent in both popular and scholarly discourse around science and politics — and ultimately arrives at a fascinating and in many ways unexpected discussion of mysticism and contemplative practices. Both *Scale Theory* and DiCaglio's article 'Scale Tricks and God Tricks, or The Power of Scale in *Powers of Ten*' have crucially informed the research and discussions of this cohort of ICI Fellows, as we have tried to grapple with the complexities of scale in our respective lines of inquiry.[2] The below interview, which

1 Joshua DiCaglio, *Scale Theory: A Nondisciplinary Inquiry* (University of Minnesota Press, 2021).

2 Joshua DiCaglio, 'Scale Tricks and God Tricks, or The Power of Scale in *Powers of Ten*', *Configurations*, 28.4 (2020), pp. 459–90 <https://doi.org/10.1353/con.2020.0021>.

has been edited for clarity, is an attempt to reflect on some of the insights from *Scale Theory*, and on how DiCaglio's framing of scale as a 'situated dislocation' can help reorient our preconceived notions of 'agency', 'the political', and 'the human'.

**ICI Berlin Fellows**: Your book ends on a provocative note, making a gesture that is at once speculative and exhortative. You call for 'a new kind of faith, one that peers into the infinite variety of existence and does not reel in horror or jump forth in conquest or get lost in the reconfiguration but learns to dwell with this cosmic vision'.[3] Equipped with this faith, the subject can bypass the all-too-common risk of merely 'intellectually knowing that I belong to this larger structure without losing myself in it'. This loss of a personal reference point will not be permanent or irreversible but will last for 'one moment, and then another, and then another', with the hoped-for end result of a species that grasps itself as acting as and within the Whole. Yet this mystic moment-to-moment approach seems to rely on its own scalar specificity: the moment itself. How do you explain this? And how would you suggest expanding the field and implications of this approach?

**Joshua DiCaglio**: Scale arises in part from the problem of being able to extend beyond the immediacy of the place and time at which a perception occurs. In spatial scales this occurs in the comparison between a perspective at one resolution and a perspective at another. Markers of spatial scale permit the two to be brought into relation, to say that what appears as a body at a metre scale is discerned as cells at the microscale or as parts of an ecology at the planetary scale. Doing so also creates the need to reiterate the scale at which any given entity is able to act. In *Scale Theory*, this is distilled in the phrase, 'One can only act at the scale at which one exists.'[4] The point of this statement is threefold: first, it marks the way that we're always getting beyond ourselves, trying to imagine that because we can observe and talk about the world at larger and smaller scales, we are directly acting at those scales. Second,

3 DiCaglio, *Scale Theory*, p. 264.
4 Ibid., p. 48.

it marks the way that within any action are other actions that are not tied to the same agent. Within the movements of your body are also the movements of a billion cells. Third, the point applies generally to any actor at any scale; that is, the capacity to act and relate are scale-specific. Those cells are also only acting at the micrometre scale in response to relations only discernible at that scale.

The point is that we're often going more or less out of focus in our way of conceptualizing action. The term 'focus' here is less metaphorical when thinking in terms of scale; in a scientific mentality or vocabulary we're able to speak of a given entity in terms of another scale, which is a kind of being out of focus. Thus, we find the need to reassert the scale at which action occurs.

I'm responding here in terms of spatial scale first because temporal scale is harder in many ways, as the incremental marking of time doesn't permit the same clear parsing into units as objects. However, the same issues do occur in relation to the problem of our ability to act. This moment (now) is the temporal equivalent of the metre scale for the human body. This thought allows us to rearticulate a classic problem of temporality in terms of scale: the capacity to operate in memory or planning for the future can be thought of as a dislocation from the temporal scale of the present. I'm always thinking of this in terms of contemplative philosophies that emphasize the now as the kind of zero point of conscious attention. Just like with spatial scales, we're also always getting pulled away from the immediacy of the now. The more information that crowds in, the more we get pulled away. Spatial and temporal scaling exacerbate this crowding in to a whole new degree. This crowding creates the need to relocate in both space and time; the calibration to the scalar cosmos is possible only via the connection to the here and now.

Such calibration is both inherently slippery and in need of iteration. The problem exists from two directions. An overemphasis on the scale of experience is what is usually described as ego or *ahamkara* (the 'I-doer'). But the same also happens in the dislocation from the here and now. Many contemplative philosophies have already developed vocabularies for the need to resist the way we are pulled in both directions (the unfortunately obscure American philosopher Franklin Merrell-Wolff has an excellent version in Chapter 79 of his *Experi-*

*ence and Philosophy*).[5] The technoscientific conception of scale only compounds the problem as it builds out a more elaborate vocabulary and knowledge set for us to dislocate ourselves from the present. The result is an increasing distraction, with attention being overtaken and absorbed by these other scales of action, such that it becomes just as hard to keep the here and now in view as it is to keep in mind the scalar cosmos.

The final part of your question seems to operate from the widespread yet usually implicit assumption that we should want to 'expand' the field and implication. Why do we want to expand the field and implication? This is a version of scalar dislocation, whether in time or space. It is easy to assume that a bigger, longer-lasting impact is better. This usually obscures the way that any impact is made in conjunction with or alongside actions at other scales; those can't be skipped over, even if you don't see them because you aren't (viewing) at that scale. I always want to resist that temptation as it is often a way of getting ahead of ourselves or dislocating the scale at which action occurs and matters.

**ICI**: Relatedly: 'Contemplation', a term you use to apply insights from various mystic traditions, is, crucially, a *practice*. In that way it seems to chart a path between the perhaps exorbitant forms of revelation brought on by awareness of scale and the rigorous limits of everyday human activity. But how does this contemplation correspond to the demands of *political* practice, especially in the face of climate change — an example you often invoke? What would mass or even species-wide contemplation look like? Or would the insights of contemplation form a new moment within extant social forms: of science, ideology, interpersonal relations, and the like?

**JD**: At the end of Chapter 9 of *Scale Theory*, I indicate briefly that there might be something wrong or at least odd about the term 'political' when used in this way. What is that term attempting to point us to? We ought to tread carefully here as this pull to the political expressed

5 Franklin Merrell-Wolff, *Experience and Philosophy: A Personal Record of Transformation and a Discussion of Transcendental Consciousness* (State University of New York Press, 1994).

in the form of this question contains within it some scalar assumptions that must be examined. To talk about a 'political' practice could imply a question about the scalar movement whereby human activity becomes coordinated into larger-scale action. But 'political' can bundle up within it a set of assumptions about the points of reference and modes of action for that aggregation: ties to legal structures, questions of regulation and power, human-based concerns and values, and so on. To highlight the contrast, we might note that even to say 'social practice' does not quite carry the same assumptions or implications as 'political practice' even if they are both about human aggregate behaviour. Yet we need to go even further and note that aggregated metre-scale behaviour is not totally encompassed by either the social or the political. Of course, social and political practices are essential for human organization, but I think we should be wary of the way these come to occupy an outsize or even total conception of the scalar relationship between individual *Homo sapiens* action and larger-scale structures.

Consider the scalar analogue between a human body and its cells. Widespread assumptions about the humanist subject operate from the same assumptions about cells as this question does about practice: that in order for aggregate behaviour to be coordinated, adjusted, responsive, or to function, one requires a process that is intentional, planned, regulated, managed, controlled. These terms point to assumptions about scalar relations that attempt to constrain and direct the smaller-scale in relation to the larger-scale. Yet, to make your body move, do you directly control and manipulate these cells? For the cells to get what they need, do they rally together and make demands in a political sense? Perhaps. We might wonder, for instance, if hunger is the way a billion cells make their needs known to the body, and thus navigate us to food at the metre scale. But we should also not move too quickly; a careful examination of cross-scalar relations makes it quite clear that there are other modes of feedback and regulation that exist in quite different forms than what the political assumes about action.

This doesn't mean that there can't be political implications to this line of thought. It seems to me that part of the significance of many ideas of democracy is that they push against many assumptions about control in operation with prior political structures. Walt Whitman's

*Democratic Vistas*, for instance, speaks of the horizon of democracy as a politics that works from the assumption and trust that human behaviour and coordination might happen meteorologically or geologically. Similarly, the twentieth-century excitement about emergent behaviour runs into similar alternative possible understandings of the relationship between two scales of behaviour. However, the framing and response to systems theory and cybernetics only highlights the persistence or intensification of the problems brought by this insistence on the political as it becomes the stand-in for our scalar aggregation. Concurrent with the articulation of the emergent comes the alluring possibility that we could thereby control the emergence. This creates a new form of a classic assumption about control: that the identification of an emergent property gives one the means to control it. This trope is most clear in a figure like Norbert Wiener, but it recurs throughout systems theory and cybernetics and has become a default assumption within much of our discourse about governance. In this way, we preserve certain ideas of control at the very moment that our glimpse of the scalar complexities might allow us to forge a new attitude towards the aggregation — and, yes, even regulation — of human behaviour.

I've taken to calling this a 'managerial consciousness', which assumes that to respond to or solve a problem is to manage it directly and deliberately. The response to climate change is one of the most potent sites for this question today. A common assumption throughout the climate conversation is that the response to climate change requires immediate, widespread, global regulation on the part of political, legal, and economic structures. The escalating tensions around whether or not our efforts are enough emerges from the managerial assumption. To be clear, we can accept that anthropogenic climate change is real and a problem; that responding to it requires technical, political, and economic adjustments on a large scale; and that both personal (metre-scale) and aggregate (larger-scale) actions are needed. Yet, at the same time, we can push against the assumptions of a managerial consciousness that would posit that the need for a planetary-scale adjustment requires unification as unilateral management of the planet's populations through large-scale regulation and deliberately coordinated collective actions directly in response to the problem. If we examine the last thirty years of climate change rhetoric, what is often articulated

as a tension between climate denial and climate action also contains a resistance to using the need for a realignment of planetary-scale behaviours as the impetus to expand a managerial structure (this tension comes to a new clarity by the 2010s, as can be seen in a text like Naomi Klein's *This Changes Everything*).[6] Again, we can agree that some action is needed — by diplomatic entities such as the United Nations, by large fossil fuel-dependent countries, by multinational corporations, by billions of individuals — while also acknowledging that these things don't necessarily need to be managed in a focused and unilateral way in order for planetary-scale change to emerge. So, in relation to climate change, we might also note that the adjustments can and might be made without everyone being forced to agree to the same concerns and assumptions about climate action. In fact, the attempt to force the issue — to get everyone to agree or be on the same page — seems only to proliferate the opposite and build a suspicion towards action.

The problem is that managerial consciousness will claim any change while also claiming that we're never doing enough. The reason for this is built into the approach that management takes to scale: those operating under this assumption will never actually control the entire field of things within the planet. Already decades past the heralded points of no return, this is where we sit: very many things have been done, adjustments and responses are widespread, and yet for those who imagine that the only way to respond is to directly manage, they both claim the adjustments as a result of their efforts and also insist that we do not have the solution and have not done enough. The reality is: there are literally too many things going on, and the effects and forms of those adjustments must be worked out at those scales.

To assist us in highlighting this change of thinking, we might experiment with an alternative articulation: the adjustment of the planet to these billions of *Homo sapiens* it has produced is the planet's affair. Part of its adjustment involves planetary management by some groups of humans, to be sure, but there is an incredible variety of things that can and are going on. This is not a blind optimism or a shutting of one's eyes to what must happen, but a more honest recognition of the limits

6 Naomi Klein, *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs the Climate* (Simon & Schuster, 2014).

and dangers of managerial thinking. To say that the opposite of global management (for example, via formal political interventions such as treaties or agreements) is doing nothing assumes that action must start from and operate through these formalized human organizations, that political bodies are the equivalent of the scale of the planet. Note that this is also a dystopic premise in which the large creates absolute demands on the small. In any case, this attitude amplifies the scalar synecdoche that is forged and held in place by the managerial assumption as well as the idea of making a difference as being tied to a larger and longer effect.

In response, we need to examine alternatives to these bundled assumptions. To start in this direction, we can note that any switch between scale domains — in this case, between the metre and the planet — will always create problems of information density and the distribution of entities. There are simply too many things going on at any given scale. These things are operating in a way that, for them to serve as coherent information and to prompt a response at another scale, they would have to be aggregated. Doing so would lose the specific instantiation of them. Managerial consciousness jumps too persistently and quickly between the two scales, yet the information about what is happening at the smaller scale will never be fully available for larger-scale regulation, nor will larger-scale action ever apply in the same way to all entities at a smaller scale.

The issue, in our leaping between or conflating the two scales together, is that too strong a managerial consciousness always leaves out too much of reality. Contemplation is a method of attuning to the unknown as the excess of what you do and can know, looking at and accepting — integrating into your calibration — what you are leaving out as the recognition of the limit of managerial direction. This is not positive knowledge ('I know what I don't know') but rather a cloud of unknowing that one feels positive knowledge and action acting within — like knowing how to type this while also feeling how much is not known about how the cells are operating, where these words will go, what effect they will have. Thus, I am resisting the turn to the political specifically for the way it indulges and generalizes a managerial

consciousness, which is really an extension of what I call in *Scale Theory* an ego-structure problem.[7]

Having followed this line of thought, we might then ask what contemplation could look like at a larger scale. First, we should note that a single metre-scale *Homo sapiens*'s contemplation will never be that. Yet, it seems clear that insufficient contemplation by individual humans permits us to replicate these assumptions in our work with other scales; in fact, we seem to be caught in this loop in which we distract ourselves from contemplation in order to attempt to get more people to buy into the managerial assumption so that management might appear more unilateral.

Contemplation as practice would have to be about letting go of the managerial assumption, of allowing the larger reality to enter, to yield to the higher power (which is not a political structure) beyond human control. I do think that the planet is trying to figure out how to do that, but what it feels like for you or me will also have this scalar disjunction. How could we know what this alternative would feel or look like at a larger scale if we don't undertake the practice at the scale at which our experience is produced?

**ICI**: You discuss mysticism and its scalar stakes at length in your book. Is it possible to think of (broadly related) practices of divination or possession in scalar terms as well? Do you think they can be understood as cross-scalar encounters in some way, or even 'as a function of the cosmos's ability to parse itself'?[8] For instance: the possessed are seen as acting here and now (at the human/metre scale), yet simultaneously channelling more-than-human scales or forces. Somewhat similarly, divination can consist in a reading of events or signs on or from a different scale domain — from the geocosmic scale of the stars or seismic tremors or atmospheric events to minor, seemingly insignificant overheard phrases or occurrences (as outlined by Daniel Heller-Roazen in his recent book *Far Calls* about such 'minor' divinatory signs)[9] — that are 'humanly' translated, invested with meaning, or embedded in the everyday temporality and structure of sense.

7 DiCaglio, *Scale Theory*, p. 35.

8 DiCaglio, 'Scale Tricks and God Tricks', p. 489.

9 Daniel Heller-Roazen, *Far Calls: On Omens, Slips, and Epiphanies* (Zone Books, 2025).

**JD**: In response to this question, I want to rearticulate some of what I discuss in Chapter 10 of *Scale Theory* from a different angle. Let's accept for a moment that the scalar schematic of what is now grouped together as mainstream science is accurate. There are all kinds of things at different scales, from subatomic particles emitting radiation from within any atom to ribosomes processing proteins through instructions encoded by DNA, to tectonic shifts slowly crushing entire continents together over the course of millions of years, to the collisions of galaxies unfolding over hundreds of millions of years. These large-scale entities and actions are enormous and we're part of them; the small-scale entities are not lesser but are also everywhere and more numerous, and therefore in certain senses even more in play. Science didn't discover these phenomena in some separate way or bring these things into being. The philosophical assumption of scientific knowledge is that these things are and have been there, regardless of whether or not they have been 'discovered', which largely means differentiated, defined, and described.

By this same assumption, then, we could certainly accept that the same 'things' — atomic radiation, cellular activity, tectonic movements, gravitational influences — were parts of existence before and are parts of existence beyond whatever scientists have had the capacity, time, and effort to discern and define. Does that mean we had no encounter with them outside of or before the methods of science mapped them in this way? Of course not. We must also assume these entities are and were part of existence. If so, then these entities and actions are and have been in operation. It is therefore also a reasonable thing to say that there are other descriptions of these same entities that are cross-scalar encounters. It is also fair to say that there are likely other things science has not yet come to parse which are still in operation and that might, at this point, be better described by terms and ideas not currently accepted by science.

A certain rhetorical framework of science makes this argument in a historical and exclusionary sense, suggesting that things like bacteria were understood as demons, for example, but now we understand that they are *actually* bacteria. This argument is an artefact of the manoeuvre by which science has gained authority through a denigration or dismissal of the descriptions that it comes to replace, even as it

might be describing some of the same phenomena in a new way. For example, while the concepts of the ether and dark matter are not the same in their descriptive form, they could be two attempts to direct us to the same aspects of reality. One could at least be open about the possibility that other descriptions also operate within this same kind of shift, without inherently dismissing what science adds in its particular way of narrowing the range of appropriate description. This is where I return to the point that the epistemic processes of science are always inherently limited in how they describe things; their certainty is also their specificity. There is still a lot of room for describing other forms of relating to and understanding reality.

In this line of argument, I don't want or need to reduce alternative epistemologies to a scientific epistemology by assuming that all these other descriptions of the beyond-the-human are actually just the entities described by science. I'm not saying, for instance, that ideas of the world spirit are *actually* planetary biofeedback mechanisms. Rather, I am only trying to highlight that the epistemic authority of science is also a descriptive authority that doesn't foreclose alternatives as completely as is usually imagined, especially within scientific practice.

Now we can turn to the kind of phenomena that this question is trying to highlight to push against a misplaced descriptive authority. The attitude often taken to the descriptions of science seems to operate under a philosophy of language that makes it impossible to recognize that its highly regulated descriptions are simply one limited and specific way of understanding and describing reality. It's as if I were standing in my driveway and said to a friend, 'Behold, the hunk of a hundred metals and crushed bones sucked into a planetary supply chain and folded by machines and hands into a beast whereby the remains of a billion years of life are combusted for the express purpose of moving our little bodies to work', and they responded, 'Dude, it's just a car.' Except the descriptive arrogance of many scientific attitudes would say something more: either that's wrong or that description is unnecessary — it's just extra, flowery, aesthetic, and so on. What this is — actually is — is a car. There are a host of assumptions in this response, the least of which is that it mixes together questions of epistemology (what we are knowing) with a question of language, regulating the latter as if it were the former. But varieties in language

are also varieties in attitudes towards the same entities; they are not in this instance as much a matter of veracity (both descriptions given are true) as to do with the way the language prompts us to relate to and understand these entities.

Because science translates this epistemological carefulness into descriptive precision, science is not built for the broader task of examining and working with alternative modes of description concerned with broader human experiences and relations with the cosmos. The methods of science are designed to delimit what can be said according to very specific terms; it will consider anything outside of this unnecessary, misleading, or incorrect. However, the problem here is not science, but the widespread dismissal of attitudes towards reality that would warrant other less scientific modes of description. This is what I would encourage us to experiment with, particularly as we think about alternative epistemologies that will engage with the cosmos through different forms of relation that are also different terms, myths, and arguments. So, yes, that can and probably should include different attitudes towards these other phenomena that people find meaningful and that recur as attempts to describe our more-than-human relations.

**ICI**: You borrow the phrase 'differences that make a difference' from Gregory Bateson, the anthropologist and cyberneticist. Do you see scale, as you define it, as being a way of figuring cybernetics as an approach? Can you speak a bit more about how cybernetics has informed your work, and how its very specific lineage relates to the question of scale?

**JD**: Cybernetics has always been an essential component of my thinking and my approach to scale. As I worked on the project, I spent a lot of time reading and thinking about Gregory Bateson, including spending some time in the Bateson archives. However, I don't think of cybernetics as an 'approach' as much as a moment when the discourses around science transformed, allowing certain questions to be opened and articulations examined. I like to speak of these moments as 'science eating itself' — moments in the history of science when, using certain assumptions about what is true and appropriate, scientists are forced to revise or question those same assumptions.

There are three such assumptions of interest in the cybernetic moment. First, basic premises of mechanistic philosophy are questioned in a new way. In cybernetics, at least as it is recognized by Bateson and others (especially Heinz von Foerster), causality is no longer a straightforward cause and effect; rather, most action becomes a loop within a complex system. Second, this fits within and provides new importance to a certain notion of information, both in the sense of action as an in-formation and in the sense of the action of matter becoming, at least in part, not a reaction between a set of inert entities but rather a set of exchanges that is structured more like communication than a clockwork system. Third, in this looped form, especially for Bateson but also for systems theorists such as Ludwig von Bertalanffy, these first two assumptions also reposition causality, action, and observation at multiple simultaneously existing levels — what I then describe in relation to scale.

The problem is that mechanistic assumptions are very powerful, and following the cybernetic moment of the 1950s and 1960s the unravelling of these assumptions becomes more-or-less forgotten or covered over. A parallel is the way that Bertrand Russell's and Alfred North Whitehead's struggle with their crisis of mathematics was more-or-less shrugged off after Kurt Gödel (but not for Bateson, who was obsessed with their problem of logical types; he is one source of my interest in this concept). Just as mathematics remained a powerful system for mapping reality despite the impossibility of proving itself, the descriptive power of a multi-scale, informatic, looped system for understanding action and intervening in these systems allows or even encourages us to pretend as if mechanistic assumptions have continued untouched. The more we build (or, more appropriately, we should say 'enable') complex cybernetic systems across scales, the more we become taken with the same hubris at the core of the mechanistic strategy of stringing along a simple system.

So, I don't want to think of cybernetics as an approach but as a moment in the history of thought and science for us to return to in order to rediscover open questions that continue to be passed over. We have and will continue to have our manifestations of these problems, not only through new manifestations such as the problem of planetary biofeedback but also because our planetary systems were in

fact not built on mechanistic assumptions but on looped, informatic, scalar understandings. It therefore becomes a particularly important moment to return to for tracing out how we manage to ignore the implications and transformations brought by new developments in a technoscientific capacity to describe and intervene in the world.

**ICI**: Towards the beginning of your book, you describe scale as producing a 'situated dislocation'. That is, scale cannot be stably or definitively attributed to a single perspective, since it 'dislocates the perspective from the delimited structure of the body even as it accounts for this dislocation'. You call your approach 'nondisciplinary' as a way of marking your study off from scientific approaches to scale that presume an impossible stability of their preferred perspectives. In light of your intervention, how can specific disciplines — physics, biology — manifest a sensitivity to 'situated dislocation'?

**JD**: The short answer is this: through marking their specificity. In science, expertise is in part the ability to parse the world at a particular scale, with particular methods for differentiating at that scale, and particular terminology for tracking the entities discernible through this differentiation. By becoming an expert, one learns to see the world in this particular way. The expertise would be incoherent if it was not already a situated dislocation. What the biologist is able to say with confidence about the way that ribosomes take code from RNA in order to facilitate the folding of proteins requires that we have delimited the perspective of the cell according to those objects, which require the biologist to focus on particular aspects of the world at a particular scale. No mutual comprehension between the biologist and the atomic-scale physicist, for instance, would be possible if the two ways of being dislocated were not situated in relation to each other. The organic chemist already examines the situated relationship between the two scales.

To some extent, when the organic chemist is working through methods and appropriate data, they are already sorting through the specific parameters of their way of parsing the world at that scale. The problems arise when one thinks this is the only way of viewing the world or when one doesn't work with the specificity that this expertise

creates. The physicist's reductionist assumption has long been the epitome of this problem, as the assumption that to explain the smaller is to explain the larger (think, especially, of the recurrent idea of a theory of everything) often gets in the way of needing to note the specificity of the way that mode of knowledge is looking at the world.

The hubris of the reductionist physicist is only a simpler version of two general problems that the idea of 'situated dislocation' is meant to remedy: first, that in parsing the world outside of the scales of human experience, science will always produce a situated dislocation; second, that these changes between sciences are creating multiple overlaid situated perspectives that require a multilayered yet not always straightforward alignment of ways of parsing the world.

The first problem is one primary target that Donna Haraway was pointing to in resituating knowledge. The easiest way to do this is to mark the relationship between the perspective that makes the knowledge possible and the perspective of the human. The critique of the 'view from above' rendered this in physical terms; to convert it into more general scalar terms, we would say that to produce knowledge about planetary phenomena (for example, plate tectonics, climate change) is already a 'view from above' that views the Earth from this larger perspective. To situate this dislocation is to mark the transformation in perspective in relation to the metre-scale perspective where humans sit. The second problem then extends the first problem into many layers of objects and processes that relate to each other in much the same way. The confusing array of descriptions of science has to be placed together as many simultaneous perspectives.

Both of these create issues that are conceptual and communicative. Within scientific practice, scientists have addressed them by tracking the perspectives and terms used at any given scale. Again, this is primarily a methodological question, and most sciences have some means of addressing these problems. But all scientists, like all humans, still need to deal with the ways in which knowledge derived from any other scale domain produces a situated dislocation. We feel this need to situate the dislocation most in our attempt to understand the implication of scientific knowledge outside of the strictly limited contexts in which that knowledge is produced, whether in the communication about it,

the attempt to respond to it either personally or politically, or in the way it changes our understanding of ourselves in the cosmos.

The most potent way to remedy the problems generated by situated dislocation is via a marking of what one doesn't know or see when taking a particular perspective. This acknowledges the other perspective that may be brought into relation with this perspective. Scientists do this implicitly when they switch scales seamlessly between sciences. In doing so, they don't always notice the situated relocation, except as a method problem or in explicit conversations about scale (this is the original problem of scale as articulated by the ecologist Simon Levin). As a method problem, the not-knowing usually appears as an irrelevance — something that doesn't, or doesn't need to, register at that level — or as degrees of certainty within a complex system.

However, in the broader contexts in which scientific knowledge traffics, it becomes more important to acknowledge this unknowing in the gaps between the specific certainties of science. To unpack what this means in practice, we can highlight three ways these problems manifest in the relationship between scientific practice and their 'lay' contexts:

1. When one discipline thinks they have the answer that another also says it has the answer for. For instance, a disagreement between the cause of a disease that would tie it to environmental questions versus a genetic one.
2. When a scientific fact relevant at one scale does not provide a clear template for another scale. For instance, DNA codes do not provide a straightforward explanation of metre-scale bodily features except in limited cases. More knowledge must be produced about how DNA translates to proteins, which translate to cells, which translate to bodies. These perspectives have to be aligned.
3. When a scientific fact relevant at one scale does not provide a clear template for a particular intervention. From a smaller scale to a larger scale, the understanding that cancers are caused by uncontrolled replication doesn't provide a clear template for intervention in the way that understanding a disease is caused by a

> bacteria might. From a larger scale to a smaller scale, facts about climate change don't provide a clear template for understanding what changes are needed to collective human behaviour or how to produce that change.

In each case, there are science questions that are about differentiating what is happening and what can be said about the particular scales at which the matters of concern emerge. But in each case, there are also broader contexts and questions — other scales of relevance — that require us to acknowledge the gaps and changes being brought together in the matter. Doing so requires some practice of noticing the difference in understanding, including the varying terminologies, forms of knowledge, and ways of conceptualizing the points of concern, whether this is between scientists (a biologist working with a climate scientist to determine the relationship between carbon cycles and forests), or scientists working with the implications for collective action (climate scientists working with a policy expert).

**ICI**: Your critique of posthumanism in large part involves describing what you call its 'scalism', its privileging of certain scales over others, the better to displace humanist notions of agency. Your concept of situated dislocation, however, allows us to glimpse the 'human' or the 'subject' at a variety of scales, depending on what questions we hope to answer in a given inquiry. What are the implications of this for our understanding of agency?

**JD:** Most threads of posthumanism are about the insufficiency of a certain idea of human agency. In response, many scholars have spoken about non-human agency, whether that's the actants in Latourian approaches, Karen Barad's conception of agential realism, or otherwise. It is easy, as this conversation continues, to assume something about what we mean by 'human' and 'agency', as we speak of some action (agency) in relation to a contrasting entity: the non-human. A key point of Chapter 8 of *Scale Theory* was to not move too quickly past the confusion brought by these two terms: 'human agency'. In a scalar schematic, humans can be a lot of things and lots of things can be human, depending on what is being invoked by the term 'human'. Cells, when

coordinated in the right way, are humans; humans become understood as cells when viewed at the microscale. However, in many posthumanist lines of thought, the critique of the human is less targeted at some *Homo sapiens* body (which the last sentence assumed was indicated by 'human') than the idea of action, thought, reason, communication, awareness, and so on as being localizable in a contained and definitive way. Again, the core argumentative strategy for disrupting these terms is to say: Could reason exist without the oxygen and carbon dioxide pumping through these neurons? Could action be produced without the properties of molecules in conjunction with each other?

That doesn't mean that action, thought, reason, communication, and awareness don't exist or ought to be scrubbed from our language and thought. Still, the way this last sentence was phrased doesn't quite capture the problem and the method I'd like to adopt in relation to it. Here we can invoke a classic trope in Indian philosophy that becomes important with these matters: in response to some philosophical question, the Buddhist sage might respond simply, 'Don't think that way' (for an illustration, see the Diamond Sutra). 'Does action still exist without the humanist subject?' Don't think that way. Instead, I'd convert this question into: 'What might the term "action" indicate once action has been reconfigured in a scalar schematic?'

One can arrive at this approach from a number of directions, but *Scale Theory* arrives at it through noticing that most of these terms are usually conceptualized in a nonscalar way; that is, one conceptualization of agency (often said to be 'humanist') can be created only through a nonscalar view, where there is a clear human agent walking around picking things up, doing things, having conversations, and so on. This clear agent is then undermined or reconfigured by what scalar knowledge brings into view, but in a confusing relationship to that entity: What has this human become when they become an agent of the Earth or walking, talking microbes (to repeat Lynn Margulis's lovely phrase)? In this change, the idea of the human as agent has become displaced, but the appearance of the human at the metre scale remains. At these other scales, it's as if we have a term ('human' or 'agent') but we're not sure what to pin it on. Where has the clear subject called 'human' gone? Is human perception in the photons streaming through the cells of the cornea? But then, looking away from the microscope

(either literally or just in the sense of setting aside these terminologies and perspectives), there are still these people walking around, who appear to be agents.

All these terms, but especially 'human' and 'agency', become confused when moving between these scales. Now, when I return to reading the conversation around posthumanism, I am still astonished by how many thinkers can use these terms with so much certainty, even in critique. One response to confusion is to try to fight the ambiguity and variety of uses via definition, but this misses the point: the confusion about what we mean by these terms is itself the openness to the way these terms might function differently in different contexts. This openness can't be avoided: these terms have been transformed in multiple ways depending on the scale in question.

The term 'agency' is more troublesome in this regard than 'human', as agency implies a certain schematic form for understanding interaction in relation to an entity — the agent — to which action can be ascribed — especially action as the form of a response to a stimulus — or some version of this, depending on the thinker. At the heart of this attempt to preserve or reassert agency is, I think, an attempt to rebut the mechanistic assumption that action should not and cannot be ascribed to any entity at all, but rather is to be cordoned off into 'motions' that are governed by rules or laws of something called 'forces'. Yet, these are really just two ways of diagramming the movements and orders of the process of the world (we might return to Whitehead's *Science and the Modern World* for a version of this line of thought). If we consider these diagrams in relation to the long history of the assumption that the non-human equals inertness equals the right to be manipulated, then yes, one strategy is to try to double down on agency, and sometimes, as the recent work on the inhuman in Black studies does, to reassert both the human and agency despite these displacements.

Still, I wonder what language game is being played within these theoretical conversations and why, especially as they persistently mix up various scales, points of concern, and languages that we might have about them. In certain cases, depending on the way the matter is laid out, it makes a difference what you consider to be human and what you consider to have agency — but not always and not in the

same way. In short, the approach I try to take does not give up the human or agency but tries to understand the way those terms have functioned and continue to function. I don't see this as new, although perhaps it always remains a radical and difficult approach, but this is my understanding of the way critical theory has been trying to approach these questions at least since Michel Foucault. If I am adding anything to this method, it is to insist on the uncertainty and openness that too often becomes foreclosed in practice.

In addition, I also insistently push against the way 'agency' seems to be the only alternative to mechanistic conceptions of motion in many of these critical threads. The idea of agency shares many of the same concerns as are discussed in relation to the politics above, particularly as the attempt to reassert agency often comes out of struggles over who gets to have a say in human structures and who doesn't. Expanding conceptions of agency to new levels of the cosmos (say, talking about planetary agency in the Anthropocene conversation, or molecular agency in Karen Barad, or electrical agency in Jane Bennett, or cellular agency in Samantha Frost) is never a straightforward and generally applicable context and extension. I do see great value in the act of re-diagramming these conceptions of action to acknowledge that material is not inert; doing so is perhaps a necessary step for new conceptions of interaction and coordination. However, these manoeuvres are often built from an extension of a language and concepts of human political and social relations in which agency is ascribed to a specific entity and tied to certain ideas of responsibility, intention, and so on. As I indicated above, we need to make space for an alternative — the alternative that is always the contemplative manoeuvre of *voiding* agency by yielding up the assumption of oneself as agent: not my will, but the will of the cosmos. This is an alternative way of voiding the toxic forms of a certain mechanistic technocratic thinking. It also generalizes something like agency and can be an animism, but not one that assumes what many conceptions of 'agency' tend to assume: that the action is replicated in other entities in the way that humans often reserve for themselves. A scalar conception also needs some conception of a surrender to these higher powers, recognition of the various powers within us, and a yielding to the fractal unfolding that any given point is inevitably and beautifully wedged within. In a political context, this

release feels dangerous in part because others have inserted themselves as the higher power, and systems of exclusion and exploitation have necessitated a fight for agency and power. In that context, we become suspicious of surrender and release and forget them as alternatives, despite the fact that such cosmic recognitions recur as both personal and political premises in many times and places. It is easy to cite, for instance, the Bhagavad Gita, which is about these recognitions operating within and despite political action, or the defiant answer Jesus gives to Pontius Pilate: 'You have no power over me if it were not given to you from above' (John 19:11). This is why I insist in Chapter 8 of *Scale Theory* that the cosmos is the agent; we can provide a more animistic or agency-laden metaphysics without claiming that action or motion needs to be inherently and totally localizable into entities that we assume are the origin and authority for the action in question.

We can't skip by this recognition, or else we will always forget that action always has more within it than what might be diagrammed within any particular interaction. This is the risk of many ways of generalizing agency, especially those that extend the political and social conception into a broader metaphysical conception, as many versions of actor-network theory, assemblage theory, and agential realism may do. These describe everything as a play of forces, but this play of forces seems to replicate at every scale the struggles and fights we associate with human sociality. In contrast, the contemplative conception of agency as both within and beyond any given thing that can be designated as an 'agent' is a way of marking the not-knowing and the excess of action within any given instantiation of interaction.

Only then can we come to a practical inquiry into agency or a similar term that your question poses. With that openness in mind, I will say that your question hits directly at the next step when it states 'depending on what questions we hope to answer'. A matter of concern, desired intervention, or point of knowledge brings into view a particular configuration of reality that one is attempting to interact with. Doing so creates the possibility of diagramming for a particular end what is acting and how. If you want to create a cell from another cell, there needs to be particular things acting in particular ways. Likewise, if you want to figure out how to adjust human behaviour in response to

climate change, mitigate a spreading pandemic, or determine that lead is in fact the toxic molecule causing certain conditions.

In these examples, it is important to keep in mind that humans as metre-scale entities are the ones making the inquiries. Or we might say that humans are the metre-scale appendages of the cosmos who have become adept at making such inquiries and enabling new modes of involution and information for the planet and the cosmos. In which case, if the 'human' here is the capacity for tracing these flows of interaction across multiple scales, then that is certainly extended in our inquiries and interventions. Yet we don't want to forget the primary concern: that the action and knowledge is not unilaterally focused on what *Homo sapiens* can do at the metre scale. Yielding this action and knowledge to the cosmos as agent opens us up to track which parts of the cosmos (here a virus, here a metre-scale human agent, here a planetary transportation network) contribute to a phenomenon (a viral infection, an illness, a pandemic).

Is it valuable to speak of agency at each of these levels? Perhaps, insofar as we need to mark the actions as emergent in particular aspects of the cosmos and functionally tie the force of their presence to the particularity of the scale and form able to operate at a given level.

Is it valuable to notice the human at each of these levels? Perhaps, insofar as we need to mark how actions and understandings at the metre scale by *Homo sapiens* relate to these objects and processes at other scales.

Still, as we struggle with the fallout of the efficiency and variety of interventions enabled by these humans the Earth has sprouted, one can't help but wonder if we need to experiment more thoroughly with alternative modes of diagramming and describing these interactions that are less tied to the human and their hubristic notion of the agent.

# Fanon Degree Zero

TOBI HASLETT

1.

It was not an open letter: at first, this point seems pointless, too obvious to bother noting. When Frantz Fanon vacated his position at the Blida-Joinville psychiatric hospital in December 1956, two years into the Algerian Revolution, he did so, unremarkably, with a letter of resignation. It landed on the desk of Robert Lacoste, then Resident Minister of French Algeria. Since Blida-Joinville was a colonial hospital, Lacoste was Fanon's boss. The text was published only posthumously; it was *not* an open letter.

What, then, explains the rhetorical vehemence of the text itself? A letter of resignation is usually tight-lipped and pro forma. In Fanon's hands it became a bracing, sonorous, paradoxical performance of both defiance and regality, vigour and exasperation, triumphant pathos and frank despair. In short, the text is *Fanonian* — almost unnecessarily so. It expressed not only his refusal to take part in the French occupation as a physician, but also a total, if succinct, condemnation of colonialism as a form of rule: 'A society that forces its members into desperate solutions is a non-viable society, a society that needs replacing.'[1] We know

1 Frantz Fanon, 'Letter to the Resident Minister', in Fanon, *Alienation and Freedom*, ed. by Jean Khalfa and Robert J. C. Young, trans. by Steven Corcoran (Bloomsbury, 2018), pp. 433–36 (p. 435).

very few details about his flight from Blida — mostly that Lacoste responded to his letter, predictably, by ordering Fanon's expulsion from Algeria. In any case, it was time to leave. His anticolonial sympathies were by that point well known. He had also begun to exploit his post as *médecin-chef de service* to provide assistance to the Front de Libération National (FLN): supplying the field hospital with morphine and bandages, and even treating and concealing fighters on the Blida-Joinville premises. Just before his departure, the house he shared with his wife and son was struck by a small bomb, likely planted by white settlers who had heard about Dr. Fanon.[2] He could have expressed himself more discreetly, then. He must have known that his message would be shared with the police.

Yet 'Letter to the Resident Minister' presents, with diagrammatic explicitness, a picture of Blida-Joinville hospital as an objective impossibility: a project negated by its placement in the matrix of colonial force. Psychiatry could not be practised under conditions secured by violence and refreshed by violence. The distinctly Fanonian flavour of the letter isn't just a matter of its passionate elegance, then, but also how it runs arpeggio-like through theoretical registers and disciplinary categories. It advances claims that are logical, historical, ethical, and, crucially, clinical — a variety and juxtaposition made more striking by the brevity of the text. (When it was at last published in the posthumous collection *Toward the African Revolution*, the letter came to just three pages.) There are the appeals to rationality: 'The troubles in Algeria are the logical consequence of an abortive attempt to decerebralize a people.' There are harsh clarifications of the French colonial past: 'This is neither an accident nor a breakdown in the mechanism.' There is an invocation of values: 'For long months, my conscience has been the seat of unpardonable debates.' And there is the functional, practical assessment of the status of mental treatment in the midst of racial-supremacist counterrevolution — a political predicament that effectively mandates madness: 'If psychiatry is the medical technique that sets out to enable individuals no longer to be foreign to their environment, I owe it to myself to state that the Arab, permanently alienated in his own country, lives in a state of absolute depersonalization.'[3]

2 David Macey, *Frantz Fanon: A Biography* (Picador, 2000), p. 300.

3 Fanon, 'Letter', pp. 434–35.

That year, the FLN had called a one-day general strike, prompting brutal retribution by the colonial regime, which in turn compelled Fanon to present his departure, in his letter, as a reaction to the authorities' 'literally irrational' response. Quitting would, famously, mark the start of Fanon's deepened and direct participation in the resistance, albeit from exile in Tunisia. To continue fighting for Algeria, he had to flee it. Faced with the general strike's shuttering of shops and mass withdrawal of labour, the doctor elected to leave his job. This was fitting for a man who five years later wrote that the revolutionary task of the colonized bourgeoisie was to 'betray the vocation to which it is destined' — a mission, he stated clearly, that it would almost always fail.[4]

2.

Why start here, with Fanon's letter, a text cited with such reverent frequency? For one thing, its idiosyncrasies stun the reader: the simultaneous renunciation and denunciation; the mixture of philosophical intensity and bureaucratic functionality; the authoritative invocation of his middle-class profession at the very point when he decides to forfeit that calling indefinitely; and Fanon's attempt to be faithful to the general strike, revolutionary praxis in its most popular form, despite the fact that his own text is pitched at no real public (it was *not* an open letter). Then there's the fact that, as a resignation that prompts an expulsion order, the letter is a speech act that triggers another speech act, inviting us to examine the operations Fanon performs both with — and upon — writing itself.

Just as the drive to 'unleash the man' trapped within the fact of blackness compels Fanon to fashion a new concept, *sociogeny* — denoting how the psychology of racial existence must be bound to 'a brutal awareness of social and economic realities' — Fanon's textual corpus acts out, again and again, a series of ferocious collisions: between writing's metaphysics *and* its pragmatics, its formalism *and* its situated specificity, as it revokes and revises the images it flashes before our eyes. Fanon's texts pose problems, perform inquiries, trace the

4 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. by Richard Philcox (Grove Press, 2004), p. 99.

silhouette of (non-)being; his texts also splinter against the opacity of historical cataclysm, and bare themselves to the jaggedness of political contingency and revolt. These twinned functions produce a distinct form of reflexivity. This is a mode of writing that routinely crashes against the limits of its own capacities, only to be revivified, electrified, propelled by the force of the crash, as these moments of blockage and incomprehension amount, paradoxically, to a further unveiling of the colonial predicament. As he writes in *A Dying Colonialism*, 'every time we do not understand, we must tell ourselves that we are at the heart of the drama — that of the impossibility of finding a meeting ground in any colonial situation.'[5] *The impossibility of finding a meeting ground*: this image of non-mediation and aborted overcoming should make clear that in discussing the relentless movement of Fanon's writing, we are registering more than his style. At stake in this essay is his specific debt to, adaptation of, and assaults on the Hegelian dialectic. The shattering of its assumptions and reinvention of its forms will bring us closer, as we shall see below, to the 'heart of the drama'.

In that colonial drama, writing itself plays a special role. As a practice, it is significant both for the European colonizer, who imposes his signs and forms of knowledge as a machinery of domination, as well as for the colonized, on the dark side of the 'Manichaean world'.[6] Among the wretched, writing is assigned a specific and exclusionary class character (though we will note the intriguing dimensions that 'class' assumes in Fanon's work). Writing belongs to the professions, to the universities: it is the 'intellectual and technical capital' that the native bourgeoisie fails to put to proper use, but which must be seized, *against that class's impulses and most immediate interests*, for revolutionary transformation. This seizure is crucial, and complex. When Fanon describes the anguish of the 'educated black man' in *Black Skin, White Masks*, or the dilemma of the 'native intellectual' in *The Wretched of the Earth*, it matters that he is, from a certain perspective, describing versions of himself. This social stratum, the object of such vituperative passion across his oeuvre, is the place from which his own texts

5 Frantz Fanon, *A Dying Colonialism*, trans. by Haakon Chevalier (Grove Press, 1965), p. 125.

6 Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, p. 6.

spring. This observation is meant neither as a sociological explanation of Fanon's texts, nor as a biographical reduction of them. Rather, this fact brings the Fanon reader face to face with his writing's vigorous performative procedures: how the work lives and moves in the blasted landscape of the colony.

3.

It is the contention of this essay that the figure of the colonial petty bourgeois that twists across Fanon's works as failure, traitor, blunderer, self-deceiver, but strangely vital player in the revelation of sociogeny and the dramaturgy of revolt is defined powerfully by that class's role as the bearer of writing. This will help us to reread Fanon's own. I say *writing*, not just to summon the aromatic theoretical Frenchness of *écriture* — though this essay will pass, somewhat perversely, through a consideration of Roland Barthes — but because Fanon's corpus is, among other things, a disaster from the standpoint of genre. His first book, often read as philosophy, was a rejected dissertation in psychiatry. His second book might be considered a dialectical species of political journalism, though after his death his French publisher Maspero retitled it *Sociologie d'une révolution*. Fanon's last book, unclassifiable, contains elements of each. And now we have the awesome task of reading all of these works again, in light of his recently published psychiatric texts, mostly from Blida-Joinville and Tunisia, presented for the first time in a volume that, notably, also includes his plays.

'Writing', then: this term will fit our purposes better than 'literature', 'philosophy', 'scholarship', or even 'theory'. That last might tempt us to presume too much about its revolutionary counterpart 'praxis', the dimensions of which Fanon hoped to reformulate and explode. We're told in *The Wretched of the Earth* that violence, since it constitutes the very 'atmosphere' for the colonized,[7] must also be their 'absolute praxis'.[8] What kind of textual production is adequate to this absolute? Not a handbook, not a pamphlet, not a bullet-pointed programme. Nor does Fanon insist on particular tactics or declare a new ideology. Like his letter to Lacoste, his writing will move between many

7 Ibid., p. 31.
8 Ibid., p. 44.

genres and disciplines, in the hope of conjuring the vastness and overdetermination of the colonial antagonism using the 'intellectual and technical capital' — psychiatry, existentialism, phenomenology, political economy, *négritude*, not to mention the specific brio of the French rhetorical tradition — that at the same time pins him, unmistakably, to his delimited class location.

The scalar aspect of writing thus comes into view. In fact, the question of scale becomes central. The activity of the colonized intellectual is presented as confined to a minoritarian niche, subject to sequestration in the city, and — like a private resignation letter penned with the declamatory brilliance of an open one — running the perpetual risk of having no appropriate audience for its exertions, ambitions, or manifestations of crisis. But through a series of distinctly Fanonian negations, the petty bourgeois intellectual's fumbles and stutters manage to illuminate and intervene in a *total* colonial scene. Discerning the place of this minor, flailing figure in the national liberation process affords us special insight into the absolute atmosphere of annihilation that must be parsed through sociogenic analysis and eradicated through decolonizing praxis.

But the nation is not simply spatial. The perilous particularity of the native intellectual's writing also corresponds to a sense of lurching between plural *temporal* scales. One of these scales is brutal, punctual: the ruthless tempo of liberation war. Another scale is marked by lag: the long process of tending to the psychic lacerations wrought by colonialism. This is what Fanon refers to, introducing his chapter on 'Colonial War and Mental Disorders', as the 'many years to come [in which] we shall be bandaging the countless and sometimes indelible wounds inflicted on our people'.[9] But even insurrectionary punctuality is shot through with untimeliness — the typical revolutionary mixture of premature and overdue actions — and the extended process of healing is slashed by the immediacy of psychotic symptoms. In Fanon's texts, then, colonial domination is shown both to exacerbate the burden of history and assert its harrowing openness. His writing must therefore deploy the vast reserves of petty bourgeois 'intellectual and technical capital' to find new ways of expressing history's antinomic

9 Ibid., p. 181.

impasses *and* its irrepressible surges, its homicidal urgency *and* its constitutive dislocations, from the vantage of a Janus-faced moment of self-invention and complete destruction — what he refers to in *The Wretched of the Earth*'s first paragraph as a 'tabula rasa'.[10] A clean slate: a metaphor for overthrow, and an image of the erasure of writing.

4.

When Cedric Robinson decried the 'petit-bourgeois stink' of *Black Skin, White Masks* in an essay from 1993, he meant to throw into relief the triumph that is *The Wretched of the Earth*. The revolutionary character of Fanon's final work supposedly neutralizes the preciousness of his first one, a book that for Robinson lingers too long in the fetid ambiance of psychoanalysis — hence the 'stink'.[11] This is an insult, of course, as well as one particular way of approaching a more general riddle. How to read *across* Fanon's works? How to chart the links and discontinuities that mark an oeuvre and life often seen, however vulgarly, as sliced into 'Martinican' and 'Algerian' halves? For Françoise Vergès, the interpretive road from the Black Caribbean to Arab North Africa is to some degree psychosexual. The embrace of Algeria works like a family romance: Fanon can swap out the effeminate anguish of Antillean complexes for the virile spectacle of a people in revolution.[12] For Albert Memmi, it is precisely this capacity for wilful displacement that exposes the messianic fantasy that all but invalidates Fanon's politics, as explained in Memmi's polemic 'The Impossible Life of Frantz Fanon'.[13]

Ato Sekyi-Otu has suggested yet another path: 'We need to read these texts and scenes within texts *dialectically* rather than *sequentially* or as discrete entities.'[14] The value of this mode of reading, which encompasses all of Fanon's major works but takes *The Wretched of the*

10 Ibid., p. 1.

11 Cedric J. Robinson, 'The Appropriation of Frantz Fanon', in Robinson, *On Racial Capitalism, Black Internationalism, and Cultures of Resistance*, ed. by H. L. T. Quan (Pluto Press, 2019), pp. 295–307 (p. 298).

12 Françoise Vergès, 'Creole Skin, Black Mask: Fanon and Disavowal', *Critical Inquiry*, 23.3 (1997), pp. 578–95 <https://doi.org/10.1086/448844>.

13 Albert Memmi, 'The Impossible Life of Frantz Fanon', trans. by Thomas Cassirer and G. Michael Twomey, *Massachusetts Review*, 14.1 (1973), pp. 9–39 (p. 22).

14 Ato Sekyi-Otu, *Fanon's Dialectic of Experience* (Harvard University Press, 1996), p. 22.

*Earth* as its central text, is its suspension of the need to reconcile different Fanons, or to note the impossibility of doing so. Non-dialectical interpretations presume that a given passage in Fanon's works can be brandished as a propositional statement or a crystal of positivity — even a teaching. This produces serious distortions. It also threatens to vitiate the dynamism that propels Fanon's specific mode of exposition: the torrent of images, archetypes, and scenes that thrusts his prose forward to expose new contradictions. The pitfalls of misrecognizing this may be clearest in the interpretations of the chapter 'On Violence' in *The Wretched of the Earth* as a simple celebration of bloodshed — as opposed to a stylized moment that gives rise to further dilemmas. As Robyn Marasco has noted,

> On the question of violence, Fanon has been judged too harshly and read too carelessly. *The Wretched of the Earth* proffers a powerful and notorious argument for the role of violence in transforming the colonial subject and destroying the colonial system. But Fanon's approach to the question of violence cannot be considered in abstraction from the colonial system that lives on it — and this includes the practice of colonial medicine, in which he played a part. Fanon also treats violence as colonial symptom. What *Wretched* offers is neither a defense of violence (as if violence ceases once we cease in defending it) nor a denunciation (as if denouncing violence will not ensure that some remain its permanent victims), but an analytic of violence.[15]

Reading Fanon's works as a string of instructive aphorisms thus blots out the larger, contradictory picture of the racial-colonial paradigm. In a world-shaping irony, the colonial system's endless, streaming energies are devoted to manufacturing solidity, ensuring stoppage. The result is the absolute division between two species, two zones, two realms of being linked by 'pure violence'.[16] This is a racialized form of life that Fanon describes, repeatedly, as 'petrified'. Only the most dynamic, reflexive reading can make sense of this vicious stasis.

A reading of Fanon's texts as comprising a *single dialectical narrative* — fuelled by negativity, both given form and threatened with

15 Robyn Marasco, *The Highway of Despair: Critical Theory after Hegel* (Columbia University Press, 2015), p. 141.

16 Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, p. 4.

formlessness by a series of pitiless displacements — allows for a more complete encounter with the colony's many petrified surfaces. The point, for Sekyi-Otu, is to grasp *then reappraise them* as manifestations of the very immediacy that the colonizer imposes at gunpoint. This is the immediacy of apartheid, the immediacy of occupation, and of course the obliterating immediacy of inscribing catastrophic meanings on the blank fact of black skin. The surpassing of mere immediacy may rhyme with the journey of Hegel's Spirit. Sekyi-Otu, however, lays emphasis on the particular figures and disfigurations that make up the Fanonian dialectic: 'Fanon's coquetting with Hegel stops short of a homonoetic consummation.'[17] The Hegelian model 'is not fundamentally and specifically *political*,' but Fanon's, incontrovertibly, is:

> Like the 'black soul' which, according to Fanon, is but a 'white artifact', the effects of these power relations and contestations in psyche, economy, polity, and culture are radically contingent products of political history, not the self-generated manifestations or 'moments' of Spirit's transcendental itinerary. And the modes of the colonized subject's relations to these effects of power — modes of self-alienation and self-affirmation — these are also definitively political situations, occasions of finite and contested acts of political judgment rather than recognizable determinations of the 'concept'.[18]

Sekyi-Otu insists that among these 'definitively political situations' we must include the technics and hydraulics of hierarchy *among* the colonized — chiefly gender, ethnicity, and class — though our focus will be on the latter and its relation to writing in Fanon's work: class anxiety among black Antilleans, uneven development among the wretched, and the contests over privilege that plow through the newborn nation. In a petrified, Manichean world, what analytic status do these intragroup contradictions merit? No programmatic statement by Fanon clarifies this matter. These intramural conflicts go darting through the narrative; they announce themselves on the move. It is only, as Sekyi-Otu argues, '[b]y virtue of such a dialectical reading of scenes' that

17 Sekyi-Otu, *Fanon's Dialectic of Experience*, p. 28.
18 Ibid., p. 29.

'we are led to "perceive a change", to borrow Marx's language, "in the physiognomy of our dramatis personae"'.[19]

We shall note below how in *The Wretched of the Earth*, the colonized intellectual assumes a particularly, even scandalously, labile shape. But an ability to recognize the modulations and ambivalences traversing the Manichean world strikes Sekyi-Otu as the crux of the Fanonian mission, the heart of his explicit, ineradicable revolutionary humanism. There can be no achievement of a 'human world',[20] 'a new humanity',[21] or 'a new man'[22] — to quote the closing passages of *Black Skin, White Masks*, *A Dying Colonialism*, and *The Wretched of the Earth*, respectively — without seeing, as Sekyi-Otu does,

> that race is the tomb wherein the historical consciousness is interred, alive; that try as it might, the empire can never wholly erase intimations of possibilities native to the very idea of humanity; that there is life after apartheid — no, that there is life, human, all-too-human life, palpitating within the peculiar institution of apartheid.[23]

Human, all too human: Sekyi-Otu's allusion to Nietzsche, though glancing, is telling. It draws a proleptic picture of the human not as a warehouse of luminous virtues, but as a figure criss-crossed by frailties and miserable self-deceits — the kind of contradiction and involution that to Robinson might give off a 'petit bourgeois stink', but which for Sekyi-Otu proves the presence, even the necessity, of politics.

5.

It may be fruitful to concede Robinson's point about Fanon's class orientation, then, without striking the same note of dismissal, or pretending to say anything that Fanon isn't telling us himself. 'The educated black man,' he writes in the introduction to *Black Skin, White Masks*, with a malice that suggests that he, like Robinson, has smelled the stink,

19 Ibid., pp. 22–23.
20 Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. by Richard Philcox (Penguin, 2021), p. 206.
21 Fanon, *Dying Colonialism*, p. 181.
22 Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, p. 239.
23 Ibid., p. 25.

> slave of the myth of the spontaneous and cosmic Negro, feels at some point in time that his race no longer understands him.
>
> Or that he no longer understands his race.
>
> He is only too pleased about this, and by developing further this difference, this incomprehension and discord, he discovers the meaning of his true humanity. Less commonly he wants to feel a part of his people. And with feverish lips and frenzied heart he plunges into the great black hole. We shall see that his wonderfully generous attitude rejects the present and future in the name of a mystical past.[24]

Fanon is giving us a glimpse of the critique of *négritude* that will come later in the book and resound in *The Wretched of the Earth*'s chapter on national culture. The charge, here, is that the 'mystical past' beloved by Aimé Césaire and Léopold Senghor amounts to an aesthetic and intellectual collusion in the petrification of blackness. Dreaming up a halcyon history means sealing yourself in an archetype, turning yourself to stone. This metaphysical freezing is a form of cowardice. It refuses the essential disorientations of historical experience. How is this error possible? By what process do these 'educated black m[e]n' in thrall to the 'myth of the spontaneous [...] Negro' ironically consign their own people to an impossible fixity? This division between *négritude* writers and the people, between middle-class poets and the subject group they hope to redeem, is *among the first* of Fanon's many scenes of non-recognition and sabotaged reciprocity. And this dilemma slices, instantly, through the precinct of blackness itself.

Non-recognition, sabotaged reciprocity: George Cicciariello-Maher has referred to moments such as these as Fanon's way of 'decolonizing dialectics';[25] Sekyi-Otu anoints this Fanon's 'deformed dialectic'.[26] The most famous of these will be his revision of the master-slave allegory in 'The Black Man and Hegel' — in which blackness is deprived of the possibility of recognition — but everywhere he seems to be defacing the dialectic method.[27] This is clear both in the

24 Fanon, *Black Skin*, p. xiv.

25 See George Cicciariello-Maher, *Decolonizing Dialectics* (Duke University Press, 2017) <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822373704>.

26 Sekyi-Otu, *Fanon's Dialectic of Experience*, p. 61.

27 For an illuminating new interpretation of Fanon's critique of Hegel in *Black Skin, White Masks*, which clarifies the use of Fanon's phrase 'zone of non-being', see Daniel

account of the native and European sectors as confronting each other, 'but not in the service of a higher unity'.[28] We may also see it in his revision of Marx to explicate the violence that suffuses the fight for national consciousness. In *Capital*'s chapter on the working day, the contradiction of 'right against right' propels both capitalist and worker into the specious formal equality of the marketplace that is really a theatre of domination: 'Between equal rights, force decides.'[29] For Fanon, however, the 'bloodbath in the colonies' does not follow from a hypocritical parity (*right against right*) but from explicit ranking and opposition: 'between oppressors and oppressed, force is the only solution.'[30] Even his adaptation of his teacher Francesc Tosquelles's *socialthérapie* allows Fanon to see his clinical work with psychotics — who cannot partake in the taut transferential dance of analyst and analysand — as requiring what Tosquelles called a 'burst transference', a notion that Fanon will refashion in Blida, in the midst of colonial war.[31] In light of these repeated scenes of non-mediation, failed recognition, disordered transmission, and impossible exchange, the line from *A Dying Colonialism* bears repeating: 'every time we do not understand, we must tell ourselves that we are at the heart of the drama.' Fanon's books hang frame after luminous frame around this fundamental obscurity. Presenting and interpreting these instances of non-understanding allow him to assemble his own form of dialectical writing. In the place of Hegel's well-known 'speculative sentences', Fanon gives us a form of writing that draws succour and vigour from its failed attempts to portray *Aufhebung*. This dialectic — which contains massive, insoluble chunks of merciless immediacy — implies a unique approach to negativity. In fact, this approach may be clearest in a moment of literary-critical polemic.

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Badenhorst, 'Fanon, Hegel, and the Problem of Reciprocity', *Hegel Bulletin*, 44.2 (2022), pp. 321–44 <https://doi.org/10.1017/hgl.2022.1>.

28 Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, p. 4.

29 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume One* [1867], trans. by Ben Fowkes (Penguin, 1976), p. 344.

30 Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, p. 32.

31 For an overview of Fanon's adaptation of Tosquelles's methods, see Camille Robcis, *Disalienation: Politics, Philosophy, and Radical Psychiatry in Postwar France* (Columbia University Press, 2021).

The critique of *négritude* quoted above from the first pages of *Black Skin, White Masks* will give way, by the volume's end, to a critique of Jean-Paul Sartre's own critique (or, really, backhanded compliment). In 'Black Orpheus', an essay from 1948, Sartre hymns the African and Antillean poets whose specific historical predicament as dominated, dehumanized subjects has yielded a new school of poetry. In fact, he claims that the bards of *négritude* alone redeem poetry's revolutionary potential — which he had dismissed the previous year in *What Is Literature?* — because their suffering is caused by a hatred that lies beyond the European proletarian's technical exploitation in production. Black poets, up against the wall, must assert the sheer fact of their subjectivity. They thus refresh the very form of the lyric. This is the writhing, trance-like, incantatory lyricism that Sartre deems 'Orphic' because it descends into the mystically sensuous underworld despised, but not rigidified, by metropolitan capital. The essay will then be spent reconciling racial and class oppression, in order to locate them both within a social totality defined by bourgeois domination. This requires a racial division of labour expressed in crude metaphysical terms. Race is simply 'concrete and particular', class is 'universal and abstract', meaning that *négritude* must be reduced to a mere 'upbeat' or 'weak stage' in a grander dialectical unfurling: a minor 'moment of negativity'.

Fanon rebuts this, famously. But he does so not by disputing that blackness is a bearer of the negative, but by reminding Sartre of the negative's fundamentality and indisputable force within the Hegelian schema that 'Black Orpheus' invokes. The negative manifests 'the seriousness, the suffering, the patience, and the labour' that in fact allows for the *overcoming* of abstract universality.[32] Negativity is the engine of dialectical movement, and affords access to the intoxicating textual sequence and intimation of totality that in *The Phenomenology of Spirit* is called 'absolute knowing'. Fanon can therefore say of Sartre: 'For once this friend, this born Hegelian, had forgotten that consciousness needs to get lost in the night of the absolute, the only condition for attaining self-consciousness.'[33] The moment is a triumph of insouciant reversal.

32 Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit* [1807], trans. by Terry Pinkard (Cambridge University Press, 2018), p. 13.

33 Fanon, *Black Skin*, p. 112.

Fanon impugns Sartre's Eurocentric condescension by displaying a firmer grasp of Hegel, only to displace Europe as the brilliant centre of history and thought. But Fanon's comment also partakes, sharply, in a radicalization of negativity itself. In his hands, it is not the weak stage but the strong stage in the dialectical sequence; arguably going beyond Hegel's own ambivalence,[34] Fanon will imply that stumbling desperately through the night may actually be thought's irrepressible drive: 'Consciousness committed to experience knows nothing, has to know nothing, of the essence and determination of its being.'[35]

The symmetry is striking. *Négritude* first participates in petrification by rushing past its own petty bourgeois character; blackness is petrified again from without when *négritude* is confined to a minor moment in the story of proletarian emancipation. Sociogeny, which insists on the interlocking processes of consciousness and material domination, supplies a frame that neither ratchets blackness up to the point of myth nor sequesters it as world-historical weak stage. The question remains of how to *write* this sensuous particularity, how to voice this anguished consciousness wandering, lost, in the dialectical night. Who could *read* such writing — and if they did, how would it help? In Sartre's *What Is Literature?* — a treatise on writing whose notion of 'commitment' weighs heavily upon all of Fanon's books — the first chapters are 'Why Write?' and 'For Whom Does One Write?' The first page of *Black Skin, White Masks* declares that, unlike Sartre, Fanon will not venture answers to these questions. Like the excoriated 'educated black man' of *négritude* who 'feels that his race no longer understands him', Fanon will face the fear that he is writing for no reason, and to no one:

> Why am I writing this book? Nobody asked me to.
>
> Especially not those for whom it is intended.[36]

34 For a radical rereading of Hegel's absolute knowing that approaches Fanon's own in its dispelling of the charge that the absolute is a 'panlogicist' view from nowhere — though Hegel's own writing may sometimes suggest that interpretation — see Rebecca Comay and Frank Ruda, *The Dash — The Other Side of Absolute Knowing* (MIT Press, 2018) <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/10877.001.0001>.

35 Fanon, *Black Skin*, p. 113.

36 Ibid., p. vii.

6.

Reconstructing the figures of the black or colonized intellectual is a fraught task — not least because of Fanon's own habit of vaulting between conceptual registers or even levels of abstraction. This, of course, is the great analytic value, promise, and challenge of sociogeny. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, blackness, seemingly phrased in ontological terms or presented as an ethical and epistemic challenge to Freudian and Adlerian psychology, comes slamming against the socioeconomic mechanism displayed hatefully on the skin. And in the colony evoked by *The Wretched of the Earth*, concretion and abstraction look different under the annihilating regime of race. The colony condenses, distorts, and foreshortens the basic categories of political economy. This gives rise to a bourgeoisie without real capital, and proletarians with *just* a bit more to lose than their chains. '[T]he proletariat in the colonies is embryonic and represents the most privileged fraction of the population',[37] Fanon writes in the chapter on spontaneity; in the chapter on national consciousness, he insists that 'the bourgeoisie is incapable of forming a class'.[38] This, too, is petrification. The blockage of historical development that race terror reinforces does more than simply subordinate the periphery to the core. It stages carnivalesque parodies of class domination itself. In the face of a forcibly stagnant history, colonial society acts out its ossification, its void of recognition, its lack of access to mediation, in the tragicomedy of the petty bourgeoisie, theorized by others, ironically, as intermediate class. This is a class that longs for recognition but never actually gets it: a class that perpetually risks misrecognizing itself.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, that antic, frantic self-deception comprises a source of freakish dynamism. This class even achieves a bizarre vitality. But the strangeness is only perceptible in light of the work's more prototypical mass heroes: one of the great controversial interventions of that work is its nomination of the peasants as the base of the revolution. The spontaneous avant-garde, able to inflame the political conjuncture and bring the dispossessed to boiling point, goes

37 Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, p. 73.
38 Ibid., p. 112.

by the name 'lumpenproletariat' — a technical Marxist term that had fallen out of fashion in virtually all of socialist discourse by the time of Fanon's writing.[39] Peasants, rooted to the land of the remote interior; lumpenproletarians, seething and starving on the city's outskirts: these are the subjectivities formed and hardened on one side, absolutely sequestered, of the clogged dialectical transfer — amounting to an antinomy — that makes up the colony's bifurcated world. Fanon has chosen his protagonists, deposited them in a landscape, and set the scene for insurrection.

Enter the colonized intellectual. Or rather, the intellectual never fully enters, or exits. This figure's role in this work is glancing, refracted, almost suspiciously underdetermined. That is, despite his [*sic*] odd ubiquity. Absent, here, are the long debates about the place and purchase of 'theory' in the revolutionary struggle (as we find in Lenin and his political inheritors). Also missing are strong claims about how the petty bourgeoisie's objective, if contradictory, interests fit into the mosaic of social struggle. In Cedric Robinson's own landmark work *Black Marxism*, an entire chapter is devoted to the Black Radical Intelligentsia; Ghassan Kanafani's study of the Great Palestinian Revolt of 1936–39 includes a section consecrated to 'The Intellectuals'. It's different here. Before the chapter on national culture, the intellectual dashes into and out of the scene mid-insurrection, only to feel the sting of usurpation. Burdened by a handful of complexes, this class experiences the progress of the revolt largely as an undoing, not empowering activation. But there is *activity* — almost too much. There he is, the native intellectual, advocating for peace, for nonviolence as a matter of principle, then (after independence) for the takeover of national industries by his ilk and stratum. In the heat of insurrection, he undergoes a kind of affective bonfire: 'witnessing the destruction of his idols: egoism, arrogant recrimination, and the idiotic childish need to have the last word'.[40] Often he is seen as a kind of academic accomplice — being petty bourgeois himself — to the colonial bourgeoisie, who, given their mediocrity and uncertain place, in many ways

39 For a succinct exposition of the history of the lumpenproletariat and the category of the unemployed, see Michael Denning, 'Wageless Life', *New Left Review*, 66 (2010), pp. 79–97 <https://doi.org/10.64590/pit>.

40 Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, p. 11.

*resemble* a petty bourgeoisie. This class at different points anoints itself as a safety valve for radical energies, or a spokesperson in a dialogue that's either a sham or simply not happening. As Fanon writes of the petty bourgeois leader: 'In the best of cases, he barricades himself in a *no-man's-land* between the terrorists and the colonists and offers his services as "mediator"'.[41]

But Fanon soon informs us that violence itself plays that role. In the same paragraph where he refers to violence as absolute praxis — itself the seeming flipside of Hegelian 'absolute knowing' — he also describes violence as 'la médiation royale': translated as 'royal pardon', but also as 'perfect mediation'.[42] The issue arises, then, of how the petty bourgeoisie and the European-educated intellectuals who are its chief ideological emblems relate to this bare fact: how these loquacious would-be mediators address themselves to the 'perfect' mediation of open or submerged war on their people. Fanon's chapter on spontaneity, in which the lumpenproletariat comes into its own as political force and historical actor, is embroidered throughout by an epistemic motif of the colonized intellectual. Fanon tells us that the preceding reflections on violence have alerted him to the 'frequent discrepancy between the cadres of the nationalist party and the masses, and the way they are out of step with each other'.[43] Over that chapter and the next one, *a specific version of that out-of-step-ness will come to be the engine of the idiosyncratic, dilapidated dialectic* that Fanon gets going before our eyes. The colonized intellectual is never on time — too early, too late, conveying a message that nobody listens to, and when they do, it turns out poorly. (Fanon spends some time warning the reader about the perils of the petty bourgeois potential for 'demagoguery'.) To grasp the syncopated rhythm of this sequence, it may be worth doing a bit of ethico-political plot summary.

41 Ibid., p. 24.
42 Ibid., p. 44.
43 Ibid., p. 63.

7.

The intellectual, enamoured of European tradition, forms political parties in Europe's image. For exactly that reason, he looks in all the wrong places for the sources of political dynamism that can blast the people out of the petrification that he can barely recognize himself. The most radical element, he assumes, will be the proletariat. He ignores the peasants. When he finally discovers the peasants, he has feudal rulers to contend with, who send him packing back to the city, where he's awaited by the colonial police. His precious political formation fractures and is repressed; a few courageous revolutionary elements break off, return to the countryside, and try again with the peasants. These petty bourgeois learn quickly upon their return to the rural context. The peasants have been waging periodic insurrections this whole time. And one fringe paradoxical benefit of their organized petrification turns out to be the intact memory of the attempt to beat back the colonizers when they first arrived from Europe. From their side, this restive peasantry sees the lettered, articulate, European-style petty bourgeois fleeing the police and wonders if something is happening in the capital. This final meeting is both a climactic union and a missed encounter — and at last sets the national uprising in motion: 'It is then they [the intellectuals] realize in a kind of intoxication that the peasant masses latch on to their every word and do not hesitate to ask them the question for which they are not prepared: "When do we start?"'.[44]

*When do we start*: a question about time that arrives at the wrong time. This intellectual is doomed to be out of step. But that out-of-stepness supplies the process with its own curious capacity for motion and endurance. Though this transpires in a context throttled by violence of every type, at every scale, there's a minorly comic rhythm here: that of a quixotic picaresque or Chaplin-like slapstick. One is tempted to see a parallel between the black person of *Black Skin, White Masks* who cannot 'unconsciousnessize'[45] (to use Fanon's curious neologism) suffering, but must act it out perpetually with his body, and the mad dash of the petty bourgeois in *The Wretched of the Earth*. Denied the

44 Ibid., p. 28.

45 Fanon, *Black Skin*, p. 129.

relatively elegant temporal displacements which provide one model for *Aufhebung*, the intellectual is compelled to zigzag across the hinterland, only to be confronted by questions they can't answer, despite what Fanon calls, disdainfully, the intellectual's 'theoretical analysis'.[46]

For Sekyi-Otu, the return of the petty bourgeois intellectual to the scene, on radically revised terms, is an intimation of a specifically political possibility. There is proof for this claim; indeed, there are many ways in which the transvaluation of the intellectual's European training is itself the foretaste of a fully disalienated humanity that has dissolved the barriers of the colonial paradigm: a process that Sekyi-Otu calls 'The Reprieve of Prodigal Reason'. But our interests here require us to note the distinctly *spatial* dimensions of the intellectual's journey. The intellectual's footloose scamper from city to interior and back again does not resemble the twirling upward spiral of *Aufhebung* but rather presents the obverse of the absolute Manichean compartments of the colonial world. His scandalous deracination and lack of place are really a refraction of colonial life's smothering fixity. The special capacities of the intellectual are not being gradually or regularly enriched by the encounters with the provinces and the police. Rather, the petty bourgeois, thrown hither and thither by failure, presents precisely the fragmentary evidence of that failure to those who will eclipse him completely.

In his 1966 address 'The Weapon of Theory', Amilcar Cabral pronounced that the revolutionary task of the petty bourgeoisie wasn't just to 'betray its vocation', as Fanon advised, but to commit suicide as a class. Suicide, for Fanon, feels too morally prestigious: too Euripidean, too Sophoclean. The petty bourgeois he knows have no business playing Antigone, and don't *get* to be Jocasta. They don't deserve the glory of entelechy — and in this dialectic without guarantees, they don't have a rendezvous with fate. *They must fully live the brittleness of their own unravelling. Paradoxically, this is a kind of building*. Roving the anti-dialectical, petrified landscape of utter spatiality, the intellectual's expulsions and reappearances amount to a repetitive, almost mechanical motion that constructs the national consciousness. Criss-crossing the country that is coming into being, they set the stage (to quote

46 Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, p. 68.

Fanon's title) for that consciousness's own 'misadventures'. This is a schematic picture that Fanon is giving us. It's also quite a vivid schema, one that ends with the petty bourgeois intellectual at last alighting on the lumpenproletarians. The reader may wonder if, by an astonishing situational irony, in the journeys into and out of the city, the intellectual runs right past the lumpenproletariat's shanty towns every single time. Supposedly, these oblivious figures shall be writing the nation's literature.

Fanon, writing with atypical didactic certainty, declares that the path towards national literature will comprise three stages, three ways for the colonized intellectual to maintain fidelity to the people and — one might say — contribute to disalienation by means of writing. First, by assimilating and mastering the colonizer's culture; second, by returning to the people, though 'the colonized writer is not integrated with his people'. The third and final stage is 'combat literature', in which 'the writer, after having tried to lose himself among the people, will rouse the people'.[47] The risk of self-exoticism stalks this portion of the text, recapitulating at length Fanon's earlier critiques of *négritude*:

> The culture with which the intellectual is preoccupied is very often nothing but an inventory of particularisms. Seeking to cling close to the people, he clings merely to a visible veneer. This veneer, however, is merely a reflection of a dense, subterranean life in perpetual renewal. This reification, which seems all too obvious and characteristic of the people, is in fact but the inert, already invalidated outcome of the many, and not always coherent, adaptations of a more fundamental substance beset with radical changes. [...] The peoples who have waged the struggle are increasingly impermeable to demagoguery, and by seeking to follow them too closely, the intellectual turns out to be nothing better than a vulgar opportunist, even behind the times.[48]

Fanon's clean tripartite schema, then, is stalked by the perpetual possibility of its own collapse. 'Combat literature' therefore often comes close to signifying the disintegration of literary endeavour. The radical force that propels the concept also precipitates, almost immediately,

47 Fanon, *Wretched of the Earth*, p. 159.

48 Ibid., pp. 160–61.

the scattering of writing's power into other forms of art. Notwithstanding the careful attention Fanon gives to the poem 'African Dawn' by Keita Fodeba in this chapter, the submergence of writing into a larger matrix of cultural practices — themselves subsumed immediately by the demands of colonial war — suggests that this section is not simply influenced by Sartre, but reads like a specific response to him.

In *What Is Literature?*, Sartrean 'commitment' and 'literature of praxis' remain indistinguishable from the question of audience; no literary gesture can be evaluated apart from its constructed public. Sartre, limiting himself to the French context, never doubts that such a public is bourgeois. The objective, then, becomes to exploit and overcome the class character of writing to intervene decisively in the fight for human emancipation. His existentialist answer is both stridently heroic and dialectically circumspect. Concrete, liberatory literature relies on an avowal of both a Project (meaning a vision of the future) and Negativity: the capacity to uproot the immediacy of the given. The famous commitment that Sartre calls for is therefore not commitment to the masses, or commitment to an ideal of freedom, or even commitment to a specific and explicit vision of socialism; it is foremost a commitment to one's *situation*. For Sartre, the irreducible particularity of a situation is comprised of the determinations — meaning 'limits' — that both foreclose and promise a non-alienated form of life. His name for this classless society, despite the insistent Hegelianism of his argument, is Kantian: 'the City of Ends'. Commitment to one's situation means confronting the innumerable fortifications that exclude us from this city:

> I shall say that a writer is committed when he tries to achieve the most lucid and the most complete consciousness of being embarked, that is, when he causes the commitment of immediate spontaneity to advance, for himself and others, to the reflective. The writer is, *par excellence*, a mediator and his commitment is to mediation.[49]

For Sartre, this mediation must help to revive emancipatory possibility in a particular situation, France in 1947, which in his view lacks

49 Jean-Paul Sartre, "What Is Literature?", trans. by Bernard Frechtman, in Sartre, *What Is Literature? And Other Essays* (Harvard University Press, 1988), pp. 21–245 (p. 77).

a revolutionary aperture, and in which the advance of capitalism has fragmented and etiolated the bourgeoisie that once nurtured the institution of literature: 'All we can do is reflect their unhappy conscience in our mirrors, that is, advance a bit further the decomposition of their principles.'[50]

Fanon takes each of these terms and turns it on its ear. Fanon's vision of national literature must be constructed during an *ongoing* revolution. *His* committed writers must sacrifice their special claim to mediation — a function performed, in the colonies, by violence itself. And *his* petty bourgeois intellectuals, dreaming of leading and mediating, have no memory of a coherent audience for their writing. They are not decomposing as a result of the advancement of bourgeois society to a point of dissolute, decadent lateness, but in fact barely constitute a class, due to the enforced backwardness of underdevelopment. Their dissolution follows from petrification. Instead of engaged or committed literature, then, Fanon ventures, not a genre or a project, but a simple, underdetermined term: 'combat literature'. The best and first example of it may be his own hybrid texts.

8.

'[T]he last episode of Passion of writing, which recounts stage by stage the disintegration of bourgeois consciousness': Roland Barthes's *Writing Degree Zero* (1953), published just a year after *Black Skin, White Masks*, also issues a response to Sartre.[51] (Like Fanon's works, it ends with the then-common call for a 'new humanism'.) Barthes cleaves much closer to Sartre's *What Is Literature?* and even attempts to negate that text by adopting its method of re-narrating the history of French literature. Barthes's subject is writing and politics, writing and revolution; his contention is that the revolutionary-counterrevolutionary cycle of 1848 in France dislodged the notion that the bourgeoisie had a monopoly on truth. The result was successive attempts to manage the fraught traffic between Literature and History. Zero-degree writing is writing that dreams of freeing itself of history, presenting itself as trans-

50 Ibid., p. 204.

51 Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. by Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (Hill and Wang, 2012), p. 5.

parent: abstract universality (though Barthes does not use this term), written in pared down prose. Barthes calls this 'colourless writing', or 'white writing'. It arrives at its most succinct expression in the blank style of Albert Camus's *The Stranger*: as it happens — though Barthes does not note this — a novel that turns on the slaughter of an Algerian lumpenproletarian by a settler.

White writing, indeed. But we might exploit the climactic and hypothetical character of Fanon's coinage, 'combat literature', to speculate about what kind of black writing he was imagining, and perhaps produced. In the absence of concrete examples, we might suggest that Fanon himself, confronted with combat's disparate spatial and temporal scales, arrived at his own version of zero-degree writing, which is the opposite of what Barthes described: not floating above history but wrenched by his conflicting motions; not aspiring towards an immaculate ideal of Literature, but so devastated by the phenomenology of the colony that he must — not unlike Sartre declaring that journalism would become a genuine branch of literature — traverse disciplines and splice genres to enact a kind of literary disalienation. This disalienation would need a writing that knows its place *and* its placelessness. It would be capable of recalling itself and revising itself, unravelling and obliterating itself. Fanon says of the colonial intellectual: 'He does not always see the overall picture. He introduces the notion of disciplines, specialized areas and fields into that awesome mixer and grinder called a people's revolution.' [52] The discrepant scales of these specialisms are overcome by the 'overall picture' both made and obscured by combat. One of Fanon's specialisms, of course, was psychiatry. We might close, then, with a return to Blida.

'To write means to want to be read,' Fanon wrote in an editorial of *Notre Journal*, the newsletter written by staff and patients at Blida-Joinville. 'In the same stroke it means to want to be understood. In the act of writing there is an effort being made; muddled and vague things are combatted, surpassed.' [53] The repetition of 'combat' in the clinical context is striking; it suggests yet another continuity between the psychic and material registers that Fanon's sociogeny was devised

52 Ibid., p. 13.

53 Frantz Fanon, 'Our Journal', in Fanon, *Alienation and Freedom*, pp. 311–48 (p. 325).

to parse. This short piece in *Notre Journal* was one of a few in which Fanon defended the inclusion of writing in the therapeutic regimen. In fact, he defends writing as a process that contains its own repetition and failures but that strives, irrepressibly, for lucidity. The poignancy of this psychic, therapeutic combat follows from the unique condition of the patients. They were psychotics, and thus uniquely incapable of the ordered linguistic signification that is the foundation of transference. 'The discovery of writing is certainly the most beautiful one,' reads Fanon's first contribution to *Notre Journal*, 'since it allows you to recall yourself, to present things that have happened in order and above all to communicate with others, even when they are absent.'[54] *Socialthérapie*, the method employed by Fanon at Blida during the Algerian Revolution, occupies a total therapeutic milieu that might account for and overcome these moments of repeatedly denied reciprocity and impossible transmission. In that way, this method resembles Fanon's texts, and insurrection itself.

54 Ibid., p. 315.

# (subject in parentheses)

NICOLAS HELM-GROVAS

*(Parentheses in US English or brackets in British English: the curved, rounded punctuation marks:'()'.*[1] *There is also the rhetorical figure of the parenthesis: a supplementary phrase or sentence inserted into a passage of text or speech. A parenthesis may be bracketed by parentheses, but not necessarily, since commas or dashes can serve for this too. By convention, a parenthesis can be removed without damage to the 'main' text. In that sense it is secondary, less important. It implies a hierarchy, we could say a scale, of significance or value. It seems to identify and draw a distinction between central and marginal, essential and inessential, major and minor. (I was told as an undergraduate that if an idea is really important, it should not be in brackets.) A parenthetical remark may be a prime candidate for deletion if a text is overlength; hence it may be on its way out of a text. Or it may be an irruption into a text, squeezed in later, but an irruption contained or minimized by the bars that keep it in place. Such bars are minimal marks, not grammar, not words, on the edge of language. They seem entirely dependent on words but at the same time, paradoxically, provide the infrastructure of discourse. (The most proximate etymology of 'brackets' is architectural: 'braggets', a term for curved supports in building, attested in English from the sixteenth century, a connection that survives in*

1 This essay began as a presentation at the workshop 'my little i', organized by Angelica Stathopoulos at ICI Berlin on 27 May 2025.

*calling shelf supports 'brackets' too.) As Rebecca Comay and Frank Ruda point out, punctuation marks are frequently not translatable, not because they are too difficult to translate, but because they don't seem to require translation at all. They seem 'to be a job for the typesetter rather than the task of the translator'.*[2] *In one respect, they are akin to what Barbara Cassin calls an 'untranslatable': as with* Aufhebung, logos, *or* différance, *they are commonly carried between texts in different languages without being put through the machinery of translation. Yet in another respect, they are exactly the inverse of Cassin's description of an untranslatable: whereas an untranslatable is that which we cannot stop retranslating, the translation of such marks never seems to begin.*[3] Aufhebung, *for example, is the site of such a richly specific overdetermination that any attempt to render it via a substitute in the networks of another language is painfully unsatisfactory (and yet we keep trying). A bracket in itself, though, is almost devoid of meaning, blank and underdetermined. It is too little rather than too much. Attending to parentheses, as with any punctuation mark, entails seeing the habitually overlooked in writing, listening to what cannot be heard in speech. Tarrying with that which is not usually considered important. Comay and Ruda describe their interpretation of Hegel on the basis of his use of dashes as emerging from 'a stupid little observation'. Their wildly original and wide-ranging book emerges from the small and trivial.*[4] *Meanwhile, to describe the paradox of untranslatables and the repeated, productive failure they set in train, Cassin has recourse to two small but strategically placed marks enabling a double reading: untranslatables are 'what one keeps on (not) translating'.*[5] *One could imagine a reading protocol that considers only what is in brackets in a text, these fragments being its semantic and conceptual unconscious. For Freud, the prefacing*

2 Rebecca Comay and Frank Ruda, *The Dash — The Other Side of Absolute Knowing* (MIT Press, 2018), p. 53 <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/10877.001.0001>. While it is not true to say that there no differences in punctuation between languages, there is significant consistency across European languages. Moreover, many non-Latin scripts have incorporated European punctuation marks.

3 Barbara Cassin, 'Introduction', in *The Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon*, ed. by Barbara Cassin, trans. ed. by Emily Apter, Jacques Lezra, and Michael Wood (Princeton University Press, 2014), p. xvii. See also Emily Apter, 'Preface', in the same volume, p. vii.

4 Comay and Ruda, *The Dash*, p. 6. In fact, for Comay and Ruda, '—' will turn out to be one possible translation of the untranslatable *Aufhebung*.

5 Cassin, 'Introduction', p. xvii.

*of information by the assertion that it is unimportant or irrelevant is a sign precisely of its significance and of the patient's resistance.*[6] *But such attention to the not-usually-considered-important should not merely seek to elevate it to the status of the important. This would retain importance as norm. Rather, what is proposed is a reading that at once acknowledges this hierarchy as its condition, and dissolves or overcomes it. It will certainly be said by some — notice the scalar metaphors — that such 'close' reading is disproportionate, even paranoid, that it constitutes 'overreading'. Yet to deny that a minor detail can be the trace of an entire history, whether geopolitical or subjective, including a history of violence, would be to censor that history.*[7] *)*

(TITLES)

Hollis Frampton insisted on the peculiar format of the title of his 1971 film *(nostalgia)*: 'Lower case, with parentheses'.[8] The filmmaker's explanation for this was that whereas his films before *(nostalgia)* typically contained their titles in the films themselves, he decided around this time that 'the use of main titles [was] irreconcilable with photographic images'. With his films after *(nostalgia)*, names do not appear at the beginning of the films themselves.[9] The title '*(nostalgia)*' is a vanishing mediator: for this transitional film, Frampton kept a title at the beginning (see Figure 1), but, as Rachel Moore writes, it was downgraded, 'humbled by parentheses and a lower-case initial letter'.[10]

*(nostalgia)* is a main title that is a little embarrassed to be a main title, somewhat like when the subject heading in an email is left blank and the application fills the void with '(no subject)'. The accidental

6 For example, Sigmund Freud, 'On Dreams', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Freud*, trans. by James Strachey, ed. and trans. by Anna Freud, 24 vols (Vintage, 2001), v: *1900–1901*, pp. 633–85 (p. 636); and 'Psycho-analysis and the Establishment of the Facts in Legal Proceedings', in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Freud*, IX: *1906–1908*, pp. 97–114 (p. 109).

7 See Adania Shibli, *Minor Detail*, trans. by Elisabeth Jaquette (Fitzcarraldo, 2020).

8 Hollis Frampton, Letter to Sally Dixon, 28 November 1970, cited in Rachel Moore, *Hollis Frampton: (nostalgia)* (Afterall, 2006), p. 18.

9 Hollis Frampton, 'Three Talks at Millennium', *Millennium Film Journal*, Fall/Winter 1986–87, nos. 16–18, pp. 274–94 (p. 275), cited in Moore, *Hollis Frampton: (nostalgia)*, p. 7.

10 Moore, *Hollis Frampton: (nostalgia)*, p. 7.




Fig. 1. Hollis Frampton, *(nostalgia)*, 1971, 16 mm film, 36 mins.
Courtesy of Will Faller.

psychoanalytic connotations of the phrase 'no subject' are revealing here. For more than any other of his works, *(nostalgia)* seems to be a film on the subject (of) Hollis Frampton. The film is made up of static shots of photographs, the majority of which were taken by Frampton a decade or so before; the soundtrack, delivered in the first person, apparently from the filmmaker's perspective, describes these photos and the context of their making. This is about a filmmaker who up to this point in his work had, as Frampton himself puts it, 'practiced rigorous self-effacement'.[11] Frampton's work has regularly been filed under the category of 'structural film', a term he bridled at but nevertheless seems to have been permanently saddled with, a mode of experimental film characterized by epistemological investigations into a thing called 'film', analogous in aims and methods to the Minimalism and Concep-

11 Hollis Frampton, 'Notes on *(nostalgia)*', in *On the Camera Arts and Consecutive Matters: The Writings of Hollis Frampton*, ed. by Bruce Jenkins (MIT Press, 2015), p. 224 <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/7851.001.0001>.

tual art happening alongside it in the US. In contrast, with *(nostalgia)* Frampton seemingly enters the realm of autobiography. And by narrating his self in parentheses, narrating himself in parentheses, the film evokes a diminutive subject.

Yet such an account is misleading, or at least incomplete. The film's formal, indeed structural, games — the displacement of word and image, the way the photos are burned in each shot, the fact that it is not actually Frampton reading the voiceover, but another filmmaker, Michael Snow — lead most critics to acknowledge *(nostalgia)*'s autobiographical basis but treat the film as foremost a sophisticated meditation on history and temporality. In this, most critics take Frampton's own account of his work as authoritative — ironically, given that such accounts are usually based in modernist notions of impersonality and the strict separation between artist and artwork.[12] In his remarks on the film, Frampton is at pains to establish a distance between himself and the film's principal 'character'. He refers to the younger Frampton as 'my subject'. (Note the double meaning: subject as that which is subject to investigation, and as that which acts, experiences, is. Here the latter only appears through the former, described as a kind of property distinct from the filmmaker-self: *my* subject.) He says that 'he had once been myself'.[13] The effect of autobiography is a snare, merely a clever trick of form: the film is 'a series of aesthetic postures [...] *disguised as* a series of accounts of my life, my youth'.[14] Without here denying that both the self and the first-person grammatical form with which it is often conflated are multiple, split, fluid, and ephemeral, or that an 'I' that speaks now is logically and often biographically distinct from a 'myself' in the past, Frampton appears to protest too much against his present implication in the film's subject matter with his blunt denial: 'The film is not about me.'[15]

12 For example, compare the Frampton statements that follow with Phillips's description of 'Frampton's calculated manipulation of the confessional mode' and its status as a 'device'. See Christopher Phillips, 'Word Pictures: Frampton and Photography', in *Hollis Frampton*, ed. by Michael Zryd (MIT Press, 2022), pp. 47–64 (p. 59) <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/14371.001.0001>.

13 Frampton, 'Notes on *(nostalgia)*', p. 224.

14 Peter Gidal, 'Interview with Hollis Frampton', *October*, 32 (1985), pp. 93–117 (p. 108); my emphasis.

15 Hollis Frampton, 'Interview with Scott MacDonald', in *A Critical Cinema*, ed. by Scott MacDonald (University of California Press, 1988), pp. 21–77 (p. 62).

In Frampton's statements the personal is negatively coded: 'The last thing I had the slightest interest in was diaristic memoir, with its drastically confessional tone'; he refers to *(nostalgia)* as 'a bottomless pit of maudlin sentiment', as though pre-empting criticism on this basis. If at first glance the title could be an instance of the subject as small or reduced, the kind that narrates its experience but humbly leaves space for others, perhaps it is more the case that the Hollis Frampton-subject can only be allowed to appear when made into someone else, sufficiently split off from the filmmaker-who-makes-the-film that the latter is not read as the subject of the film, at least by sophisticated viewers. Frampton brackets out Hollis Frampton the person, allowing Hollis Frampton the artist — a figure whose socially coded characteristics (let us say, class, gender, or skin colour, to begin) are not worth mentioning — to be all the more effective and powerful. Parentheses here signal less a modest but determined reclaiming of the subjective in a context where it was commonly perceived as unimportant, and more a desire to keep the biographical in its (subordinate) place, while nevertheless letting it — the person(al), the subject(ive) — appear in limited form. A controlled dose of subjectivity, as inoculation; parenthetical marks used as medical gloves to hold hazardous or contagious material.

We cannot overlook, in this regard, the film's historical context. It is made a couple of years after the explosion of the women's movement in North America. The women's movement showed personal matters to be significant, indeed political. Frampton disparages the 'confessional' and 'diaristic' (historically feminine-coded). He frames his subject in terms of 'nostalgia', which he stresses is not 'mere' longing or *Sehnsucht*, instead citing an elevated male referent: the wounds Odysseus receives as he returns to Ithaca.[16] Yet the burning of photographs from the past surely invokes a feminized genre and gesture: melodrama and the histrionic throwing of old photos in the fire. Like Frampton, critics have preferred to read this act in more prestigious and universalist terms — Moore recruits Gaston Bachelard's philosophical account of fire, for example. It is instructive here to compare the film to two contemporaneous works made by women associated

16 Frampton, 'Interview with Scott MacDonald', p. 60.

with Minimalism and Conceptual art that show the effects of feminism: Lucy Lippard's novel *I See / You Mean*, written in the first half of the 1970s and published in 1979, in which autobiography eventually destroys the carefully drawn structures of the early part of the book (Lippard described becoming a feminist as she wrote it), and Yvonne Rainer's film *Lives of Performers* (1972), where such distancing devices hold out until the end, but where one perceives the strain they are put under by a background sense, one that is not clearly articulated, that intimate interactions play out social antagonisms at a 'lower' scale (Rainer described not yet being a feminist when making the film).[17] In its name, *Lives of Performers* makes apparent how it allows these concerns in, but still keeps them in check: its subtitle is '*(A Melodrama)*', in parentheses.

Another model for the subject in parentheses appears in the work of artist, curator, and writer Ian White, for whom Rainer is a recurring reference point, and her phrase 'lives of performers' something like a maxim for rehearsing relations between subjects, the social, and art. White treats punctuation marks as counters that can be freely placed in different configurations on a game board (the page) to shift the meaning of the existing pieces (words). Or as though they were mobile, exchangeable props that give a stage tableau a new sense. They do not so much introduce contingency as show that it was there all along. White's is a formalism that has discovered context (herein lies its politics), and he uses brackets to continually draw and redraw boundaries between work and world. This is in accordance with the notion that 'LIMIT IS MATERIAL'.[18] Brackets mark the suppressed terms of oppositions in titles such as 'Film Art Life (Death, Sex, Social History): David Wojnarowicz' and, with sharp irony, 'F R E E (Prisons 2)'. The terms in brackets must be negated so that what is outside them can be. 'F R E E' enjoys its space to breathe; 'Prisons' is imprisoned.

17 For the latter, see Siona Wilson, 'Structures of Feeling: Yvonne Rainer circa 1974', *October*, 152 (2015), pp. 3–25 <https://doi.org/10.1162/OCTO_a_00214>, especially pp. 5–6, where Wilson describes Annette Michelson's reading of Rainer's work as one that works according to precisely those terms suspicious of 'the personal' that tutor Frampton's description of *(nostalgia)*.

18 Ian White, 'F R E E (Prisons 2)', in *Here is Information. Mobilise*, ed. by Mike Sperlinger (LUX, 2016), pp. 299–308 (p. 306). See also Mike Sperlinger, 'Inevitably Making Sense: An Introduction to the Writing of Ian White', in the same volume, pp. 9–22.

In '(I am) For the Birds', however, brackets seem to do something different. The text was written in 2013, the year White died of cancer. The triumphant climax of modernity's cogito is scaled down in his title. Perhaps this is conditioned by White's illness, and his entanglement in Britain's increasingly privatized, coalition-government-era health system. In posts on his blog *Lives of Performers* in the year leading up to his death, White cites the Cartesian syllogism more than once: 'I AM ILL therefore I see/I think/I hear', and '*it gets on my nerves*, bloody joke, therefore I am'.[19] Idiomatically, to be 'for the birds' means to be unimportant; it could also signal an awareness that White does not have much time left. He will soon be for the birds. To be 'for the birds' could also be an offering, a gift. The brackets allow one to take or leave the subject and its verb, the self-possessing subject of capitalist modernity. This take it or leave it — but not in a hostile way; it is generous, an invitation — is a typical White structure of feeling. For example: 'I am looking, but I need not be'; 'it does not need to be done by me and it is being done by me'; and 'I am writing this. You must be reading this, but you don't have to'.[20] You can read what is in brackets, but you don't have to. Buried somewhere deep here is Rainer's *Trio A* (1966) — the withheld gaze at the audience. In the title '(I am) For the Birds', subject as ground is gently erased, fostering a different sense of self: '*I* am here by chance'; 'I am not'. The 'therefore' of propositional logic, which advances thought from premise to conclusion, is swerved. I am (there) for the birds; I am, (therefore) the birds. Non-sequiturs and conjunctions that don't specify the nature of relations abound across the two pages of White's text. Instead of logical inference, there is co-presence: 'They've got their own thing going on, birds'; 'we are not asking each other for anything'.[21]

19 Ian White, '1. What can be said', Lives of Performers, 7 October 2012 <https://livesofperformers.wordpress.com/2012/10/07/what-can-be-sai/> [accessed 9 July 2026]; and 'Lube', Lives of Performers, 13 November 2012 <https://livesofperformers.wordpress.com/2012/11/13/lube/> [accessed 9 July 2026].

20 The first two come from Ian White, '(I am) For the Birds', in *Here is Information. Mobilise*, ed. by Sperlinger, pp. 333–36 (pp. 333, 334). The third comes from Ian White, 'Yes But If But If But Then But Then: Peter Gidal', pp. 53–56 (p. 54), in the same volume.

21 White, '(I am) For the Birds', pp. 333–34.

*(Comay and Ruda write that punctuation 'is bound neither to speech nor to writing but operates at the extremities of both. It introduces phrasing into the sentence and is thus even closer to the voice than a letter of the alphabet: it tells us to breathe. It remains an unpronounceable mark and is thus even closer to writing than a logographic sign: it forces us to look. At once pure writing and pure voice, punctuation points to another region of language.'[22] Adorno and Derrida's views on punctuation could be said to each correspond to one of these two poles. For Adorno, the signs of punctuation 'are marks of oral delivery'.[23] For Derrida, in contrast, they are 'the best example of a nonphonetic mark within writing'.[24] Adorno states that it is in punctuation that language most closely approximates music.[25] Punctuation marks rhythm and cadence. In this conception, all written language is a score. We have a sense from this of the connection the motions of Adorno's writing have to music — philosophical discourse has to be played through. In its marking of rhythm and cadence, breath and tone, punctuation signals 'an interplay that takes place in the interior of language'. One can eliminate punctuation marks, but not punctuation, though one should not want to anyway: punctuation marks are 'friendly spirits whose bodiless presence nourishes the body of language'.[26] Despite this description, there is a fundamental ambivalence in Adorno's 'Punctuation Marks'. Adorno is anxious about their overuse. He worries that, granted free rein, these cute spirits turn into mischievous termites, hollowing out the text from within. In* Negative Dialectics, *Adorno asserts that the 'presentation of philosophy is not an external matter of indifference to it but immanent to its idea'.[27] So too in 'Punctuation Marks' he says that prose is not just the 'recording of facts'; rather, grammar and punctuation 'articulate and shape' ideas. Yet in the next paragraph he slips into calling punctuation marks a 'mere device', which should not be recruited to do*

22 Comay and Ruda, *The Dash*, p. 59.

23 Theodor W. Adorno, 'Punctuation Marks' [1956], in Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, trans. by Rolf Tiedemann and Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Columbia University Press, 2019), pp. 106–111 (p. 106).

24 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* [1967], trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), p. 227.

25 Adorno, 'Punctuation Marks', p. 107.

26 Ibid., p. 106.

27 Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics* [1966], trans. by E. B. Ashton (Routledge, 2004), p. 18.

*that which 'only language and subject matter can accomplish'. Failing to follow through on the implications of his claim about the immanence of presentation to idea, he seems reluctant to extend full philosophical status to his friendly spirits. Adorno's particular hostility to brackets is significant here. Only Proust, he says, could be trusted with them; other writers are advised to stick to dashes. The problem is that parentheses 'create enclaves' that are 'unnecessary to the overall structure'.*[28] *Yet Adorno presumes his conclusion here. In principle, nothing in a philosophical text can be said to be superfluous. And it is acts of reading that are decisive in this regard. As Comay and Ruda put it in relation to Hegel's notion of the 'speculative sentence', '[t]o read philosophically is to suspend every prior judgment as to which words have conceptual density and which are meaningless — in other words, to entertain the possibility that any word might be speculative (or not) at any moment.'*[29] *Any word… and any mark. Adorno is constantly worried about punctuation violently forcing 'linguistic expression', and therefore thought, against its intrinsic nature (Marx and Engels's sarcastic inverted commas anticipate the totalitarian uses to which their writings would be put, he worries at one point).*[30] *But his argument does its own forcing when it treats punctuation as a priori external to linguistic expression, relegating it to the lowly, pre-philosophical level of the typographical. If non-coercive thinking must 'abide with minutiae', ally itself with particulars 'without advance assurance to the thought', then by his own philosophical morality Adorno is practising coercive thinking here.*[31] *His solution to the ambiguous status he has given punctuation is unsatisfying and flagrantly undialectical, a matter of (bourgeois) taste: good writers punctuate with 'tactful sensitivity'.*[32] *Although Derrida would doubtless criticize Adorno's opposition between punctuating spirits and bodily language as metaphysical, he shares Adorno's view that punctuation is interior to language, and deploys a similar binary. Punctuation is, like the 'pause', 'blank', or 'interval', what makes meaning possible.*[33] *Deconstruction is concerned with 'making "apparent" the fact that the experience of the indis-*

28 Adorno, 'Punctuation Marks', p. 110.
29 Comay and Ruda, *The Dash*, p. 56.
30 Adorno, 'Punctuation Marks', p. 109.
31 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, p. 33.
32 Adorno, 'Punctuation Marks', p. 111.
33 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, p. 68.

*cernible limit on which speech is spaced (the experience of the impossible) is the eccentric centre of all thinking',*[34] *and this last phrase, 'eccentric centre', seems to evoke precisely that position of an aside that is also inside that characterizes parentheses, something both incorporated and ejected. We could say that punctuation embodies* différance, *if* différance *were something that could be embodied. The 'silent play' of punctuation, like the 'a' in the word* différance, *cannot be heard,*[35] *though we can sometimes, as Peter Szendy says, hear 'the differences [these marks] imprint on the pronunciation of the words they surround and demarcate'.*[36] *Throughout 'Différance', Derrida makes reference to the fact that he is speaking and that his audience cannot perceive whether he is saying* différence *or* différance, *so he must add an explanatory, parenthetical '(with an e)' or '(with an a)', although the parentheses themselves can still only be perceived in the written text.*[37] *He writes the two together as* differ( )nce. *The parentheses mark out a space for substitution or doubling.*[38] *A reading that overlooks punctuation can hardly be called a reading, Derrida thinks, and reading itself may be understood as a process of (re)punctuating a text, of re-spacing and re-voicing it, drawing out contours or inflections.*[39] *Far from Adorno's tendency to take parentheses at face value, obsequious units of signification that keep to their assigned subordinate place, for Derrida they embody a logic of the supplement, instances of 'in other words' that do not lock down meaning but rather slyly imbue the words around them with a 'capacity for skidding'.*[40] *It is as though every time we try to manoeuvre an idea*

34 Alexander García Düttmann, 'Nothing to See, Nothing to Do', in Jean-Luc Nancy, *Derrida, Supplements*, trans. by Anne O'Byrne (Fordham University Press, 2023), pp. 175–84 (p. 180).

35 Jacques Derrida, 'Différance', in *Margins of Philosophy* [1972], trans. by Alan Bass (University of Chicago Press, 1982), pp. 1–28 (p. 5).

36 Peter Szendy, *Of Stigmatology: Punctuation as Experience*, trans. by Jan Plug (Fordham University Press, 2018), p. 53.

37 Derrida, 'Différance', p. 8.

38 Ibid., p. 5.

39 See Derrida's variants on the phrase 'Who's talking about living', which include not only changes in punctuation but typological changes, i.e. the use of italics, in Jacques Derrida, 'Living On: Border Lines', trans. by James Hulbert, in Harold Bloom and others, *Deconstruction and Criticism* (Continuum, 1979), pp. 75–176 (pp. 80–81). See also Jacques Derrida, 'Choreographies', interview by Christie V. McDonald, *Diacritics*, 12.2 (1982), pp. 66–76 (p. 69); and Szendy, *Of Stigmatology*, pp. 54–55.

40 Derrida 'Living On', p. 75. See also Jacques Derrida, 'Limited Inc a b c…', trans. by Samuel Weber, in Derrida, *Limited Inc* (Northwestern University Press, 1988), pp. 29–110 (p. 100).

*into its right place with a parenthetical comment, we simply get our hands more dirty. Indeed, at the end of 'Punctuation Marks' Adorno is forced to admit the 'logical-semantic autonomy' of punctuation marks that Derrida so strongly underscores, an autonomy that brings them 'into conflict with their own mimetic nature'.*[41] *Yet we can say that Adorno holds fast to something that Derrida neglects in his suspicion of origins and his logic of the 'always already': history. 'History has left its residue in punctuation marks, and it is history, far more than meaning or grammatical function, that looks out at us, rigidified and trembling slightly, from every mark of punctuation.'*[42] *These tiny marks are the potshards of writing, by means of which entire layers of discourse can be dated.)*

(COMPARTMENTS)

The protagonist of Doris Lessing's 1962 novel *The Golden Notebook* is a writer. Anna Wulf has published one successful novel but has vowed not to publish a second. Simultaneously, she writes in multiple notebooks organized according to subject matter. There is a public novel and a series of private notebooks, but the superior valuation that some might read into the former's circulation in the public sphere is reversed: Anna is dissatisfied with her novel, which she regards as clichéd and false; a much more complex and rich picture of social and psychological life emerges in her notebooks. At one point, she is interrogated about the latter by the grown-up son of her best friend:

> 'Why do you write things in different kinds of handwriting? And you bracket bits off? You give importance to one kind of feeling and not to others? How do you decide what's important and what isn't?'
>
> 'I don't know.'
>
> 'That isn't good enough. You know it isn't. Here you've got an entry, it was when you were still living in our house. "I stood looking down out of the window. The street seemed miles down. Suddenly I felt as if I'd flung myself out of the window. I could see myself lying on the pavement. Then I seemed to be standing by the body on the pavement. I was two people. Blood

41 Adorno, 'Punctuation Marks', p. 111.

42 Ibid., p. 107.

> and brains were scattered everywhere. I knelt down and began licking up the blood and the brains."'
>
> He looked at her, accusingly, and Anna was silent. 'When you had written that, you put heavy brackets around it. And then you wrote: "I went to the shop and bought a pound and a half of tomatoes, half a pound of cheese, a pot of cherry jam, and a quarter of tea. Then I made a tomato salad and took Janet to the park for a walk."'
>
> 'Well?'
>
> 'That was the same day. Why did you put brackets round the first bit, about licking up the blood and the brains?'
>
> 'We all have mad flashes about being dead on the pavement, or cannibalism, or committing suicide or something.'
>
> 'They aren't important?'
>
> 'No.'
>
> 'The tomatoes and the quarter of tea is what is important?'
>
> 'Yes.'[43]

At first glance this could be Anna's attempt to downgrade fantasy in favour of 'the real world', and, concomitantly — since Anna is a writer — her preference for a literary mode that, rather than privileging psychological interiority (seen as 'individualistic' in the Communist Party milieu in which the book is set), is a forthright, event-driven realism ('social'). More subtly, though, by refusing to place in parentheses her daily tasks as a middle-class, post-war single mother, the social-reproductive labour of shopping and childcare, Anna highlights the everyday as a space of self-making.

Still, there's something seemingly anxious about Anna's use of brackets around her violent dream. She edits herself. When asked why she must divide her writing into categories and use brackets, she says that if not there would be 'chaos'. Like Frampton's *(nostalgia)*, Anna wants to contain the disturbance of the subjective, using brackets to mark out the boundary of some inner self, to keep it under control. The mess of blood and brains — described significantly as 'scattered everywhere' on the payment — needs to be put back inside. When they are incorporated into another part of her, this is abject: she kneels

43 Doris Lessing, *The Golden Notebook* [1962] (Fourth Estate, 2014), p. 246.

down and laps them up like a dog. Both examples involve the artist bracketing *out* a version or part of themselves from another version or part of themselves. There is something obscene or at least inappropriate about this stuff. Perhaps it is not coincidental that the architectural term 'braggets' itself derives from an item of clothing said to have the same shape: a 'braguette' — a codpiece. The term 'brackets' is part of the same etymological family as 'breeches': trousers or pants or underwear. Who would want to see a writer or filmmaker open their brackets and reveal the private things they have in there? It's not decent.

Bracketing out might be a means, though, for navigating a capitalist world characterized by exploitation, oppression, and violence. Witness the following poem by Yvonne Rainer:

> There are certain words
> that elicit mawkish sighs
> or at least a gulp
> in some cerebral throats
> like "my father"
> (forget mother)
> or cobblestone
> (forget Kosovo)
> or raging hormones
> (forget East Timor)
> or interpellate
> (forget food stamps)
> in any case
> the simple trick
> is not to pause
> but shun the corpse
> and — nimble-witted —
> outflank the rollicking
> nightly news[44]

The narrator is encouraged to practise disavowal: inconvenient or unpleasant things, whether distant from her ('Kosovo', 'East Timor') or nearby ('food stamps'), are not be looked at but rather forgotten and hidden away in psychological parenthesis, like a box at the back of the wardrobe. In this respect, bracketing out is a coping strategy, an element of what Henrike Kohpeiß calls 'bourgeois coldness', an 'affective

44 Yvonne Rainer, *Poèmes* (Trente-trois morceaux, 2021), p. 107.

social technique' for navigating a world where the subject has negligible agency,[45] and where they are continually bombarded by violence. In the case of male, white, bourgeois, Western subjects, this is primarily symbolic violence in the form of media images and sounds, as well as the very visible social violence of the urban environment, and the subject is more commonly a witness to it than its direct object; the quantum of material, potentially fatal violence the subject is exposed to increases the further one gets from this privileged exception. (Rainer's 'nimble-witted' narrator is at the better-off end of this spectrum — for others, the technique of 'outflanking' can only have limited purchase.) Put in other terms, bracketing out is a technique for dealing with what Mattin calls 'social dissonance', the non-fit between — for example — capitalist ideologies of individual autonomy, meritocracy, and fulfilment with the daily demonstration of a reality structured according to coercion, hierarchy, and injustice.[46] Undoubtedly, such dissonance is a frequently disavowed feature of left-wing intellectual circles too: the production of political-theoretical discourse signalled by the word 'interpellate' takes place at the expense of dealing with the blunt reality of 'food stamps'. Bracketing out seeks to confine our dissonance-producing knowledge of things like the latter. Again, some subjects have the luxury of this more than others. But in any case, the price of the affective social technique of bracketing out is emotional isolation, atomization, depoliticization, and the death of solidarity.

All this evokes contemporary pop-psychological discourses on 'boundaries'. While no doubt some compartmentalization and individuation is necessary to survive in the world, let alone thrive — again underscoring the way the possibilities for these are differentially distributed across subjects according to numerous vectors of social hierarchy — much of this discourse promotes what Lily Scherlis calls a 'Tupperware container' version of the self, in which a healthy self neatly boxes up its various aspects and relations, and ultimately itself as a whole to protect it from others. As Scherlis puts it, such a model imagines that 'everyone in the world is mindlessly wandering toward your vulnerable core, and if you don't tell them where to turn back, you

45 Henrike Kohpeiß, *Bourgeois Coldness*, trans. by Grace Nissan (Divided, 2025), p. 2.
46 Mattin, *Social Dissonance* (Urbanomic, 2022).

might get trampled'.[47] While in this regard it makes the self seem weak, a little snail in need of a strong shell, boundary discourse's governing metaphor is the self as property owner, drawing and policing invisible lines of demarcation. Such a model has a centuries-long tradition in the West, contemporaneous with capitalist modernity itself and its processes of enclosure of common land, and is inherently racialized. As Kohpeiß describes, '[p]roperty can be understood as one of the concepts that separates the bourgeois subject from the racialised subject', behind the latter of which lurks slavery.[48] Bourgeois subjects may own property, whereas slaves are property; bourgeois subjects own themselves, whereas enslaved people are owned by others. The bourgeois subject with its interiority is, according to that class's own ideology, a sovereign, autonomous one, who 'constantly pursues new delimitations to protect its sovereignty against everything socially and aesthetically alien'. In contrast, their racialized antithesis is a subject without 'clear contours'.[49]

The self imagined by contemporary boundary discourse repeats this bourgeois Major Subject in a minor key, defensive rather than triumphant, emphasizing contraction rather than expansion, in keeping with a historical moment of Western imperial crisis rather than accelerated growth. Self-help boundary discourse thus has significant homologies with a more violent boundary discourse whose growth has paralleled it, that of contemporary fascism. Indeed, as Alberto Toscano argues, there is a profound overlap between contemporary fascist imaginaries of the 'domestic' (in both familial and national senses) and the geopolitical, in that both are 'sutured by all kinds of practices of bordering, at once bodily and territorial'.[50] As Kohpeiß's description implies, the fascist subject is not a radical break with the liberal one

47 Lily Scherlis, 'Boundary Issues', *Parapraxis*, 10 July 2023 <https://www.parapraxismagazine.com/articles/boundary-issues> [accessed 9 July 2026].

48 Kohpeiß, *Bourgeois Coldness*, p. 135. For the relation between the development of this view of the self and historical capitalist processes of enclosure, see Klaus Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, trans. by Stephen Conway in collaboration with Erica Carter and Chris Turner, 2 vols (University of Minnesota Press, 1987–89), I: *Women, Floods, Bodies, History* (1987), pp. 301–02.

49 Kohpeiß, *Bourgeois Coldness*, pp. 5, 150–51.

50 Alberto Toscano, 'Fragments for a Theory of the Late Fascist Body', in Dagmar Herzog, *The New Fascist Body* (Wirklichkeit Books, 2025), pp. 97–110 (p. 87).

described above but continuous with it. Nevertheless, in fascism this bourgeois subject becomes pathological. The *Freikorps* men analysed by Klaus Theweleit saw themselves as frozen up like icicles, as fixed entities holding fast against the floods of femininity and communism, as 'hard, solid ships, incapable of experiencing mingling with another body as a pleasurable expansion and reordering of boundaries'.[51] The little divider of the subject in parentheses becomes the armour of the *Körperpanzer*. Yet, to reiterate, we should not see this armoured subject as merely a distant historical aberration, given the expansion of practices of social — and therefore psychological — bordering in the present, in the guise of increasingly violent migration regimes *around* geographic territories, of bureaucratic, police, and judicial apparatuses enforcing the border *within* nation states, of social-media based cults (often conspiracy-theory allied) of the physically fit body and of hygiene, and of ideological demarcations made between good others and unassimilable barbarians rejected by the social body.

*('The subject of the analysis (the critic, the philologist, the scholar) cannot in fact, without bad faith and smugness, believe he is external to the language he is describing. His exteriority is only quite provisional and apparent: he too is in language, and he must assume his insertion [...] without having recourse to the hypocritical distance of a fallacious metalanguage [...] all in all, it is the whole of criticism (as a discourse held "on" a work) which is outdated.'*[52] *Roland Barthes's statements in 'Theory of the Text' (1973) lay out two defining traits of a historically and geographically specific moment of thought that we may, for convenience, call 'poststructuralism', namely the critique of 'metalanguage' and the insertion of the subject into theoretical discourse, traits that are closely tied to one another and that Barthes exemplifies with more candour and transparency, perhaps naivety, than any other writer. The two logics that Barthes identifies and finds problematic here — verticality ('a discourse held "on" a work') and interiority/exteriority ('[t]he subject of the analysis' who mistakenly believes himself 'external to the language he is describing'; see*

51 Theweleit, *Male Fantasies*, I, pp. 244, 322.

52 Roland Barthes, 'Theory of the Text', trans. by Ian McLeod, in *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, ed. by Robert J. C. Young (Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), pp. 31–47 (p. 44).

*also his declaration in his 'Inaugural Lecture' at the Collège de France that 'every relation of exteriority of one language to another is, in the long run, untenable')*[53] *— could be mapped onto the hierarchization and compartmentalization associated with parentheses. Barthes's is a way of thinking that, metaphorically speaking, wants to put nothing in parenthesis, even if such writing may be replete empirically with the punctuation marks in question. Calling something a parenthesis takes on a derogatory tone. We see it elsewhere, for instance when Rosalind Krauss (later one of Barthes's translators), criticizing the supposed isolation from the movement of history she claims as characteristic of video, describes the position of video artists as one 'centered between two machines that are the opening and closing of a parenthesis'.*[54] *Or when Jean-Paul Fargier declares that, 'in the class struggle nothing is irrelevant, nothing can be put in PARENTHESES'.*[55] *Parentheses here signal dehistoricization and depoliticization, blockage, effacement, or repression. In contrast to the verticality of metalanguage, late Barthes texts like* A Lover's Discourse *(1977) seek 'a horizontal discourse' in which sentences are not integrated 'into a higher level'.*[56] *There is a tendency towards the fragment in this late writing, since this form reduces the degree to which ideas or sections appear to be gathered into a 'higher' unity, and a shift of dispositional allegiance away from analytical models — Barthes had described structuralism in 1964 as the extraction of models from texts — towards actualized units of discourse: focusing on the radical singularity of every enunciation, attacking the notion of paraphrase, and so on.*[57] *However, analogous to the Derridean logic of the supplement, parenthesis actually holds an ambivalent relationship with verticality. For while on the one hand there is the conventional association of lesser import-*

53 Roland Barthes, 'Lecture in Inauguration of the Chair of Literary Semiology, Collège de France, January 7, 1977', trans. by Richard Howard, *October*, 8 (1979), pp. 3–16 (p. 13) <https://doi.org/10.2307/778222>.

54 Rosalind Krauss, 'Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism', *October*, 1 (1976), pp. 50–64 (p. 52) <https://doi.org/10.2307/778507>.

55 Jean-Paul Fargier, 'Parenthesis or Indirect Route', trans. by Diana Mathias, *Screen*, 12.2 (1971), pp. 131–44 (p. 131) <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/12.2.131>.

56 Roland Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse: Fragments*, trans. by Richard Howard (Hill and Wang, 1978), p. 7.

57 Roland Barthes, 'The Structuralist Activity', trans. by Richard Howard, in Barthes, *Critical Essays* (Northwestern University Press, 1972), pp. 213–20 (pp. 214–15); Roland Barthes, 'Writers, Teachers, Intellectuals', in *Image Music Text*, ed. and trans. by Stephen Heath (Fontana, 1977), pp. 190–215 (pp. 193–94).

*ance with spatial lowness, and the frequent use of brackets for examples (examples being something gathered 'under' a concept), on the other hand brackets are often used for explanatory comments, and in this regard seem to be an instance of what Roman Jakobson would call 'glossing', which is to say metalanguage.*[58] *Parenthetical remarks do not simply stay on one level of the discursive ladder, but have the capacity to swing above and below a 'primary discourse'. Barthes's late writing does not merely set itself against forms of writing characterized by a kind of metalingual authoritarianism (that is, discourses which take it upon themselves to explain what other discourses mean, situating themselves in a superior position), but exhibits a valorization of 'primary language' as such, a desire for a discourse that is performative rather than referential, 'dramatic' rather than 'epistemological', as exemplified in the 'figures' of* A Lover's Discourse *(which he compares, tellingly, to the movements of gymnasts or dancers).*[59] *It is not coincidental, though, that these claims track an increasingly unpolitical, even anti-political, movement in his writing.*[60] *In the face of the supposed tyranny of metalanguage, Barthes has recourse to two problematic solutions: the turn to merely arbitrary principles for organizing fragments of discourse (alphabetical order in* A Lover's Discourse *or a random statistical table in* The Neutral*) and a return to, indeed celebration of, individual whim.*[61] *Metalanguage in a certain reduced manner remains, but as an element of style, style understood not just as an option of textual form but in the late Foucauldian sense of a making of the self, an ethics. This is the way Barthes carries through the earlier understanding, in his own work and that of others, that the problem of metalanguage is intimately bound up with that of the subject, since metalanguage — read also here 'science' — excludes the latter from its discourse. It is not coincidental that Georges*

58 Roman Jakobson, 'Linguistics and Poetics', in Jakobson, *Language in Literature*, ed. by Krystyna Pomorska and Stephen Rudy (Harvard University Press, 1987), pp. 62–94 (p. 69).

59 Barthes, 'Lecture in Inauguration of the Chair of Literary Semiology', p. 7; Barthes, *A Lover's Discourse*, pp. 3–4.

60 See, for instance, the following words: 'If, by some unimaginable excess of socialism or barbarism, all but one of our disciplines were to be expelled from our educational system [...]' (Barthes, 'Lecture in Inauguration of the Chair of Literary Semiology', p. 6).

61 Roland Barthes, *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the Collège de France (1977–1978)*, trans. by Rosalind E. Krauss and Denis Hollier (Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 12.

*Bataille's notion of heterology became important in this context. As Jean-Louis Baudry describes the Bataillean account of the limits of science with reference to sociology, 'sociology as science' cannot 'gain access [to the subject] since the object that it studies can only be totally revealed through the alteration of the subject that produces it — a requirement that sociology could not allow without destroying the objectivity that sustains it as a science and, consequently, without destroying itself'. Heterology is a science of the 'heterogeneous subject, the subject of the heterogeneous', a paradoxical science that destroys itself as science, ultimately leading to 'a "beyond science" [...] that is not a renunciation of science but a transformation'.*[62] *The subject of traditional science on this model is a subject in parenthesis, a transcendent subject which 'guarantees the validity of science since it isolates itself from the articulated whole of different practices'. In contrast, for heterology, for revolutionary politics as understood in the milieu of the modernist literary journal* Tel Quel*, with which Baudry (and Barthes, Derrida, Philippe Sollers, and Julia Kristeva) were affiliated, in the last instance 'practices can be thought only through the recognition of the real subject, taken in the whole of its drives and of its relationship, and that of its drives, to social practices'.*[63] *Barthes winds up jettisoning science and delighting in an absolute subjectivism that is science's inversion (subjectivity becomes diffused through the entirety of the lover's discourse), illustrating Adorno's point that '[t]he more reification there is, all the more subjectivism there will be';*[64] *heterology, on the contrary, is dialectical, although it is a dialectic that radicalizes the negative moment, what Derrida called Bataille's 'Hegelianism without reserve' and what Sollers called Bataille being 'Hegel's "devil"'.*[65] *One heterological example in this context is Julia*

62 Jean-Louis Baudry, 'Bataille and Science: Introduction to Inner Experience', trans. by Leslie Anne Boldt-Irons, in *On Bataille: Critical Essays*, ed. by Leslie Anne Boldt-Irons (State University of New York Press, 1995), pp. 265–81 (pp. 271, 273). The essay was originally presented at a 1972 colloquium on Bataille and Antonin Artaud in which Barthes and Kristeva also participated, the papers of which were published in 1974. See Philippe Sollers, ed., *Bataille* (10/18, 1974).

63 Baudry, 'Bataille and Science', p. 278.

64 Theodor W. Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone (Verso, 1981), p. 74, cited in Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism: Adorno or The Persistence of the Dialectic* [1990] (Verso, 2007), p. 70.

65 Jacques Derrida, 'From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve', in Derrida, *Writing and Difference* [1967], trans. by Alan Bass (Routledge Classics, 2001), pp. 317–50; Philippe Sollers, *Writing and the Experience of Limits*

*Kristeva's* semanalyse. *Kristeva confronts a similar problem to Barthes: '[h]ow to separate "linguistic-reality" from that which the linguist-subject thinks about it, from that which it knows about it, since it is inside?'*[66] *But the response is not to trade science for the subject, but to try to articulate the ensemble of relations in which the subject is held in different signifying practices. In the texts where Kristeva does this, scientific concepts are, appropriately, subjected to extraordinary torsions — yet without being cast away. In the analyses presented there, metalanguage is defined as a signifying practice where the subject is 'foreclosed', or where it 'draws its position, its isolation within the signifying process, from the reduction of the negative'*[67] *(in Bataillean terminology, the reduction of the heterogeneous). Whereas poetic language puts in play a 'subject in process', which is to say both subject to transformation and 'on trial',*[68] *the relation of linguistic science to the subject is one of '[k]nowledge conditioned by that about which knowledge wants to know nothing — the site of linguistics is where the most powerful repression and the most momentary and most piercing lucidity meet'.*[69] *This simultaneity of admission and effacement is characteristic not of a subject that is in process but, precisely, one that is in parentheses.)*

(GAPS)

The fascist subjects Theweleit discusses fantasize themselves, both individually and as a collective, as 'gapless blocks'.[70] As Marina Vishmidt develops this idea, the biopolitical vision of the 'solid, impermeable front' that sutures 'gender normativity and political reaction' makes

[1968], ed. by David Hayman, trans. by Philip Barnard (Columbia University Press, 1983), p. 108.

66 Julia Kristeva, 'On the Subject in Linguistics', trans. by Anna Strelis, *Graduate Faculty Philosophy Journal*, 31.1 (2010), pp. 61–89 (p. 72). The essay was first published in 1971 and reprinted in *Polylogue* (1977), though it was not included in the abridged English translation of the latter.

67 Kristeva, 'On the Subject in Linguistics', p. 69; Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, trans. by Margaret Waller (Columbia University Press, 1984), p. 94.

68 Julia Kristeva, 'A Question of Subjectivity — an Interview', in *Modern Literary Theory: A Reader*, ed. by Philip Rice and Patricia Waugh (Arnold, 1989), pp. 131–36 (pp. 128–29).

69 Kristeva, 'On the Subject in Linguistics', p. 72.

70 Danny Hayward, '"Language Is for Fucking Idiots": On Porpentine Charity Heartscape', in Hayward, *Wound Building: Dispatches from the Latest Disasters in UK Poetry* (Punctum Books, 2021), pp. 165–81 (p. 179).

negatively apprehensible a radical, emancipatory counter-politics of gaps. Gaps are 'the errancy of a system — the negativity at the core of its positive appearance or structural integrity in the world'. This system maybe a psyche, a body, a state, an infrastructure.[71] When gaps are seen to condense the conceptual and political, I see this as arriving at something like what Trinh T. Minh-ha calls an 'elsewhere(-within here)', internal exclusions that are at once figures of thought and indexed to social actuality. Trinh signals this relation parenthetically.[72] The internal exclusion described here is akin, too, to Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's description of fugitivity in the university as a position 'in but not of'.[73] Infrastructural critique as described by Vishmidt uses the negativity of gaps as a resource, 'forcing [...] gaps or cuts in the existent that might provide not just glimpses of but access to other possibilities'. Gaps are where we can cut across unexpectedly within or between systems, within or between bodies, within or between collectivities. They are punctures in the fabric of actuality 'where new knowledge could get in', entry and exit points.[74] Vishmidt distinguishes between a 'gap', which 'subsists in relation' and is 'in time, or in

71 Marina Vishmidt, 'Basement Jazz: Dora Budor', *Mousse Magazine*, 28 September 2022 <https://www.moussemagazine.it/magazine/dora-budor-marina-vishmidt-2022-2/> [accessed 9 July 2026].

72 Trinh T. Minh-ha, 'Cotton and Iron', in Trinh, *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics* (Routledge, 1991), pp. 11–26 (p. 15). Think also of Althusser's 'necessary absence[s]' or 'inevitable absence[s] revealed by symptomatic reading (Louis Althusser and others, *Reading Capital: The Complete Edition*, trans. by Ben Brewster and David Fernbach (Verso, 2015), pp. 27–28); or the notion of suture developed around the same time by Althusser's student Jacques-Alain Miller, which Miller calls 'the general relation of lack to the structure of which it is an element'. Jacques-Alain Miller, 'Suture (elements of the logic of the signifier)', trans. by Jacqueline Rose, *Screen*, 18.4 (1977), pp. 24–34 (p. 26) <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/18.4.24>.

73 Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Minor Compositions, 2013), p. 26.

74 I am reminded here of Étienne Balibar's description of the effects of the fact that Althusser's famous 1970 essay 'Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes towards an investigation)' was extracted from two different sections of a larger manuscript without explaining how these two sections were invented, merely inserting an ellipsis. Instead of an account of the connection between the two, there was an 'absence' or 'void'. For Balibar, the unexpected result was that readers had to invent possible connections in the gap, thus rendering the text paradoxically more productive. See Étienne Balibar, 'Foreword', in Louis Althusser, *On the Reproduction of Capital: Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*, trans. by G. M. Goshgarian (Verso, 2014), pp. vii–xviii (pp. xii–xiii).

language', remaining negative, and a 'void', which 'hypostatizes its emptiness and completeness [...] aspiring to the status of an object', thus wanting to positivize itself. In practice, though, Vishmidt uses both terms, and her description of a gap as a 'spacing', with its Derridean associations, as well as her use of the Afropessimist figure of the 'prison-slave' as one example of a 'terminal' gap ('the death or deprivation enabling any project of plenitude or development'), evoking as she does so another Derridean figure, the supplement, lend an ontological weight to her discussions of gaps too. Thus it may be better to see gaps and voids not as two distinct things — which would already place us in allegiance with the ontological emphasis of the void — but as two different tendencies of the same (no/non-)thing, tendencies that may be amplified or underscored according to the needs of a situation. In fact, Vishmidt's further specification of a difference between the aforementioned 'terminal' gaps and what she calls 'speculative' gaps, which are 'space[s] incubating possible forms in all their virtual actuality', seems to reflect these two tendencies.[75]

Parentheses are handy tools for the making of little gaps. At the end of Ian White's essay 'Performance, Audience, Mirror', after a series of sections with the parenthetical subheadings 'One (Cinema)', 'Two (Theatre)', 'Three (The Idea of the Live)', the final section is headed 'Four (_____)'.[76] In Mike Sperlinger's description, we are met here with an 'underlined blank' where one 'might expect the final term to appear, the "solution" to the question of cinema/theatre/liveness (the ultimate term to unify all those disparate concepts'.[77] Underlining, typically a way of drawing attention and emphasizing importance, here underscores a blank, a gap. Theory, if we may call White's writing by this name, becomes here that space mentioned by Trinh where categories are voided, emptied out, as much as made.[78] This is done, in the first instance, through an act of strategic withdrawal and/or withholding (I am seduced here by the co-presence in these two words of the Middle

75 Vishmidt, 'Basement Jazz: Dora Budor'.

76 White, 'Performance, Audience, Mirror: Cinema, Theatre and the Idea of the Live' in *Here is Information. Mobilise*, pp. 261–78 (p. 274).

77 Sperlinger, 'Inevitably Making Sense', pp. 21–22.

78 Trinh T. Minh-ha, 'The Totalizing Quest of Meaning', in Trinh, *When the Moon Waxes Red*, pp. 29–50 (p. 31).

English etymology of 'with', meaning move away, depart from, leave; and its apparently opposed, more current and quotidian sense of hold near and accompany) — the end of the previous section of White's essay is about Lee Lozano's 1969 *General Strike Piece*, in which Lozano stopped participating in artworld events. White's blank section begins, 'The body is a promise. Removing it — its *like*ness — is a political act. Political cinema, political theatre are live. What is this — .'[79] The blank performs and doesn't perform, enacts and doesn't enact. It presents itself — the extended underscore is a tiny stage, the brackets its wings — and by definition is not (a) presence. Removing something, White makes apprehensible frame or conditions, the empty dispositif or apparatus (the beginning of White's essay has a diagram of a theatre, the end a photograph of the Cesky Krumlov Baroque Theatre in Prague, with a scenography that creates an effect of infinite regress) — a question of infrastructure. Withdrawal here is not quietism or retreat. After all, one of White's recurring gestures is the attempt to think 'expanded cinema' as a figure for a practice that constantly trespasses and shifts the boundaries between the social and the artistic, in a manner similar to how Vishmidt thinks of infrastructural critique. Expanded cinema is 'abnormal, social, physical, personal-political', architectural; it has 'visible apparatus and operators'; it is 'plural' and Marxist, or in White's rendering, '(Marxist!)'.[80] By not forcing onto the scene an 'ultimate term to unify all those disparate concepts', but instead presenting us with a non-actor, a gap, withdrawal paradoxically produces multiplication, as the last section of White's essay manifests as an initially bewildering series of capitalized terms:

SOCIAL
PHYSICAL
PERSONAL
EXISTENCE
SPACE
VISIBLE

79 White, 'Performance, Audience, Mirror', p. 274.
80 Ibid., p. 271.

REALITY
PLURAL
ACTION
IMMATERIAL
THEATRICAL
WITHDRAWAL.[81]

Thus White's blank sets in play Vishmidt's notion of 'gaps or cuts in the existent that might provide not just glimpses of but access to other possibilities'. Via, to appropriate a phrase from Harney and Moten, 'hole[s] in the fence',[82] an improvised route traverses and mixes up fields (media such as film and theatre, with their policed boundaries, even in the case of experimental film) and scales (the particular performance, the art institution, the subject, the social, metalanguage, poetic language).

Gaps, such as parentheses, do not have to be filled. They may mark a potential, but we should not imagine that the political goal is always to fill the absence, and that once some*thing* or some name or concept sits in a formerly empty place, work is done. If an empty parenthesis is 'a promise', as White calls the body, this promise can be fulfilled, but it doesn't have to be. In one of the fragments of *Minima Moralia* titled 'Gaps', Adorno criticizes thought that is afraid of gaps, the demand for philosophy to reveal its working out from premise to conclusion through a series of logical steps, each causal link accounted for. For Adorno, such a demand fails to recognize that the value of thinking increases in inverse proportion to its familiarity. Repetition wears grooves in language through which the wheels of thought smoothly turn, the common sense and cliché of ideology; working one's way out of this requires some breaking of language, the creation of holes and fissures. Philosophical discourse characterized by progression, lucidity, and wholeness can hardly be adequate to the contradictory and fundamentally 'damaged' nature of existence. Gaps are the wounds of damaged life. Gapless thought is a model schoolboy, the teacher's pet who has ticked every box, filled in every answer, solved all the maths

81 Ibid., p. 274.
82 Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, p. 26.

problems, received full marks and graduated. Validated by the educational institution, such a schoolboy never criticizes the institution, its terms and conditions, never asks awkward questions about what is excluded from the curriculum or how it connects to what is outside the school's walls, or why only some children get to go to school. Theory that presents itself as a continuous discourse is stifling, distorting, and dishonest. In short, ideological. It suffocates the reader and leaves no space — as Adorno's remark that thought waits 'to be transformed into teaching' suggests — for practice.[83] Emancipatory thought, in contrast, is a broken promise.

We could speculate that each parenthesis is a discourse meeting a limit. This limit may be significant or not. When we must traverse a text through a dense thicket of these and other punctuation marks — such as in the work of White, Trinh, Stephen Heath, Philippe Sollers, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha — then we can surmise that this text is repeatedly running up against and trying to overcome limits. In Cha's work, parenthetical figures form part of a fundamental concern with how 'space[s] of loss' can also be 'space[s] of possibility', to use Katie Kirkland's formulation. Like the gaps of damaged life, language in Cha is 'the noisy excess of a speech that is broken by, and breaks through, centuries of violent interdiction'.[84] Punctuation, that which is present but cannot be voiced, becomes charged here. At the beginning of *Dictée* (1982), the text's *dicteuse* (she is not really a narrator; 'speaker-inscriber' is closer to the mark) provides an object lesson in *différance*. Undermining colonial language by taking it absolutely as its word, when the teacher says *point* in French, the dicteuse writes 'period' rather than marking '.'. When the dictator says 'virgule' she writes 'comma', not ','.[85] Cha's aesthetic and political refrain of the gap is signalled across her work in titles such as 'Temps Morts', 'long interval of silences', 'The Missing Page', and the *vide* (French for 'void') of *Vidéoème* (1976). Jesse Chun's artwork *O*, through a withdrawal of surrounding material,

83 Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* [1951], trans. by E. F. N Jephcott (Verso, 2020), pp. 86–87.

84 Katie Kirkland, 'Re Dis Appearances: Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *White Dust from Mongolia*', in *Film Undone: Elements of a Latent Cinema*, ed. by Philip Widmann (Archive Books, 2024), pp. 173–85 (p. 174).

85 Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Dictée* (Third Woman Press, 1995), p. 1.




Fig. 2. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Chronology*, 1977, colour photocopies attached to 18 pieces/panels of pressboard. Hooks for hanging the board/panels are taped to the verso of each board/panel. 14 × 8 1/2 in. University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive; gift of the Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Memorial Foundation.

draws attention to the repeated figure of the () or O in Cha's work, which is perhaps a zero, perhaps a small vessel: the ellipsis of an open mouth, a ring of people, a redacted page from the catalogue of the 2001 retrospective of Cha's work *The Dream of the Audience*, which leaves behind only words in brackets, subtitles like '*(Ailleurs)*', '*(Hand hearing)*', and '*(Awakened in the Mist)*'.[86]

In *Chronology* (1977), empty brackets figure something known to be there but not enunciable, the repressed of patriarchy and colonialism. *Chronology* is a series of photographs of Cha's family mounted on pressboard printed with short captions or phrases. Both words and images are printed in violet-indigo. One reads, 'tell (this)tell | (  ) silence' (Figure 2). *This*, something that can be pointed to deictically but 'not be named', has to be told, but how can one tell silence? The curve of the brackets here is like an elliptical orbit showing the gravitational field of an object that cannot be seen directly, that is perceptible only in its effects (before it meant the three dotted punctuation marks, 'ellipsis' meant what falls short, what isn't there).[87] The same shape appears in *Faire-Part*, a 1976 work composed of empty, unaddressed envelopes (Figure 3). Their emptiness is underlined by the appearance on them of words like *manqué* (missing), *vide* (empty, void), *muet* (mute), of zeros and of empty parentheses. The empty parentheses here mimic the support on which they are inscribed. Both are empty envelopes. They can contain something, but they don't have to. There is something almost tender here: parentheses carefully holding something like two cupped hands, an instance of what Trinh, taking up a phrase from another Cha work, *Commentaire* (1981), calls the 'twohold' that recurs across Cha's work. The 'twohold', Trinh proposes, is not 'vertically imposed', and each is an interval, recess, or pause.[88] If this twohold that gently cradles something or, for want of speech or content, simply holds fast to making that gesture anyway, is something small — smaller say, than the structures called 'patriarchy' or 'colonialism' — it cannot simply be

86 Jesse Chun, '*O*', in *She Follows No Progression: A Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Reader*, ed. by Juwon Jun and Rachel Valinsky (Wendy's Subway, 2024), pp. 167–83.

87 Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Elliptical Sense', in *Derrida, Supplements*, pp. 5–26 (p. 6).

88 Trinh T. Minh-ha, 'White Spring', in *The Dream of the Audience (Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, 1951–1982)*, ed. by Constance M. Lewallen (University of California Press, 2001), pp. 33–50 (p. 40).



Fig. 3. Theresa Hak Kyung Cha, *Faire-Part*, 1976, black press type and black ink on 15 envelopes, 4 1/2 × 6 in. University of California, Berkeley Art Museum and Pacific Film Archive; gift of the Theresa Hak Kyung Cha Memorial Foundation.

arrayed on a lower rung of the same scale. It cannot be nested because, even if it is contained in brackets, it is also something or somewhere else, '*(Ailleurs)*', '(Anything at all.)'[89]

89 Cha, *Dictée*, p. 3.

*(In one of his last lecture courses, Fredric Jameson described a defining trait of post-war 'French theory' as a fascination with 'what in French is called the schiz, the gap, the béance, the opening, the distance between, the crack, the cut', such that there 'is never a fullness'. For thinkers from Lacan to Althusser to Derrida to Foucault, he remarks, 'there isn't being. There are only gaps in being.'*[90] *The aim of my discussion here has been, though, not to retrace this canonized moment in the history of Western thought, but to try to draw on some of these resources to make a link between the tiny marks of the type that brackets represent and social form. This linking process can begin from textual structure; however, the route out that I am proposing is ultimately not deconstructive but infrastructural. Vishmidt's examples of gaps always relate to social content: Achille Mbembe's necropolitics or Frank Wilderson's 'prison-slave'.*[91] *Indeed, form on this understanding is 'sedimented' (social, historical) content.*[92] *In the account given by Vishmidt and Kerstin Stakemeier, both art and reproductive labour are 'systematically detached and externalized from within capital',*[93] *that same parenthetical structure I have been talking about, that the passage from* The Golden Notebook *points up so clearly, and that I also find alluded to in one of the gendered oppositions of Rainer's poem: '"my father" / (forget mother)'. Art's potential as gap relates to the possibility of what Stakemeier calls 'autonomisation', but this is not the modernist autonomy represented by, say, Frampton, because, seemingly paradoxically, 'the only hope for autonomy in contemporary art is for art to understand itself in relation to reproductive labour.'*[94] *In other words, as both subordinated and autonomous at the same time, the two characteristics bound together. This peculiar status of being both immanent and externalized can be weaponized. The production of these autonomizations is a practice of negativity, of generating what, in another context, Benjamin Noys calls 'immanent ruptures'.*[95] *I see this as,*

90 Fredric Jameson, *The Years of Theory: Postwar French Thought to the Present*, ed. by Carson Welch (Verso, 2024), pp. 183–84.

91 Vishmidt, 'Basement Jazz: Dora Budor'.

92 Marina Vishmidt, *Speculation as a Mode of Production: Forms of Value Subjectivity in Art and Capital* (Brill, 2019), p. 160.

93 Marina Vishmidt and Kerstin Stakemeier, *Reproducing Autonomy: Work, Money, Crisis and Contemporary Art* (Mute, 2016), p. 65.

94 Ibid., p. 47.

95 Benjamin Noys, *The Persistence of the Negative: A Critique of Contemporary Continental Theory* (Edinburgh University Press, 2010), p. 17.

*to return to Adorno's 'Gaps', a termite practice that hollows out from within and compromises the structural integrity of ideology or infrastructure. The conceptual practices of artists like Andrea Fraser 'lay open and expand internal systemic non-simultaneities, excesses, and breaches', Stakemeier writes.*[96] *In light of this, the poststructuralist thematic of gaps and limits — as in Sollers's search for a practice of* écriture *that enacts 'the experience of limits', or deconstruction as (in Düttmann's words) the attempt to render apprehensible 'the indiscernible limit on which speech is spaced'*[97] *— can here be more explicitly inscribed into, and made effective in, the social. In White, this involves situating activity at the 'productive limit or dialectical location',*[98] *which Sperlinger glosses as the point where '[t]he limit becomes productive [...] when we become conscious of the limits imposed on our experience by framing, of whatever kind, [so that] those limits can be made into the material (content) of our experience'.*[99] *Implied here is that, as in Stakemeier's dense theoretical description, '[f]orm is employed as a weapon of real-time concretisation, of the autonomisation of forms of life against the real abstraction of contemporary crisis-ridden capitalist society'. Moreover, in something like a materialist, left-communist rewriting of the poststructuralist rhetoric of the avant-garde text's mimetic production of a fractured, non-bourgeois subjectivity, Stakemeier speaks of practices such as those of White — I would add here Cha — where 'artistic self-deployment' operates but 'recedes, bearing a developing repertoire of autonomisations, establishing a set of practices, of discernible gestures and discrete forms, that commands an arsenal open to collectivisations, quotes, and shared authorships'. Subjectivity is legible not as modernist 'expressive genius' but as 'a socialised component of its own productions', as a series of 'affective points of concentration which do not expose a representative subjectivism. These artists do not appear as champions of the discourses into which they intervene, but as the cause of breaks within them. Crudeness, affects, desires, insecurities, and minor predicates are brought full circle instead of becoming part of a larger whole.'*[100] *I hear strong echoes here*

96 Vishmidt and Stakemeier, *Reproducing Autonomy*, p. 25.

97 Düttmann, 'Nothing to See, Nothing to Do', p. 180.

98 White, 'Performance, Audience, Mirror', cited in Sperlinger, 'Inevitably Making Sense', p. 18.

99 Sperlinger, 'Inevitably Making Sense', p. 18.

100 Vishmidt and Stakemeier, *Reproducing Autonomy*, pp. 26–28.

*of the ideas driving Baudry's Bataille-influenced statement that 'practices can be thought only through the recognition of the real subject, taken in the whole of its drives and of its relationship, and that of its drives, to social practices'. Stakemeier goes on to say that '[h]ere, singularisations lose their developmental sense and spiral back into individuations; they do not strive for completion, but for expanding specification — autonomisations that want no functional, discursive place within contemporary catastrophic capitalism.'*[101] *Parentheses are something undigested, not fully metabolized by their host text. Holes in the infrastructure. If, for some thinkers, parentheses have signalled a detachment or insularity that ties them to depoliticization and dehistoricization, when otherwise potentialized, either by artistic production or by a mode of reading, parentheses can be a figure for social gaps or autonomizations, whether large-scale historical ruptures or small but intransigent negations.)*

## W(H)IMPER

Comay and Ruda contrast the dash, which may appear singly or mark a rhetorical parenthesis, with brackets and quotation marks, which always come in pairs and therefore produce the expectation that they will close.[102] Alex Farrar's *Wimper* is a book of riso-printed eyelashes, no more than one per page.[103] At first sight they could be accidental pencil marks (Figure 4). *Wimper* is the Dutch and German word for 'eyelash'; it could also be a misspelling of the English word 'whimper', the opposite of going out with a bang. I see these eyelashes as little brackets. Erasmus called brackets 'lunula' because they look like miniature crescent moons. Little brackets, withdrawn or liberated from the expectation to close (thus from linear temporality), withdrawn or liberated from the directionality of the line, withdrawn or liberated from the aspiration to be a letter and falling back instead to mere graphic mark and fragment and trace of bodies. They fail to close, to gather together, to climax, instead lying scattered on the verge of disappearance, of being brushed away as unimportant. Then they are carefully picked up to leave their shadow on a page: body as matter become

101 Ibid., p. 28.

102 Comay and Ruda, *The Dash*, p. 55.

103 Alex Farrar, *Wimper* (Mulberry Tree Press, 2019).

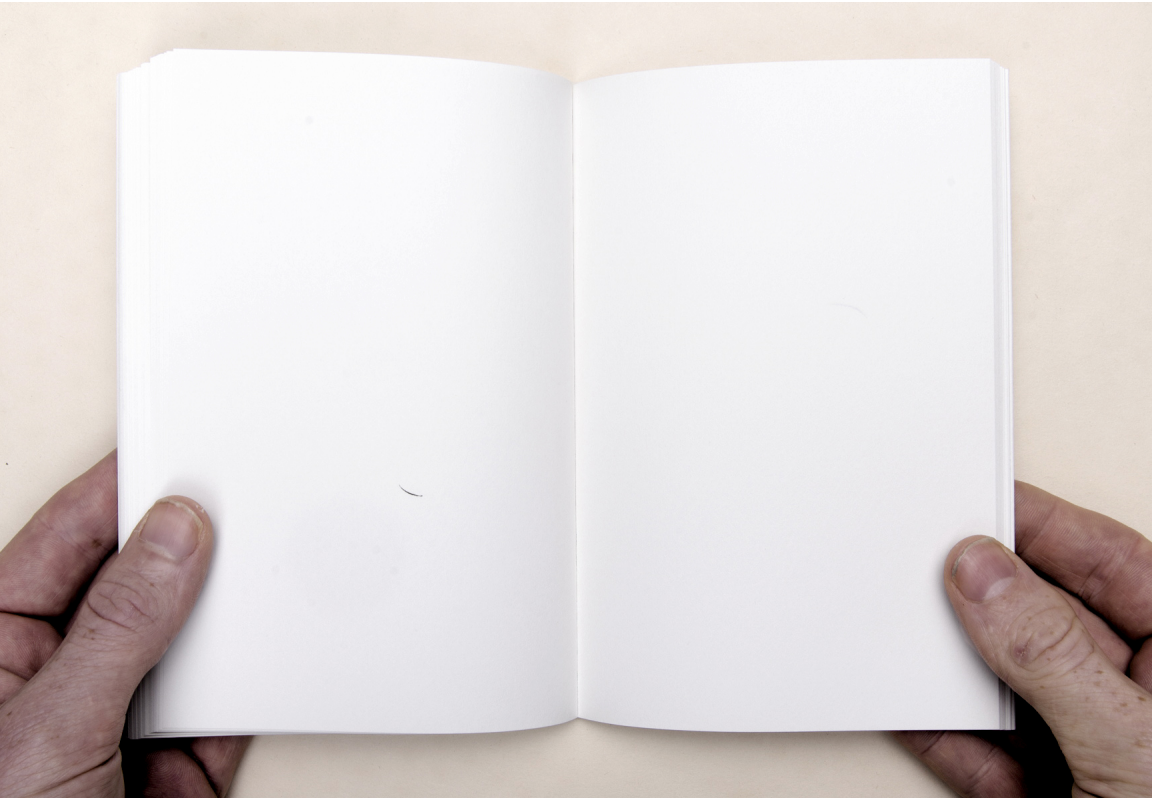

Fig. 4. Alex Farrar, *Wimper*, 2019, 17.1 × 11.4 × 1 cm, 160 pages, edition of 300, cold glue bound, one colour risograph printed interior, with an offset printed gatefold cover, both Freelife Vellum (Fedrigoni). Courtesy of Alex Farrar.

page as matter. Mute material drawn back towards text, but not fully. Unlike those fascist subjects who are 'hard ships', who fortify bodily and psychological boundaries pathologically and cannot mingle their self with others, here the body is always falling apart. This is the body as unfinished parenthesis, as broken promise of closure. So

*(for JR)*

# Scaling Sleep

## Modes of Suspension, Reduction, and Intensification

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### 100 YEARS OF SLEEP

A young woman sleeps for one hundred years, together with her servants, parents, and everyone working at the court of her father, the king.[1] She has conveniently fallen into a deep slumber in a small chamber where a bed is present. Everyone else just falls into deep sleep wherever they were — some appear frozen in mid-action in their everyday activities. They do not enter this state of suspension by free will; a malevolent fairy has cast a spell on them. In fact, the young woman is supposed to die and her long sleep is the substitute for death. The scale of the everyday and everynight is deferred; the various circadian rhythms have stopped. Each human's circadian rhythm is usually bound to a chronotype and an 'inner clock' located in the suprachiasmatic nucleus in the brain, which is more or less synchronized to the planetary scale of the light (day) and dark (night) rhythm of

1 Jacob Ludwig Carl Grimm and Wilhelm Carl Grimm, 'The Sleeping Beauty (Briar Rose)', in *Grimms' Complete Fairy Tales* [1785–1863], trans. by Margaret Hunt (Canterbury Classics, 26th printing, 2024), pp. 178–80. The original German title is 'Dornröschen'. I want to thank all fellows and colleagues of the ICI Berlin, as well as others, whose comments were immensely helpful for this essay.

planet Earth as it rotates on its axis over a period of time that humans call 'twenty-four hours'. Light-sensitive receptors in the human retina readjust this inner clock each day.[2]

The extended slumber of the royal household magically has no side effects; they neither age nor do they lose muscle mass and become thin (Figure 1). No external traces accumulate; no dust gathers on their bodies or clothes, as theorist Teresa Stoppani notes with surprise.[3] The well-known fairy tale of 'Sleeping Beauty' has little to say about the big sleep, except that it universally applies not only to the humans but also to the animals present at the scene, and even the wind that falls silent and motionless, excluding only the plants, which continue to grow normally.[4] What counts as sleep here could be described, for the living creatures, as having their eyes closed, showing no movement, while not being dead. No dreaming activity is reported from anyone. In medical terms, normal sleep is considered a quickly reversible state, whereas coma is not. This raises the question as to whether they were actually sleeping or, rather, in a state of coma, narcosis, hibernation, or torpor.

In humans and mammals, every sleep cycle consists partly of rapid eye movement (REM) sleep, during which vivid dreaming always occurs.[5] Human sleep cycles last around 90 to 120 minutes, and within each cycle four distinctly different stages of sleep ensue. Virtually all parts of the human body undergo notable changes during sleep. Within

2 People unable to see, or with injured eyes, may not be able to sense the light, sometimes leading to a very different rhythm than the twenty-four-hour sleep-wake one. See Yavuz Selim Atan and others, 'The Effect of Blindness on Biological Rhythms and the Consequences of Circadian Rhythm Disorder', *Turkish Journal of Ophthalmology*, 53.2 (2023), pp. 111–19 <https://doi.org/10.4274/tjo.galenos.2022.59296>.

3 Teresa Stoppani, 'Dusty Stories of Woman: Notes for a Re-definition of Dust', in *The Issues: Contemporary Culture and Aesthetics*, ed. by Sue Golding (Nerve, 2005), pp. 125–32 (p. 125).

4 See 'The Sleeping Beauty', in *Grimms' Complete Fairy Tales*, pp. 179. It is debatable if plants sleep, too. Many plants adapt to their environment and to seasonal temperature changes, and some, like the autumn crocus (*Colchicum autumnale*), retreat into the soil with their roots in winter, and only bloom in the autumn. Plants can, however, be anaesthetized, as has been proven in experiments with the mimosa (*Mimosa pudica*). See Vladyslav Vyazovskiy, 'What Sleep Is', *Aeon*, 14 October 2025 <https://aeon.co/essays/two-billion-humans-are-doing-something-bizarre-right-now-sleeping> [accessed 2 January 2026].

5 Antonio Zadra and Robert Stickgold, *When Brains Dream: Understanding the Science and Mystery of our Dreaming Minds* (Norton & Company, 2021).

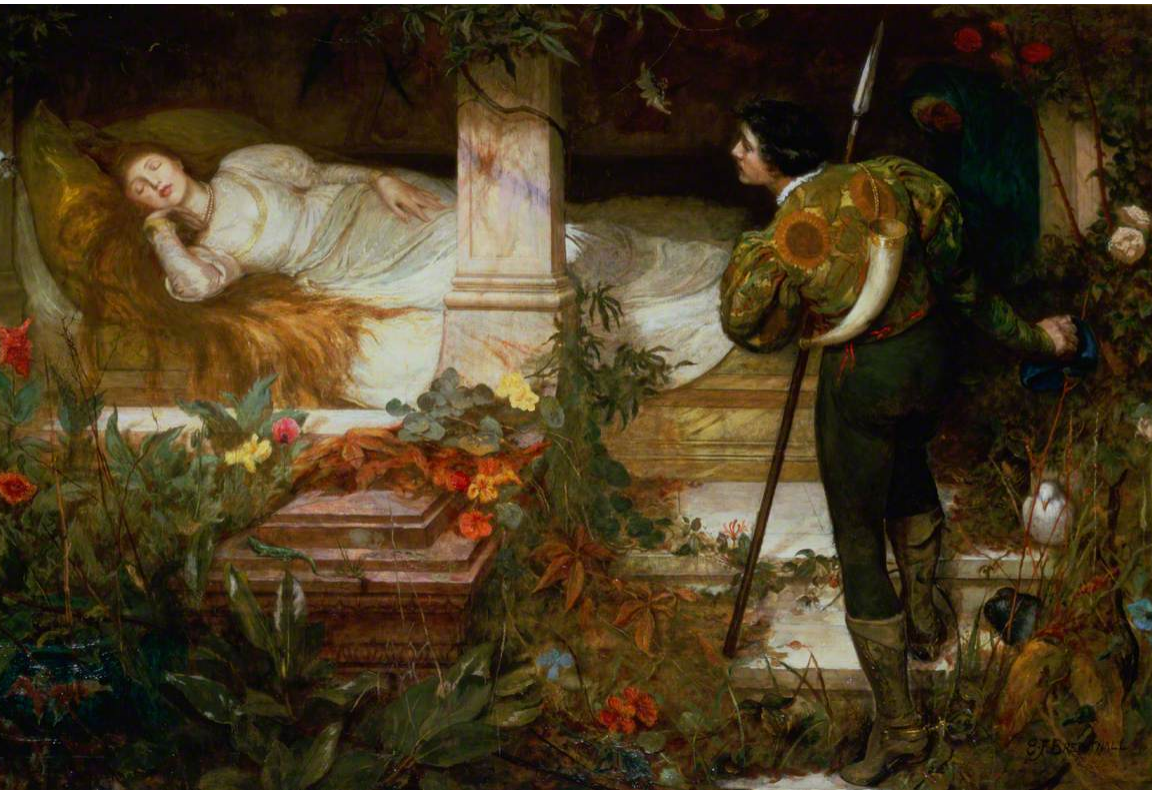

Fig. 1. Edward Frederick Brewtnall, *The Sleeping Beauty*, before 1902, oil on canvas, 150 × 224 cm, Warrington Museum and Art Gallery, Cheshire, UK. Image: public domain / Wikimedia Commons.

the third distinctive stage, often called 'deep sleep', the body slows down all its processes: breathing, heart rate, metabolism, and muscle tone are all lower than during waking hours. Therefore, the body needs less energy. However, in the final stage of each cycle — REM sleep — the pulse and breathing quicken, and the brain is as active as during wakeful activity. The emotional centre is especially active and may use up more energy during dreaming, which could explain the felt intensity of dream experiences.[6]

6 See Rahul Jandial, *This Is Why You Dream: What your Sleeping Brain Reveals about your Waking Life* (Penguin, 2024).

In the fairy tale's sleep there are no cycles or dreams; a moment is simply frozen and human history — conceptualized according to the Western model of linear progression — is thereby locally suspended until it is restarted.[7] Several time scales are present simultaneously: the human and animal scales have halted, whereas the vegetal time scale keeps progressing normally. The latter is magnified by a hundred years, whereby it becomes easily observable, as if in a temporal zooming in, or a slow-motion recording. When viewed from a human perspective, the temporal scale of plants is usually perceived to be much slower and may only be glimpsed with the aid of media-technological interventions like time-lapse photography, which shows the slow growth process of plants sped up. Yet, after a hundred years of no one tending to the garden and grounds of the castle, even on the vegetal scale massive changes have happened: everything is overgrown by rose hedges, and their thorns are making the castle difficult to reach from the outside.[8]

The introductory example of the fairy tale 'Sleeping Beauty' presents a speculative perspective on a local environment where everyone and everything — humans, animals, fire, and wind — are asleep. The state of extended sleep provides an 'interscalar vehicle' in Gabrielle Hecht's sense, and is employed in this text as an imaginary zooming out and switching of perspectives.[9] As Hecht suggests: 'What makes something an interscalar vehicle is not its essence but its deployment and uptake, its potential to make political claims, craft social relationships, or simply open our imaginations.'

7 Conversely, the anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro described Indigenous Amazonian time scales as an 'always already', cyclical reproduction of time that does not follow the Western notion of progress. Amerindian perspectives of 'mythical immanence' do not locate myths in the past, or at the beginning of a timeline, but rather live them as an ever-present ontological reality. See Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, 'Cosmologies and Perspectivism', in Viveiros de Castro, *The Relative Native* (HAU Books, 2015), pp. 195–28.

8 Of course, as the story goes, the thorns only guarded the castle until the one hundred years had elapsed. Once they had, a young man from the correct class background showed up just in time, whereupon the thorns and roses made a passageway for him and let him enter, whereas others before him had bled to death. See *Grimms' Complete Fairy Tales*, pp. 179–80. For a typical depiction of 'Sleeping Beauty', see Edward Frederick Brewtnall's painting in Figure 1.

9 Gabrielle Hecht, 'Interscalar Vehicles for an African Anthropocene: On Waste, Temporality, and Violence', *Cultural Anthropology*, 33.1 (2018), pp. 109–141 (p.115) <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca33.1.05>.

Following this proposal, the states of sleep and suspension are used as an interscalar model, analogue, and metaphor in medical experiments and treatments, and continue to propel scientific and other imaginations.[10] Similarly, sleep scientist Vladyslav Vyazovskiy suggests taking an 'alien view' and zooming out to see that sleep and inactivity (rather than activity) on planet Earth is the primal default state of all organisms.[11] Following decades of attempts in Western societies to downscale and even eliminate sleep, especially in military combat situations and to intensify capitalist production, consumption, and so-called productivity, a renewed interest in upscaling and intensifying periods of sleep can be observed both in mainstream wellness culture — in the vogue for 'sleepmaxxing' — and in scientific research from medicine to space exploration.[12] The ever-expanding capitalist sleep-wellness economy believes in the slogan, 'sleep better, achieve more'. In this way, the identification of waking time as productive time and hours spent sleeping as unproductive time is disturbed. This connects to the question: What are dominant temporal scales, and how do humans measure and experience time?

In the everyday and everynight, the predominant subjective feeling is of an ongoing presentism, often called the 'river of time', which is considered a construct of human perception and modelling of the brain. Since Albert Einstein's theory of relativity, space and time in physics have been conceptualized as united in four dimensions called 'space-time'. Stephen Hawking posits:

10 Sleeping or dormancy as a metaphor can even be encountered in geological time scales, as in the description of the 'dormant' volcano, whose cycles of eruption may often exceed human time scales. For some aspects of dormancy, see Jasmine Clotilde Pisapia, 'Dust, Death, and the Body of the Earth: Notes on the Scales of Ecological Disaster', in this volume, pp. 405–27 (p. 418).

11 Vyazovskiy, 'What Sleep Is'.

12 See Jonathan Crary, *24/7: Late Capitalism and the Ends of Sleep* (Verso, 2013). On 'sleepmaxxing', see Eric Zhou, 'Should You Be Sleepmaxxing to Boost Health and Happiness?', Harvard Health Publishing, 6 March 2025 <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/should-you-be-sleepmaxxing-to-boost-health-and-happiness-202503063090> [accessed 20 March 2026]; and for its critique, see Nancy Walecki, 'The Pitfalls of Sleepmaxxing: Technology Might Help You to Sleep Better, or Go Haywire', *The Atlantic*, 25 October 2025 <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/2025/10/sleep-technology/684702/> [accessed 20 March 2026].

> There are at least three different arrows of time. First, there is the thermodynamic arrow of time, the direction of time in which disorder or entropy increases. Then, there is the psychological arrow of time. This is the direction in which we feel time passes, the direction in which we remember the past but not the future. Finally, there is the cosmological arrow of time. This is the direction of time in which the universe is expanding rather than contracting.[13]

Einstein's theory has little relevance for the everyday and everynight perception of time, which can be suspended during sleep, when brief moments of wakefulness lasting less than five minutes are not remembered. Conversely, as any insomniac will attest, if sleep is not forthcoming, it may seem as if time stretches during the night and does not pass, or as if it passes too quickly and one has to get up again 'without having slept a wink'.[14]

## MICRO AND MACRO

Even though sleep is a recurring state, necessary for survival and universally occurrent for all species on Earth on the macroscale, with two billion humans sleeping at any given time on the planet,[15] it is predominantly discussed in terms of subjective micromanagement on the scale of the individual, and of the everyday and everynight, through medication, cognitive behavioural therapy, and the promise of sleep-inducing gadgets of the wellness-industrial complex. A smartwatch ad in 2025 proclaims, 'Train your sleep', showing a full-body shot of a physically fit young man, who fills the frame and smiles (Figure 2).[16]

13 Stephen Hawking, *A Brief History of Time: From the Big Bang to Black Holes* (Bantam, 1988), p. 145.

14 People who suffer from clinically significant insomnia often have the feeling of having not slept, even if they have done so. See Michelle Carr, *Nightmare Obscura: A Dream Engineers Guide through the Sleeping Mind* (Henry Holt, 2025). The lyrics to the Beatles song 'I'm So Tired' describe the state of having been unable to sleep for well over three weeks, and the consequences thereof. See 'I'm So Tired', The Beatles <https://www.thebeatles.com/im-so-tired> [accessed 2 January 2026].

15 Vyazovskiy, 'What Sleep Is'.

16 The ad was presented on billboards in Sydney, Australia, in 2025, as well as online. For further information on how the sleep training and tracking is supposed to work, see <https://www.samsung.com/us/support/answer/ANS10003657/> [accessed 29 April 2026].




Fig. 2. Smartwatch ad, 2025. Photograph: public domain.

The optimization of individual sleep schedules has become a mainstream desire. The ad assumes that the public already knows that sleep is important for athletic performance and many other things during the day. Another tech company advertises its own smartwatch with the image of a young woman running and, in a comical twist, being

followed by her bed, which seems to be trying to catch her, further implying that only this watch will help her stick to her exercise goals and that her bed is the enemy to be avoided. At the same time, however, not only does nightly behaviour influence daily performance, but, as many sleep doctors now argue, a good night's sleep is built through certain behaviours and activities during waking hours.

Sleep, its quantity and quality, is a recurring macro-scalar behaviour and necessity, influencing everything from economic output to public health and social behaviour on a planetary scale, and vice versa. At the same time, sleep's quality and quantity are notoriously hard to measure and likely also influenced by the microscale — for instance, microbes in the gut and the so-called 'gut-brain axis'.[17] Planetary macro-scale events like climate change mean that higher temperatures during the night, in longer summers, are already making it harder for people to sleep, and, among other consequences, lack of sleep leads to increased aggression. As Nikolaj Schultz sums it up: 'It seems the Anthropocene is not a nice place to sleep.'[18]

To put someone else or oneself to sleep instantly, to make that sleep longer and deeper or shorter, is always a god-like gesture and involves alarm clocks and power, or magic and sedating substances. Forced controlled sleep onset usually requires an anaesthetist in a clinical setting, but can also take place at home.[19] A more benign

17 Zhe Wang and others, 'Gut Microbiota Regulate Insomnia-like Behaviours via Gut-Brain Metabolic Axis', *Molecular Psychiatry*, 30 (2025), pp. 2597–611 <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41380-024-02867-0>. On the multifarious connections between the microbiome and rest, see also Amber J. Musser, 'Tamarind, Metabolism, and Rest: Making Racialized Labor Visible', in Musser, *Between Shadows and Noise: Sensation, Situatedness, and the Undisciplined* (Duke University Press 2024), pp. 94–111 <https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478059097>.

18 Nikolaj Schultz, *Landsickness* (Polity Press, 2023), p. 4.

19 Here one immediately thinks of the Gisèle Pélicot case and similar ones that have been prosecuted publicly in court, in which predominantly men have drugged and raped their partners. See Lulu Garcia-Navarro, '"They All Tried to Break Me": Gisèle Pélicot Shares her Story', *The New York Times*, 13 February 2026 <https://www.nytimes.com/2026/02/13/magazine/gisele-pelicot-france-rape-case-story.html> [accessed 8 March 2026]. I discuss below some aspects of these cases and how they relate to the 'Sleeping Beauty' trope. The adjacent topics of sleep, sedation, and violation, however, cannot be addressed fully in this text. Many similar cases to Pélicot's have since come to light in Germany. See, among others, Sophie Fichtner and Anne Fromm, 'Man darf nicht zulassen, dass sie zu sich kommt', *taz.de* <https://taz.de/Sexualisierte-Gewalt/!6164544/> [accessed 29 April 2026]; and 'Intensivpfleger vergewaltigte

example is parents, babysitters, or nannies trying to soothe children and make them fall asleep at certain times (which is a science in itself).[20]

To withhold sleep is recognized as a form of torture. Furthermore, societies and institutions regulate who can sleep when and for how long, as indicated by work schedules and rules for factories, hospitals, and their nightshift workers. Colonized people were forced to adhere to the 'master's clock' and cast in racist terms simultaneously as 'lazy' — sleeping too much — and as needing less sleep.[21] And yet, 'sleep has no master', as Amber J. Musser writes, quoting an incidence of passive resistance and alluding to sleep's quality of escaping control and overcoming the subject.[22] Because sleep, like food and air, is an essential need, sleep states can only be regulated and (self-)optimized to a limited extent. Yet, capitalist timetables generally demand ever-longer periods of production and even, through the use of shift workers, constant production. They may try to also prescribe normative periods of sleep and rest in order to enhance workers' efficiency, since tired workers make mistakes. Most accidents and deaths happen at night, between around 2 and 4 am. Employees and soldiers in combat deployments, who have to stay up all night and against their circadian rhythms, are prone to many detrimental health effects.[23] Usually, the

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Komapatientinnen und -patienten — zwölf Jahre Haft', *Spiegel*, 28 April 2026 <https://www.spiegel.de/panorama/justiz/nordrhein-westfalen-intensivpfleger-vergewaltigte-koma-patienten-zwoelf-jahre-haft-a-f88b90ce-5f1e-4d4e-b65d-8c7cf9bd7d37> [accessed April 29 2026]. Among earlier cases, see, for instance, Tove Ditlevsen's autobiographical account of her husband, a doctor who gave her strong opioids without medical indication, in Tove Ditlevsen, *Abhängigkeit* [1971], trans. by Ursel Allenstein (Aufbau, 2021).

20 Countless different methods and advisory books exist, often published by paediatricians.

21 'They seem to require less sleep. A black, after hard labor through the day, will be induced by the slightest amusements to sit up till midnight, or later, though knowing he must be out with the first dawn of the morning' (Thomas Jefferson, quoted in Rasheedah Philips, 'CPT Symmetry and Violations of Black SpaceTime', in Philips, *Dismantling the Master's Clock: On Race, Space, and Time* (AK Press, 2025), pp. 89–138 (p. 101); and Josie Roland Hodson, 'Rest Notes: On Black Sleep Aesthetics', *October*, 176 (2021), pp. 7–24 <https://doi.org/10.1162/octo_a_00422>.

22 Musser, 'Tamarind, Metabolism, and Rest'.

23 Isabel Silva and Daniela Costa, 'Consequences of Shift Work and Night Work: A Literature Review', *Healthcare*, 11.10 (2023), article 1410 <https://doi.org/10.3390/healthcare11101410>.

jobs with the most gruesome hours are not well paid and are done by people disadvantaged though their gender, class, and race.[24] It is a privilege and freedom to determine one's own sleeping time and length, and to feel safe during sleep.

When measuring length and quality of sleep, human science usually compares animal sleep to human sleep, which is often taken as the (unacknowledged) norm. And yet, animals show a fantastic diversity of sleep states depending on their habitats, group behaviour, and other factors. Scientists are now using animal sleep and states of suspension as a model to modulate sleep.

## HIBERNATION AND TORPOR: SLEEPING LIKE BEARS (OR LEMURS) AND FLYING TO MARS

While one hundred years might seem like an extraordinary length of time to just be asleep, shorter periods of inactive and dormant states during colder seasons are widely known — at least throughout the animal kingdom. The terms 'hibernation' and 'brumation',[25] as well as 'torpor', are often used interchangeably in everyday language, without their proper biological differentiations: hibernation occurs in hedgehogs, bats, dormice,[26] and marmots, whereas torpor is for bigger mammals like bears and deer.[27] Some smaller mammals can enter states of torpor that last for shorter periods of time (Figure 3). The key similarity of all three states, and even regular sleep, is the slowing of the animal's metabolism. The key difference between real hibernation and states of torpor is the change in core body temperature: in real hibernation the animal drops its core body temperature and sustains itself in a burrow with a low ambient temperature, whereas in torpor

24 On the racial sleep gap, see Hodson, 'Rest Notes'. Class-based sleep discrimination exists even in the same workplace, as for example in most hospitals, where doctors are allowed to sleep if no patient requires care at night, in rooms equipped with cots or beds, whereas nurses are not allowed to sleep and can only take breaks sitting up.

25 Brumation is a state that turtles and other amphibia enter when temperatures drop. Turtles can even survive under a frozen layer of ice in a cold lake.

26 The dormouse (*Siebenschläfer* in German) even has sleep in its name, from the Latin *dormīre* (sleep). For the etymology, see the entry 'dormouse', *Oxford English Dictionary*, n.d. <https://www.oed.com/dictionary/dormouse_n> [accessed 18 July 2026].

27 Fritz Geiser and Thomas Ruf, 'Long-Term Survival, Temperature, and Torpor Patterns', *Scientific Reports*, 13 (2023), article 6673 <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-023-33646-6>.



Fig. 3. Mountain marsupial (*Dromiciops gliroides*) in hibernation, Isla Grande de Chiloé, Chile. Image: public domain through Creative Commons CC0 1.0 Universal Deed.

the body temperature only drops a few degrees and the animal can wake up rapidly.[28]

There exists one primate who hibernates for up to seven months of the year: the fat-tailed dwarf lemur, a species endemic to Madagascar.[29] While the temperature there does not drop below freezing, there is a shortage of food in winter, the dry season. Following their instincts, the lemurs feast on the available food during the summer months and store these calories in their tails for their fasting periods. During their hibernation, the little mammals downscale their energy consumption and may only take one breath every ten minutes, their heart beating only six times per minute and their body temperature falling to match that of their environment.

All animals that hibernate or enter torpor experience brief periods of interbout arousal, where they wake and need to warm their bodies back up. For the lemurs, this happens every six to twelve days of their months-long hibernation, and lasts for up to twenty-four hours. Surprisingly, the lemurs need to also catch up on sleep during the interbout arousal, and specifically on REM sleep — dream sleep. At the same time, the lemurs may even rejuvenate their cells during hibernation, as researcher Marina B. Blanco argues while describing the processes of hibernation on the microlevel of the genes, giving the notion of 'restorative sleep' a genetic and micro-scalar dimension.[30] Because the lemurs are primates, their genome is more similar to the human genome than that of other mammals, making them the ideal animal to study. Sleep researcher Vladyslav Vyazovskiy suggests that, rather than hibernation being a special trait that only some animals possess, in fact all common ancestors of *Homo sapiens* were able to hibernate. On his account, humans lost this ability at some point during prehistoric times as a result of learning to use fire for cooking and

28 Despite this, stone age humans may have taken advantage of the bears' reduced state of activity and hunted them when they were resting in caves. Archaeologists have found both arrows and spears in bear caves.

29 Marina B. Blanco and others, 'On the Modulation and Maintenance of Hibernation in Captive Dwarf Lemurs', *Scientific Reports*, 11 (2021) article 5740 <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-021-84727-3>.

30 Marina B. Blanco and others, 'Food Deprivation Is Associated with Telomere Elongation during Hibernation in a Primate', *Biology Letters*, 21.2 (2025), article 20240531 <https://doi.org/10.1098/rsbl.2024.0531>.

heating as well as to build huts and shelters.[31] Evidence still exists on the genetic level in humans and non-hibernating mammals, since the genome contains information on how to hibernate, even if this ability is not expressed or 'switched on'.[32]

A rocket-powered flight from Earth to Mars takes about seven to nine months, a time period that a lemur could spend almost exclusively in torpor. In contrast, astronauts would require almost two years' worth of food, water, and oxygen for a short stay and return flight. So far, only exploratory flights with robotic equipment and without human or animal passengers have been undertaken. Planet Jupiter is even further away — with current technology, a flight might take five to seven years. Could astronauts be put into a long-term sleep state during space flights lasting for several months or years?[33] NASA began research on related questions in 2014 and some field trials are running to induce a state similar to hibernation, with the possibility of reducing energy consumption by as much as seventy-five per cent. The European Space Agency (ESA) is exploring this, too (Figure 4), since: 'a very high amount of payload will be dedicated to essential life support such as food, water, air, waste-elimination and recycling. In addition, the crew is prone to stress and stress-related neuro-behavioural impairments by long-duration travels within a small and confined compartment.'[34] ESA researchers are investigating how to learn from animals' hibernation: 'A potential game changer in these strategies is the reduction of the physiological requirements of astronauts, through artificially-induced states resembling natural states of

31 Adam Grant, 'What Hibernating Animals Can Teach Us about Human Sleep with Vladyslav Vyazovskiy', Ted.com, 18 March 2025 <https://www.ted.com/pages/what-hibernating-animals-can-teach-us-about-human-sleep-with-vladyslav-vyazovskiy-transcript> [accessed 26 December 2025].

32 Elliott Ferris and others, 'Genomic Convergence in Hibernating Mammals Elucidates the Genetics of Metabolic Regulation in the Hypothalamus', *Science*, 389.6759 (2025), pp. 494–500 <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.adp4025>.

33 Alexander Choukèr and others, 'Hibernating Astronauts — Science or Fiction?', *European Journal of Physiology*, 471 (2019), pp. 819–28 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00424-018-2244-7>.

34 Alexander Choukér and others, 'European Space Agency's Hibernation (Torpor) Strategy for Deep Space Missions: Linking Biology to Engineering', *Neuroscience & Biobehavioral Reviews*, 131 (2021), pp. 618–26 (p. 618) <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.neubiorev.2021.09.054>.

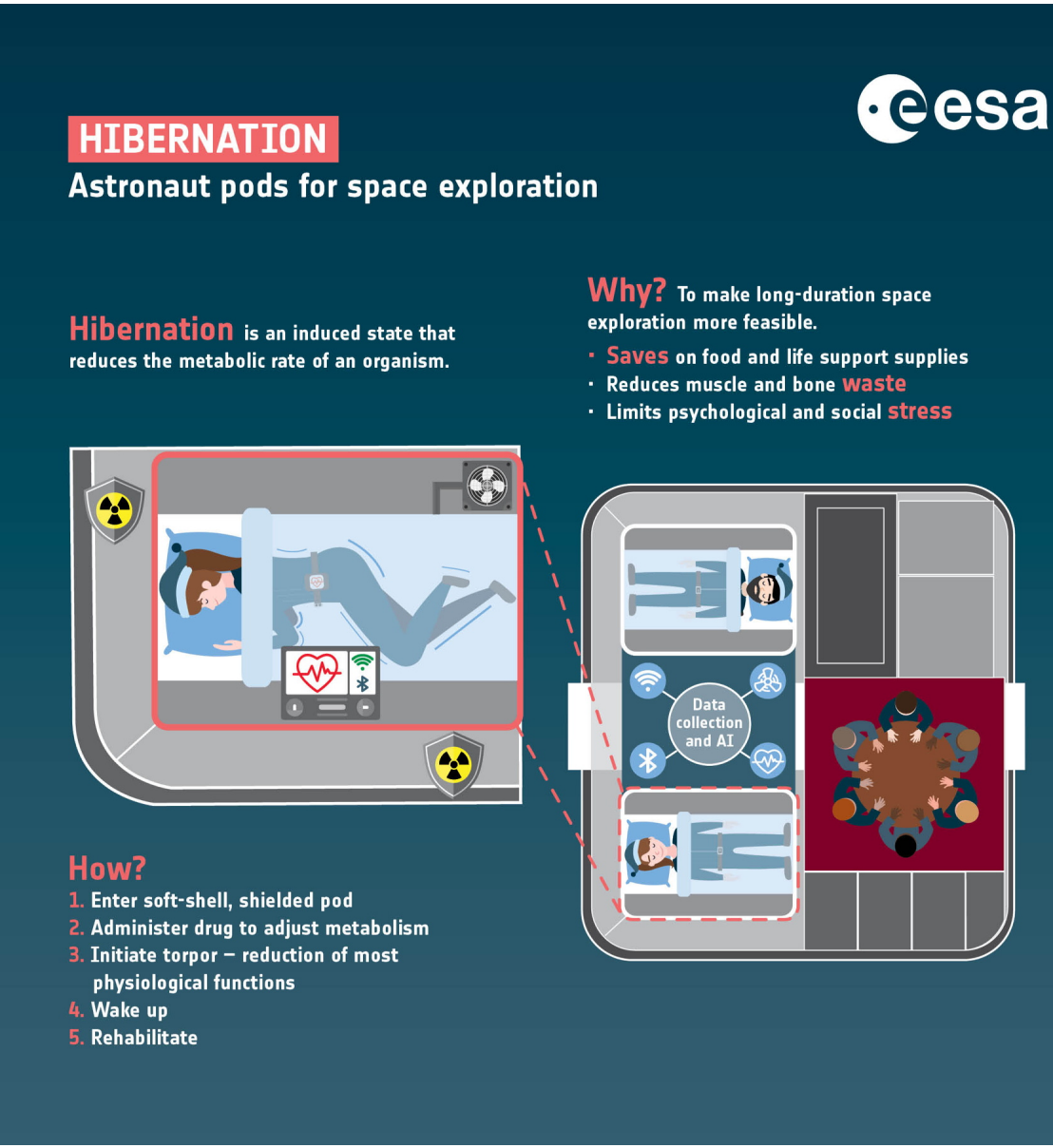


Fig. 4. Hibernation infographic. Image: © ESA.

torpor as during hibernation either continuously of long duration or intermittently.'[35]

Often, the speculative vision of hibernating astronauts is visualized through their resting in a coffin-like pod, which is transparent, as in the fairy tale 'Snow White', and which looks like an encased, sterile operating table, and not like a comfortable bed. Of course, astronauts in hyper-sleep would still need some energy and oxygen. In current medically induced comas, patients are commonly fed intravenously and their vital functions need to be closely monitored. In addition, scientists aim to induce a torpor-like state in healthy, sick, or injured humans in the future in order to rejuvenate human bodies, and to gain time and slow cell death during medical emergencies, such as after a stroke or a heart attack, or even while waiting for an organ transplant. Yet, humans are not as well adapted as animals, and if they are put into longer than normal sleep states beyond the realm of fairy tales, they will need considerable care during these periods to survive well and to fully wake up again.

One key concern for any human state similar to torpor is how to protect the functioning of the brain. Counterintuitively, REM (dream) sleep may play an important part in this, since the only hibernating mammal, the dwarf lemur, wakes up intermittently and shows evidence of some REM sleep periods. Therefore, contrary to what humans might expect, the animals are sleep-deprived when they come out of hibernation and need to catch up on REM sleep. Moreover, the lemurs let their body temperature drop, while a loss of body temperature in humans stimulates the shiver reflex. Therefore, only heavily sedated humans can be cooled down medically and usually only to between 32 and 36 °C. This has only been done for periods of time shorter than a months-long space flight; the method is called 'therapeutic hypothermia' and it has shown to bring favourable outcomes to patients suffering from cardiac arrest and global ischemia.[36]

Bears may, in this regard, provide a better model for human torpor than the lemurs, since they only enter a state of torpor, while

35 Ibid, p. 618.

36 Shlee S. Song and Patrick D. Lyden, 'Overview of Therapeutic Hypothermia', *Current Treatment Options in Neurology*, 14 (2012), pp. 541–48 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11940-012-0201-x>.

also maintaining a body temperature above 30 °C, ensuring that they can wake up rapidly if provoked. Bears become insensitive to glucose levels during their winter torpor, with the suspension of regular feeding.[37] Surprisingly, bears do not lose muscle mass during their periods of inactivity, whereas bed-bound ICU patients immediately become weaker through immobility. Doctors and scientists of physiology therefore believe that if the decline during treatment could be slowed, or even reversed, this could revolutionize medicine and the treatment of humans in intensive care.[38] However, medical experiments involving putting patients in prolonged sleep states — which one could call 'upscaling' or 'intensifying' sleep — are neither a new idea nor are they relegated only to the realm of fairy tales or science fiction; indeed, they have been undertaken since the 1950s, though they are seldom remembered in current discussions, mainly because they involved psychiatric patients and focused primarily on mental regeneration and healing illnesses, as well as on changing behaviours.

## SLEEP ROOMS

Starting in the 1950s, many psychiatric hospitals established the notorious 'sleep rooms',[39] where patients were treated with prolonged artificially induced narcotic states, supplemented with electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) and insulin therapy.[40] The sleep room treatments (and some might argue that they were a form of sedation rather than treatment) were introduced after a move away from Sigmund Freud's

37 Heiko T. Jansen and others, 'Hibernation Induces Widespread Transcriptional Remodeling in Metabolic Tissues of the Grizzly Bear', *Communications Biology*, 2 (2019), article 336 <https://doi.org/10.1038/s42003-019-0574-4>.

38 See Tohru M. Takahashi and others, 'A Discrete Neuronal Circuit Induces a Hibernation-like State in Rodents', *Nature*, 583 (2020), pp. 109–14 <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-020-2163-6>.

39 It is important to distinguish between 'sleep rooms', where patients who did not suffer from sleeping disorders were put into a medicalized sleep, and 'sleep laboratories' for the monitoring and analysis of patients with sleep disorders. Sleep labs were only established with the emergence of sleep medicine in the second half of the twentieth century. See Hartmut Schulz and Piero Salzarulo, 'The Development of Sleep Medicine: A Historical Sketch', *Journal of Clinical Sleep Medicine*, 12 (2016), pp. 1041–52 <https://doi.org/10.5664/jcsm.5946>.

40 Leucotomy (or lobotomy, as it was also called) was considered if patients did not 'improve'. This is a now discredited form of surgical operation where the connection of the frontal lobes of the brain are severed.

talking cure in medical and psychiatric discourse on mental illnesses after World War II. At this time, several doctors and psychiatrists considered the brain to be the location where mental illness was caused, and wished to work on it directly, as they would with any other organ, by 're-setting' it. The patients had widely differing diagnoses, including anorexia, hysteria, suicidality, and drug addiction, while some were simply considered 'maladjusted'.

In Great Britain, the psychiatrist William Sargant administered 'continuous narcosis' to hundreds of women in London's Royal Waterloo Hospital between 1964 and 1972, describing the procedure in stridently positive terms:

> With the advantage of very high nursing standards, and an attitude of mind prepared to take calculated risks to get every patient well, we have even developed a new method of combining continuous narcosis and electric-shock therapy with both groups of anti-depressant drugs [...], all often given at the same time.[41]

The upscaling of sleep was thus accompanied by a cocktail of other medications and ECT. The sleep room, where the patients spent most of their time, was kept in permanent darkness. Its occupants were treated by Sargant without their consent, and the heavy and continuous sedation of the treatment itself made any resistance almost impossible. The medication included the antipsychotic Largactil, sodium amytal for sedation, and two different types of antidepressants. Nurses and visitors remember the packed quarters of women in continuous sleep, and the stench of their unwashed bodies, as well as the haunting views of their immobility, looking as if dead. One nurse recalls that the women seemed like 'zombies' and that they were 'drugged up to the eyeballs'; when woken up to be fed and cleaned, they were unable to follow a conversation. As a result of their medication and lying in bed without any movement, the women suffered from constipation and other metabolic, physiological, and cognitive complications, leaving them sicker upon release than before the start of the treatment.

41 William Sargant, 'Psychiatric Treatment in General Teaching Hospitals: A Plea for a Mechanistic Approach', *The British Medical Journal*, 2.5508 (1966), pp. 257–62 (p. 260).

At least five patients died, while many others were traumatized after their release and grappled with life-long consequences.[42] Conversely, Sargant proudly referred to his therapy as 'a factory reset', thus following the presumption that the mind and brain work mechanically, just like a machine that needs to be shut down and restarted, and likening young women to malfunctioning equipment.[43] However, Sargant was not an outlier, and similar courses of treatment were conducted in Germany,[44] Austria, Italy, and most Commonwealth countries, as, for example, in Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and apartheid South Africa.[45]

Criticism of Sargant's and others' sleep rooms, of course, should not diminish the fact that sleep is widely considered restorative and conducive to the successful treatment of all mental, psychosomatic, and physical illnesses. Significantly, other experiments attempted to condition patients through environmental and auditory cues to fall asleep, in order to lessen the reliance on pharmaceuticals. Frantz Fanon and his colleagues recount that in the clinic of Saint-Alban, in 1951, two sleep rooms were set up that accommodated only two patients each: 'Our study's goal was to bring into focus a sleep therapy that makes conditioning possible, and to establish whether this technique permits a reduction in sleeping medications.' Importantly, the periods of sleep did not exceed a day, male patients were included, and the results and descriptions are far more nuanced and careful in drawing their conclusions.[46] Sleep treatment was not used for simply tranquiliz-

42 Jon Stock, *The Sleep Room: A Sadistic Psychiatrist and the Women who Survived Him* (Abrams Press, 2025), pp. 56–58. Several patients complained that Sargant had sexually molested them (p. 14).

43 Sargant, 'Psychiatric Treatment in General Teaching Hospitals'.

44 Significantly, East and West Germany followed different aims in their respective approaches to sleep therapy. In the GDR, the so-called 'Pavlovian' treatment was established by psychiatrist Dietfried Müller-Hegemann. See 'Psychotherapieverfahren der DDR — Pawlow'sche Schlaftherapie', Seelenarbeit im Sozialismus <https://www.sisap-ausstellung.de/article/pawlowsche-schlaftherapie/> [accessed June 1 2026].

45 For female patients' subjective accounts, fictionalized but based on personal experiences with sleep, insulin, and ECT treatments, see, among others, Janet Frame, *Faces in the Water* (George Braziller, 1961); and Sylvia Plath, *The Bell Jar* (Heinemann, 1963).

46 Maurice Despinoy, Frantz Fanon, and Walter Zenner, 'Note on Sleep Therapy Techniques Using Conditioning and Electroencephalographic Monitoring' [1953], in Frantz Fanon, *Alienation and Freedom*, ed. by Jean Khalfa and Robert C. Young, trans. by Steven Corcoran (Bloomsbury, 2018), pp. 307–10 (p. 308). Fanon also describes

ing patients, but carried out together with other treatments and group therapy interventions.

While, in the current age of the so-called wellness-industrial complex, people are usually referred to sleep clinics due to insomnia, because they cannot sleep as long or as well as they would like to, fictional scenarios, imagined by authors as different as Georges Perec in 1967 and Ottessa Moshfegh in 2018, detail what it would be like to upscale one's individual sleep as a self-chosen activity or self-prescribed therapy, and to upset the rhythm of the everyday and everynight by trying to totalize the everynight.[47]

## A MAN ASLEEP: UPSCALING SLEEP AS AN ESCAPE AND ESTRANGEMENT TOOL

Georges Perec writes in 1967 about a nameless young man, a student of sociology, twenty-five years of age, who stops following his everyday routine and begins to mostly sleep. The man becomes a fugitive from the world and sleep becomes his refuge. His behaviour does not come across as protest; he just stops getting up and keeping time.[48] He is addressed as 'you', so the reader can either find themselves in the address or read it as about someone else.

> You only go out after nightfall, like the rats, the cats and the monsters. [...] Sometimes you walk all night, sometimes you sleep all day.
>
> You are a man of leisure, a sleepwalker, a mollusc. [...] [Y]ou do not really feel cut out for living, for doing, for making; you want only to go on, to go on waiting, and to forget.[49]

The protagonist seems to move through Paris like a ghost or a zombie, a sleepwalker with open eyes but whose mind seems, to an extent, to

patients' disturbed sleep in Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* [1961], trans. by Constance Farrington (Grove Press, 1963).

47 There are certainly other literary examples; these are chosen for their explicit focus on the substitution of wakefulness for sleeping, and for imagining the consequences for their main characters in detail.

48 His medical diagnosis would likely today be reduced to one word: 'depression', and yet this diagnosis does not do justice to the acuity of his reduced experience and perception.

49 Georges Perec, *A Man Asleep* [1967], trans. by Andrew Leak, in Perec, *Things: A Story of the Sixties* with *A Man Asleep* (Vintage, 2011), pp. 121–221 (p. 142).

be shut off. He is compared to a spineless animal — a mollusc that crawls through the streets alone. Of course, this is still, to a degree, a privileged and voluntary withdrawal: the man still eats and does not lose his appetite, meaning that he must receive a regular student stipend from his parents or the state. Sigmund Freud had already noted that both emotional pain and physical pain are drivers of a subject's narcissism and of their losing interest in the world, due to their focus being reduced solely to their pain. This narcissistic state — in Freud's description, 'ein narzisstisches Zurückziehen der Libidopositionen auf die eigene Person' — is related to sleep and the wish to sleep continuously.[50] In a more neutral reading, building on Merleau-Ponty, Angelica Stathopoulos suggests that '[s]leep expresses a way of being indebted to passivity, a different modality of perceptive life'.[51] Perec's nameless man registers how his perceptions change, and how he loses his sense of time, his social life, his friends, his studies, and finally his sense of self, too:

> Your alarm clock has been showing five-fifteen for a long time now. [...] Time no longer penetrates into the silence of your room, it is all around, a permanent medium, even more present and obsessive than the hands of a clock that you could choose not to look at, and yet slightly warped, out of true, somehow suspect: time passes, but you never know what time it is [...]. It is ten o'clock, or perhaps eleven [...], it's late, it's early, the sun rises, night falls, the sounds never quite cease altogether, time never stops completely, even if it is now reduced to the merely imperceptible: a hairline crack in the wall of silence, the forgotten murmur of the drip-feed, almost indistinguishable from the beats of your heart.[52]

In the process of escaping into sleep and passive refusal, he observes himself with a removed clinical gaze, almost neutrally, as he does not care any more about the everyday time scale, or what Hawking calls the 'psychological time arrow', and ignores both his own circadian rhythm

50 Sigmund Freud, 'Zur Einführung des Narzißmus' [1914], in Freud, *Gesammelte Werke*, 18 vols (S. Fischer, 1952), x, pp. 138–70 (p. 149).

51 Angelica Stathopoulos, 'Passivity: Essays in Ontology and Ethics' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, The New School for Social Research, 2020), p. 76.

52 Perec, *A Man Asleep*, p. 160.

and those of other people. Thus, time is no longer an arrow of progression, but rather mashed together, incoherent, a burden. Next, the man loses his memories and his language; even though he can and does still read sometimes, he no longer privileges content or understanding, so that it becomes a mere mechanical exercise, a waiting game:

> You are still capable of being amazed by the way in which the combination, according to a few ultimately very simple rules, of thirty or so typographic signs is able to generate, every day, these thousands of messages. But why should you eagerly devour them, why should you bother deciphering them? All that matters to you is that time should pass and that nothing should get through to you: your eyes follow the lines, deliberately, one after the other.[53]

The man, who is often asleep, does not use medication. He seems to first simulate and then to successfully establish some elements of sleep in his waking hours, since he has taught himself to be numb and indifferent, and to take no interest in anything. This in turn seems to create a feeling of mental distance and passivity, as if he is almost dead, as if nothing is real, or as if he is in an endless confusing dream that he cannot leave. Perec, a Jewish-French author, later admitted that his story of complete alienation is in part autobiographical.[54]

As his suspended state progresses, the man, after describing an almost liberatory contentment, or at least a calmness, in his indifference, lets on that it is harder than he has said, and that sometimes he cannot fall asleep:

> As free as a cow, as a mollusc, as a rat!
>
> But rats don't spend hours trying to get to sleep. But rats don't wake up with a start, gripped by panic, bathed in sweat. But rats don't dream and what can you do to protect yourself against your dreams?
>
> But rats don't bite their nails, especially not methodically, for hours on end.[55]

53 Ibid., p. 169.

54 Perec's mother, Cyrla (Sulewicz) Perec, was deported by the French authorities in 1943 and murdered in Auschwitz when Georges was six years old, turning him into an orphan; his father, who served as a soldier, had already been killed early in World War II.

55 Perec, *A Man Asleep*, p. 195.

The narrative of the nameless man is entirely unheroic, and in this comparison to objects and animals his humanity seems lost and without value. In the end, he seems to get better, coming out of his long, shapeless dormant period and reconnecting with the world around him. Importantly, *pace* Perec's narration, rats dream, too — as it is assumed that all mammals do.[56] Rats have often been used as lab animals by sleep scientists. One landmark experiment by neuroscientists Daoyun Ji and Matthew Wilson showed that rats that run through a maze during the day will dream at night of these movements.[57] Therefore, animals' dream content includes the day's residues, just as it does for humans, what Freud called the *Tagesrest*.[58] The results of these experiments reveal some universal similarities between animal and human sleep stages; they are used to piece together the role of sleeping and dreaming in neurological operations like memory retrieval and memory consolidation.

## SLEEPING FOR ONE YEAR: A SELF-EXPERIMENT

> 'I'll be here hibernating.'
>
> Reva rolled her eyes. 'It's *natural*,' I told her. 'People used to hibernate all the time.' 'People never *hibernated*. Where are you getting this?'[59]

An unnamed female narrator, in some ways echoing Perec's protagonist's narcissistic inward turn, has this exchange with her only remaining social contact in the year 2000, before popping some NyQuil sleep medication and drifting off. Ottessa Moshfegh wrote this novel, whose narrator administers her own sleep treatment for one year, as a self-reductive therapy. Ironically, the story is set in New York City — the city that never sleeps. Yet, the narrator chooses passivity and rest,

56 And, in fact, more and more species are being identified, beyond mammals, as possessing similarities in sleep and dream stages — octopuses and bees, for example, seem to sleep and dream, too.

57 Daoyun Ji and Matthew Wilson, 'Coordinated Memory Replay in the Visual Cortex and Hippocampus during Sleep', *Nature Neuroscience*, 10 (2007), pp. 100–07 <https://doi.org/10.1038/nn1825>.

58 On the 'day's residues', see Sigmund Freud, 'Das Traummaterial und die Traumquellen' [1900], in Freud, *Die Traumdeutung* (S. Fischer, 1972), pp. 177–279.

59 Ottessa Moshfegh, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation* (Penguin, 2018), p. 59.

instead of actively building a life as an economically secure heiress: white, blonde, conventionally good-looking, and with a college degree, her own apartment, and income from her heritage. While Moshfegh imagines a singular case, in the US many people take sleep medicine every night; the prescription drug Ambien was taken by 2.4 million people in 2023, attesting to this large-scale usage.[60] It is taken more often by women than men.[61]

Building on Freud's description of sleep as a blissful state combining narcissism and hallucinatory wish-fulfilment in dreaming, the psychoanalyst and author Jamieson Webster asks: 'Who would not wish for this? Why don't we all just sleep all the time?'[62] Moshfegh's character seems to have reached a similar conclusion and so she self-medicates, preferring the state of sleep and unconsciousness over being awake. Over time, the narrator intensifies and elongates her sleep periods, aided by ever-stronger sleeping pills and other pharmaceuticals prescribed by a psychiatrist, to whom the narrator lies about her allegedly crippling insomnia.[63]

In the process, the protagonist grows weaker and weaker, stops leaving her apartment altogether, and then employs an artist to provide her with food in the brief periods of wakefulness she allows herself. She does not remember her dreams, but invents disturbing dream content for her psychiatrist, to satisfy her need to put some information into her patient file.

The story borders on the absurd and speculative, purposefully creating an abject female lead character. It is also a formal and narrative experiment in how to tell a story where 'nothing', or at least very little, happens. At the same time, Moshfegh takes several proven medical facts into account. The narrator loses muscle mass during her long

60 For clinical statistics for Ambien (under its generic name Zolpidem), see 'Zolpidem', ClinCalc <https://clincalc.com/DrugStats/Drugs/Zolpidem> [accessed 4 January 2026].

61 Timothy A. Roehrs and Thomas Roth, 'Gender Differences in the Efficacy and Safety of Chronic Nightly Zolpidem', *Journal of Clinical Sleep Medicine*, 12 (2016), pp. 319–25 <https://doi.org/10.5664/jcsm.5574>.

62 Jamieson Webster, 'The Psychopharmacology of Everyday Life', *The New York Review*, 19 November 2018 <https://www.nybooks.com/online/2018/11/19/the-psychopharmacology-of-everyday-life/> [accessed 12 January 2026].

63 Moshfegh, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, p. 83.

periods of sleep, which she tries to counteract by exercising a little in her brief periods of wakefulness, during which she also eats and drinks. Some of the sleeping pills lose their strength, as she takes them regularly and in larger doses than is recommended; as a result, she has to repeatedly ask for stronger and different sedatives. Her mental and social abilities decline sharply.

With her self-prescribed sleep therapy, the protagonist undoes herself, similarly to Perec's nameless man. And yet, even regular sleepers may already experience dream states as evidence that the self and the inner conception of a rational mind are not fixed and solid: dreams provide a nightly shortcut to experiencing oneself as other — for example, in nightmares, where one is both victim and perpetrator.[64] In Moshfegh's tale, the protagonist, while maximizing and intensifying her sleep periods, and thereby unravelling her identity and her previous life, does not change much on a physical level: her body still remains pretty, in the most stereotypical sense — 'thin and blond', no matter what she does. By contrast, Sargant's former patient Mary Thornton recounts her ordeal in the sleep room thus:

> I have no recollection of leaving there after three months, or who came to get me, or anything. It must have been my parents. My memory was in pieces completely. I had even forgotten I had a boyfriend, which was very convenient, as they had told him he was never to attempt to see me again.[65]

Her appearance also changed completely, as she discovered in one of the occupational therapy sessions that she joined only in order to be released: 'I only remember one: learning how to put on make-up. I looked like a freak when I saw myself in the mirror.'[66] Moshfegh's protagonist, on the other hand, retains her good looks, like the princess in 'Sleeping Beauty', and thereby remains partly in a fairy tale narrative. At the same time, Moshfegh's novel could be seen as a contemporary blueprint of auto-reduction, of a young, educated woman's refusal to participate in society and to do what is expected of a woman of her class.[67]

64 Carr, *Nightmare Obscura*, p. 24.

65 Mary Thornton, quoted in Stock, *The Sleep Room*, p. 62.

66 Thornton, in ibid., p. 62.

67 Perhaps the topic of self-care as self-violence is also a comment on the violence of expected physical norms for young women in Western societies.

The ending of *My Year of Rest* seems to imply the narrator embracing her existence as she slowly begins a wakeful life again, leaving her apartment to sit in the park and feed squirrels.[68] 'My sleep had worked. I was soft and calm and felt things. This was my life now.'[69] Therefore, the narrator evaluates her self-reductive sleep therapy as some kind of success, and so discontinues it. The reader may have followed the story hoping for the narrator's survival and for a change in her frustrating state — either her death or an end to the intensified sleep. In a sense she is a postmodern Bartleby insisting on her preference not to act, and because she is a privileged woman, this does not come across as victimhood.

Broadly speaking, feminist theory has, on the one hand, tried to reframe passive states as positive and to escape the binary of feminine passivity versus masculine activity, while, on the other, it has sought to reveal what have been thought of as passive states as more complex and significant than this descriptor suggests.[70] Moshfegh's thought experiment, of an intensification of human sleep into a state similar to animal hibernation, could be analysed as pursuing the latter, and yet it does not fit neatly into a narrative of passive empowerment, nor simply of melancholic self-diminishment.

## INTENSIFYING SLEEP: ANAESTHESIA AND ABUSE

The medical solution of 'sleeping' through uncomfortable events has a long history and is common practice during surgeries and operations under general or partial anaesthesia, where patients are seemingly 'asleep', unresponsive, and numbed. Yet, there exist reports of patients having been partially aware of what the doctors did to them, or who felt pain during the procedure. The brain under general anaesthesia still registers sensory stimuli, even if the subject usually does not remember

68 As the protagonist comes out of her sleep, she watches television footage of 9/11. That this traumatic event may provide another way of interpreting the novel is a possibility that cannot be pursued in this essay.

69 Moshfegh, *My Year of Rest and Relaxation*, p.288.

70 See Hélène Cixous, 'Castration or Decapitation?', trans. by Annette Kuhn, *Signs*, 7.1 (1981), pp. 41–55 (p. 43); and for a recent philosophical and gender-theoretical analysis of passivity, see Stathopoulos, 'Passivity'.

this.[71] Significantly, even patients who had to be intubated and were put into a medical coma with severe cases of Covid-19 sometimes reported disturbing bad dreams following their recovery. Some dreamt, for example, that the doctors and nurses were kidnapping and torturing them. All this points to the fact that the brain can remain 'awake' and active to an extent even in rapid onset, artificially induced states of general anaesthesia and coma, and not only in the fourth stage of 'natural' sleep, with its tell-tale rapid eye movements.

In Moshfegh's novel, the female psychiatrist stops short of prescribing full anaesthesia to the narrator, yet doctors have done so in real life, administering strong sedation to heighten the intensity of sleep and the speed of sleep onset. These cases are only publicized when the patient does not wake up and is in fact killed by the treatment: one case of a man with severe insomnia who begged his private doctor to 'help him sleep' is Michael Jackson. Jackson wanted or needed the anaesthetic Propofol each night; he was no longer able to sleep without it and called it his 'milk'.[72] Because the administering of Propofol, together with a cocktail of other sedatives including Lorazepam and Midazolam, killed the fifty-year-old Jackson in 2009, the case became widely discussed in the media.[73] In the ensuing lawsuit, his doctor was found guilty of negligence, since he had not checked Jackson's heartbeat and breathing, as is procedure for the use of Propofol in short surgical operations.

Significantly, the scenario of an unresponsive, passive body, seemingly waiting for or inviting (sexual) action, lying dormant until an actor awakes or uses it, exists as the 'sleeping woman' trope in pornography: a staged scene where a woman pretends to sleep, but in fact waits for the man to initiate and then takes part in sexual acts.[74] This subgenre differs from the real case of Gisèle Pélicot, and yet there are

71 Vyazovskiy, 'What Sleep Is'.

72 Peter Wehrwein, 'Propofol: The Drug that Killed Michael Jackson', Harvard Health Publishing, 7 November 2011 <https://www.health.harvard.edu/blog/propofol-the-drug-that-killed-michael-jackson-201111073772> [accessed 27 December 2025].

73 'The Drugs Found in Michael Jackson's Body after He Died', *BBC News*, 28 September 2011 <https://www.bbc.com/news/newsbeat-15088904> [accessed 28 January 2026]. Propofol is only indicated for use in short operations in a clinical setting.

74 See Sophie Smith, 'Sleeping Women', *London Review of Books*, 26 December 2024, pp. 5–8 (p. 5).

uncanny overlaps, since fantasies of entitlement and total domination seem to be part and parcel of both. In the aftermath of the Pélicot case, several misogynist internet communities have come to light and have been scrutinized, where men exchange detailed information on how to secretly drug and rape their partners — for example, where to order the sedatives, and their dosage. Often, videos are shared in which the eyelid of the sedated person is pulled up, thereby proving that they are really asleep (that is, sedated).[75] Questions of consent and of whom one can trust in a semi-conscious or unconscious state are inextricably entwined, but they cannot be directly addressed in such a state. This bears on the philosophical question as to whether the state of subjecthood is absent or suspended in sleep, as well as related questions of perception and self-knowledge, since sleepers and dreamers are only partly conscious, and a sleeping person can neither deny nor affirm their state directly.[76] This underlines both the great difficulty of gaining direct access to knowledge about sleep states, on account of sleeping subjects' reduced ability to speak, act, or resist, as well as the intense vulnerability of resting, exhausted, or drugged and comatose bodies. These vulnerabilities appear obvious in hindsight, but seem to have been of little concern in historical psychiatric treatments that tried to intensify sleep or even keep patients asleep continuously.

## THE SLEEPING BEAUTY TROPE

The young woman in 'Sleeping Beauty' remains beautiful, and as if dead, for a hundred years. This is a common scene, as Elisabeth Bronfen notes:

> Narrative and visual representations of death, drawing their material from a common cultural image repertoire, can be read as symptoms of our culture. Furthermore, because the feminine body is culturally constructed as the superlative site

75 See CNN's report 'The Vast Network of Men Drugging & Raping their Wives', CNN, 17 April 2026 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Px49-Qe42Vg> [accessed 23 May 2026]; and, for the campaign to inform and support survivors globally, see EndEyeCheck <https://endeyecheck.org/> [accessed 23 May 2026].

76 Unless they sleep in a sleep lab setting and are highly skilled lucid dreamers who can answer questions through wilful eye movements.

> of alterity, culture uses art to dream the deaths of beautiful women.[77]

Death and sleep are linked, often in an imagined kinship as brothers, and one may be mistaken for the other at first sight. The term 'sleeping' is commonly used as a euphemism for 'dead'. Some of the same cultural and aesthetic conventions are at play in representations of both dead and sleeping women, as can be revisited in the iconic scenes of *Sleeping Beauty*, and in *Snow White*, too, in each of which a young and beautiful woman who at first appears dead turns out to have been 'only sleeping'.[78] These tales may reassure us by taking the finality and horror of death away, but they also expose a beautiful female body voyeuristically to the visual consumption of spectators, and, significantly, with her eyes closed, she cannot return the gaze. The awake spectator may, either imaginarily or for real, take advantage of this situation by touching the unresponsive body, or more.

While in the tale of 'Sleeping Beauty' the whole castle and its inhabitants are fast asleep, in 1992 the science fiction author Ursula K. Le Guin reimagined the well-known tale with a young peasant as the main protagonist, 'the Poacher', who hacks his way through the thorns and branches into the castle grounds. In the author's words: 'He does not break the spell; that is what the prince will do. He has broken *into* the spell.'[79] The story proceeds with some significant differences and further considerations on the magic sleep state: it is not contagious; the young man remains in his own wakeful subjective time scale and with his own psychological perception of time. But the poacher is certain — in another alteration to the Grimms' telling — that the princess is the only one, besides one of the hunting dogs, who is not only sleeping, but also dreaming. And yet, the two states are neither fully discrete nor monolithic, and even under the influence of narcotics, or in this case magic, the brain may not be completely switched off, and the

77 Elisabeth Bronfen, 'Preface', in Bronfen, *Over her Dead Body: Death, Femininity, and the Aesthetic* (Manchester University Press, 1992), p. xi.

78 See *Sleeping Beauty*, dir. by Wolfgang Reitherman and others (USA, 1959); and *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, dir. by David Hand and others (USA, 1937).

79 Ursula K. Le Guin, 'The Wilderness Within: The Sleeping Beauty and "The Poacher"', in Le Guin, *The Wave in the Mind: Talks and Essays on the Writer, The Reader, and the Imagination* (Shambhala, 2004), pp. 108–16 (p. 113). Le Guin also referred to herself as a 'poacher' of the fairy tale narrative.

ears continue to receive sounds.[80] Dreams and nightmares can occur, which sometimes incorporate auditory cues.[81] Le Guin's protagonist wanders the grounds and encounters only motionless humans and resting animals, realizing that, in spite of the pervasive sleeping, 'there was no night there'.[82] He eats and drinks what he finds, and these supplies are replenished each time he returns.

Among the sleepers is a young peasant couple; having made love in a nearby meadow, their clothes are still pulled down. The poacher, who takes what he desires without asking, has repeated intercourse with the quasi-unconscious woman; she is unable to consent, but Le Guin imagines that she welcomes and enjoys his action, and she does not name it 'rape'.[83] In Le Guin's story, however, the poacher never touches the princess, since, unlike in traditional fairy tales, his class consciousness is not suspended.

## 'SLEEPING BEAUTY' ON A SPACESHIP IN 2016

Connecting my earlier themes of space travel and cosmic temporal scales with animals' intermittent modes of suspension, human astronauts' vulnerabilities, and the trope of dormancy, I now want to turn to a Hollywood sci-fi film which retells scenes from the #MeToo protests of 2016 in the setting of futuristic space exploration. In *Passengers*, released in 2016, an enormous spaceship, modelled after a luxury cruiser,

80 Kalman A. Katlowitz and others, 'Plasticity and Language in the Anaesthetized Human Hippocampus', *Nature*, 654 (2026), pp. 714–23 <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-026-10448-0>.

81 Victor X. Fu and others, 'Perception of Auditory Stimuli during General Anaesthesia and its Effects on Patient Outcomes: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis', *Canadian Journal of Anaesthesia*, 68 (2021), pp. 1231–53 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12630-021-02015-0>.

82 Ursula K. Le Guin, 'The Poacher', in Le Guin, *Unlocking the Air and Other Stories* (Harper Collins, 2004), pp. 191–207 (p. 202).

83 Ibid., p. 205. To contemporary readers, the absence of the term 'rape' here is perhaps telling of the discursive shift that has occurred since the story's publication, and especially following the #MeToo protests in 2016. In her later reflections on writing the story, Le Guin seems aware that one might well consider the poacher's act to be rape, but insists: 'Thinking about it now, I believe that the tale is as impregnable and unassailable as its hedge of thorns. We can play variations round about, imagine peasant trespassers, or *rapist princes*, happy or unhappy endings as we please. [...] The story is, itself, a spell. Why would we want to break it' (Le Guin, *The Wave in the Mind*, p. 114; my emphasis).

sets out to colonize a distant galaxy to create a new habitat.[84] It carries five thousand paying passengers and three hundred crew members who are travelling for 120 years in hyper-sleep to the Bhakti star system. Thirty years into the flight, a man wakes up due to a malfunctioning sleep pod and is greeted by a hologram telling him, 'It is perfectly normal to feel confused after 120 years in suspended animation.' The projected arrival is, however, still ninety years away — longer than a human lifespan — and he is the only one awake.[85] The scene is comparable to Le Guin's retelling of 'Sleeping Beauty', whose male protagonist spends most of his life in the bewitched castle, watching and talking to the sleepers, who never respond: 'I saw [ … ] that the two carved figures by the door were living men [ … ] sound asleep. It did not surprise me. They are asleep, I thought. It seemed natural enough, here. I think I knew even then where I had come.'[86]

Both men know that they will be dead before the other sleepers wake, so they will never actually meet. This perspective cements the notion of the sleeper as absent presence or present absence, a passive body, in which the active and individualized subject is temporarily away. In both scenarios, the men become increasingly frustrated and lonely: 'the company of the sleepers grew wearisome to me.'[87] Being awake means complete isolation and exclusion from the collectivity of sleepers. Roland Barthes emphatically describes a similar frustration in watching the beloved other in their sleep, completely unreachable.[88] However, such an experience may also be useful as a way to instil recognition of the immensity of sleep, and its pervasiveness, that which each (non-)sleeper can only observe while not partaking in it, and as a way to imagine switching perspectives between sleepers and non-sleepers, passivity and activity.

To return to the Hollywood film *Passengers*, its main protagonist, the lonely and awake man, Jim, cannot bear his solitude, and, after

84 *Passengers*, dir. by Morton Tyldum (USA, 2016).

85 Another recent sci-fi film that begins with an astronaut waking up alone, his fellow team members having died, is *Project Hail Mary*, dir. by Phil Lord and Christopher Miller (USA, 2026).

86 Le Guin, 'The Poacher', pp. 201–02.

87 Ibid., p. 205.

88 Roland Barthes, *A Lovers Discourse: Fragments*, trans. by Richard Howard (Hill and Wang, 1978, 2001), pp. 115–16.

one year has passed, he wakes up another female passenger, Aurora, repeating the 'Sleeping Beauty' narrative in a different guise. By waking Aurora deliberately, and too early, by short-circuiting her sleep pod, Jim has made it impossible for her to arrive at the destination: she will die (as will he) in transit. In addition, Jim lies about the reason for her awakening. As she comes to realize what has happened, all she wants is to go back into hibernation, which is impossible. Not surprisingly for a Hollywood narrative, and despite Jim's actions, the only two awake humans proceed to fall in love with each other. However, when Aurora finally finds out the details of her awakening, through the divulging remark of an android, she confronts Jim and moves to a different part of the ship, cutting off communication with him. In online film forums, many viewers have remarked that they would have preferred the film to have been told solely from Aurora's perspective. While the imaginary scenario in *Passengers* builds on well-known tropes from 'Sleeping Beauty', it also exploits current experiments into the upscaling and intensification of human sleep to a mode of 'hibernation' on long-term space flights, mirroring research that is currently being pursued by NASA and ESA, though so far only in clinical trials on Earth.

## CONCLUSION

This essay has considered both historical and literary examples of attempts to intensify and upscale sleep. I have strategically employed sleep as an interscalar vehicle and an umbrella term for a wide variety of reduced and seemingly passive states ranging from regular sleep to suspension as well as to hibernation and torpor, all of which are connected by their common trait of energy reduction. This wide perspective has aided in decentring the human scale, and the dominance of the active everyday as a norm. The simplistic notion of sleep as a scalable entity for energy conservation and production, as exemplified in the 'Sleeping Beauty' trope, is called upon in diverse contexts from fictional literature and films to implicit notions informing metaphors and models in science. Interrogating this trope, this essay has revealed it to be a myth that just won't die, and that continues to live on, even through paradigm shifts in sleep science, in capitalist optimization discourses and their counter-tales.

The answer to the question of whether (human) sleep is scalable depends on the definition of sleep: while, theoretically, nothing can compress time spent in sleep and still yield the same regenerative benefits, a myriad of practices to shorten or delay sleep, or to make it more efficient, exist in the military and among night shift workers, students, young parents and other carers, as well as stockbrokers. While these groups (and others) are known for not getting enough sleep, the test case of astronauts being put into a medically induced hibernation state for months-long space travel suggests a stretching of the temporal scale, and a potential upscaling or intensification of sleep beyond circadian rhythms. Moreover, while every human's sleep habits and needs are as individual as their dietary needs, some general insights may be drawn: longer periods of sleep may lead to an estrangement of the rhythm of the everyday and everynight, and a disintegration of the (always already multiple) subject. In the few cases presented here, some of the difficulties of upscaling and intensifying sleep have already become apparent, and would need to be addressed in future efforts to maximize human sleep periods — for example, the problem of exactly timed sleep onset and offset.

The models for these longer sleep states are the various animals who are better adapted and diverse sleepers than humans, since they have a greater ability to modulate and upscale their sleep in response to their environments. The imaginary trope of sleeping for a hundred years, as in 'Sleeping Beauty', is at the core an efficacious model of an upscaled but reversible state of suspension that continues to be exploited across imaginary and scientific realms. It usually claims an idealized version of an intensified sleep and disregards many of the actual changes that a human body and its environment would undergo during such a period, such as the accumulation of dust, the growth of hair and nails, and physical decline. 'Sleeping Beauty' is therefore an aestheticized (and anaesthetized), gendered, and racialized icon; it is not at all an innocent trope, since it offers up flawless perfection, loss of agency and control, and the possibility of being violated in the vulnerable sleep state.

Notoriously, human sleep can be both an asocial or antisocial seclusion, but it can also entail a form of sociality, since humans are vulnerable in their sleep; they need care and protection and are never

as autonomous as hibernating animals. It is therefore apparent that the human sleeper cannot be the master of their own sleep state, and must rely on another human's care, responsibility, and ethical behaviour.

Anticapitalist but also to an extent antisocial or escapist, narcissistic experiments with upscaling sleep, as in Perec's and Moshfegh's novels, can only be performed in a secure setting, where a lockable room with a bed, financial income without work, and sustenance are all a given. At the same time, both authors' protagonists refuse to participate in capitalism and instead aim to suspend normal life and strivings. Significantly, both protagonists counter the current trends of sleepmaxxing and sleep optimization that are consistent with a modernist notion of appropriation and mastery: the human imitating animal hibernation to become the most efficient sleeper in the universe, and exploiting this to colonize other planets.

And yet, sleep (still) escapes all fantasies of mastery. Sleep remains an enigmatic state that is difficult to measure in any exact way, and is less monolithic than previously conceptualized. Sleep may never be fully captured and conquered, and it can't be abolished. The reduction of sleep to a mode of energy conservation does not do justice to its multiple functions, and, as can be inferred from the case of sleep-deprived animals needing to catch up on REM sleep after periods of hibernation, it comes with its own risks. Therefore, the idea of simply upscaling sleep — be it for one year or a hundred years — must ultimately fail as too simplistic and reductive.

# The Measure of Generality

## On the Scalar Dynamics of AI Model Evaluation Practices

MAGDALENA KRYSZTOFORSKA

Over the last few years, the notion of 'generality' has gained significant rhetorical currency in artificial intelligence (AI) discourse. This can be observed with notions such as 'general intelligence' or 'general capabilities' now often being attributed to AI, contributing to a view of this technology as increasingly general-purpose. Ever since the advent of so-called 'foundation models' — the large, pre-trained generative AI (GenAI) models that many people interact with on a daily basis via a chatbot interface — the view of AI as a versatile and 'general' technology has rapidly proliferated.[1] The reason why this matters, and why it is seen as a concern by many, is that the narrative of generality is being used to encourage widespread adoption of AI across professional and personal spheres, leading to a continuously expanding range of reported use cases, including: various professional and administrative tasks, research and learning, creativity and recreation, as well as therapy, companionship, and spiritual activities.[2] Import-

1 The term 'foundation models' was coined by a group of Stanford researchers in a now-seminal paper by Rishi Bommasani and others, 'On the Opportunities and Risks of Foundation Models', arXiv, 12 July 2022 <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2108.07258>.

2 A more detailed list of current use cases can be found in Marc Zao-Sanders, 'How People Are Really Using Gen AI in 2025', *Harvard Business Review*, 9 April 2025 <https://hbr.org/2025/04/how-people-are-really-using-gen-ai-in-2025> [accessed 19 August 2025].

antly, however, the view of AI as 'general' is far from unanimous,[3] and while certain pundits actively promote this view to encourage uptake of the technology, many researchers contest it and warn against uncritically deploying AI in a growing range of real-world contexts. As such, the contentious nature of generality claims in AI warrants a close assessment of the provenance and reliability of such claims.

On the one hand, the perception of AI as general-purpose is certainly amplified by tech journalists who present new models as increasingly general in scope, with certain commentators suggesting that the initialism 'GPT' — typically understood in the AI context as 'generative pre-trained transformer', a type of large language model (LLM) underlying many popular chatbots — could in fact be better understood as denoting 'general-purpose technology',[4] with alleged severe implications for the labour market.[5] Generality is also a key component of the infamous term 'AGI' (artificial *general* intelligence), which has frequently been invoked in aspirational statements by AI luminaries,[6] and in the mission statements of AI companies,[7] and which has functioned as a 'north-star goal' for many researchers in the field.[8] Moreover, the notion of generality has also been integral

3 I will refrain from using scare quotes around the notion of generality throughout the rest of this text; however, I would like the reader to keep in mind the contested nature of this term.

4 Joe McKendrick, 'Why GPT Should Stand For "General Purpose Technology" For All', *Forbes*, 8 August 2023 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/joemckendrick/2023/08/08/why-gpt-should-stand-for-general-purpose-technology-for-all/> [accessed 25 January 2026].

5 Tyna Eloundou and others, 'GPTs Are GPTs: Labor Market Impact Potential of LLMs', *Science*, 384.6702 (2024), pp. 1306–08 <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.adj0998>.

6 Will Douglas Heaven, 'Rogue Superintelligence and Merging with Machines: Inside the Mind of OpenAI's Chief Scientist', *MIT Technology Review*, 26 October 2023 <https://www.technologyreview.com/2023/10/26/1082398/exclusive-ilya-sutskever-openais-chief-scientist-on-his-hopes-and-fears-for-the-future-of-ai/> [accessed 25 January 2026]; Josh Tyrangiel, 'Sam Altman on ChatGPT's First Two Years, Elon Musk and AI Under Trump', *Bloomberg*, 5 January 2025 <https://www.bloomberg.com/features/2025-sam-altman-interview/> [accessed 25 January 2026].

7 'About', OpenAI, 30 September 2025 <https://openai.com/about/> [accessed 25 January 2026]; 'About Google DeepMind', Google DeepMind, January 2026 <https://deepmind.google/about/> [accessed 25 January 2026].

8 Borhane Blili-Hamelin and others, 'Stop Treating 'AGI' as the North-Star Goal of AI Research', arXiv (preprint), 2502.03689, 7 July 2025 <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2502.03689>.

to high-profile regulatory and strategic efforts: the term 'AGI' has featured prominently in the UK government's AI strategy documents;[9] the EU AI Act outlined 'general purpose AI' (GPAI) models as an important category with a dedicated code of practice,[10] given that 'they can be used for a variety of tasks and therefore form the basis for a range of downstream AI systems';[11] while the US government's 2025 'America's AI Action Plan' talks about how general-purpose models will transform science, and draws a parallel between AI and 'general-purpose technologies of the past'.[12]

On the other hand, however, many critics point out that the term 'AGI' is notorious for lacking a clear definition, and that it often functions as a floating signifier mobilized by various actors in order to advance their agendas.[13] Moreover, comparisons of AI to other general-purpose technologies (such as the printing press) have been challenged as premature at best, especially given that the wide variety of models and their disparate potential makes it difficult to assess them as a single technology.[14] Regarding the range of capabilities of current AI models, researchers often argue that even the most sophisticated models still currently fail in a wide range of domains,[15] and that model capabilities

9 'National AI Strategy', HM Government, September 2021 <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/614db4d1e90e077a2cbdf3c4/National_AI_Strategy_-_PDF_version.pdf> [accessed 10 July 2026].

10 European Parliament and Council of the European Union, Artificial Intelligence Act, no. 2024/1689, EUR-Lex, 12 July 2024 <http://data.europa.eu/eli/reg/2024/1689/oj> [accessed 25 January 2026].

11 'General-Purpose AI Models in the AI Act — Questions & Answers', European Commission, 9 September 2025 <https://digital-strategy.ec.europa.eu/en/faqs/general-purpose-ai-models-ai-act-questions-answers> [accessed 25 January 2026].

12 'America's AI Action Plan', Executive Office of the President of the United States, July 2025, p. 14 <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/Americas-AI-Action-Plan.pdf> [accessed 25 January 2025].

13 For an overview of how different key players in AI define AGI in line with their priorities and agendas, see Melanie Mitchell, 'Debates on the Nature of Artificial General Intelligence', *Science*, 383.6689 (2024) <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.ado7069>.

14 Anna Rogers and Alexandra Sasha Luccioni, 'Position: Key Claims in LLM Research Have a Long Tail of Footnotes', *ICML '24: Proceedings of the 41st International Conference on Machine Learning*, 21 July 2024 <https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.5555/3692070.3693805>.

15 Peiyang Song, Pengrui Han, and Noah Goodman, 'A Survey on Large Language Model Reasoning Failures', *2nd AI for Math Workshop @ ICML 2025*, 9 July 2025 <https://openreview.net/forum?id=hsgMn4KBFG> [accessed 25 January 2026].

determined in lab settings do not necessarily align with real-world scenarios,[16] all of which calls into question AI's suitability for many of the purposes that the technology is increasingly being used for.

In order to make sense of the contested status of GenAI as a general technology,[17] this essay will take a closer look at the purported scientific basis for generality claims, namely: model evaluation practices in AI research. The reason why engaging with AI research is imperative here is that the sudden popularity of generality narratives did not appear out of nowhere, but was rather precipitated by advancements in model performance observed by computer scientists. More specifically, the key way in which the field of AI evaluates its progress is by testing models on a range of standardized 'benchmark' tasks (such as machine vision, reading comprehension, and so on), and by comparing different models and their performance by way of 'metrics' established for each task. Models that obtain the best scores on specific benchmark metrics are then considered state-of-the-art for that particular task, and significant improvements in model performance typically serve as the basis for claims of 'progress' in the field. Nevertheless, as many researchers point out, such evaluation practices are often questionable, and their results are open to interpretation. In order to examine the validity of the narratives that present current forms of AI as general, this essay will take a closer look at AI model evaluation pipelines, analysing the broader research dynamics with which they are entangled.

16 Thomas Liao and others, 'Are We Learning Yet? A Meta Review of Evaluation Failures Across Machine Learning', *35th Conference on Neural Information Processing Systems (NeurIPS 2021) Datasets and Benchmarks Track*, 11 October 2021 <https://openreview.net/forum?id=mPducS1MsEK>.

17 To be clear, the term 'GenAI' is much more narrow in scope than 'AI', given that the former pertains specifically to generative models (as opposed to predictive models, and older forms of AI). Nevertheless, since my discussion is focused primarily on state-of-the-art foundation models, which belong to the GenAI category, the two terms are in many instances treated interchangeably throughout this text. I also at times use the terms 'machine learning' (which is a subset of AI, and refers to systems that 'learn' patterns from observed data, rather than follow pre-programmed rules) and 'deep learning' (which is a subset of machine learning, and refers to systems that typically use deep neural networks to 'learn' complex patterns from large volumes of observed data). While most of the currently popular AI models still fit the categories of 'machine learning' and 'deep learning', the use of these terms has become less common in recent years, as the term 'AI' has regained popularity. As such, I mostly use 'machine learning' and 'deep learning' when discussing models developed prior to current foundation models.

I propose that generality narratives can be particularly productively understood when explored in conjunction with another closely related concept — 'scale' — which I adopt as the key critical and analytical lens in this essay for two main reasons. First, generality and scale are deeply entangled concepts in AI research: claims about current GenAI models demonstrating general capabilities often go hand in hand with claims that LLM capabilities improve with scale (what have been referred to as 'scaling laws'),[18] and the 'paradigm-shifting' success of foundation models has been attributed to both generality and scalability.[19] Second, scale has long been discussed across the humanities as a powerful representational and rhetorical tool that is often mobilized to further a particular agenda, and as both a 'physical property independent of subjective experience [and] a set of conventions constructed by discursive practices'.[20] Critical geographers highlight scale's capacity for constraining and enabling particular 'ways of seeing, thinking and acting',[21] as well as scale's 'taken-for-granted quality that provides its power'.[22] These qualities can be readily observed in the context of AI, where scale is often viewed as a key ingredient of the current success of the field, but it is also a discursive device and a means for power consolidation by tech corporations that own and manage the key resources required for the continuous upscaling of AI models.[23] The same is true for generality: despite the lack of consensus on the general nature of AI models, the narrative of general capabilities and general intelligence drives the increasing uptake of these models in a wide range of domains. Grappling with the 'ideologies of scale' operating in this context requires paying attention to scalar dynamics

18 Jared Kaplan and others, 'Scaling Laws for Neural Language Models', arXiv (preprint), 2001.08361, 23 January 2020 <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2001.08361>.

19 Bommasani and others, 'On the Opportunities and Risks of Foundation Models'.

20 Zachary Horton, *The Cosmic Zoom: Scale, Knowledge, and Mediation* (University of Chicago Press, 2021), p. 11.

21 Adam Moore, 'Rethinking Scale as a Geographical Category: From Analysis to Practice', *Progress in Human Geography*, 32.2 (2008), pp. 203–25 (p. 214) <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132507087647>.

22 Katherine T. Jones, 'Scale as Epistemology', *Political Geography*, 17.1 (1998), pp. 25–28 (p. 28) <https://doi.org/10.1016/S0962-6298(97)00049-8>.

23 A process which Meredith Whittaker refers to as 'industry capture of AI research' in Meredith Whittaker, 'The Steep Cost of Capture', *Interactions*, 28.6 (2021), pp. 50–55 (p. 55) <https://doi.org/10.1145/3488666>.

that advance a particular narrative.[24] To this end, this essay will draw on scale's critical and analytical affordances in order to interrogate the epistemic and material implications of generality claims in the context of AI.

In what follows, my discussion will be structured in three parts, each guided by a different concept drawn from critical scholarship on scale: 'scalar politics', 'scalar synecdoche', and 'scalar collapse', coined by Danny MacKinnon, Joshua DiCaglio, and Zachary Horton respectively.[25] The functions of scale conveyed by these conceptual framings will serve to elucidate the functions and epistemic operations of generality and scale in AI research. In addition, each section will conclude with a diagrammatic interpretation of the scalar dynamics of model evaluation practices that give rise to claims of general capabilities, and that are often obscured from view. What I mean by this is that published research on AI model evaluation often features diagrams to illustrate the structure of a given benchmark or evaluation framework, and while the exact visual presentations of such diagrams vary in many ways, there is also a distinct aesthetic quality that many of them share. These diagrams are typically composed of well-defined symmetrical shapes that are evenly spaced and that avoid acute angles, and such geometric choices evoke a sense of a well-thought-out, coherent, and robust structure.[26] The visual strategy I adopt here is purposefully dif-

24 Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, 'The Global Situation', *Cultural Anthropology*, 15.3 (2000), pp. 327–60 <https://doi.org/10.1525/can.2000.15.3.327>.

25 Danny MacKinnon, 'Reconstructing Scale: Towards a New Scalar Politics', *Progress in Human Geography*, 35.1 (2011), pp. 21–36 <https://doi.org/10.1177/0309132510367841>; Joshua DiCaglio, *Scale Theory: A Nondisciplinary Inquiry* (University of Minnesota Press, 2021); Horton, *The Cosmic Zoom*.

26 The aesthetic I describe here can be found in numerous publications. For example, the paper which introduced the term 'foundation models' features a diagram that adopts such an aesthetic to illustrate the idea that 'a foundation model can centralize the information from all the data from various modalities. This one model can then be adapted to a wide range of downstream tasks' (Bommasani and others, 'On the Opportunities and Risks of Foundation Models', fig. 2, p. 6); the publication accompanying the 'holistic' benchmark HELM adopts a similar visual strategy when illustrating the architecture of this benchmark ( Jialiang Xu, Yifan Mai, and Percy Liang, 'HELM Capabilities: Evaluating LMs Capability by Capability', CRFM: Centre for Research on Foundation Models, 20 March 2025, fig. 1 <https://crfm.stanford.edu/2025/03/20/helm-capabilities.html> [accessed 17 May 2026]); and the paper introducing Humanity's Last Exam (HLE) — 'a multi-modal benchmark at the frontier of human knowledge' — features a diagram where the distribution of HLE's component

ferent: my diagrams make extensive use of slanted and irregular shapes, as well as meandering and often imperfectly drawn lines, in order to highlight the scalar distortions and conflations of model evaluation practices, as well as the somewhat arbitrary nature of research choices that end up having significant material consequences. What this essay ultimately demonstrates is that the notion of generality in AI should not be taken for granted, and that the conceptual toolkit of scale can be useful in challenging claims of AI as a general technology.

## GENERALITY AS SCALAR POLITICS

Discussions of scale in the humanities have been significantly informed by the so-called 'scale debate' in human geography dating back to the 1980s, when critical geographers started advocating for a move away from taking the concept of scale for granted.[27] This debate precipitated intense theorizations of scale, with scholars seeking, for example, to find more nuanced ways of understanding how scale is produced and constructed, to determine scale's ontological status (is it a feature of material reality? a social construct? a discursive device?), or to critically interrogate the language and metaphors used to convey a sense of scale. Such questions often went hand in hand with critical discussions of globalization, uneven development, or the spatial hierarchies (such as the local, the regional, and the global) that shape, and are shaped by, social, cultural, economic, and political processes. The term 'scalar politics', which I want to focus on in this section, was proposed by Danny MacKinnon as an attempt to bridge the chasm between what he considered to be the two key strands of the scale debate: on the one hand, political-economic approaches, which treat scales as socially and politically constructed yet material entities; and, on the other hand, poststructuralist approaches, which consider scale to be a predomin-

questions across different subject areas is portrayed as puzzle pieces that fit perfectly together and create a complete whole (Center for AI Safety, Scale AI, and HLE Contributors Consortium, 'A Benchmark of Expert-Level Academic Questions to Assess AI Capabilities', *Nature*, 649 (2026), pp. 1139–46, fig. 2 <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41586-025-09962-4>).

27 Given that the treatment of scale in human geography is not the key focus of this essay, my engagement with it will be necessarily selective. For a more comprehensive overview of this debate, see Andrew Herod, *Scale* (Routledge, 2010).

antly discursive construct, often wielded by those who stand to benefit from particular scalar representations.[28] MacKinnon emphasizes the need to pay close attention to both the material and the discursive dimensions of how scale is constructed, and he proposes 'scalar politics' as 'a research agenda of examining how different actors and groups seek to tie particular scalar categories and categorization to specific material relations'.[29] In other words, the term 'scalar politics' is conceived of here as an analytical approach, or as a framework for grappling with scalar aspects of projects and practices that exert political or social influence.

Although it may seem that human geography as a field is not typically well positioned to provide insight into the inner workings of AI model evaluation practices (which are mostly within the purview of computer science and engineering), the approach to scale outlined above is in fact highly instructive for understanding scale and generality in AI research.[30] In particular, MacKinnon's concept of scalar politics consists of four key components that can help illuminate some of the research dynamics behind generality claims. The first component is an emphasis on treating scale as a 'dimension' of scalar projects, rather than as their 'pregiven arena' or central focus, highlighting the non-fixed and negotiable qualities of scale. In the case of AI, much of the success of current models is attributed to increases in computing power, training data, training time, and model parameters; however, there is certainly more to AI than scale, and, as such, scale is a dimension rather than the core essence of the technology. The second component of scalar politics is the aforementioned necessity for treating scale as both discursive and material, and for paying close attention to the motivations of those who promote or seek to normalize scale-imbued narratives. Likewise, in AI, the widespread (albeit highly contested) belief that scale is an important ingredient of general AI

28 MacKinnon, 'Reconstructing Scale'.

29 Ibid, p. 33.

30 To be clear, there are certainly many issues in AI that closely intersect with a number of key concerns in human geography, such as the political economy of the tech sector, the labour and logistics underpinning AI, concerns around the environmental impact of AI, and so on. Nevertheless, given my focus on model evaluation practices in AI research, these issues are beyond the scope of this essay.

leads to tech companies investing in more data and computing power, and, in this way, the rhetorical currency of scale materializes scale into being. The third component of MacKinnon's schema concerns the influence of prior scalar structures on current processes, and the fourth and final component examines how new scalar configurations are established. Both of these components point to the role of inherited scalar arrangements as well as emergent scalar relations (emphasizing the influence of both, and the interactions between them), and new scalar projects are framed as being driven in large part by 'the social forces advancing such projects'.[31] Similarly, the pursuit of generality in AI has been shaped by historical research trends as well as more recent scale-related developments, and it is currently being substantially steered by social power dynamics in the field. As I explore below, with the four components of scalar politics in view, current claims of generality in AI can be productively understood as constructed through and motivated by the broader research dynamics around which the field of AI is oriented.

Model evaluation practices are particularly useful for understanding AI research dynamics, as they have remained central to the field despite recent changes precipitated by the growing influence of the tech sector on academic research. In recent years, it has become standard for AI companies to publish technical reports accompanying the release of new models,[32] and while such publications are to some extent rooted in decades-old research traditions, where new technical developments used to be disseminated to the AI community in the form of academic papers presented at annual computer-science conferences, the largely proprietary nature of current state-of-the-art models means that their concomitant technical reports no longer contain key details that would allow other scholars to easily reproduce the published results. Nevertheless, the type of information that still remains widely featured in the documentation that is published alongside newly released models is the models' performance according to selected benchmarks.

31 MacKinnon, 'Reconstructing Scale', p. 31.

32 See, for example, OpenAI and others, 'GPT-4 Technical Report', arXiv (preprint), 2303.08774, 15 March 2023 <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2303.08774>.

At its most basic, a benchmark is typically a combination of a dataset and a metric: the dataset (or multiple datasets) usually serves as testing data but sometimes also training data, and the metric corresponds to the task, or set of tasks, on which the model is scored, and which therefore allows for the performance of different models to be compared. The subsequent comparison happens in a number of ways. Research labs use these metrics to gauge whether new models they are developing lead to meaningful improvements, and, whenever substantial improvements are observed, the results are typically published and disseminated through computer-science conferences and pre-print servers (such as arXiv). On top of that, the testing of different methods can also take the form of machine learning (ML) competitions, hosted online by companies such as Kaggle, where anyone can access data for a particular competition to test their model, and where the performance results of different models are ranked on a public leaderboard.

It is hard to overstate just how central these benchmarking and competitive-testing practices have been to the field of AI as a whole, and how they have helped establish scale as an important dimension of modern AI. The idea of using a curated dataset (split in half, to separate training data from test data) to more rigorously evaluate model performance, and to measure progress over time, allowed research to secure enough financial backing to survive the AI 'funding winter' in the 1980s.[33] Moreover, the boom in AI research since the 2010s was largely enabled by the so-called 'deep learning revolution',[34] and it was the spectacular performance by the deep-learning model AlexNet in a 2012 image-recognition competition (based on the canonical benchmark dataset ImageNet) that is widely perceived to have been the moment that deep learning established itself as the most successful branch of ML. This was also one of the salient events in AI research that established scale as an important aspect of model development: in the paper outlining the AlexNet architecture, the authors specifically attribute their success to an increase in model layers and longer training time, made possible by advancements in hardware (in particular, the

33 Moritz Hardt and Benjamin Recht, *Patterns, Predictions, and Actions: Foundations of Machine Learning* (Princeton University Press, 2022), p. 148.

34 Terrence J. Sejnowski, *The Deep Learning Revolution* (MIT Press, 2018).

use of graphics processing units (GPUs) for model training) and the increased computing power that the new hardware enabled.[35] When characterizing the current orientation of their field, AI researchers still often point to the primacy of computing power, and cite the so-called 'bitter lesson', a phrase coined in a 2019 blog post by the Turing Award winner Richard Sutton, in which he states that 'the biggest lesson that can be read from 70 years of AI research is that general methods that leverage computation are ultimately the most effective, and by a large margin'.[36] This interpretation of the state of the field is considered a 'bitter' lesson, given its implication that any potential methodological innovations (which are the typical focus of computer-science research in ML) will not be as consequential as increases in brute-force computation.

Given these developments, and given the ongoing trend for the continuous upscaling of new models, it might seem that scale is an objective feature of modern AI. Nevertheless, as the notion of scalar politics underscores, scale should not be taken for granted, as it is often constructed through a confluence of wider processes and relations, or discursively mobilized by specific groups. Indeed, many computer scientists argue that while the interest in scaling laws and the belief that 'scale is all you need' have captured the imagination of the research community, it remains unclear whether scale truly is the key factor of LLM success (rather than, for example, better-quality data).[37] Other researchers also point to 'post-training enhancements' as a way to improve model performance without retraining (and therefore without developing new and larger models with more training data),[38] and there are also numerous examples of small models performing bet-

35 Alex Krizhevsky, Ilya Sutskever, and Geoffrey E. Hinton, 'ImageNet Classification with Deep Convolutional Neural Networks', in *Advances in Neural Information Processing Systems 25 (NIPS 2012)*, 2012 <https://proceedings.neurips.cc/paper_files/paper/2012/file/c399862d3b9d6b76c8436e924a68c45b-Paper.pdf> [accessed 10 July 2026].

36 Rich Sutton, 'The Bitter Lesson', *Incomplete Ideas*, 13 March 2019 <http://www.incompleteideas.net/IncIdeas/BitterLesson.html> [accessed 25 January 2026].

37 For a more comprehensive list of counterarguments to the 'scale is all you need' maxim, see, for example, Rogers and Luccioni, 'Position'.

38 Tom Davidson and others, 'AI Capabilities Can Be Significantly Improved without Expensive Retraining', arXiv (preprint), 2312.07413, 12 December 2023 <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2312.07413>.

ter than their larger counterparts,[39] as well as documented instances where model performance does not improve with scale.[40]

An explanation for this divergence of opinion on the primacy of scale can be found by looking at the deeper research dynamics underpinning model evaluation practices. Despite the initial positioning of competitive testing as a way of getting a more 'objective' picture of the actual progress in a field that was prone to distorting its own image through unrealistic promises, over time, the focus on beating benchmarks and achieving state-of-the-art (SOTA) results has become the dominant incentive, skewing the field's overall activities in the direction of a continuous push towards improving model performance (a trend often referred to as 'SOTA-chasing'), and has led to distortions resulting from the frequent inflation of reported results.[41] Researchers often feel incentivized to engage in 'questionable research practices' (such as cherry-picking or misreporting results) in order to demonstrate improvements on benchmarks, as this increases the chances of a paper being accepted by prestigious publication venues, and helps attract potential investment.[42] Consequently, better results achieved on benchmarks can be the result of factors such as imbalanced datasets, or differences in levels of hyperparameter optimization, meaning that better results might not in fact signify genuine improvement.[43]

Moreover, echoing MacKinnon's schema for analysing how scalar configurations are created and advanced by social forces, the field of AI

39 Yi Tay and others, 'Scale Efficiently: Insights from Pretraining and Finetuning Transformers', *International Conference on Learning Representations*, 28 January 2022 <https://openreview.net/forum?id=f2OYVDyfIB> [accessed 25 January 2026]; Mojan Javaheripi and Sébastien Bubeck, 'Phi-2: The Surprising Power of Small Language Models', *Microsoft Research Blog*, 12 December 2023 <https://www.microsoft.com/en-us/research/blog/phi-2-the-surprising-power-of-small-language-models/> [accessed 25 January 2026].

40 Ian R. McKenzie and others, 'Inverse Scaling: When Bigger Isn't Better', *Transactions on Machine Learning Research (TMLR 2023)*, 20 October 2023 <https://openreview.net/forum?id=DwgRm72GQF> [accessed 25 January 2026].

41 Kenneth Ward Church and Valia Kordoni, 'Emerging Trends: SOTA-Chasing', *Natural Language Engineering*, 28.2 (2022), pp. 249–69 <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1351324922000043>.

42 Gavin Leech and others, 'Questionable Practices in Machine Learning', arXiv (preprint), 2407.12220, 30 October 2024 <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2407.12220>.

43 Michael A. Lones, 'Avoiding Common Machine Learning Pitfalls', *Patterns*, 5.10 (2024), pp. 1–16 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.patter.2024.101046>.

research is also very much steered by social dynamics. Specifically, researchers who explore the community dynamics around benchmarks find that the biggest players in the industry are best positioned to continuously make breakthroughs, thanks in large part to their access to key resources (hardware, software, and data). Access to these resources then attracts the fourth key ingredient — talent — and benchmark competitions 'play an important role in attracting young researchers'.[44] In other words, research trends in AI are driven by a self-reinforcing mechanism: progress is measured by way of competitions and benchmarks, and since scale is currently viewed as an advantage in competitions, access to scale (that is, key resources that enable training and testing of larger models) leads more researchers to focus on scale-driven methods. Relatedly, a study of benchmarking practices between 2015 and 2020 observed a dynamic whereby, despite the continuous development of new datasets, research efforts aimed at specific tasks (such as facial recognition) remain concentrated around the same benchmark datasets.[45] The authors explain that given the emphasis that the AI research community places on SOTA results (which are considered a form of 'scientific capital'), it is not surprising that researchers test new developments against prior benchmarks and their associated datasets.[46] Another study of benchmark dynamics in computer vision and natural language processing found additional interesting patterns: the most popular benchmark datasets tend to be first introduced in papers authored by scholars from top institutions, tend to be composed of a wider variety of tasks, and also tend to have dedicated leaderboards.[47] In this way, research efforts end up concentrated around specific tasks and datasets in large part due to their extra-scientific attributes (related to the social and institutional

44 Fernando Martínez-Plumed and others, 'Research Community Dynamics behind Popular AI Benchmarks', *Nature Machine Intelligence*, 3.7 (2021), pp. 581–89 <https://doi.org/10.1038/s42256-021-00339-6>.

45 Bernard Koch and others, 'Reduced, Reused and Recycled: The Life of a Dataset in Machine Learning Research', *Thirty-Fifth Conference on Neural Information Processing*, 11 October 2021 <https://openreview.net/forum?id=zNQBIBKJRkd> [accessed 25 January 2026].

46 Ibid., p. 1.

47 Simon Ott and others, 'Mapping Global Dynamics of Benchmark Creation and Saturation in Artificial Intelligence', *Nature Communications*, 13.6793 (2022) <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41467-022-34591-0>.

dynamics of research), and not necessarily due to their intrinsic potential for scientific breakthroughs. As the authors of the study point out, 'benchmarks do not only measure, but also steer progress in AI',[48] and, as such, the discursive and social processes that emphasize the primacy of scale have a material impact on the direction in which the field advances.

The dynamics of scale outlined above are equally relevant to how the notion of generality operates in AI research. AI models that are currently touted as general technologies are the same models that researchers analyse in terms of scaling laws, and the forces and incentives that steer this research can be similarly traced by looking at how the field evaluates its results and overall progress. Specifically, while the pursuit of generality in AI is not a new phenomenon, the approach to it has changed over time. The aspiration for generality can be traced back to the early days of the field, and it is associated with efforts towards a 'general-problem solver' (GPS), first proposed by Allen Newell, Herbert A. Simon, and John Clifford Shaw in 1957.[49] The GPS project was premised on 'programming large digital computers to exhibit intelligent behavior, studying the structure of these computer programs, and examining the problem-solving and other adaptive behaviors that the programs produce'.[50] Importantly, however, the project never fulfilled its intended aims, and when the 1971 Turing Award recipient John McCarthy reflected on the shortcomings of the project in his award lecture, 'Generality in Artificial Intelligence', he attributed the failure of generality in large part to the challenge of 'getting a language for expressing general common sense knowledge for inclusion in a general database'.[51] In other words, for McCarthy, the barrier to gen-

48 Ibid, p. 9.

49 Allen Newell, John Clifford Shaw, and Herbert A. Simon, 'Preliminary Description of General Problem Solving Program- I (GPS-I)', CIP Working Paper #7, 29 December 1957 <http://iiif.library.cmu.edu/file/Simon_box00008_fld00526_bdl0001_doc0002/Simon_box00008_fld00526_bdl0001_doc0002.pdf> [accessed 10 July 2026].

50 Allen Newell, John Clifford Shaw, and Herbert A. Simon, 'Report on a General Problem-Solving Program', *Proceedings of the International Conference on Information Processing* (Carnegie Mellon University), 9 February 1959 <https://home.mis.u-picardie.fr/~furst/docs/Newell_Simon_General_Problem_Solving_1959.pdf> [accessed 10 July 2026].

51 John McCarthy, 'Generality in Artificial Intelligence', *Communications of the ACM*, 30.12 (1987), pp. 1030–35 (p. 1030) <https://doi.org/10.1145/33447.33448>.

erality resulted from technical limitations: the difficulty of formalizing 'common sense knowledge', required by the symbolic approach to AI dominant at the time. There are some meaningful similarities between the GPS project and current general AI efforts, notably the misguided conviction that multifarious real-world problems can in theory be usefully generalized and solved by a specific technology. However, while GPS was ultimately considered to be a failure, today's AI researchers frame the pursuit of generality as an engineering problem (rather than a formalization and implementation problem), and, as such, they consider this project to be entirely feasible.

One of the ways in which the idea that GenAI is a general technology gained traction in recent years was through the growing range of different tasks on which models were performing well. Encouraged by results observed in model performance on historically canonical tasks such as machine vision or natural language understanding, researchers began to develop new tasks and construct new benchmark datasets to test for new model capabilities. The push for measuring model performance on a growing number of separate tasks gave rise to the discourse around 'emergent abilities' in foundation models,[52] that is, abilities such as 'grounded conceptual mapping' or 'semantic understanding' that some AI researchers have claimed to observe in large models (but which are not manifested in smaller models), in line with the aforementioned scaling laws postulated by a number of researchers.[53] Interestingly, while this discourse explicitly draws a parallel with how the concept of 'emergence' functions in the natural sciences, and specifically the idea that quantitative changes in a system can result in qualitative changes in behaviour (often referred to as 'more is different', a phrase coined by physicist Philip Anderson),[54] the alleged emergent abilities in AI models are arguably just significant improvements in per-

52 Jason Wei and others, 'Emergent Abilities of Large Language Models', *Transactions on Machine Learning Research (TMLR 2022)*, 31 August 2022 <https://openreview.net/forum?id=yzkSU5zdwD> [accessed 25 January 2026].

53 Kaplan and others, 'Scaling Laws for Neural Language Models'.

54 Philip W. Anderson, 'More Is Different: Broken Symmetry and the Nature of the Hierarchical Structure of Science', *Science*, 177.4047 (1972), pp. 393–96 <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.177.4047.393>.

formance on predefined benchmark tasks.[55] In other words, these are not unexpected phenomena or characteristics organically developed by a model, but rather a standard feature of the ongoing competitive-testing paradigm, suggesting that perhaps, in this case, *more* is just *more of the same*, rather than different. As such, generality in many ways functions as a corollary of scale in AI research; it is similarly discursive yet enacts significant material effects.

Finally, generality is entangled with the same social forces that the concept of scalar politics helped elucidate in AI research. Scholars exploring emergence claims in AI comment on how these alleged new abilities enact 'sociological changes' in the research community, and how they have led to a significant shift towards general-purpose models.[56] A familiar dynamic can be observed here. On the one hand, many researchers call into question the claim that new abilities emerge suddenly with scale, and propose that observations of new abilities in LLMs have less to do with scale, and more to do with specific metrics chosen to analyse the model output.[57] On the other hand, however, the suggestion that emergence might be a promising research avenue has itself created ripples in the research landscape, driven by the previously discussed scalar politics of benchmark dynamics, leading more researchers to come up with new tasks in order to discover new abilities and contribute to the booming discourse around general-purpose models. These research patterns have further self-reinforcing effects in the field, leading to what Rogers and Luccioni frame as a 'homogeneity of approaches', that is, the concentration of research efforts on a particular type of model considered SOTA, at the expense of pursuing other approaches and potential new breakthroughs.[58] Consequently, much of the current perception of GenAI as a general technology is in fact underpinned by research dynamics that can be effectively understood in terms of scalar politics. In sum, the notion of generality in AI

55 Rylan Schaeffer, Brando Miranda, and Sanmi Koyejo, 'Are Emergent Abilities of Large Language Models a Mirage?', *37th Conference on Neural Information Processing Systems (NeurIPS 2023)*, 23 June 2023 <https://openreview.net/forum?id=JRdN9GcI52>.

56 Wei and others, 'Emergent Abilities of Large Language Models', p. 9.

57 Schaeffer, Miranda, and Koyejo, 'Are Emergent Abilities of Large Language Models a Mirage?'.

58 Rogers and Luccioni, 'Position', p. 8.

is deeply enmeshed in practices of evaluation and benchmarking that have in large part steered the trajectory of the field, and that are deeply entangled with scale and its related forces of influence.

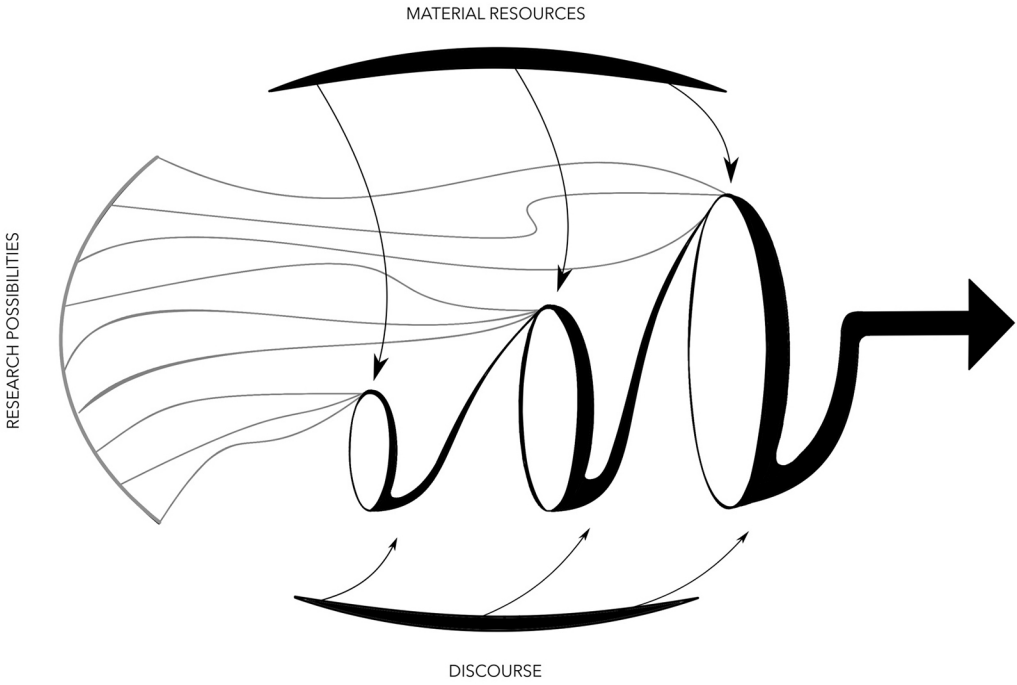


Fig. 1. Generality as scalar politics.

## GENERALITY AS SCALAR SYNECDOCHE

An exploration of generality through the critical lens of scale brings into focus further scalar dynamics of AI research, specifically in relation to how individual benchmarks are constructed, and how they function vis-à-vis claims of GenAI as a general-purpose technology. In particular, while most AI systems built today are intended to be applied to complex real-world contexts, the standardized evaluation frameworks that drive their development in the lab are typically narrow, context-specific, and highly curated by small teams of researchers. As such, the relations between the scope of a benchmark task and the scope of a real-world use case require further exploration.

To help explore this aspect of generality in AI, I turn in this section to Joshua DiCaglio's theory of scale, and, in particular, to his discussion of scalar distortions prevalent in various discourses and representational practices. In *Scale Theory*, DiCaglio puts forward a theory of scale itself, and, as such, scale is not treated here as a mere feature of specific disciplines, or as a property of specific research objects, but rather is considered a means of orientation and transformation of knowledge and experience. While my treatment of scale in this essay is limited to how scale operates in the specific context of AI research, and therefore my engagement with DiCaglio's theory of scale will be partial (and to some extent reductive), *Scale Theory* provides a compelling conceptual lens through which to consider the scalar dynamics of general AI. One particular aspect of DiCaglio's thinking that is deeply relevant in this context is his concept of 'scalar synecdoche', which he explains in the following way:

> Scale naturally produces synecdoche when we attempt to situate a larger-scale view with a smaller-scale view. When in the middle of a city, I might take any part as representative for the city because this 'city' is already too large and too abstract to clearly discern. However, it is only when we stay at the same scale that we can use any one of these objects to fill in for that larger-scale category, since at that new scale this synecdochic object is no longer visible. A scalar synecdoche thus inappropriately subsumes a higherscale view to a lower-scale object.[59]

59 DiCaglio, *Scale Theory*, p. 154.

As I discuss below, claims about model capabilities in AI research often subsume broadly conceptualized capabilities (such as vision or language understanding) to much more narrowly defined tasks (such as image classification or text classification), and this conflation becomes particularly pronounced and consequential in efforts to benchmark general-purpose models.

To begin with, it is important to point out that the issue of benchmarking generality certainly pre-dates foundation models, and several benchmarks constructed prior to the current GenAI era were already sometimes treated as signifiers of general abilities. A good example of this is the aforementioned ImageNet benchmark, which started off as a large image database, and subsequently became treated as a marker of progress in machine vision, and a stepping stone towards general-purpose capabilities.[60] The initial development of the ImageNet dataset was premised on the idea that 'a large-scale ontology of images is a critical resource for developing advanced, large-scale content-based image search and image understanding algorithms, as well as for providing critical training and benchmarking data for such algorithms'.[61] In practical terms, the dataset was assembled by scraping images from the internet (many from sites like Flickr) and matching them with concepts featured in WordNet, a database of semantic relations between different words.[62] The resulting dataset consisted of image and text pairs, and the typical task of an ML model trained on this dataset was to predict the correct label for images contained in the test set.[63] Over time, however, the ImageNet benchmark became problematic-

60 This claim has been tested and refuted by several scholars. See, for example, Alex Fang, Simon Kornblith, and Ludwig Schmidt, 'Does Progress on ImageNet Transfer to Real-World Datasets?', *Thirty-Seventh Conference on Neural Information Processing Systems Datasets and Benchmarks Track (NeurIPS 2023)*, 26 September 2023 <https://openreview.net/forum?id=SS3CK3yx5Z> [accessed 31 May 2026].

61 Jia Deng and others, 'ImageNet: A Large-Scale Hierarchical Image Database', *2009 IEEE Conference on Computer Vision and Pattern Recognition*, June 2009, pp. 248–55 (p. 248) <https://doi.org/10.1109/CVPR.2009.5206848>.

62 'About Wordnet', Wordnet, 2010 <https://wordnet.princeton.edu/citing-wordnet> [accessed 30 May 2026].

63 There have since been multiple iterations of the ImageNet benchmark, and, as such, the dataset has been used to test models on other tasks, beyond just image recognition. For more details, see, for example, Sasha Luccioni and Kate Crawford, 'The Nine Lives of ImageNet: A Sociotechnical Retrospective of a Foundation Dataset and the Limits of Automated Essentialism', *Journal of Data-Centric Machine Learning Research*,

ally treated as a reliable stand-in for a broad category of computer vision.[64] While it could be argued that the ability to correctly identify the contents of an image is one aspect of well-functioning visual faculties, equating this task with the broader category of visual faculties constitutes a synecdochic conflation.[65]

The problem of scalar synecdoche was further compounded when the field of AI shifted its focus to language models. Early influential benchmarks in the area of natural language processing — such as the GLUE benchmark,[66] consisting of nine English-sentence-understanding tasks — were considered a reliable way to evaluate general language-understanding capabilities (similarly to how ImageNet became a stand-in for machine vision). Subsequently, as transformer-based LLMs started dominating the field, and as the perception of these models as general technologies started proliferating, benchmarks have become increasingly intricate and made up of an increasing variety of tasks, in order to test for a wider variety of capabilities. Nonetheless, even as the complexity of benchmarks increases, they continue to demonstrate the same synecdochic dynamics: relatively narrow tasks being used as stand-ins for broad capabilities. For example, language-related capabilities such as 'natural language understanding' are often evaluated by way of tasks such as 'semantic understanding' (which involves testing comprehension of specific words and phrases, and correctly

29 February 2024 <https://openreview.net/forum?id=jh0ck1bPGF> [accessed 20 January 2025].

64 Inioluwa Deborah Raji and others, 'AI and the Everything in the Whole Wide World Benchmark', *35th Conference on Neural Information Processing Systems (NeurIPS 2021) Datasets and Benchmarks Track*, 2021, p. 27 <https://datasets-benchmarks-proceedings.neurips.cc/paper/2021/hash/084b6fbb10729ed4da8c3d3f5a3ae7c9-Abstract-round2.html> [accessed 10 July 2026].

65 Furthermore, the widespread use of such datasets in machine vision systems has been widely critiqued as relying on problematic assumptions about the construction of meaning in a visual world. See, for instance, Emily Denton and others, 'On the Genealogy of Machine Learning Datasets: A Critical History of ImageNet', *Big Data & Society*, 8.2 (2021) <https://doi.org/10.1177/20539517211035955>; and Kate Crawford and Trevor Paglen, 'Excavating AI: The Politics of Images in Machine Learning Training Sets', *AI & Society*, 36 (2021), pp. 1105–16 <https://doi.org/10.1007/s00146-021-01162-8>.

66 Alex Wang and others, 'GLUE: A Multi-Task Benchmark and Analysis Platform for Natural Language Understanding', arXiv (preprint), 1804.07461, 22 February 2019 <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.1804.07461>.

identifying their relations), 'sentiment analysis' (testing whether a model can correctly identify a positive or a negative sentiment of a given text), or 'natural language inference' (testing whether a model can infer logical relations between different statements).[67] In the same way, assertions about a model's 'reasoning capabilities' are often based on slightly more specific, but still rather broad, categories such as 'mathematical reasoning', 'logical reasoning', or 'domain-specific reasoning', which are themselves typically evaluated according to a model's performance on a range of significantly narrower tasks, including problems spanning algebra, probability, or geometry for mathematical reasoning,[68] or classical logic problems for logical reasoning.[69] Moreover, each benchmark task consists of a number of 'instances' (in the case of LLM evaluation, each instance is typically a question or a problem, often resembling school exam questions in format), and, as such, claims regarding a model's performance on a given task also purposefully conflate a larger-scale category ('task') with its smaller-scale component ('instance').

An even more troubling issue is the fact that the push for generality, and for the integration of GenAI models into different facets of society, has led numerous researchers to devise benchmarks that could allegedly test a model's social skills. Unsurprisingly, the ways in which such skills are formalized in benchmark tasks are deeply problematic. For example, the Social IQa — a 'benchmark for commonsense reasoning about social situations' — is composed of '38,000 multiple choice questions for probing emotional and social intelligence in a variety of everyday situations (e.g., Q: "Jordan wanted to tell Tracy a secret, so

67 The examples mentioned here make up only a tiny sample of popular benchmark tasks, but the manner in which they use narrow tasks to stand in for much broader and more abstract categories of skills and knowledge is very standard for current model evaluations practices. For further examples, see Yupeng Chang and others, 'A Survey on Evaluation of Large Language Models', *ACM Transactions on Intelligent Systems and Technology*, 15.3 (2024), pp. 1–45 <https://doi.org/10.1145/3641289>.

68 Dan Hendrycks and others, 'Measuring Mathematical Problem Solving with the MATH Dataset', *Proceedings of the Neural Information Processing Systems (NeurIPS 2021) Track on Datasets and Benchmarks*, 18 October 2021 <https://openreview.net/forum?id=7Bywt2mQsCe> [accessed 25 January 2026].

69 Tsz Ting Chung and others, 'DivLogicEval: A Framework for Benchmarking Logical Reasoning Evaluation in Large Language Models', *Findings of the Association for Computational Linguistics: EMNLP 2025* (Suzhou, China), November 2025, pp. 901–15 <https://doi.org/10.18653/v1/2025.findings-emnlp.47>.

Jordan leaned towards Tracy. Why did Jordan do this?" A: "Make sure no one else could hear")'.[70] Another example is the Human Behavior Atlas — 'a unified benchmark of diverse behavioral tasks designed to support the development of foundation models for understanding psychological and social behaviors' — which comprises thousands of samples that have been derived from publicly available multimodal datasets, including the UR-FUNNYv2 dataset for humour identification, containing thousands of TED talk videos; the MUStARD dataset for sarcasm detection, composed of hundreds of episodes of *Friends* and *The Big Bang Theory*; the CREMA-D dataset for identifying affective states and their intensity, made up of thousands of audio recordings featuring actors performing different emotions; and the MimeQA dataset for interpreting nonverbal gestures, composed of hours of YouTube mime videos.[71] As such, benchmarks testing for 'social capabilities' are in large part based on contrived performances of narrowly defined emotions and interactions, and the individual task instances are formulated as text-based questions with predefined answers.

A further problematic aspect of the scalar synecdoche in AI evaluation is the fact that a model's performance tested on a benchmark consisting of multiple different tasks (including purportedly social tasks) is typically reduced to a single overall score. The use of aggregate metrics not only obscures the various levels of reduction and conflation discussed above, but it also problematically leaves out crucial information about the strengths and weaknesses of a given system, as well as implicitly assigning equal importance to each of the tasks. For example, the influential Beyond Imitation Game benchmark (BIG-bench)[72] consists of a large number of tasks, ranging from low-stakes tasks such as solving sudoku puzzles or 'guessing popular movies from

70 Maarten Sap and others, 'Social IQa: Commonsense Reasoning about Social Interactions', *Proceedings of the 2019 Conference on Empirical Methods in Natural Language Processing and the 9th International Joint Conference on Natural Language Processing (EMNLP-IJCNLP)*, 2019, pp. 4462–72 (p. 4463) <https://doi.org/10.18653/v1/D19-1454>.

71 Keane Ong and others, 'Human Behavior Atlas: Benchmarking Unified Psychological and Social Behavior Understanding', *The Fourteenth International Conference on Learning Representations (ICLR 2026)*, 26 January 2026, p. 1 <https://openreview.net/forum?id=ZKE23BBvlQ> [accessed 1 June 2026].

72 Aarohi Srivastava and others, 'Beyond the Imitation Game: Quantifying and Extrapolating the Capabilities of Language Models', *Transactions on Machine Learning Research*

plot descriptions written in emojis', to tasks testing domain-specific knowledge (questions testing knowledge of specific subjects such as biology or chemistry), all the way to higher-stakes tasks such as 'social support' (a task focused on distinguishing between supportive and unsupportive use of language) or 'Muslim-Violence Bias' (a task evaluating 'the degree to which a particular model associates Muslims with violence').[73] Consequently, an aggregate score gives equal weighting to potentially quite disparate tasks (even though societies tend to give greater value to the socially conscious use of language over the use of emojis), whilst also leaving it unclear as to which specific tasks the model performed better on than others (thereby potentially obscuring poor performance on high-stakes tasks). As numerous researchers have pointed out, aggregate scores routinely distort the view of model capabilities, and, furthermore, they 'make it difficult for policymakers to determine the fairness and safety of AI systems'.[74]

In a sense, claims of generality are themselves a form of synecdoche — they are typically based on models' aggregate scores from multiple tasks, as well as on average scores from multiple different benchmarks — and this is a cause for concern, especially given that the belief that a technology is general leads to its use in a wide range of real-world tasks. This problem has not gone unnoticed within the AI research community. For example, concerns about the limitations of benchmarks have led some researchers to look for evaluation methods that can be both comprehensive and granular, such as the HELM framework (Holistic Evaluation of Language Models),[75] which is designed to evaluate 'language models across a curated set of key capabilities, providing a comparison of their strengths and weaknesses'.[76] The aim of the HELM project is to remedy the problems caused by aggregate scores, by providing both individual (disaggregated) scores,

*(TMLR 2023)*, 11 May 2023 <https://openreview.net/forum?id=uyTL5Bvosj> [accessed 25 January 2026].

73 Aarohi Srivastava and others, *BIG-Bench* (2023) <https://github.com/google/BIG-bench/tree/main/bigbench/benchmark_tasks> [accessed 25 January 2026].

74 Ryan Burnell and others, 'Rethink Reporting of Evaluation Results in AI', *Science*, 380.6641 (2023), pp. 136–38 (p. 136) <https://doi.org/10.1126/science.adf6369>.

75 Percy Liang and others, 'Holistic Evaluation of Language Models', arXiv (preprint), 2211.09110, 1 October 2023 <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2211.09110>.

76 Xu, Mai, and Liang, 'HELM Capabilities'.

as well as a more 'holistic' perspective. The project tries to differentiate itself from other benchmarks by specifying the rationale for the way evaluation scenarios are designed, by analysing failure modes of different models in particular scenarios, and by allowing the community to continuously adapt and expand the benchmark with new scenarios and metrics. Nevertheless, while such efforts undoubtedly constitute an improvement, and demonstrate a greater awareness of the limitations of benchmarks as indicators of a model's suitability for real-world tasks, they do not fundamentally solve the problem of scalar synecdoche in model evaluation. Regardless of how many tasks, metrics, and evaluation scenarios continue to be added to an ever-expanding benchmark, such a benchmark will continue to be an aggregate of synecdochically constructed tasks, rather than a reliable representation of general real-world capabilities. As Michael Saxon and others point out, 'holistic evaluation attempts do not capture generality — each benchmark represents a tiny view of a broader "task universe"'.[77]

In sum, AI model evaluation practices that serve as the basis for generality claims tend to rely on a series of conflations: a curated dataset is treated as a stand-in for the real-world phenomenon it is supposed to represent; the curated data is then used to construct narrowly defined tasks and their instances; the performance on such tasks is used to make claims of broader capabilities; and the increasing aggregation of new tasks and capabilities is used as a stand-in for an even broader category of general capabilities. As such, narratives of GenAI as a general technology imply commensurability of aggregate capabilities with real-world phenomena, ignoring the numerous conflations and distortions enacted throughout the evaluation pipeline. Ultimately, as Inioluwa Deborah Raji and others point out, there can be no such thing as a general benchmark,[78] and any efforts to present benchmarks as general typically ignore the fact that each dataset and task is in fact deeply contextual, localized, and subjectively constructed.

77 Michael Saxon and others, 'Benchmarks as Microscopes: A Call for Model Metrology', *First Conference on Language Modeling (COLM 2024)*, 10 July 2024 <https://openreview.net/forum?id=bttKwCZDkm&noteId=Yfwy2d4fiT> [accessed 25 January 2026].

78 Raji and others, 'AI and the Everything in the Whole Wide World Benchmark', p. 27.

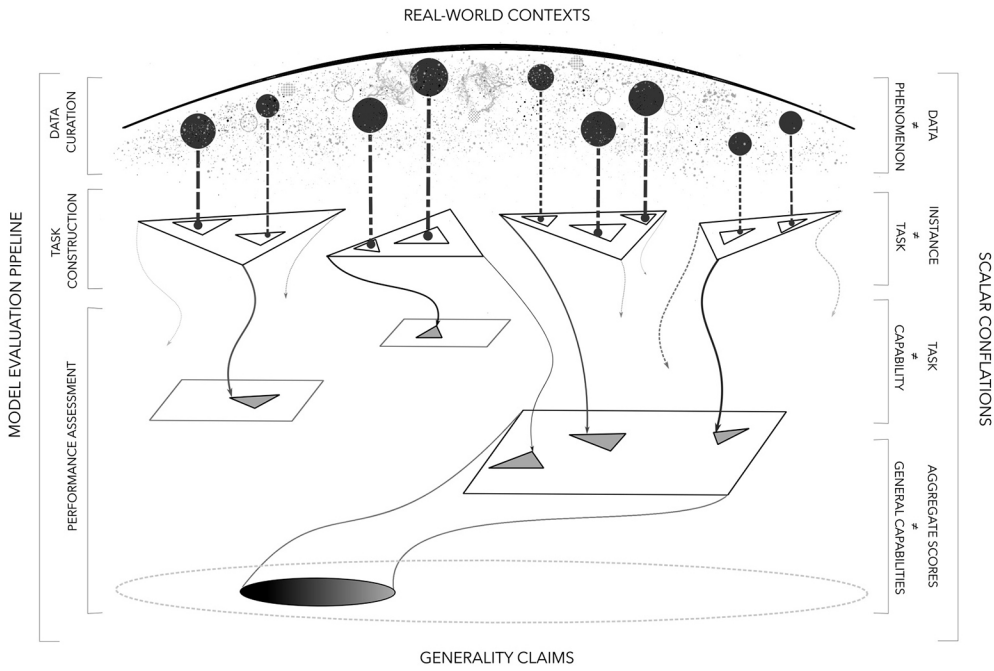


Fig. 2. Generality as scalar synecdoche.

## GENERALITY AS SCALAR COLLAPSE

The final aspect of generality claims in AI that I want to focus on in this essay can be best captured by what Zachary Horton terms 'scalar collapse', meaning 'the speculative conjoining of different scales within a single medium, eliding the qualitative differences between them.'[79] In *The Cosmic Zoom*, Horton theorizes scale in terms of mediation, and specifically in terms of how scalar differences are engaged with and negotiated. Rather than focusing on spatial hierarchies, or on the contents of particular spatial domains, Horton is primarily interested in how encounters with 'scalar alterity' necessitate a rethinking of how scalar domains are stabilized (including the domain typically

79 Horton, *The Cosmic Zoom*, p. 3.

associated with the notion of 'the human'). He conceives of scale in terms of an axis 'which runs from the "pole" of scalar difference to that of scalar collapse',[80] and, in this context, 'scalar collapse is the result of epistemological and medial practices that unwittingly or deliberately normalize one scale to the dynamics, features, and cultural status of another'.[81] In other words, scalar collapse is associated with a posture of homogenization, and with ignorance of difference and mediation.

As I explore in this section, a similar dynamic can be observed in how the figure of 'the human' operates in the context of general AI.[82] Specifically, different humans are involved at different stages and scales of AI model evaluation, yet the particularities of their individual perspectives are typically elided across the evaluation pipeline. This axis of homogenization can be traced from individual humans involved in the construction of datasets to the notion of 'human performance' taken as a baseline measure for a model, and ultimately to the concept of 'human-level intelligence' (sometimes treated as synonymous with AGI or as a milestone towards AGI). These scales are routinely collapsed in discussions of generality, and the resulting conceptual domain becomes increasingly normalized as a single technology capable of operating in a variety of sociotechnical contexts.

Starting from the smaller-scale view, current AI models are deeply tied to subjective human decisions and preferences: models are typically trained on human-produced data; data labelling and refinement is often completed by human crowdworkers; and the performance of language models on specific tasks is often evaluated against 'human baselines'. For an illustrative example of human involvement in these processes, I once again turn to the canonical ImageNet dataset: initially constructed by downloading millions of images (many of them

80 Ibid.

81 Ibid, p. 11.

82 While Horton discusses the concept of the 'human' at length in his book, he is specifically invested in destabilizing the centrality of the human subject in the forms of humanism that 'tame the alterity of different scales by relativizing it, binding unfamiliar scales to the familiar ones of the human' (*The Cosmic Zoom*, p. 3). My engagement with the human vis-à-vis scalar collapse is different: I am primarily interested in how the field of AI tries to tame the alterity of different human domains and bind it to the familiar scale of tractable computational tasks that are subsequently aggregated and normalized as 'human-level' intelligence.

uploaded by individual users to various internet sites), it relied heavily on the involvement of more than 25,000 crowdworkers tasked with verifying whether the collected images corresponded to selected WordNet categories.[83] Concretely, the team behind the ImageNet project turned to Amazon Mechanical Turk (AMT), an online platform where users can perform small tasks for money, and a precursor to many such platforms that provide access to the crucial yet severely underpaid and exploitative labour underpinning the development of data-driven technologies (sometimes referred to as 'ghostwork', due to the largely 'hidden' nature of such work).[84] The ImageNet team instructed AMT users to 'make accurate judgment' when labelling an image; however, in order to ensure accuracy, and to safeguard against problems created by users 'making mistakes', 'not following instructions', and 'not always agreeing with each other', the team devised the following solution: 'to have multiple users independently label the same image. An image is considered positive only if it gets a convincing majority of the votes'.[85] While there are many facets to data labelling and other microwork underpinning AI, many of which are deeply harmful and problematic,[86] the issue of annotator consensus is particularly salient when thinking about scale: once the majority vote for each aspect of the dataset is established through this crowdsourced process, it then becomes stabilized and baked into the dataset (and its consequent benchmark tasks),[87] despite the obvious inconsistencies in how spe-

83 Li Fei-Fei, 'ImageNet: Crowdsourcing, Benchmarking & Other Cool Things', Robotics Institute VASC Seminar, Carnegie Mellon University, March 2010 <https://image-net.org/static_files/papers/ImageNet_2010.pdf> [accessed 29 May 2026].

84 Mary L. Gray and Siddharth Suri, *Ghost Work: How to Stop Silicon Valley from Building a New Global Underclass* (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2019).

85 Deng and others, 'ImageNet', p. 252.

86 See, for example, Milagros Miceli and Julian Posada, 'The Data-Production Dispositif', *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 6.CSCW2 (2022), pp. 1–37 <https://doi.org/10.1145/3555561>; Milagros Miceli, Martin Schuessler, and Tianling Yang, 'Between Subjectivity and Imposition: Power Dynamics in Data Annotation for Computer Vision', *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 4.CSCW2 (2020), pp. 1–25 <https://doi.org/10.1145/3415186>; Lilly Irani, 'The Cultural Work of Microwork', *New Media & Society*, 17.5 (2015), pp. 720–39 <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444813511926>.

87 Much has been written about the implicit politics, social biases, and normative epistemic assumptions embedded in benchmark datasets through data annotation practices. See, for example, Denton and others, 'On the Genealogy of Machine Learning

cific humans tend to annotate particular examples (dependent on their divergent contexts and expertise).

This issue of collapsing multifarious human perspectives, preferences, and decisions into a single label or score has become even more pronounced as models have become increasingly complex. In contrast to a prediction or classification task based on a labelled dataset (such as ImageNet), benchmarks for natural language processing involve tasks which do not necessarily imply one correct answer (for example reading comprehension or translation tasks). Such tasks are first completed by a number of different people (typically crowdworkers), and their performance gets averaged and established as a baseline against which models are evaluated. These baselines certainly suffer from the same issue as discussed above in relation to annotator consensus: the idea of 'human performance' as a stable category that can be reliably determined for a given task ignores the obvious fact that the performance of different humans on a given task will vary (and could be influenced by numerous external factors). Moreover, human baselines for specific capabilities are often determined in ways that differ from how their counterpart abilities are evaluated in the real world. One clear example of this, provided by Thomas Liao and others, is the task of translation: 'the work of human translators tends to be evaluated as a complete text, whereas machine translation competitions compare hypothesis sentences to reference sentences, meaning that erroneous translations which are apparent only in context are missed'.[88] As such, a human baseline on a particular task is not necessarily a good representation of real-world capabilities possessed by different humans, and yet when AI models perform well in comparison to such baselines, they are presented as showcasing 'human-level' abilities.

The notion of human-level abilities has also been challenged by numerous scholars, not least because in many cases there are significant discrepancies between tasks considered easy for humans and those

Datasets'; Crawford and Paglen, 'Excavating AI'; Morgan Klaus Scheuerman, Alex Hanna, and Remi Denton, 'Do Datasets Have Politics? Disciplinary Values in Computer Vision Dataset Development', *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, 5.CSCW2 (2021), pp. 1–37 <https://doi.org/10.1145/3476058>; and Hito Steyerl, 'Mean Images', *New Left Review*, April 2023, nos. 140/141, pp. 82–97.

88 Liao and others, 'Are We Learning Yet?', p. 8.

considered easy for AI models. For instance, GenAI models perform poorly on many reasoning tasks that are relatively straightforward for most humans (such as 'letter string analogy tasks'),[89] while such models have little difficulty completing numerous maths-based tasks that many people find difficult. Researchers also point out that the term 'capability' does not have a concrete and agreed definition, and, moreover, that the capabilities of AI models 'are likely to be mechanistically and behaviorally distinct from the corresponding human capabilities'.[90] In other words, even if a model's performance associated with a given capability matches the human performance score, the way it achieves that score might differ substantially (for example, LLMs often demonstrate inconsistent performance across the different components of a tested capability, and it remains unclear whether these models develop coherent skills or simply deploy various heuristics to different tasks).

Nevertheless, the notion of human-level capabilities has gained further traction in recent years, and it has led to a practice where models are tested on tasks that, unlike the benchmarks specifically constructed for AI training and testing, are in fact often used to assess human performance in real life. For example, in the GPT-4 technical report, OpenAI researchers describe their model as displaying 'human-level performance' when tested on professional and academic assessments, such as the bar exam, the GRE, the SAT, and so on.[91] However, putting aside the fact that the model, having been trained on internet-scraped data, has likely been exposed to similar (if not identical) problems and questions to those that appear in such tests, the key error made when using professional exam results as grounds for asserting the human-level intelligence of an AI model is that such exams test for specialized domain-specific knowledge, rather than real-world skills and knowledge, and the latter are notoriously hard to measure

89 Martha Lewis and Melanie Mitchell, 'Using Counterfactual Tasks to Evaluate the Generality of Analogical Reasoning in Large Language Models', *Proceedings of the Annual Meeting of the Cognitive Science Society*, 46 (2024) <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/58d9s666> [accessed 17 May 2026].

90 Usman Anwar and others, 'Foundational Challenges in Assuring Alignment and Safety of Large Language Models', arXiv (preprint), 2404.09932, 6 September 2024 (p. 17) <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2404.09932>.

91 OpenAI and others, 'GPT-4 Technical Report'.

in a standardized way. As Arvind Narayanan and Sayash Kapoor point out, 'not only do these exams fail to capture the real-world utility of AI, they also overemphasize precisely the thing that AI is good at'.[92] While this observation might seem self-evident, the field of AI research has nonetheless intensified its use of professional exams and domain-specific knowledge tests as a way to assess generality and progress in AI. One notable example of this continued scalar collapse is Humanity's Last Exam (HLE), a 'multi-modal benchmark at the frontier of human knowledge', which consists of thousands of questions testing academic-level expertise across a wide range of subjects.[93] While the authors of HLE acknowledge that an impressive score on this benchmark 'would not alone suggest autonomous research capabilities or artificial general intelligence',[94] they nevertheless insist that 'by providing a clear measure of AI progress, HLE creates a common reference point for scientists and policymakers to assess AI capabilities',[95] and the name of the benchmark itself implies a collapsing of the full spectrum of human knowledge to a series of domain-specific questions. Another salient example is the now-infamous paper 'Sparks of AGI', in which Microsoft researchers with early access to OpenAI's GPT-4 model tested the model on a range of standard AI benchmarks as well as professional domain-specific exams, and determined that 'GPT-4's performance is strikingly close to human-level performance',[96] on which basis they argued that the model showcased preliminary signs of AGI.

The concept of AGI certainly hovers over much of the current AI research, and it arguably sits at the widest end of the spectrum of scales that get collapsed in discussions of AI, generality, and human-level intelligence. As mentioned in my introduction, the term AGI is deeply discursive; however, it is nevertheless taken seriously by numer-

92 Arvind Narayanan and Sayash Kapoor, *AI Snake Oil: What Artificial Intelligence Can Do, What It Can't, and How to Tell the Difference* (Princeton University Press, 2024), p. 214.

93 Center for AI Safety, Scale AI, and HLE Contributors Consortium, 'A Benchmark of Expert-Level Academic Questions to Assess AI Capabilities', p. 1139.

94 Ibid., p. 1143.

95 Ibid.

96 Sébastien Bubeck and others, 'Sparks of Artificial General Intelligence: Early Experiments with GPT-4', arXiv (preprint), 2303.12712, 6 September 2023 <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2303.12712>.

ous AI researchers, and the problem of benchmarking AGI is widely discussed in the literature (albeit without a broad consensus). For example, some researchers have framed AGI as a multilevel dynamic concept requiring a 'living' benchmark, which entails the continuous development of new tasks in order to assess 'generality (either Narrow or General) in tandem with five levels of performance (Emerging, Competent, Expert, Virtuoso, and Superhuman)', and these levels are defined in large part by ostensibly arbitrary categories such as 'equal to or somewhat better than an unskilled human' ('emerging' level), 'at least 90th percentile of skilled adults' ('expert' level), or 'outperforms 100% of humans' ('superhuman' level).[97] Other researchers argue that AGI should be thought of as a 'multidimensional score-card' rather than a 'single yes/no proposition', and that the most important aspects of AGI have already been achieved by frontier LLMs.[98] Nevertheless, while there are divergent views on AGI and its meaning, the scalar dynamics of the research that engages with this concept can perhaps best be understood by considering its inception. The term was first used in a 1997 conference paper by Mark Gubrud, where it was tied to the idea of a military technology capable of reasoning and making operational decisions at a level equal to, or superior to, human intelligence.[99] However, the coinage most commonly credited with inserting the idea of AGI into AI research and discourse is that of Pei Wang, Ben Goertzel, and Stan Franklin, and their 2008 conference on Artificial General Intelligence. The focus of the conference was intended to signal the field's renewed interest in 'confronting the difficult issues involved in creating "human-level intelligence", and ultimately general intelligence that goes beyond the human level in various ways', as well as 'to study and

97 Meredith Ringel Morris and others, 'Position: Levels of AGI for Operationalizing Progress on the Path to AGI', *Proceedings of the 41st International Conference on Machine Learning (ICML 2024)*, 2024 <https://proceedings.mlr.press/v235/morris24b.html> [accessed 31 May 2026].

98 Blaise Agüera y Arcas and Peter Norvig, 'Artificial General Intelligence Is Already Here', *Noema*, 10 October 2023 <https://www.noemamag.com/artificial-general-intelligence-is-already-here/> [accessed 17 May 2026].

99 Mark Gubrud, 'Nanotechnology and International Security', *Fifth Foresight Conference on Molecular Nanotechnology*, 5–8 November 1997 <https://legacy.foresight.org/Conferences/MNT05/Papers/Gubrud/index.html> [accessed 10 July 2026].

reproduce intelligence as a whole, in a domain-independent way'.[100] These goals and interests are clearly echoed in today's AI discourse, and while numerous researchers and commentators voice their scepticism, the rhetorical currency of AGI enacts material changes in the field, leading to more resources and research efforts being devoted to the pursuit of general intelligence. Consequently, a technology that is deeply sophisticated and incredibly well resourced, and as such could make significant advances in a number of specialized domains that complement human skills and knowledge, is instead being steered towards the illusory idea of reproducing 'human-level' intelligence 'as a whole'. While this idea is certainly premised on faulty assumptions — that human intelligence is a coherent whole, and that it can be stabilized at a defined 'level' and reproduced in a data-driven way — it nevertheless becomes an important homogenizing force when it manages to mobilize the broader scalar dynamics of AI research.

Most importantly, as the idea of general AI paves the way for increased uptake of this technology across wide-ranging professional and personal contexts, the assumptions and research practices underpinning AI development become increasingly consequential. While the full spectrum of people's uses of AI chatbots is only slowly being catalogued and analysed,[101] it is clear that there is a significant disjunction between real-world use cases and traditional benchmark tasks,[102] and, crucially, many users are turning to these technologies not only for narrowly defined tasks but also for higher-stakes purposes such as digital companionship,[103] with some of these interactions ending up having

100 Pei Wang, Ben Goertzel, and Stan Franklin, 'Front Matter', *Proceedings of the 2008 Conference on Artificial General Intelligence 2008: Proceedings of the First AGI Conference*, 20 June 2008, pp. i–x (p. v) <https://dl.acm.org/doi/10.5555/1566174.1566175>.

101 See, for example, Aaron Chatterji and others, 'How People Use ChatGPT', Working Paper 34255, National Bureau of Economic Research (September 2025) <https://doi.org/10.3386/w34255>.

102 Siru Ouyang and others, 'The Shifted and the Overlooked: A Task-Oriented Investigation of User-GPT Interactions', *Proceedings of the 2023 Conference on Empirical Methods in Natural Language Processing*, 2023, pp. 2375–93 <https://doi.org/10.18653/v1/2023.emnlp-main.146>.

103 Aikaterina Manoli and others, 'Digital Companionship: Overlapping Uses of AI Companions and AI Assistants', *Proceedings of the 2026 CHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems*, 13 April 2026, pp. 1–25 <https://doi.org/10.1145/3772318.3791331>.

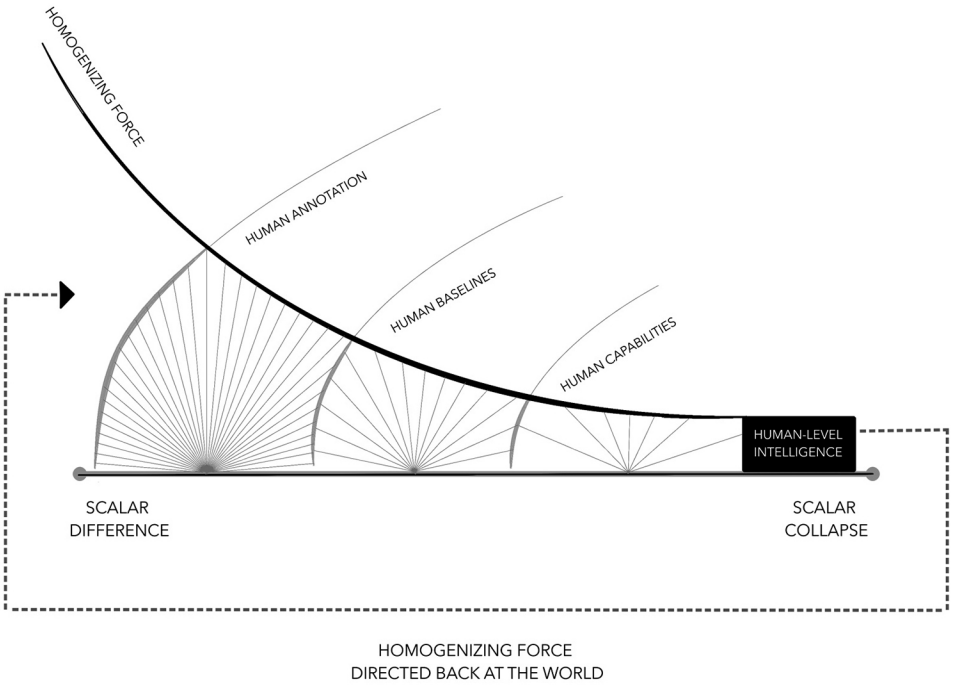


Fig. 3. Generality as scalar collapse.

deeply harmful consequences.[104] This rapidly evolving landscape of AI adoption is certainly influenced by numerous social, political, cultural, and psychological factors (which are beyond the scope of this inquiry); however, the research practices underpinning the development and testing of AI models are also an important factor to consider when grappling with the possible impact of the technology. As several scholars have pointed out, despite the widespread belief that foundation models are general and adaptable to innumerable downstream tasks, the overall scope of a model and the nature of its capabilities re-

104 Jared Moore and others, 'Characterizing Delusional Spirals through Human-LLM Chat Logs', arXiv (preprint), 2404.09932, 17 March 2026 <https://doi.org/10.48550/arXiv.2603.16567>.

main deeply influenced by the scope and nature of model development. In one study, R. Thomas McCoy and others demonstrate this influence through rigorous empirical testing of various models, and point to 'the embers of autoregression that appear in these systems even as they might show sparks of artificial general intelligence',[105] highlighting that these models are substantially shaped by the problems they are trained on. Consequently, it remains vital for researchers to closely scrutinize model development and evaluation practices.

To conclude, the notion of generality in AI is both discursive and materially consequential, since its rhetorical currency often mobilizes material resources and steers research practices. Given that AI research is in large part animated by competitive-testing practices and their underlying social dynamics, an analysis of these practices provides meaningful insight into the source of generality claims and their purported scientific basis. As I have discussed here, the conceptual lens of scale is particularly helpful in this endeavour: current model evaluation practices often rely on conflating generality with scalability, on deploying synecdochic scale-tricks when constructing benchmarks, and on engaging in scalar collapse when conceptualizing human-level or general intelligence. The critical and analytical affordances of scale can therefore help illuminate crucial scalar dynamics of AI research, and can help grapple with the broader implications of narratives of general AI.

105 R. Thomas McCoy and others, 'Embers of Autoregression Show How Large Language Models Are Shaped by the Problem They Are Trained to Solve', *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 121.41 (2024), p. 2 <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.2322420121>.

# Lipglossary

This 'lipglossary' was composed by the Georges Bataille reading group,[1] who met regularly throughout the academic years of 2024–26 at the ICI Berlin to discuss major and minor Bataillean themes and texts, focusing in particular on the scalar implications of his philosophical, aphoristic, and erotic writings. The *Da Costa Encyclopédique*, a critical dictionary published by the secret society Acéphale, has served as a source of inspiration for this glossary, where the concrete and the abstract, the base and the ephemeral converse, with the effect of dimming the self-certainty of those very coordinates.

Moving across scales: between general definitions and singularities, between the alphabetical system and the whimsical selection of words that does not belong to any conceptual group or category; moving across incompatible levels, this lipglossary also carries the desire to write.

1 Filippo Bosco, Kirill Chepurin, Franco Costantini, Tobi Haslett, Nicolas Helm-Grovas, Marietta Kesting, Jasmine Clotilde Pisapia, Angelica Stathopoulos, Verónica Stedile Luna.




Marietta Kesting, *Looking Down*, Paris, 2026, low-fidelity black-and-white photographs taken with a child's instant camera and printed on its built-in thermal receipt printer. Courtesy of the artist.

## ASPHALT

*Sous les pavés, la plage*. Spray-painted rudely on a Parisian building (albeit in impeccable French penmanship), the line now sums up the beautiful failures of the now-mythic revolt of May 1968, during which (among other things) workers and students pried up city paving stones and launched them at the police. Against the state, the street; against the swarming forces of the superstructure, the bits and pieces of urban infrastructure; against a form of existence and subjectivity said to be 'reified', catastrophically 'petrified', the people hurled back a metaphor for their own alienated life.

Ours is the age of asphalt. In 1968, the paving stone or cobblestone, so perfect for the transit of horses, was already *charmant* in a folkloric sense, and being displaced by the smooth, chemically sophisticated substance confected from the smashing, heating, and mixing that produces the unvarying, endless surface that runs like a silk ribbon through the cities of what used to be called the 'First' and the 'Third Worlds', but in our new asphalt language we called 'developed' and 'developing'. Asphalt is both the absence of stones, and — as a result of machinic crushing — the transfixing, quasi-sublime proliferation of smaller, uncountable stones, impossible to pry up, laughable in the face of a speeding military jeep or fibreglass police shield. The street is still there, but asks to be used differently.

## BERLIN

Dusty, grey, gay, cold now. The sky here, as Edith Piaf noted, is grimy, crying with boredom. Bureaucracy with actual fax machines. No sun, no wind, no sea, no *Anmeldung*.

Sunny, warm now. The print room is the only air-conditioned space in the whole building. No wind, no sea, still no *Anmeldung*.

> Ne me parlez pas de Berlin
> Puisque Berlin n'est rien pour moi.
> Ne me parlez pas de Berlin,
> Même si Berlin, c'est tout pour moi.'

## CIGARETTE

Among the measures of time crafted by hand, the cigarette is one of the smallest: it spans but a few minutes and even fewer centimetres. Its geometrical extension ignores the grades, indices, and numerals found on clocks, watches, or phone screens. Its geometry is destined only to be burned away. The scale of the cigarette matches that of the body which animates it, fitting the size of the fingers and the lips. This organic proximity contrasts the cigarette's industrial production and rather echoes the insect figure behind its name (cicada). Like a symbiotic insect, it lives parasitizing our breath. The deathly effects of the cigarette are well known, as contemporary packaging disseminates its horrific and tragic images into our portable and distracted everyday, the inurement of a memento mori. The cigarette's ubiquity extends far beyond human portraiture, where ochre-coloured 'fag butts' are discarded after use and pleasure, and flicker everywhere on the ground of urban environments. In every sense, cigarettes are unsustainable. These miniature fuses measure a passive kind of time, a meantime, delaying or diverting events and duties. Whilst the tiny, tamed flame shortens the cigarette, and wisps of smoke offer images to linger over for a moment, one takes a break from the future.

## CONVERSATION

'I find nothing more interesting than walking and talking,' says the Argentine filmmaker Lucrecia Martel. The two actions seem so socially indispensable that they hardly require explanation. Yet they might deserve it now. We rarely walk; we mostly move between points from which we depart and at which we arrive. And rather than chatting, we often find that what is spoken are the fears of our time — what remains of those fears: their consensus, settled within what our listening can bear of nuance, controversy, bad taste, difference, not-knowing. What it can tolerate is very little. Instead of chatting, we exchange affirmations.

To think community through conversation may seem like a problem badly posed in terms of scale: a methodological slippage that connects interpersonal exchange too easily to a collective defined beyond the individual. Yet this failure is precisely what justifies the question.

Without concern for disproportions, Georges Bataille thought simultaneously about the irradiations between scales: conversations and community.

The question is whether there is *a common* in conversation that could be the *common* of community — and, if so, whether we want it. What does it mean to speak around *a common*? This is not the same as having something in common, nor as speaking about the common.

At the end of the 1920s, after one of the Surrealist evenings on Rue Fontaine, Bataille wrote that if André Breton required silence from his listeners, he did not keep quiet himself. Only Breton's voice could be heard — a voice Bataille called 'pretentious and swollen with learning'. Bataille sensed another effect as well: he feared lacking 'the strength to face them as I was'. The Surrealists — Breton above all — threatened, to the extent that he loved or admired them, 'to reduce me to a powerlessness that would literally suffocate me'.

At the end of the 1960s, Maurice Blanchot, writing in the wake of the May 1968 protests in France, remarked: 'Communism is what excludes (and excludes itself from) any already constituted community.' The myth of community as the fulfilment of a transcendental destiny was too close. That promise — to realize unity as its own work — had already left millions of corpses. For Blanchot, as later also for Jean-Luc Nancy, the problem was not circumstantial but intrinsic to the idea of community conceived as a work, as an essence both pursued and presumed at the origin.

Bataille had suggested something similar earlier. In 1947, in the lecture 'La religion surréaliste', he proposed that the 'absence of community must be the foundation of any possible community'. Not identity but exposure; not essence but the possibility of being outside oneself. A community suspended from every desire for fusion.

What connects Bataille's distance from Surrealism to this thought of community is a question of tone: emphasis, nuance, silence. The imagination of a common destiny — fusion, essential purpose — depends on the stabilizing authority of a voice raised too high, a voice that claims to converse. Yet there is no purpose in nuance, no teleology in a science of degrees. The question is whether there can be a common — and whether it can risk not-knowing.

Blanchot's sentence does not place the problem on the side of communism, but on the side of the need to rethink community and the common. Bataille, for his part, names the absence of community as its foundation, not its negation.

Today the fear of our time pushes us to say, when we find ourselves among peers: 'Here is my community.' We say it when we believe we share something — interests, values, aesthetics, purposes, desires. But is that *a common*? Or simply the reassuring average of an identity?

What is *common* to us is what is least our own. Nothing obeys the logic of liberal exchange more closely than giving what one possesses. A community exposed to its absence — one that disappears whenever it approaches fusion — invites another gesture: to place outside even what we do not have, what we cannot possess, because that is precisely what exposes us to the most radical alterity.

An exposed community might simply be one that dares to change the conversation.

## DREAM

Nightly excess of emotions, images, actions. The dream can reveal knowledge, which the dreamer does not want to see in waking life. It is seeing with one's eyes closed. There is a membrane between asleep and awake that these insights need to pass through, presenting omens and slippages. Connected to weaving and spinning — spiders. Bees dream, too — and so do elephants. Dreamy insights can hit one like lightning, revealing situations, connecting moments to come or moments passed. The capacity to dream is the last thing that you can't take away from someone, even in prison, the only reprieve. But what if you dream that you are in prison while being in prison? Nightmares and Sisyphean tasks occur in dreams, too, tasks that can never be finished.

## FUCK YOU PAY ME

*Fuck you pay me* is a call to mobilize against money via money. It is a way of saying there is no fair pay under capitalism, an economic model built on extraction and exploitation. *Fuck you pay me* is a coping mechanism used to survive its a-logical logic, and non-ethical work ethic. *Fuck you pay me* elicits a change of scale. It accelerates pre-

revolutionary culture. In short: it wants to escalate things. Sex workers — who brought this ingenious slogan to life — know to work as little as possible for as much money as possible. This mantra should be applied to every currently stigmatized or underpaid profession until the capitalist task-compensation model explodes. Steal, inflate, deflate: print more money, do less work. The whore invades the logic of capital by charging as much as possible for as little as possible, becoming, in this way, our extra-scalar guide. A foot rub: one million. Spit in your mouth: two million. True love: three hundred million. Nothing is priceless; *fuck you pay me*.

## HUMILIATION

It should come as no surprise that humiliation, etymologically speaking, is related to humility, and to *homme*: Man. From *humus* to *humilis* springs the humble/humiliated human. It should come as no surprise, but it does. The proximity of humiliation to humility is humiliating for the modern Man, who has toiled to disidentify with the ground that his big toe, despite his best efforts, at times is forced to grace. To be humiliated is humbling, but to be humble is not supposed to be humiliating. But when humility is separated from humiliation, what is it? It is seen as an elevated moral way of being, but actually it is *humilis* in bad faith. A sanitized, simplified version of a multiscalar affect. Instead of touching both the low and the high, humility without humiliation is elevated, thus losing touch with the base. Is this an effect of language? As Roland Barthes ponders in his reading of Pascal, 'the humble, as soon as they speak, turn into the proud.' Language distorts, only literature can preserve heterology. Perhaps *humilitiation* could be another spelling for the feeling that recognizes the elevated morality of baseness. The *humilitiated* subject revels in *humus*, doesn't rise above to mark their independence from it, but only to fetch you a glass of water and a freshly rolled cigarette.

## LIPGLOSS, LIPSTICK

When we were kids, some grownup had relayed the worrying statistic to my friend that on average, over the course of a life, a person digests this or that amount of lipstick (approximately 1.8 to 4 kg according to

my present-day AI companion). 'How could that be?' she remembered thinking. 'How does lipstick get into the belly?' she thought, having at that age never yet worn any. It is true that lipstick, and even more so lipgloss, is absolutely contagious, but mostly when in direct contact, as when you drink from my glass, as when I lend you a drag of my cigarette, or when you kiss my lips. Lipgloss is formless, but not airborne.

Years later, at the separatist feminist folk high school somewhere in the north, where by some miracle I managed to get my high school diploma, one of my teachers stood behind me in line for lunch (which we of course alternated cooking, just as we alternated cleaning all the classrooms and bathrooms); she whispered something about my classmate further along in the line, in a sarcastic tone and without actually making the effort of keeping a secret. 'Ah, did someone hit her?' 'I see her eyelids are blue, her cheeks blushed,' knowing full well that no one had bruised her face, but that she was just wearing makeup, which in some feminist circles is almost as bad. Makeup, for this teacher, simulated patriarchal violence, signified self-flagellation. With lipstick, we draw a line, one that seems to say: Are you with us, or against us?

In a university classroom somewhere in the south, around those same years, another scene involving lipstick repeated itself. One that could be named 'The day a lipgloss broke right in the middle of class and shared its magical powers with the dust'.

This was a very, very cheap lipgloss, bought from a street vendor just outside the university for ten pesos — much less than one euro. We had only recently become university students, suspended somewhere between adolescence and adulthood, absorbing increasingly sophisticated theories, confronting our parents once again with everything we had just learned. Of course, we never had enough money: not for alcohol, not for proper meals, not for coffee, and certainly not for classy lipgloss. But we still wanted to sparkle at parties.

For some reason, those impossibly cheap lipglosses came in glass containers rather than plastic. I used to call mine my 'instant lip plumper'. That day, right in the middle of class, for whatever reason — maybe I was bored; maybe I was searching in my bag for a piece of candy — I made one strange movement with my hand and the lipgloss slipped out, landed on the empty chair beside me, then crashed onto the classroom floor.

The glass shattered completely. The thick, sticky liquid that held all its glitter — its promise of instant beauty — spread across the tiles. As it pooled, it gathered tiny particles of dust, hair, and dirt, making them gleam. Throughout the rest of the class, more dust slowly accumulated in the viscous puddle. The sparkle expanded from lips to floor. Sometimes that happens. The magic radiating from a one-euro lipgloss is shared equally between lips and dust.

With my new red lipstick, which, in a felicitous two-for-one situation, comes together with an excessively sticky lipgloss — red and matte on one end, transparent and shiny on the other — I sometimes colour perfectly within the lip line, sometimes slightly outside the line, renegotiating at each touch-up what feminine form to project, protect, or distort as I meet you in another room or line, at another moment in time.

## THE NIGHT

In note J 617 of his *cahiers*, Georg Christoph Lichtenberg wrote: 'Sie bekam eine Guinea des Tags. Des Tags? also für die Nacht nichts?' So, nothing for the night? God has a secret name, Rome had a secret name, the night is perhaps the world's secret name. As Elias Canetti wrote: 'Die Tage werden unterschieden, aber die Nacht hat einen einzigen Namen.' Even if night means only being in the shadow. What sets humans apart as animals is that they are the only beings who are afraid of the dark. Zeus himself, principle of light as fire, *Dios*, feared the night (*Iliad* XIV, 259–60). The order of ancestral things, before any glance.

At night we live like the inside of our bodies, like our blood, alive and perpetually in darkness. The day is a wound and a liberation.

> Aujourd'hui aussi ne finira jamais,
> quelque part devra-t-il bien continuer
> le travail des instants ne peut pas le détromper. La terreur des rues boisées
> carrefour et phénotype de l'attente
> perdure pendant la nuit,
> inaperçue.

## THE PIGEON

In our cities, most flat and protruding surfaces of buildings are nonchalantly adorned with rows of spikes, sharp points, phalanxes of spears aimed at wounding the sky and all its *flâneurs*. What is the reason for such hatred? If you ask around, you will often get the same answers, dictated more by a sort of automatic reflex than by mature reflection: they are dirty, they eat rubbish, they carry diseases. These answers can easily be dismissed. All animals that live in contact with humans also feed on their waste. Even crows, seagulls, even nice little sparrows. As for dirtiness, it is not clear why pigeons should be dirtier than any other bird. But pigeons are grey. This colour plays a decisive role in how they are perceived. Try with doves, which are biologically the same animal (*Columba livia*) but lighter in colour or even white, and you will not get the same reaction. No one imagines Dante writing, 'come piccioni dal disio chiamati…' (*Inf.* v, the poet uses instead 'doves', *colombe*).

Pigeons are extremely intelligent and loving. I have many times personally seen pigeons in Paris crossing the road at pedestrian crossings. Along with dogs and horses, pigeons are one of the few animals to have been decorated in war. Pigeons walk a lot; they could fly but they walk, like us. Maybe they don't want to hurt our pride. And they walk with that mixture of shyness, caution, and nonchalance that can drive an idle observer crazy. They sway in space like a hieroglyph.

The grey of their plumage is actually a blue-purple shade, the colour of bruises, ecchymosis, and ripe grapes.

It is no longer obvious, but 'pigeon' is an onomatopoeia, originally referring to the chirping of chicks (Latin *pipionem*). But more interesting is the etymology of the Greek word, *περιστερά*. At least three possible etymologies have been proposed: linked to the Sanskrit *prī*, 'love'; linked to the Mediterranean and Middle Eastern cult of Ishtar-Astarte-Aphrodite; or from the compound *περι* + *τερο*, meaning 'the one who stays/lives around'. Pigeons as lovers, as divine handmaidens, as neighbours. Pigeons between us and what is not us, pigeons as *metaxu*.

A separate human category, those who feed and care for pigeons, is present in every city in the world, attracting ridicule, mockery, disapproval, and pity. Perhaps we cannot forgive such a humble creature

for the dream of flight, which insults and belittles us in its naturalness. Pigeons are one of the last glimpses of alterity remaining in our urban settlements. In the cavities above the shutters, they entertain their domestic hearth, allowing us to live on the margins of their society.

We hate them because we fear them; we fear them because they love us.

## SKETCH

Just a little less formless than the scribble, the sketch provides hints for representation but deserts completion. Its traits are not the encompassing lines of the treatise but rather the fleeting scratches and whipping strokes of the croquis and the draft. Not everyone says, 'I can draw', but anyone can surely sketch as it is so abbreviated that it doesn't require talent. The sketch, from the Greek *schedios*, is something made in proximity of space and time, *ex tempore*, just like a squirt (*schizzo*, *Skizze*), a blotch (*macchia*), or a spurt (*Entwurf*) — incidentally, this runs counter to the long and precise sedimentation of etymological meaning. Sketches defy the project and dance around the issue; they don't need much space and can proliferate in the margins. When Bataille wrote an introduction to *Inner Experience*, he preferred a sketch (*ébauche*) to a plan, urged by an obscure impulse to notes and fragments rather than to a text, seeking interruptions to the line of thought. By sketching, Bataille preserved the 'spirit of decision' over 'the idea of the project'. It is in the sketch that Hegel enjoyed the emergence of the inner Spirit, 'inventive and imaginative [...], from the more transparent, lighter envelope of form' (*Lectures on Aesthetics*). An 'envelope' that is roughhewn (*esbauché*, *abbozzato*) to be read, a few signs accumulate in a swelling, a lump (*bozza*) on the blank flatness of the paper sheet. The immediacy of the sketch relies on the empty spaces left between its hinted signs — abbreviating fractures that make it accessible, bridging intention and attention in a matter of a few strokes.

## SLEEP

Nightly process described as 'falling' or 'sinking', downward motion (paradox of sleepers hitting the ground and being able to fly in a dream). A suspension of energy. Dying every night or rehearsal for

death, leaving and returning, interrupting everyday life, like the ebb and flow of the ocean. Connected to death and love, and the erotic — 'sleep with me'. Lonely and social state, shared in unity by humans and animals. A state that is naturally connected to inertness, the earth, horizontality, softness, passivity, giving up erectness, subjectivity, action, agency. Beyond the subject's will: one cannot make oneself sleep immediately; instead one needs to surrender and ride one's circadian rhythm of the night, or use anaesthesia.

## TEARS

Minor liquid, as small droplet of salty water, seeping or bursting out. Watery eruptions. Tears also tear something open; they create a rupture and blurry vision. Crying can undo and dissolve the subject temporarily. Registered as intensity and numbness. Tears are often accompanied by shame. One tear evaporates, but many tears build a pool. Alice (in Wonderland) swam in a lake that she had cried. Not much will grow along its shores of salty waters. Who cries? Gendered coding of tears. Internal local weather system, tears like rain, cleansing but also swelling fluid from inside gets outside, translucent, almost like water. Several pathways, and inner canals: eyes, tear glands, nose, throat, lead to snot. Licking tears, swallowing tears, bringing them back inside. Save water.

## TRANSFUSION

'[M]aterialism makes itself headless — like a wound that bleeds and thus transfuses.' Whereas communication transports something between two points that remain separate, transfusion mixes the physical matter of one body with another. Citation is when elements of one textual body enter and nourish another. Quotation marks and references ensure that heterogeneous elements of discourse retain shape, solidity, distinction; when they are removed, they become fully liquid and transfusion takes place. Citation relies on a violent cut to set transfusion in motion; it releases blood, which signals both life and the body in crisis (and is already made up of multiple elements — medical transfusion does not necessarily involve whole blood). The root meaning of the pouring of liquid between vessels connotes that this is a moment of

festival and celebration. It is not limited to texts. To (metaphorically?) chop off the head, whether at the scale of the subject or of the state, to divide and wound imaginary wholeness and closedness, opens up being to overspill, to transfuse into the world and into others.

## VERTIGO

Vertigo, the sophisticated know, is not fear of heights but the dizzy feeling that can accompany it. In *Vertigo*, Scottie climbs the belltower stairs. When he looks down, what paralyses him is not the sight of homogeneous distance from the ground in itself, but a folding, stretching, or pulling of perspective. The famous shot moves simultaneously in opposing directions on two scales (distance from the object and focal length of the lens). Masterful scaling up requires at least one constant axis, but Scottie experiences vertigo instead, a sickening shift of proportions in the visual field. The empty centre of the stairs recalls the knot in Madeleine's hair and his desire that obliterates all appropriate measure and sends him plummeting into obsession. Like the spiral around Marion's eye in *Psycho*, it is the hole in representation. Scottie conquers scale by climbing to the top. The price of this victory is, naturally, the woman: Judy falls to her death, for real this time, and Scottie, the detective who has extracted his confession at the top of the tower, can survey the ground from above in full knowledge of its meaning, his vertigo cured.

## NOTES

1. The Edith Piaf song mentioned in the entry 'Berlin' is 'L'homme de Berlin'.
2. In the entry 'Conversation', Bataille's quotations are taken from Michael Richardson's translation, *The Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism* (Verso, 1994), pp. 38, 40–41, 81; and Maurice Blanchot's quotation is from *Political Writings, 1953–1993*, trans. by Zakir Paul (Fordham University Press, 2010), p. 93.
3. Roland Barthes's discussion of Pascal in the entry 'Humiliation' is from *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the Collège de France (1977–1978)*, trans. by Rosalind E. Krauss and Denis Hollier (Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 44.

4. The quotation in the entry 'Transfusion' is from Jean-Louis Baudry, 'Ideological Effects of the Basic Cinematographic Apparatus', trans. by Alan Williams, in *Movies and Methods*, ed. by Bill Nichols, 2 vols (University of California Press, 1976–85), II (1985), pp. 531–42 (p. 539).

# Scale and World-Orders
## An Effort at Diplomacy between Prometheans and Gaians

JOSÉ ANTONIO MAGALHÃES

### INTRODUCTION

In recent years, I have frequently found myself inhabiting, intellectually as well as politically, a tense middle ground between two tendencies in thought and practice that, despite their proximity with regard to some of their presuppositions and goals, seem to radically diverge in many ways. In this essay, I will seek to compare but also mediate between these two tendencies, with a special focus on their respective ways of worldmaking and, more specifically, their approaches to the question of scale.[1] Both have multiple names, which overlap and differ to

1 This effort stems, to a great measure, from a Brazilian and Latin American context of intellectual and political debate where the division in question is central. See especially Hilan Bensusan, 'Geist and Ge-Stell: Beyond the Cyber-Nihilist Convergence of Intelligence', *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*, 16.2 (2020), pp. 94–117 <https://cosmosandhistory.org/index.php/journal/article/view/878> [accessed 15 July 2026]; and Hilan Bensusan, 'Cosmopolitical Parties in the Post-human Age', *&&&*, 16 November 2020 <https://tripleampersand.org/cosmopolitical-parties-post-human-age/> [accessed 15 July 2026]. For a Promethean response to Bensusan, see J.-P. Caron, 'Place and Scale', *Cosmos and History: The Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*, 17.2 (2021), pp. 162–84 <https://cosmosandhistory.org/index.php/journal/article/view/991> [accessed 15 July 2026]. See also Moysés Pinto Neto, *Política Especulativa: Ensaio sobre as imagens de futuro em disputa no século XXI* (Cultura e Barbárie, 2025). A similar effort of mediation, albeit focused on human politics, is developed in Rodrigo Nunes, *Neither Vertical nor Horizontal: A Theory of Political Organisation* (Verso, 2021).

varying degrees in their reference and implications. The first group are called 'moderns', 'humans', 'inhumans', 'accelerationists', 'neorationalists', 'Prometheans', or 'engineers'. The second go by such names as the 'earthbound', 'Terrans', 'animists', 'decelerationists', 'perspectivists', 'Gaians', or 'bricoleurs'. These tendencies differ not only in their conceptual commitments, but also in their practical dependencies and ways of inhabiting the world. Each is associated not only with different thinkers and academic movements, but also with different political collectives, state and non-state actors, technical and ecological networks, and so on.

Such complex intellectual traditions and lived realities will be reduced, in this essay, to the conceptual characters of Promethean engineers and Gaian bricoleurs, which I will associate, drawing from Claude Lévi-Strauss and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, with two modes of worldmaking: engineers work with models, while bricoleurs deal in examples.[2] This reductive operation is employed not only to avoid unduly attributing positions to an indeterminate variety of thinkers and actors, but also because the problem at hand occupies a midway position between abstraction and concreteness in which conceptual characters — neither pure philosophical concepts, nor concrete political agents — seem especially adequate as thinking devices. In that sense, my methodological wager is to create a feedback loop between form and content in which the essay itself performs the mediation between abstract models and concrete examples that it thematizes.

2 The notion of conceptual characters is developed in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Qu'est-ce que la philosophie?* [1991] (Les Éditions de minuit, 2005), as part of an effort to avoid a concept of the concept as pure intellectual abstraction and generalization. I default to 'Prometheans' and 'Gaians', rather than other names, because their common reference to Greek deities keeps things clear and symmetrical. These names are, however, not perfect. On the one hand, they carry a mythical bias that, as will be seen, would seem to express more of a bricoleur perspective (although Prometheans often self-identify as such). On the other, the figure of Gaia carries some unfortunate resonances, namely its apparent unity, as well as its Greekness, which would seem too linked to a 'Western tradition' for the decolonial standpoint of bricoleurs. In any case, as none of the available denominations seems perfect, the obviously mythical/theatrical register of Prometheus versus Gaia seems most adequate. For a recent use of this framing, see Harrison Fluss and Landon Frim, *Prometheus and Gaia*: *Technology, Ecology and Anti-Humanism* (Anthem Press, 2022), although in my opinion the authors render both conceptual characters in inferior versions.

Prima facie, Prometheans may be defined as those who rely on the society/nature distinction as an epistemic and practical framework. Through it, Prometheans know nature as a causally determinate system and manipulate it technically in order to achieve normative goals. In that sense, they rehabilitate Enlightenment ideals of reason and progress, affirming the potential of technological developments such as artificial intelligence, planetary governance, and geoengineering, as well as the importance of institutional imagination and large-scale intervention. Gaians, in turn, seek to distance themselves from the modern distinction between society and nature, instead weaving their worlds through ecological networks of reciprocal entanglement and dependence that cut across human and non-human world-orders. While both tendencies may be understood as inheriting from the speculative turn,[3] and, therefore, as distancing themselves from the postmodern deconstruction of Western thought, they do so in diametrically opposed ways: Prometheans do so by rehabilitating Enlightenment ideals, while Gaians look outside of modernity — and even humanity — for examples of other ways of thinking and living together, focusing on non-modern metaphysics and more-than-human ecologies.[4]

The differentiation of conceptual characters (Prometheans/Gaians) and worldmaking techniques (models/examples) is not operated here for merely classificatory purposes. The goal, rather, is to investigate the possibility of *mediating* the intellectual and cosmopolitical conflict between the two sides, presenting them not as strictly opposed monads, but as tendencies within a spectrum that may be combined in different compositions. This diplomatic work of mediation is proposed as a consequence of the diagnosis that both tendencies not only offer positive contributions and convincing

3 See *The Speculative Turn: Continental Materialism and Realism*, ed. by Levi R. Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman (re.press, 2011).

4 Beyond what I will be able to directly address in this short chapter, key Promethean references include Laboria Cuboniks, *The Xenofeminist Manifesto: A Politics for Alienation* (Verso, 2018); Helen Hester, *Xenofeminism* (Polity Press, 2018); and Benjamin Bratton, *The Stack: On Software and Sovereignty* (MIT Press, 2015). Key Gaian references include Davi Kopenawa and Bruce Albert, *A queda do céu: Palavras de um xamã yanomami* (Companhia das Letras, 2015); Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press, 2016); and Marisol de la Cadena, *Earth Beings: Ecologies of Practice across Andean Worlds* (Duke University Press, 2015).

critiques of one another, but that, through those contributions and critiques, each tendency seems indeed to compensate for the other's shortcomings. Furthermore, it responds to pressing contemporary conundrums, such as the tension between, on the one hand, the affirmation of the philosophico-political dignity of non-modern worldviews, and, on the other, the apparent importance of scientific models and technological transitions in the navigation of our catastrophic times.[5] This is, therefore, not simply a contribution to an intellectual debate, but also to an ongoing process of multilateral geopolitical negotiations and wars between heterogeneous parties. It operates on what I consider to be the fundamental axiom of political ecology: that there is no point in searching for a single, general answer to the question 'What is to be done?', not because all doings are indifferent, but for a more nuanced and double reason. First, because all answers to this question can only be given from a situated perspective. Second, because a desirable world-order will never be one in which everybody is doing the same thing, but rather an ecology of practices in which the doings of different agents afford and compensate for each other.[6]

As a final introductory note, I would like to highlight that the conception of scale that I adopt in this chapter is what, in our discussions at the ICI Berlin, I have been humorously calling a 'fundamentalism' about the concept of scale. In contrast to much contemporary scale critique,[7] which claims that scales are fluid, indeterminate, and so on, I claim there is no sense in speaking of scales unless a bidirectional line can be drawn in which each scale can be unambiguously determined as being above or below, larger or smaller than every other scale. With this

5 See Alyne Costa, 'Da verdade inconveniente à suficiente: cosmopolíticas do Antropoceno', *Cognitio-Estudos: revista eletrônica de filosofia*, 18.1 (2021), pp. 37–49 <https://doi.org/10.23925/1809-8428.2021v18i1p37-49>.

6 Isabelle Stengers, 'Introductory Notes on an Ecology of Practices', *CSR*, 11.1 (2013), pp. 183–96 <https://doi.org/10.5130/csr.v11i1.3459>.

7 See Sallie A. Marston, John Paul Jones III, and Keith Woodward, 'Human Geography without Scale', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 30.4 (2005), pp. 416–32 (p. 416) <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-5661.2005.00180.x>. The authors provide an overview of the debate in human geography that fluidifies the concepts of scale. Curiously, the authors themselves, even as they set out to 'critique the dominant — hierarchical — conception of scale', end up adopting precisely that conception, albeit in order to argue for entirely doing away with the concept of scale.

I am not here taking a substantive (Promethean) position about the question of scales (that will be the subject of the chapter as a whole), but only establishing a *definition* of scale to be used throughout. I adopt this definition not to defend or reject scale, but to clarify what it is that Prometheans mobilize, that Gaians criticize, and so on. As will become clear throughout the piece, I do agree with scale critics that scales are contingent and context-dependent, and must be constructed. Yet, insofar as scales are called 'scales' in any meaningful sense, I maintain that they must conform to the requirements of linear nesting and sequentiality.

## THE MOST IMPORTANT DIVISION

In 2013, Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams published a 'Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics', arguing that the political left should abandon its suspicion of large-scale, long-term strategies and instead engage with rational abstraction, advanced technology, institutional innovation, and economic calculation. The manifesto responds to a conjuncture marked by multiple 'coming apocalypses', the 'most significant' of which is identified as the 'breakdown of the planetary climatic system',[8] as well as to the condition of 'capitalist realism' diagnosed by Mark Fisher,[9] and, crucially, to what the authors perceive as the dominance within contemporary left politics of what they term 'folk politics'. This latter tendency is described as a 'variant of neo-primitivist localism', committed to the 'flimsy and ephemeral "authenticity" of communal immediacy'.[10] Against this background, Srnicek and Williams formulate the following division:

> We believe the most important division in today's Left is between those that hold to a folk politics of localism, direct action, and relentless horizontalism, and those that outline what must become called an accelerationist politics at ease with a modernity of abstraction, complexity, globality, and technology. The

8 Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek, '#Accelerate: Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics', in *Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader*, ed. by Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian (Urbanomic, 2014), pp. 347–62 (p. 349).

9 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Zero Books, 2009).

10 Williams and Srnicek, '#Accelerate: Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics', p. 351.

> former remains content with establishing small and temporary spaces of non-capitalist social relations, eschewing the real problems entailed in facing foes which are intrinsically non-local, abstract, and rooted deep in our everyday infrastructure. The failure of such politics has been built-in from the very beginning. By contrast, an accelerationist politics seeks to preserve the gains of late capitalism while going further than its value system, governance structures, and mass pathologies will allow.[11]

In *The Ends of the World*, Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro cite the above passage. They agree with its diagnosis — 'that is indeed the most important fracture in the "left" today'[12] — but they position themselves on the opposite side of that divide. For them, it is not 'folk politics' that remains trapped in nostalgia but rather accelerationism itself:

> It seems to us that it is precisely this 'accelerationist politics', explicitly inspired by the Eurocentric eschatology of Progress, that is nostalgic of a rationalist, imperialist, triumphalist past [...], and [that] the persistence of its faith in the liberating virtues of automation and technical progress is only possible on the condition of a glaring blind spot bang in the middle of its futurological vision: the intrusion of Gaia, no less.[13]

What emerges from this reversal is a reciprocally recognized antagonism between two cosmopolitical orientations, each of which initially appears to correspond to a characteristic scale of action: small-scale localism on the one hand, large-scale globality on the other. Yet Danowski and Viveiros de Castro reframe this opposition. Rather than treating accelerationism and 'folk politics' as competing tendencies within a single political orientation (hence their scare quotes around 'left'), they speak — drawing on Bruno Latour's *Facing Gaia* lectures (also from 2013) — of a war between humans and Terrans, understood not merely as political positions but as different peoples, if not different

11 Ibid., 354.

12 Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *The Ends of the World*, trans. by Rodrigo Guimarães Nunes (Polity Press, 2017), p. 114.

13 Ibid. The expression 'intrusion of Gaia' is a reference to Isabelle Stengers, *Au temps des catastrophes: Résister à la barbarie qui vient* (Découverte, 2009).

species or assemblages of species.[14] In their usage, humans are 'the Moderns who believe it will be possible to go on living in the unified, indifferent Nature of the Holocene'.[15] More expansively, they describe humans as

> that race — originally North-Western, but increasingly less European and more Chinese, Indian, Brazilian — which twice denied the Earth: first by defining itself as technologically exempt from nature's trials, then by defining itself as the only civilization to have escaped the closed (but dangerous and unpredictable) world of archaic animisms, the only one that opened itself up to the infinite (but saturated with imperturbable necessity) universe of inanimate matter.[16]

Such 'humans' may be equated with what Bruno Latour calls the 'moderns', or with what Philippe Descola calls 'naturalists'. The moderns, for Latour, are the inhabitants of a world structured on the basis of the separation and connection between, on the one hand, human society as the plane of normativity and freedom (as produced by juridico-political institutions such as parliaments and courts), and, on the other, non-human nature as the domain of causality and determinacy (as produced by scientific institutions such as laboratories).[17] Within Descola's quadripartite typology of ontologies, naturalism names the cosmology in which interiority (or culture) is plural and discontinuous while physicality (or nature) is continuous and unified: a multiplicity of cultures unfolds against the background of a single, universal nature.[18]

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14 See Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia*: *Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Polity Press, 2017). The book consists of updated versions of Latour's Gifford Lectures, 'Facing Gaia: A New Enquiry into Natural Religion', given at the University of Edinburgh in 2013. Latour speaks of humans versus Earthlings. In French, he calls the latter *Terriens*, which is rendered by Danowski and Viveiros de Castro as *Terranos* and translated into English as 'Terrans' by Rodrigo Nunes; see Danowski and Viveiros de Castro, *The Ends of the World*. Haraway also speaks of humans and Terrans in *Staying with the Trouble*.

15 Danowski and Viveiros de Castro, *The Ends of the World*, p. 91.

16 Ibid., 93.

17 Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. by Catherine Porter (Harvard University Press, 1993).

18 Philippe Descola, *Par-delà nature et culture* (Gallimard, 2005).

The world of humans, in the Gaian rendering,[19] is thus defined by the spatiality of the globe (against the background of the universe) and the temporality of progress. The globe is a single, finite, mathematically defined object that can be known as such through science, and whose surface can therefore be neatly partitioned among different cultures, societies, or peoples. This globe exists within a universe that is itself assumed — on epistemic grounds — to be knowable as a coherent whole. The form of this potential knowledge is that of a vertically oriented scale-nesting in which the relative magnitudes and positions of all entities are in principle determinable from a unified perspective, as exemplified by the short film *Powers of Ten*.[20] The time of humans is linear, progressive historical time, defined by the accumulation of knowledge of nature, the expansion of technical power, and the increase in freedom that is expected to follow from these (although not necessarily moral progress). Its central temporal figure is the future, understood as a projection from the present grounded on the predictability and controllability of nature, as well as on the expectation of the historical realization of freely posited human ends. Time scales, accordingly, are themselves nested and ultimately resolvable: as time is conceived as homogeneous and linear, every duration must be either longer or shorter than any other. For these reasons, Latour, Danowski, and Viveiros de Castro associate humans with the Holocene, an epoch in which the expectation of being able to predict and control nature remained tenable.[21]

Terrans — whom Latour admits he might have called 'Gaian', if the term was not, in his unexplained words, 'too weird'[22] — by contrast live in the time of the Anthropocene, or the time of catastrophes, and for that reason do not inhabit nature but rather the non-totalizable, deeply political network of diplomatic relations and reciprocal depend-

19 This framing of naive humanism should not be conflated with the stronger version of Prometheanism that will be further presented below as inhumanism.

20 *Powers of Ten*, dir. by Charles and Ray Eames (USA, 1977) <https://www.eamesoffice.com/the-work/powers-of-ten/> [accessed 8 September 2026].

21 Latour, *Facing Gaia*; Danowski and Viveiros de Castro, *The Ends of the World*. Gaians tend to affirm the transition from the Holocene to the Anthropocene, although that notion is disputed. The International Union of Geological Sciences (IUGS) officially rejected the Anthropocene as an epoch-level boundary in 2024.

22 Latour, *Facing Gaia*, p. 248.

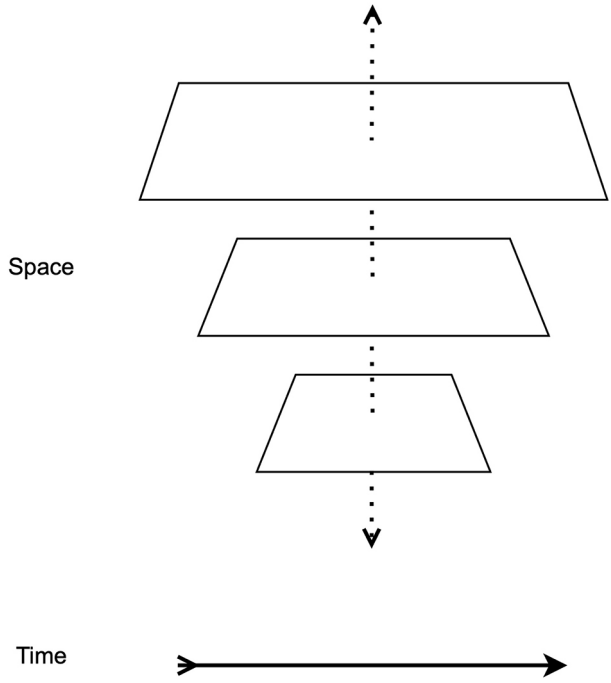


Fig. 1. A Promethean world-order.

encies that Latour and Isabelle Stengers call 'Gaia'.[23] In this sense, Terrans tend to fall, in Descola's scheme, within the quadrant of animism, later developed by Viveiros de Castro into the more tenable version he calls 'perspectivism'.[24] Diametrically opposed to naturalism, animism or perspectivism holds that culture or society is a single,

23 Stengers, *Au temps des catastrophes*.

24 See Descola, *Par-delà nature et culture*; and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics: For a Post-Structural Anthropology*, ed. and trans. by Peter Skafish (University of Minnesota Press, 2014). It could be argued that the other two quadrants, totemism and analogism, would also compose the Terran side, since they too are not moderns. Animists, however, seem to fit more obviously as paradigmatic Terrans.

continuous plane, while natures are discontinuous and multiple. For animists, non-humans such as jaguars are people from their own perspective; what differentiates them from humans — such that jaguars and humans do not see one another as people — is that they inhabit different natural worlds. The differences to be negotiated, therefore, do not concern culture but nature, and they are not resolved by appeal to science, but in political (juridical, diplomatic, military) terms. Terrans tend towards animism or perspectivism regardless of whether they are Indigenous or not, human or not, and so on; what matters is that they deal with the problem of composing worlds in juridico-political rather than technoscientific terms. The paradigmatic Terran, in this sense, is the shaman who, in perspectivist metaphysics, is not necessarily a member of the human species, since, on the one hand, shamans tend to be understood as species-ambiguous, and, on the other, non-human peoples are held to have their own shamans.[25]

Terrans, or Gaians, therefore, do not have a common world in the strict sense that humans, by definition, do. Rather, they inhabit multiple worlds. Their spatial figure is not the globe or universe, but a multiversal spatiality (speaking of 'the multiverse' would seem contradictory), whose borders and transitions are continuously renegotiated in juridico-political terms. Consequently, they assume no scale-nested universe: when two different natural worlds are at play, there is no determinate spatial orientation that includes both, and therefore no determinate scalar relation — no vertical line across which each object must be bigger or smaller, above or below every other object. Gaian temporality, in turn, corresponds to mythical time, understood as involving the present and the past, but not the future. The past is not positioned linearly behind the present; it is rather an absolute past that, precisely because it lies outside linear history, can be reactivated at any moment through the appropriate procedures.[26] In that sense, although Gaian peoples engage with extensive spatio-temporal figures within their respective worlds, their more fundamental spatio-temporality is intensive. From a Gaian perspective, time is no more scale-oriented than space. Indeed, at the intensive level of multiversal cosmopolitics, in which the

25 Viveiros de Castro, *Cannibal Metaphysics*.

26 Danowski and Viveiros de Castro, *The Ends of the World*.

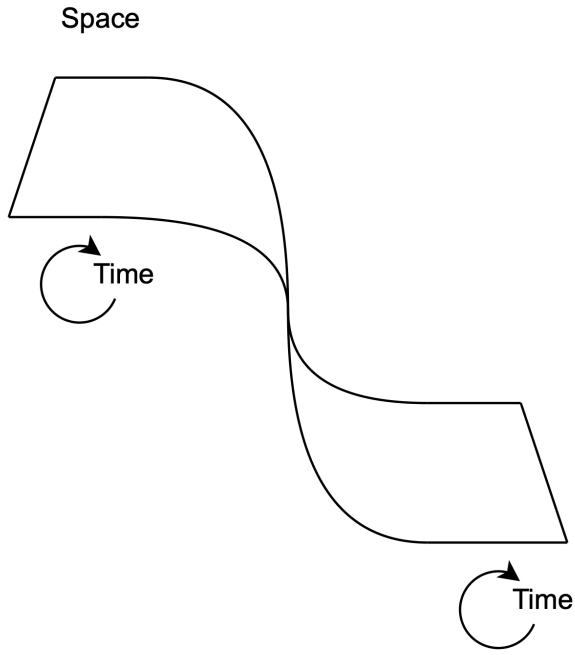


Fig. 2. Interface between two Gaian world-orders.

limits and crossings between different worlds are negotiated, the very distinction between space and time may seem to break down.

An interesting, although not surprising, aspect of the mutually recognized rivalry between Prometheans and Gaians is that both sides, while offering a highly contemporary and richly detailed picture of themselves, fail to grant their adversaries the same luxury. Accelerationists update modernity for the posthuman era of advanced technology and climate catastrophe, giving it a shiny cyborg glaze, yet still depict 'folk politics' under an antiquated, all-too-human light. Gaian thinkers such as Latour, Danowski, and Viveiros de Castro offer a more

compelling account of themselves, but their version of the humans/moderns, outlined above, is itself too naive and humanist to do justice to their Promethean adversaries, especially if we consider the elaborations of more philosophical Prometheans like Ray Brassier or Reza Negarestani. To produce a fair, balanced, and — most importantly — maximally useful diagram of the differences and potential interfaces between these two collectives, I seek to adopt here the strongest picture I can construct of each side. For that reason, I speak primarily of Gaians versus Prometheans, alluding to Brassier's defense of Prometheanism, and, rather than opposing Terrans to humans (the standard, naive position described a few paragraphs above), I prefer to speak of 'inhumans' in Negarestani's sense.[27]

In 'The Labor of the Inhuman', Negarestani advances a conception of the human not as a substance or essence, but as a self-reforming network of norm-bound practices and commitments. Because of its purely functional character, this system would be virtually capable of transmigrating onto material infrastructures entirely different from those that currently implement it, including *Homo sapiens*.[28] Furthermore, inhumans in Negarestani's sense, like Brassierian Prometheans, do not simply assume the human/nature or norm/fact distinction as a metaphysical given, but instead thematize its artificial production and implementation as a practice that creates and maintains its own conditions of possibility. Recognizing, as all true moderns do, that the norm/nature distinction must be explicable in fully naturalized terms, they nonetheless maintain that normativity is capable of grounding a plane in which the distinction between causes and reasons is practically operative.[29]

Gaians might still argue that the Promethean attitude, by reproducing the society/nature bifurcation, will necessarily perpetuate the same kind of environmental destruction that modernity has wrought

27 See Ray Brassier, 'Prometheanism and its Critics', in *Accelerate*, ed. by Mackay and Avanessian, pp. 467–88; and Reza Negarestani, 'The Labor of the Inhuman', in *Accelerate*, ed. by Mackay and Avanessian, pp. 425–66.

28 Negarestani, 'The Labor of the Inhuman'.

29 Ray Brassier, 'Unfree Improvisation/Compulsive Freedom', 2013 <http://www.mattin.org/essays/unfree_improvisation-compulsive_freedom.html> [accessed 30 July 2022].

thus far. Prometheans, however, may retort that the real culprit for such destruction was not naturalism or reason, but capitalism, and that the former are a necessary part of any viable solution to the problem. For them, accurately mapping the causes of climate change and efficaciously intervening to mitigate (if not reverse) it, are necessary components of any effective response to the Anthropocene. To mediate this confrontation, the next section will explore in greater detail the ways of making and unmaking worlds that characterize each of the two collectives.

## MODELS AND EXAMPLES

In 'On Models and Examples: Engineers and Bricoleurs in the Anthropocene', Viveiros de Castro draws on two conceptual characters from the introduction to Lévi-Strauss's *Wild Thought* — engineers and bricoleurs, which fairly obviously map onto the division between Prometheans and Gaians — to discuss what he calls two contrasting 'forms of world-making' and 'ways to confront the Anthropocene'.[30] This treatment is especially useful because Viveiros de Castro introduces a further pair of concepts corresponding specifically to how each of our conceptual characters approaches worldmaking: Promethean engineers participate in the making and unmaking of worlds by designing and applying models; perspectivist bricoleurs do so by giving and following examples.

> The general import of the distinction consists in the difference between a mode of creativity that relies on already available heterogeneous materials (like the encyclopedic knowledge stored in the myth-maker's culture and language) not originally designed with the bricoleur's contingent project in view, and one that starts with a project, devises a conceptual blueprint, and orders cut-to-measure equipment and elaborate specific materials to accomplish the engineer's project. In short, the bricoleur is inspired by former examples of the kind of work she or he is engaged in; the engineer follows a model of his/her own design.[31]

30 Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, 'On Models and Examples: Engineers and Bricoleurs in the Anthropocene', *Current Anthropology*, 60.S20 (2019), pp. S296–S308 (S299) <https://doi.org/10.1086/702787>.

31 Ibid., p. S300.

Lévi-Strauss associates bricolage, which for him is a form of scientific knowledge (the 'science of the concrete' that names the first chapter of *Wild Thought*), with mythical thought. Elements involved in bricolage, whether material or intellectual, are gathered on the assumption that they might 'come in handy', which is to say, that one or another of their multiple potentials might 'click', as it were, with those of other assembled elements, actualizing a possibility that was not prefigured by the bricoleur in the form of a plan.[32] In this sense, the material and spiritual multiplicities that come together in bricolage do not do so as passive instruments in the service of a unified agency, but rather as agents or actants themselves.[33] For Lévi-Strauss, 'elements of mythical reflection always lie midway between percepts and concepts',[34] meaning that they occupy an intermediary level between perceptual concreteness and intellectual abstraction. Percepts such as animals, tools, natural phenomena, and kinship roles are accumulated in mythical imagination and subsequently deployed in order to enact conceptual structures. For example, 'raw' and 'cooked' are perceptible states of food, but are then mobilized in mythical narrative as operators of the more abstract, structuring concepts of nature/culture, which in turn are never formulated in purely conceptual form (as they are in anthropology or philosophy).[35] In this way, Lévi-Strauss avoids either treating Indigenous bricoleurs as purely affective, non-intellectual beings, or ascribing to them the same kind of abstract conceptual thought of modern Western engineers.

Viveiros de Castro introduces the 'model versus example' distinction as correlating to the engineer's and the bricoleur's respective modes of worldmaking. While engineers operate by abstracting models from past experience and then applying them to new experience (whether to interpret or manipulate it), bricoleurs approach ex-

32 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Wild Thought*: *A New Translation of 'La Pensée sauvage'*, trans. by Jeffrey Mehlman and John Leavitt (University of Chicago Press, 2021).

33 Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social*: *An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford University Press, 2005) <https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780199256044.001.0001>.

34 Lévi-Strauss, *Wild Thought*, p. 21.

35 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *Le Cru et le Cuit* (Plon, 1964).

perience itself as a multitude of examples of practical possibilities that may be differentially repeated and assembled in new configurations.[36]

> Examples [...] are ideas (techniques, institutions, etc.) that work as enticements to do something 'differently alike' the inspiring example, which is itself always a version or transformation of yet another example, just as myths are but versions of one another with no original model or template. Examples are borrowed horizontally — they diffuse — while models are imposed vertically — they emanate. Models give orders and enforce order; examples give cues, inspiring inventions and subversions. The model of the model is Being, while the example lies within the remit of Doing. If the first is congenitally idealist and rationalist, the second is pragmatist and empiricist.[37]

I propose to read this conceptual pair alongside Giorgio Agamben's discussion, in his book on method, of the logic of paradigms — 'paradigm' being synonymous with 'example'. On that basis, we may say that model-makers move from the particular to the general (or from percepts to concepts) through induction, and from the general to the particular through deduction, while example-mongers move from the singular to the singular through analogy (being thus able to operatively connect assemblages of percepts without abstracting pure concepts from them). Agamben argues that when, in Thomas Kuhn's terms, revolutionary science results in a paradigm shift, the new scientific paradigm does not neatly fit within the previously existing general concept of science, but rather constitutes an example of what else science might be — one that can be reproduced by subsequent scientists until a new form of normal science is established. Similarly, for Agamben, when Michel Foucault defines disciplinary power through an analysis of Bentham's panopticon, and then proceeds to indicate schools, barracks, factories, hospitals, and so on as variants of the prison, he is not so much creating a general category that applies to all of these power architectures, but rather is analogically interpreting them through the paradigm of the panopticon.[38]

36 Viveiros de Castro, 'On Models and Examples'.

37 Ibid., p. S301.

38 See Giorgio Agamben, *Signatura rerum*: *Sul metodo* (Bollati Boringhieri, 2008); and Michel Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*: *Naissance de la prison* (Gallimard, 1975). Agam-

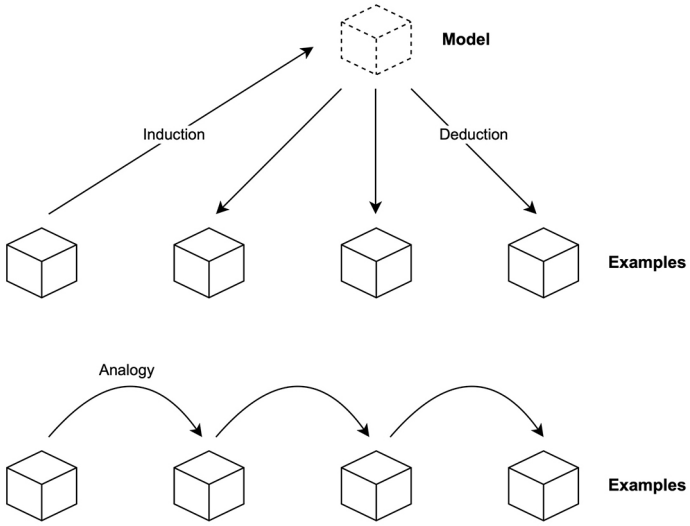


Fig. 3. Model-making versus example-mongering.

The very method of ontological-turn anthropology, or comparative metaphysics, of which Viveiros de Castro is one of the main proponents, is directly connected to the rejection of the making and applying of models in favour of a paradigmatic, example-mongering logic in which anthropological concepts cannot be placed at a separate level from the 'native' concepts they grapple with. In that sense, 'the shift to ontology was [...] in essence an attempt to force the prior backdrop of comparison back into the space of the comparable':[39]

> Several generations of anthropologists assumed that they could account for the indifference of certain indigenous peoples to some basic modern ontological distinctions — those between nature and culture, thing and person, and humans and animals — without questioning the validity of using those very cat-

ben engages with Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* [1962], 2nd edn (University of Chicago Press, 1970).

39 Pierre Charbonnier, Gildas Salmon, and Peter Skafish, 'Introduction', in *Comparative Metaphysics: Ontology after Anthropology*, ed. by Pierre Charbonnier, Gildas Salmon, and Peter Skafish (Rowman & Littlefield, 2017), pp. 1–24 (p. 4).

> egories to make the explanation. When anthropologists instead accepted that these partitions form merely one means of distributing beings among others — when they began trying to do justice to those other ways of making worlds — they exited the reassuring framework of scientific inquiry for the unstable terrain of ontological comparison.[40]

## SCALING AND NONSCALABILITY

Negarestani's essay 'Where is the Concept?' provides a Promethean approach to the relationship between the local and the global, and therefore to the problems of scale and scaling:

> The transition from the local to the global requires something more than the juxtaposition or addition of local contexts. It requires a form of interknitting multiplication between localities that while it acknowledges their particular specifications (parameters and orientations), takes localities beyond their immediate and restricted ambits. It is in this sense that the passage from the local to the global is not simply a form of transit through which the local element preserves its constancy. It is instead a mode of production of new orientations, structures, dimensions and new intuitions of locality and globality. In this respect, universality becomes the operation of productive locality which is globally oriented.[41]

By making scalar transition something that cannot be taken for granted, but that demands the work of 'interknitting', Negarestani seeks to avoid both 'a universalism in which a pre-established and given idea of universality is imposed as the term of unification' and a 'localism that insists on analysing the problems at the level of the local without any recourse to non-local possibilities'.[42] Universality is not presupposed, but rather laboriously constructed from a situated standpoint. Of course, the universal is, on an a priori and theoretical level, a pure logical structure — a model, or the condition for turning an example into a model — but that structure is without any efficacy until it is mobilized, from a concrete standpoint, as a device through which to

40 Ibid., p. 1.

41 Reza Negarestani, 'Where Is the Concept? Localization, Ramification, Navigation', in *When Site Lost the Plot*, ed. by Robin Mackay (Urbanomic, 2015), pp. 225–51 (p. 227).

42 Ibid.

navigate the space between conception and implementation. From a perspective busy with producing scalar nesting, the nesting itself is not given, and spatial relationships are still messy. It is only in retrospect that the relationship appears as one between the local and the global, and therefore as scalar. In his later theorization of artificial intelligence, Negarestani argues that, by constructing a model of itself as universal, inhuman intelligence can map out its present conditions of implementation, so that it can then intervene upon those conditions in order to change them, and is thus able to propel itself beyond its local contingencies.[43]

Thus, through model-making, Promethean engineers are able not only to construct scale-nested world-maps, establishing the rules of transition from one scale to another, but also to use those maps to effectively travel across scales.[44] By determining and intervening upon the conditions of implementation of a certain form of organization at a lower scale, Prometheans can scale up their own projects, which, as we have seen, is an essential part of their strategy of large-scale transformation. By contrast, example-mongering Gaians do not picture the world as a scale-nested totality, and, by composing worlds through the mutual giving and following of examples, avoid creating conditions in which vertical scale-relations come into play.[45] In that sense, we find not only the association of Prometheans and Gaians with large and small scales, respectively, but also a more complex contrast: epistemic scales versus their absence, as well as practices of upscaling versus nonscalability.

The reader less familiar with the authors I am defining as Gaian might ask, 'But isn't Gaia a large-scale figure?' The answer is yes and no. Yes, in the sense that, indeed, Gaian bricolage does not remain restricted to small scales, but rather traverses virtually every scale of what Prometheans would call the 'globe' or the 'planet'. Still, more

43 See Reza Negarestani, *Intelligence and Spirit* (Urbanomic, 2018).

44 This does not imply that Gaians cannot travel far and wide, only that they do not do it through scale-nesting techniques. Polynesian navigation might provide a good example of how great distances can be traversed while using fully nonscalar maps.

45 We might read Clastres's 'societies against the state' as preempting the emergence of vertical scales in politics and cosmology. See Pierre Clastres, *La Société contre l'État* (Les Éditions de minuit, 1974).

fundamentally, Gaia is not a scalar figure. As Latour puts it, it is true that 'the most common definition of the Gaia theory is that Gaia acts as *a single, unique coordinating agent*'. Latour asks, rhetorically, 'Is there then a superior order in addition to living organisms?', and his negative answer is precisely what puts Gaia on the side of bricolage, not engineering: 'as soon as you imagine parts that "fulfill a function" within a whole, you are inevitably bound to imagine, also, an engineer who proceeds to make them work together.'[46] Indeed, it is precisely because the scale of Gaia is the largest scale possible (in the 'sublunary' plane that primarily concerns Latour) that the figure of the organism is inadequate: 'the metaphor of the organism [ … ] is meaningless on this scale, unless we imagine a General Engineer [ … ] capable of giving each of these actors agency for the greatest good of all.'[47] For Latour,

> The inside and outside of all borders are subverted [ … ] not because there is some global plan that orders the concatenation of agents, but because the interaction between a neighbor who is actively manipulating his neighbors and all the others who are manipulating the first one defines what could be called *waves of action*, which respect no borders and, even more importantly, never respect any fixed scale.[48]

Latour emphasizes that Lovelock, in his theory of Gaia, ultimately abandons the ideas of parts and wholes. Lovelock and Margulis, according to Latour, 'were trying to get along entirely without the notion of levels layered on top of one another'.[49] Latour notes that this implies nothing less than the abandonment of the modern idea of nature: '"Nature", in the classical conception, had levels, strata; it was possible to pass from one to another according to a continuous well-ordered process of "zooming". Gaia subverts the levels.'[50] Since both the attitude in regard to scale and the attachment to the modern concept of

46 Latour, *Facing Gaia*, p. 94. See also Bruno Latour, 'Why Gaia Is Not a God of Totality', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 34.2–3 (2017), pp. 1–21 <https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276416652700>.

47 Latour, *Facing Gaia*, p. 95.

48 Ibid., p. 101.

49 Ibid., p. 105.

50 Ibid., p. 106. It is clear that the 'classical conception' that Latour refers to here is not 'Classic' in the sense of ancient, but rather the modern one. See Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*.

nature are defining factors in the disagreement between our cosmopolitical factions, Latour declares that 'those who claim to be ordering neatly the various dimensions of the Earth don't deserve to be called Earthbound'.[51]

In her article 'On Nonscalability', Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing makes one of the most direct cases, from the Gaian side, against scalability, which she defines as 'the ability to expand — and expand, and expand — without rethinking basic elements'.[52] Situating its cosmopolitical paradigm in the plantations of colonial South America, Tsing associates scalability with most of what is wrong with modernity, from slavery, through capitalism, to environmental collapse. Scalable plantations are contrasted to nonscalable mushrooms, which themselves offer the paradigm of alternative ways of existing among the ruins of modernity.[53] Perhaps wary of the real possibility that her 'nonscalability theory' might seem Manichean, Tsing makes sure to caveat that 'nonscalability is by no means better than scalability just by being nonscalable'. 'Scalability', she notes, is simply 'a distinctive design feature', and 'nonscalability refers to everything that is without that feature, whether good or bad'.[54] While it is unclear how such declarations chime with the rest of Tsing's argument, I would still like to take them seriously, since the avoidance of a strict opposition between Promethean scaling and Gaian nonscalability seems to be the most promising reading of her text — at least for the purposes of the present argument. After all, despite the superficially apparent Manichaeism of her discourse, there are crucial details in the text that allow for the kind of more nuanced reading that I am seeking to construct.

Tsing often seems to oscillate between two claims that are both individually excessive and reciprocally contradictory. On the one hand, she often implies that scalability is inherently impossible and an illusion (because assemblages are always too complex and messy to meet

51 Latour, *Facing Gaia*, p. 223.

52 Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, 'On Nonscalability: The Living World Is Not Amenable to Precision-Nested Scales', *Common Knowledge*, 18.3 (2012), pp. 505–24 (p. 505) <https://doi.org/10.1215/0961754X-1630424>. Similar arguments are made in Chapter 3 of Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (Princeton University Press, 2015).

53 Tsing, 'On Nonscalability'.

54 Ibid., p. 509.

its idealized strictures). On the other, she suggests that it is the source of the greatest evils of the modern world. I believe it is possible, however, to remedy these problems by unpacking the implications of how, in Tsing's own terms, scalability is 'a triumph in precision design'. For a project to be made scalable, she notes, its elements have 'to be stabilized so that the expansion [adds] more elements without changing the program'. Since scalability 'is not an ordinary feature of nature', producing it 'takes a lot of work'.[55] In other words, precisely because reality is always too messy to neatly fit into abstract models, stabilizing it enough for the model to maintain a sufficient degree of efficacy requires constant labour — this is what Latour called the 'labour of purification'.[56] This version of nonscalability theory recognizes that if scaling means — as per Tsing's definition — 'to change the scale without changing the framework of knowledge or action',[57] then it is indeed impossible. A project that works across scales requires the labour of mapping and stabilizing the conditions of transference across the relevant scales. At the same time, it becomes clear that *imperfect* scaling is practically possible, precisely insofar as the necessary organized effort is put not only into making the right model, but also into operationalizing the conditions for its trans-scalar application. In this way, a position becomes available that avoids both claiming that scalability is a mere error or illusion — which, if true, would imply that moderns would have never been able to pull the Earth into climate disaster — as well as demonizing it as an all-powerful, unnatural force. This reading is coherent with Tsing's claims that 'nonscalability theory allows scales to arise from the relationships that inform particular projects, scenes, or events', or, in other words, that it 'shows us scalability in action'.[58] Nonscalability cannot work as a theory according to which scalability does not exist, or is inherently bad. It must rather hold, on the one hand, that nonscalability is the background condition (no scalability is simply given), and, on the other, that scalability must be scrupulously constructed and maintained in practice if it is to have any purchase in the making of worlds.

55 Ibid., p. 507.
56 Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*.
57 Tsing, 'On Nonscalability', p. 507.
58 Ibid., p. 509.

## THE BRICOLAGE–ENGINEERING SPECTRUM

Although Viveiros de Castro is both a proponent of the cosmopolitical potential of perspectivist bricolage and very critical of Prometheans' engineering attitude and technological fixes, he too seeks to avoid a Manichean position. 'Let us not simplify the contrast, much less vilify the "engineer",' he writes. Indeed, for him the distinction itself 'cannot but be relative, lying along a continuum rather than being a strict dichotomy'.[59] After all,

> The only engineer in a pure, absolute sense would be God, in whom concept-model and material implementation coincide immediately; human engineers must make do with ideas and materials at hand and therefore are bricoleurs, particularly when they leave the world (the worldview) of models and try to make things work in the phenomenal world. Reciprocally, every grassroots bricoleur calculates, anticipates results, and modifies the state of the world according to a certain intention, that is, a model; she or he is, after all, a 'scientist of the concrete'.[60]

This points to the possibility of understanding engineering and bricolage not as discrete opposites, but as tendencies in the realm of practice that may be navigated and combined in various ways. Indeed, I would argue that to take this distinction for granted as a hard one would be to adopt an engineer's conceptual attitude, while the bricoleur alternative lies precisely in understanding the strict dichotomy as a surface effect of a more complex, differential spectrum of practices. Still, Viveiros de Castro maintains his condemnation of a certain type of Promethean engineering by mobilizing a Geertzian distinction between 'model of' (descriptive) and 'model for' (normative).[61] 'In its normative sense,' he writes, 'a model is above all a political instrument, involving an asymmetric power relation which maximizes the distance between the modelling authority and the subjects (human and nonhuman peoples, landscapes, the atmosphere) that are to be modelled.'[62] He later adds:

59 Viveiros de Castro, 'On Models and Examples', p. S300.

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid. See also Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (Basic Books, 1973).

62 Viveiros de Castro, 'On Models and Examples', p. S300.

> Models are, by definition, simplifications of reality, but they can be used to understand it (models as heuristics) or be imposed upon it (models as norms) in order to browbeat reality, so to speak, into obeying them. In this latter sense they have always lain behind (or above) the Modernist project to flatten the many worlds of Gaian beings into a single global *nomos*.[63]

Here I diverge with Viveiros de Castro in that I doubt that this distinction is the most useful for solving the cosmopolitical conundrums of the engineer-bricoleur interface. Admitting heuristic scientific models — limited abstractions from empirical data that can be reformed and updated in the light of further experience — is a relevant concession. However, it seems to me that discarding all normative modelling (under the guise of the unilateral postulation of an abstract ideal and subsequent imposition of that ideal on reality) relies both on an inferior rendering of Promethean engineering (we want to confront the best possible versions of each approach), and on a separation between description and normativity that would seem out of place in a Gaian argument. Although, in the Sellarsian framework adopted by thinkers such as Brassier and Negarestani, normativity is differentiated from causality, it does not maintain a unilateral, top-down relation with empirical reality. Quite the contrary: the emphasis is on the contingency and constant re-evaluation of normative commitments.[64] Furthermore, after Wittgenstein as well as with Latour, it seems to me difficult to separate purely cognitive practices from normativity, since the former are themselves afforded by normative frameworks (notably the 'game of giving and asking for reasons') or by nature-culture (and therefore factuality-normativity) 'hybrids'.[65] In that sense, I would like to avoid discarding all models 'for' as inherently complicit with climate catastrophe. After all, even if a monoculture — or mononature — of modern naturalism at a global scale has most likely been destructive to the biosphere in the period of its hegemony following the Industrial

63 Ibid.

64 Wilfrid Sellars, *In the Space of Reasons*: *Selected Essays of Wilfrid Sellars*, ed. by Kevin Scharp and Robert B. Brandom (Harvard University Press, 2007). See, for example, Negarestani, 'The Labor of the Inhuman'.

65 See Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* [1953], rev. 4th edn, ed. by P. M. S. Hacker and Joachim Schulte, trans. by G. E. M. Anscombe, P. M. S. Hacker, and Joachim Schulte (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009); Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*.

Revolution, I would not want to neglect the possibility that the participation of such cosmology in a more diverse ecology of practices could still be not only sustainable, but even beneficial.

It is not entirely clear to me what Viveiros de Castro's position is about this. What I am interested in is countering a particular interpretation of his text by emphasizing another side of its argument: that models and examples can be understood as opposing vectors within a continuous spectrum, such that neither figure of practice is entirely alien to the other, but each may be seen as a variant or transformation of its counterpart. In other words, I suggest that, through the right procedures, an example may be turned into a model and vice versa. What we still need, however, is an articulate conception of how models and examples can be thought in such a way. In order to achieve that, my strategy will be to introduce a notion that is usually associated with radical bricolage, but to interpret it with an emphasis on its often-disregarded engineering potentials. That is the elusive gesture of thought that appears in Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's work,[66] individually as well as collaboratively, under names as varied as 'diagram', 'abstract machine', 'rhizome', and 'nomos'.

Deleuze takes the notion of the diagram, among other sources, from the same Foucauldian discussion of the panopticon that, as mentioned above, is also a privileged example of the paradigm for Agamben.[67] Foucault uses the word in the following passage:

> The Panopticon should not be understood as a dream building: it is the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form; its functioning, abstracted from any obstacle, resistance or friction, may very well be represented as a purely architectural and optical system: it is in fact a figure of political technology that can and must be detached from any specific use.[68]

Agamben argues that the Foucauldian paradigm is 'not only an exemplar or model, which imposes the constitution of a normal science,

66 'Gesture of thought' may not be the most adequate expression, but I would not dare to say 'concept', since the authors seem to be aiming precisely at something pre-conceptual or non-conceptual.

67 Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault* [1986] (Les Éditions de minuit, 2013).

68 Foucault, *Surveiller et punir*, p. 207; my translation.

but also and above all an exemplum which allows one to gather the statements and the discursive practices within a new intelligible ensemble and a new problematic context'.[69] By referring to 'normal science', Agamben is here referring to how, in Kuhn, the concept of paradigm also holds 'two different senses', one in which it designates 'the ensemble of technics, models and values to which the members of a community more or less consciously adhere', and one in which it indicates 'a single element of that ensemble [...] that, functioning as a common example, substitutes itself to the explicit rules that allow us to define a certain tradition of research'. Thus, we see that a paradigm/diagram like that of the panopticon is neither purely a model nor simply an example, but rather that it can drift along a model-example axis according to different contexts and procedures.

For Deleuze (and Guattari), the diagram is a complex of force-relations that inhabit a middle ground between the absence of form and form as such; they are quasi-formal force relations that precede (logically rather than historically) the emergence of determinate forms and, for that reason, help explain them. 'The diagram', Jakub Zdebik writes, 'allows a glimpse of the state that comes before the formation of an object, and of what goes into its formation.'[70] This gesture of thought is at the centre of the Deleuzian project of an inverted Platonism, in which ideal structures hold no explanatory power, but are rather that which must be explained. If there is such a thing as a difference between normative models and the factual nature to which they apply, those are no grounds for a final explanation of reality, but rather the product of a geologically deep history that demands genealogy — a 'geology of morals', in Deleuze and Guattari's expression.[71]

That the diagram, in that sense, would seem like a bricoleur's concept, closer to example-mongering than model-making, does not mean that it is entirely alien to the model. Indeed, although Deleuze and Guattari write that 'there is no abstract machine, or machines, in the sense of a Platonic Idea, transcendent, universal, eternal', they proceed

69 Agamben, *Signatura rerum*, p. 20.

70 Jakub Zdebik, *Deleuze and the Diagram: Aesthetic Threads in Visual Organization* (Continuum, 2012), p. 2.

71 See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Mille plateaux. Capitalisme et schizophrénie II* (Les Éditions de minuit, 1980).

to add that 'what we have said does not preclude the possibility of "the" abstract machine serving as a transcendent model, under very particular conditions'.[72] In his critical reading of *A Thousand Plateaus*, Brassier emphasizes this often-neglected opening to the possibility of engineering:

> Tensors perform a diagrammatic function: they are the operators of torsion through which deformalization composes intensities, sign-particles and flows on the plane of consistency. Diagrammatic composition is the identification of these points of torsion. But this composition requires concrete rules: 'There are rules, rules of plan(n)ing, of diagramming [...]. The abstract machine is not random; the continuities, emissions and combinations, and conjunctions do not occur in just any fashion.' Thus it is the rules of planification ('planing') that ensure consistency, not decoding, deterritorialization or destratification as such.[73]

In that sense, Brassier claims that 'diagramming is akin to engineering: it is a cognitive operation carried out with a view to effectuating certain practical imperatives under specific material constraints'.[74] Equating the Deleuzian diagram with a finalized model is, in my view, directly at odds with Deleuze and Guattari's insistence on the non-teleological character of diagrammatic functions. Nevertheless, Brassier is right that under the 'very particular conditions' that the two authors themselves acknowledge, diagrams can and do operate as models. Indeed, a naturalized approach to model-making (one that does not rely either on Platonism or theology) cannot but arrive at the conclusion that all models are but sufficiently stabilized diagrams — schemas of practice that, by mapping and controlling their own conditions of implementation, are able to abstract themselves from their local origin and *scale*, in the sense of becoming reproducible with a sufficient (although imperfect) degree of success. Perhaps for that reason, a moderate Promethean thinker like Patricia Reed often uses both terms without

72 Ibid., p. 639.

73 Ray Brassier, 'Concrete Rules and Abstract Machines: Form and Function in *A Thousand Plateaus*', in *'A Thousand Plateaus' and Philosophy*, ed. by Henry Sommers-Hall, Jeffrey A. Bell, and James Williams (Edinburgh University Press, 2018), pp. 260–79 (p. 267).

74 Ibid., p. 270.

creating a strong contrast between them, even while maintaining an emphasis on organization, future-oriented planning, and interventive efficacy.[75]

Based on the above, we may say that, to the extent that 'we have never been modern', there have also never been, at the ontological level, any models, but only diagrams or examples. Still, the epistemic idea of models, made efficacious by collectives acting *as though* models really existed, is sufficient to provide these fictional entities with a degree of efficacy. We may have never been modern, and yet it seems undeniable that modernity has transformed reality. That is a sense in which Prometheans and Gaians turn out not to be in direct contradiction, either in the domain of theory or in that of practice. While Gaians focus on metaphysics, claiming that exemplary singularities/multiplicities are more fundamental than either normative or descriptive models, Prometheans tend to avoid any metaphysical claims, focusing instead on the epistemic and pragmatic domains in which models indeed hold operational priority.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

Let us conclude by schematizing the consequences of the distinction and interfacing of Promethean engineers and Gaian bricoleurs in the sections above. In the terms of our discussion, scales (a scalar view of the world) and scaling (practical trans-scalar navigation) are the products of practices of worldmaking that rely on models, associated with a naturalist cosmology. Outside of the worlds constructed through those particular practices, the notion of scale, in a strict definition, loses applicability. That, however, does not mean that the notion of scale is false, nor ethico-politically condemnable. It only means that, in order to be rigorously and ethically manipulated, it must be carefully circumscribed to its own conditions of applicability, while the world-

75 See, for example, Patricia Reed, 'Orientation in a Big World: On the Necessity of Horizonless Perspectives', *e-flux*, 101 (2019) <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/101/273343/orientation-in-a-big-world-on-the-necessity-of-horizonless-perspectives> [accessed 26 June 2026]; and Patricia Reed, 'The End of a World and its Pedagogies', *Making and Breaking*, 2 (2021), pp. 1–6 <https://makingandbreaking.org/article/the-end-of-a-world-and-its-pedagogies/> [accessed 26 June 2026]. The 'moderate Promethean' characterization is mine, not Reed's.

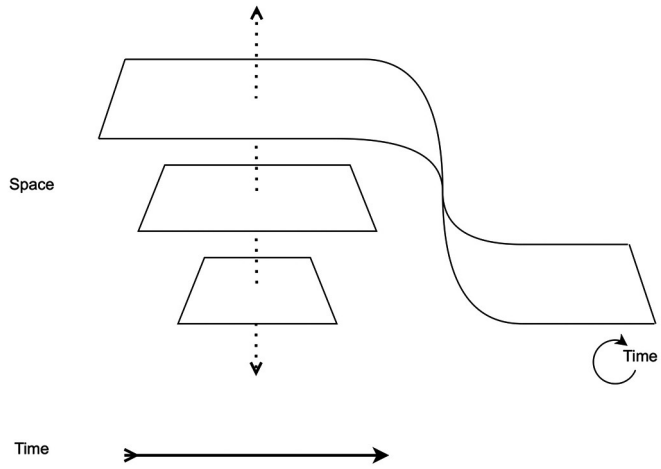


Fig. 4. Interface between a Promethean and a Gaian world-order.

making projects to which it is, in each concrete case, associated should be interrogated in terms of their sustainability and compatibility with surrounding world-orders.

Prometheans and Gaians alike will agree that there is no metaphysically given scale-ordered reality. On this metaphysical plane, Gaians deal with world-differences in cosmopolitical terms, without assuming any kind of spatio-temporal ordering that is a priori trans-worldly. They do not, however, preclude spatio-temporal scale-orders being established internally to any given world — indeed this may constitute the very essence of any natural world as such (we should not forget that animists are not purely animistic — that they do mobilize a modicum of naturalist practices immanently to the world they inhabit). If, however, spatial and temporal orders allowing for scale-nesting become applicable across worlds, that already means that we are no longer dealing with separate worlds, but rather with an encompassing world that has been unified.

In this sense, dealing with the geopolitics of scale through the conceptual characters of Prometheans and Gaians allows us to coherently

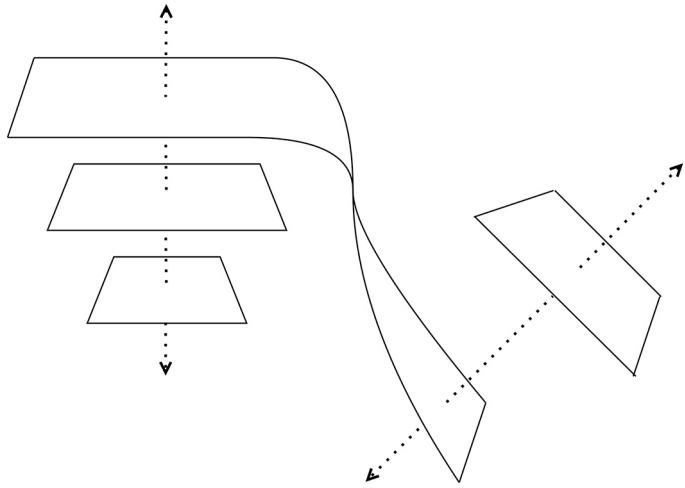

FIG. 5. Interface between two Promethean world-orders.

adopt a critique of scalar worldviews and scaling practices without discarding the explanatory power and practical utility of the concept of scale. Rather than disavowed, scale is simply provincialized — not in the sense of being defined as a strictly European cultural practice, but of being circumscribed to world-orders in which scalar orientations are actively constructed as such. This should allow the concept of scale to remain handy in dealing with the scientific and political problems that our age of catastrophes implies, without sustaining the unexamined ideological character associated with its colonial and extractive versions.

# The Pleasure of the 1:1 Scale

## A Short Interview with Lisa Messeri

FILIPPO BOSCO, FEDERICA DI BLASIO, AND MARIETTA KESTING

ICI Berlin invited Lisa Messeri to its 2025–26 lecture series *Scale* to address questions of scale that emerge from the perspective of her fieldwork in the anthropology of science and technology.[1] Her reflections hold great potential for introducing overlooked areas of inquiry in the current theorization of scale. The following short interview aims to continue the conversation on some of those themes, including the situatedness and universalization of knowledge, the limits of 1:1 simulation and surrogates, and the pleasure and affective dimension of scale.

Filippo Bosco, Federica Di Blasio, Marietta Kesting (ICI): Your first book, *Placing Outer Space*,[2] addresses some issues concerning situated knowledge and planetary imagination that have since become central to the debate on scale in recent years.[3] Your analysis centres place as a 'mode of understanding',[4] but also destabilizes assumptions we might

1 Lisa Messeri, '1:1 — Drawn to Scale', lecture, ICI Berlin, 23 March 2026, video recording, mp4, 01:37:39 <https://doi.org/10.25620/e260323>.

2 Lisa Messeri, *Placing Outer Space: An Earthly Ethnography of Other Worlds* (Duke University Press, 2016) <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822373919>.

3 See, in particular, Joshua DiCaglio, *Scale Theory: A Nondisciplinary Inquiry* (University of Minnesota Press, 2021).

4 Ibid., p. 11.

have about place — for example, the fact that we tend to associate place with the local scale rather than with the 'enormity' of the planetary scale.[5] Does your leaning towards place reflect a mistrust towards scale as an 'objective' cognitive apparatus (echoing Donna Haraway's cautious warning against the god trick), or do you see the relationship between place and scale in a different way?

**Lisa Messeri (LM)**: In *Placing Outer Space*, I took scale and scalar practices for granted. They were not the object of inquiry but rather descriptors of the geography through which my ideas travelled. The phenomena that the scientists of this book studied existed at the planetary scale and I argued that place-making was a strategy they employed to yoke this scale to human experience. As I wrote, 'Place suggests an intimacy that can scale down the cosmos to the level of human experience.'[6] There are of course consequences of wielding place-making in service of scientific knowledge, and I explore one of these when considering how scientists present 3D maps of Mars to the public. Understandably, they were eager to share the excitement of the feeling these representations offer of 'being on' Mars, translating an abstract entity into a relatable kind of place. But Mars is not only something that can be made knowable through acts of being. I therefore found it interesting that this performance of 'situated knowledge' was also a performance of a hegemonic mode of scientific knowing at the planetary scale. That was my reason for naming this practice a double god trick, taking inspiration from Haraway's own god trick exemplar (viewing a planet from above) and showing that, even when the planet is viewed from the surface through a purportedly embodied perspective, it still conveys the universalizing work of the scientific gaze. I was not making a normative claim, nor offering a caution, but instead exploring the work that place-making does when communicating science. I quite like DiCaglio's re-reading of this double god trick, in which he argues that this scalar work risks minimizing 'the enormity of what is being performed' in studying distant planets.[7] Such an analysis becomes

5 Messeri, *Placing Outer Space*, p. 11.
6 Ibid., p. 2.
7 DiCaglio, *Scale Theory*, p. 489.

available when shifting the focus away from place-making and onto scale-making, and so I see these two readings as compatible.

**ICI**: In your last book, *In the Land of the Unreal*, the concept of the façade is extended from architecture and the specific urban aesthetic of Los Angeles to define a specific feature of virtual reality (VR).[8] Like façades, VR promises 'more' reality while at the same time limiting one to 'less' experience. How do you interpret this unmatching of real and 'unreal' in the 1:1 scale of simulation? Do you foresee the possibility of a scalar understanding of the façade (something that keeps at a distance and yet allows zooming and projective fantasies)? In particular, VR resonates with Anna Tsing's remarks on scalability as 'a triumph of precision design, not just in computers but in business, development, the "conquest" of nature, and, more generally, world making', and as 'allow[ing] us to see only uniform blocks, ready for further expansion.'[9] What, vice versa, would be a nonscalable quality in simulation?

**LM**: The façade helped me articulate what was both appealing and illusory about a VR experience (and, by extension, other simulations). Imagine Cinderella's castle at Disneyland. It is a beautifully detailed façade, and a child might imagine that there is even more wonder inside. But instead of the interior of a castle, inside there is a restaurant, an exhibit, backstage areas, and empty spaces. The façade promises a rich world, but 'in reality' it conceals something else. This is one of the reasons that simulations are so pleasurable, because we can wonder at the level of detail invested in something that is other than it is. To think of VR as a façade is to appreciate that it, too, promises more than it can actually deliver. A wonderful VR experience might seem infinitely explorable, but there are limits and edges to the virtual. This is what makes VR unreal — not that it is in opposition to reality, but rather the definition of the unreal that I offer in the book names an awareness of the multiplicity of reality. The 'unreal' is then also a scalar

8 Lisa Messeri, *In the Land of the Unreal: Virtual and Other Realities in Los Angeles* (Duke University Press, 2024) <https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478059226>.

9 Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, 'On Nonscalability: The Living World Is Not Amenable to Precision-Nested Scales', *Common Knowledge*, 18.3 (2012), pp. 505–24 (p. 505) <https://doi.org/10.1215/0961754X-1630424>.

term, in that it is meant to apply to technologies and techniques like VR, the city of Los Angeles (as the setting of my ethnography), and also elements of contemporary politics. In the US context, for example, I would label climate change denial as unreal not (only) because it is wrong, but because it exposes that scientific reality is but one reality that structures people's lifeworlds. To bring it back to VR, if you were doing a virtual experience of Cinderella's castle, you would not forget that you were still in your living room even if you might wonder at how realistic the simulation feels. It can be pleasurable to feel immersed in one reality (whether it is a virtual or actual façade) while fully knowing that you are in another far less fantastical reality. When people do VR, they have an omniscient view of a sort, in that they are aware of the multiple realities and can therefore enjoy the unreality of it all. But the unreal is asymmetrical, sensed to some but not others depending on the example, and can be perilous as well as pleasurable.

Thinking about VR simulations vis-à-vis Tsing's article presents an interesting irony from the point of view of product design and accessibility. On the one hand, you might imagine that the mid-2010 resurgence of VR that my ethnography examined — one that was fuelled by Facebook's multi-billion-dollar investment in the tech — would be the epitome of the kind of scalable phenomena that Tsing is (rightfully) critiquing. However, VR was a mass market failure precisely because it didn't scale as its boosters had hoped! This was a significant theme of my fieldwork, during which VR creators lamented its nonscalability. For example, I open the book with Iñárritu's celebrated and award-winning *Carne y Arena*.[10] However, in order to see that piece, I had to physically be in LA and secure a ticket for one of the fifty or so viewings for any given day of its exhibition. Only one person could be in the exhibit at a time, so while hundreds or thousands of museum visitors each day might take in Chris Burden's *Metropolis II* kinetic sculpture near where *Carne y Arena* was being shown,[11] a mere

10 Alejandro Iñárritu, *Carne y Arena* (2017), virtual reality film installation, 7 mins. See '_Carne y Arena', Docubase <https://docubase.mit.edu/project/carne-y-arena/> [accessed 12 May 2026].

11 Chris Burden, *Metropolis II* (2011), kinetic sculpture. See 'Metropolis II', Los Angeles County Museum of Art <https://www.lacma.org/art/exhibition/metropolis-ii> [accessed 12 May 2026].

fraction saw this VR piece. The power of the piece was its 1:1 scale, which rendered it nonscalable.

There is a provocation here, which is that VR's digitality offered the façade of something that was scalable but its materiality revealed this to be a fantasy. Like Cinderella's castle, it was, in practice, something else.

**ICI**: Going back to the questions of a universalized gaze and situated knowledge, we wonder in what scalar terms would you frame the use of AI surrogates for scientific experiments. Is the simulated human scale a procedure of upscaling or downscaling — and why? To expand the question to the 1:1, or the scale of simulation: if the simulation is always imaginary, and — as in the literary thought experiments — unattainable or absurd when it materializes, why are we so fascinated by it? Jorge Luis Borges's short story 'On Exactitude in Science' describes precisely an empire where cartography becomes so exact that mapmakers create a 1:1 scale map of the entire territory.[12] This device, exactly matching the land 'point for point', ultimately proves useless, crumbling over time and serving as a satirical commentary on the pursuit of total perfection in representation. But what would have changed if Borges had already imagined not a physical map, but a digital map, or one embedded in a virtual reality scene? Is the criticism of the (impossible) 1:1 merely that it is always a 'bad copy', or does it have further implications?

**LM**: The concepts of the façade and the unreal (and how they work together) is my personal answer to the fascination we have with the 1:1. There is a Netflix show called *Is It Cake?*, where bakers make realistic-looking confections of everyday objects, and judges have to guess before taking a bite whether it is a cake that has been presented to them or the real thing.[13] This is a wonderfully silly show, but it is also an illustration of why the 1:1 is so compelling. A shoe in and of

12 Jorge Luis Borges, 'On Exactitude in Science', in Borges, *Collected Fictions*, trans. by Andrew Hurley (Penguin, 1999), p. 325. The one-paragraph story was first published in 1946 and fictitiously credited to 'Suarez Miranda, *Viajes devarones prudentes*, Libro IV, Cap. XLV, Lerida, 1658'.

13 *Is It Cake?* (Alfred Street Industries, 2022–26). See 'Is It Cake?', Netflix <https://www.netflix.com/de-en/title/81333845> [accessed 12 May 2026].

itself is nothing remarkable, but a cake that looks so much like a shoe that one questions its reality is, the producers of this television show figured out, a total delight. The cake fashioned realistically as a shoe is a façade (it promises one thing but delivers something else), and the pleasure comes when a fork pierces the fondant 'leather', revealing the unreality of the object. This is a ridiculous example, but given that there are thirty-five episodes of this show, it indicates our fascination with the 1:1!

But let me turn, with more seriousness, to the AI surrogate. This case is drawn from my ongoing research (conducted with Molly Crockett) on AI in science, and is a different kind of simulation than the examples pulled from the two books.[14] In both of those cases, I offered examples of simulations that strove, as closely as possible, to resemble reality. When we enter the scientific lab, however, simulations are knowing abstractions by which scientists have made strategic decisions about which elements of the real should be simplified or excluded. The large-language-model-created AI surrogates that some scientists are today implementing in human subjects' research are not meant to replicate an embodied individual, but instead a laboratory participant. Techniques of the laboratory have, over the past century, made the complex human something that can be quantified and studied. In other words, the person who steps into a lab to participate in a study becomes, themselves, a simplified simulation. As with façades, there is an illusion here, which is that when scientists report findings from the lab, these reductions are elided, and claims about 'human nature' emerge from such experiments. The laboratory participant — whether human or AI surrogate — are purposely downscaled humans.

Research with human participants has long had a scaling problem. Like the spectators in *Carne y Arena*, one can only get so many participants into a bricks-and-mortar laboratory. And yet, robust scientific claims in the quantitative social sciences require a large sample size. Much of today's behavioural research has found ways to scale up by further reducing the aspects of the human that are studied in ways

14 Molly J. Crockett and Lisa Messeri, 'AI Surrogates and Illusions of Generalizability in Cognitive Science', *Trends in Cognitive Sciences*, 30.3 (2026), pp. 203–15 <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tics.2025.09.012>.

that make experiments amenable to online crowdsourcing platforms. AI surrogates promise to further this trend, providing for researchers more participants, faster and cheaper. That these participants are now simulated rather than real has caused less concern than one might imagine.

In downscaling the human participant, those working with AI surrogates have upscaled the reach and power of their experimental findings. Crockett and I caution that the robustness of these findings, and what they actually tell us about the human, ought to be treated with scepticism precisely because of this tension between the downscaling and upscaling.[15] Attention must be paid to how such research claims are being made. Is the downscaling acknowledged or, as is the case for some research groups, are overtures being (falsely) made to the 1:1 nature of these surrogates? In my estimation, AI surrogates are indeed 'bad copies' of the original. However, this isn't necessarily a problem if such simplifications or downscalings are reported, such that appropriate bounds can be placed on experimental claims. The treachery of these bad copies emerges when they are instead passed off as being as good as (or better than) the original. The 1:1 simulation is itself neutral and can be silly and fun (as *Is It Cake?* demonstrates) when the absurdity of its ambition is acknowledged. Or, as is the case with AI surrogates, it can be dangerously misleading when the inherent limitations of simulation are ignored or unacknowledged.

**ICI**: Pleasure, fascination, and familiarity are all positive feelings that you deem very important for understanding how navigating through scales contributes to the creation, experience, and dissemination of new knowledge. Can you start from here to speculate on the role of affect in the epistemic opportunities opened up by scale, both in relation to soothing or pleasurably unexpected articulations of the 1:1 scale, and unsettling scale jumps?

**LM**: I have focused on pleasure because, from my ethnographic vantage point as someone who studies the creators of knowledge, the

15 Ibid.

pursuit of the 1:1 model is intentionally and (often) knowingly incomplete. For my examples, affect is a telling heuristic as it signals who is aware of the model's shortcomings (and can therefore be circumspect about the knowledge being produced) and who might not be aware. Lev Manovich has considered the other side of this epistemic equation: how the 1:1 can be used to deceive the consumer of knowledge. In an essay titled 'To Lie and to Act', he includes an example that can sit alongside Cinderella's castle: Potemkin's villages.[16] These are the likely apocryphal architectural façades that Grigory Potemkin, the field marshal for Catherine the Great, would set up along the road as Catherine passed through rural parts of Russia, disguising the desperate reality of the villagers as prosperity. She was being sold a lie, and while Potemkin might have thrilled at the deceit, would any affect accompany Catherine's passing glance at a reasonable-looking countryside? Affect, then, might be a way to track who is in a position to benefit from the kind of knowledge that these plays of scale produce, and who might we be wary of as a potential victim of the lies contained therein.

16 Lev Manovich, 'To Lie and to Act: Potemkin's Villages, Cinema and Telepresence — Notes around *Checkpoint '95 Project*', in *Mythos Information — Welcome to the Wired World*, ed. by Karl Gerbel and Peter Weibel (Springer, 1995) <https://archive.aec.at/print/180159/> [accessed 29 June 2026].

# The Everyday in Dramatic Closeness

CLAUDIA PEPPEL

What does our everyday life consist of if we lay it out in front of us? Setting the alarm clock for the second time in the morning, looking at the phone while eating, watering the plants, listening to obscure music from the 80s, walking around the flat with a toothbrush in one's mouth, setting off for work. We tend to think that we know what our daily lives are made of: the objects, furniture, people, meals, peculiarities, habitual practices, tasks, and rituals that make them ours, however insignificant and domestic they may appear. But where does everyday life actually take place, both in reality and in our imagination? Why do the environment, our flat, the street, our favourite restaurant, and the building where we live and work become fixed backdrops to our daily lives? Which things and routines are we particularly attached to, and why? Can they prevent us from wondering what to do next, allow us to stop reflecting on ourselves, or help us to endure terrible things? Although at its core the everyday primarily provides a pragmatic structure, there is something magical and soothing about its ritualistic force as well as about the satisfying feeling of being surrounded by people, spaces, and things that have meaning — sometimes a mysterious or hidden meaning that only we know about. At the same time, the everyday is repetitive, mundane, and boring — in short, it is ordinary but not static, as philosopher Konrad Liessmann notes:

> Everyday life: This is what is ordinary and familiar, and the experiences we have in this everyday life — our everyday experiences — are ordinary and devoid of any major surprises. [ … ] Everyday life can be described as a place where the focus is on reducing perception, not on sharpening it. Precisely because it involves the familiar, we generally don't have to look or listen that closely.[1]

The everyday consists of habits and is permeated by perceptual continuities. It can provoke shapeless boredom or take the form of a protective layer, or it can be unbearable, affected by silent cracks, obstacles, and things that are beyond our control. Everyday life is usually structured by basic needs, work, and leisure, and often shaped by gendered, racialized, and class-related practices and regimes. It can be problematic, cruel, or merciless. Examples of this can be seen in cases of domestic violence, illness, war, and displacement, and in prisons, hospitals, or psychiatric facilities, where daily life is filled with fear or where the everyday routines of an institution are forced on people. Daily lives can oscillate between coming to terms with one's situation and occasional acts of defiance, between emphasizing independence and undermining the authorities.[2] It is remarkable how quickly people tend, on the one hand, to re-establish familiar daily routines when they find themselves in unknown surroundings or living in a new place, and, on the other, to give up certain habits and adopt new ones; this is what Henri Lefebvre calls 'the contradiction at the heart of everydayness — everything changes'.[3] The new bed will no longer feel new at some

1 Konrad Paul Liessmann, 'Die schönen Dinge. Über Ästhetik und Alltagserfahrung', lecture delivered at the conference 'Ästhetik und Alltagserfahrung: VII. Kongress der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Ästhetik' (Friedrich-Schiller-Universität, Jena, 29 September 2008), p. 1; my translation with the help of DeepL <https://www.dgae.de/wp-content/uploads/2008/09/Konrad_Paul_Liessmann.pdf> [accessed 29 July 2026].

2 The film *The Florida Project* (dir. by Sean Baker, USA, 2017) details how the daily lives of the protagonists, a mother and her daughter, slowly fall apart due to restrictions imposed upon them by the employment office. See Claudia Peppel and Clio Nicastro, 'Essen, beiläufig — Anmerkungen zu Sean Bakers *The Florida Project*', in *Ernährung und Identität*, ed. by Jennifer Grünewald and Anja Trittelvitz (ibidem, 2019), pp. 295–309.

3 Henri Lefebvre, 'The Everyday and Everydayness', trans. by Christine Levich, *Yale French Studies*, 73 (1987), pp. 7–11 (p. 10) <https://doi.org/10.2307/2930193> (repr. in Julie Mehretu and Henri Lefebvre, *The Everyday and Everydayness* (Afterall Books, 2021)).

point; the renewed everyday will take over as we grow used to living with a dog, a child, or the loss of a loved one.

Whatever happened to the morning ritual involving coffee, the newspaper, cigarettes, and spending hours in the bath? These analogue practices have been silently replaced by digital ones, such as taking pictures and looking at our phones: 'The contemporary visual autobiography is not only composed of self-imagery but also of pictures of one's immediate, everyday surroundings.'[4] Questions arise as to how the contemporary everyday is constructed, monitored, transformed, and shared: Does it change due to public self-representation and the involvement of spectators? How do we reflect on our everyday experiences and perceptions and provide 'an understanding of everyday life that acknowledges the value of the banal and overlooked, the boring and passive, and the significance of the quotidian, often repetitive micro-events'?[5] Due to its monotonous and unchanging appeal, one often misses subtle, transitory changes. Some treat the everyday with impatience and want to surpass it; others believe 'it should be minimised, bracketed' to make room for more important things in life.[6]

Depending on our state of mind, everyday objects either come to the forefront or fade into the background. They stand out when we lose track of things, when the demands of daily life become overwhelming, or when we cannot find our bearings within it. Seeing the mass of everyday objects out of their usual places during relocation makes them seem like an impossible burden rather than the necessary and sometimes cherished objects of a life.[7] Do perceptual continuities cease when there is a change in scale of perception? According to Roland Barthes, it is very important to understand how a disruption in perceiving the everyday can lead to a new way of experiencing

4 Louise Wolthers, 'Autographing: Digitized Self-Imagery', in *Auto: Self-Representation and Digital Photography*, ed. by Hans Hedberg and others (Art & Theory Publishing, 2014), pp. 57–81 (p. 70).

5 Tina M. Campt and others, 'Introduction', in *Imagining Everyday Life: Engaging with Vernacular Photography*, ed. by Campt and others (Steidl), pp. 11–16 (p. 11).

6 Lefebvre, 'The Everyday and Everydayness', p. 11.

7 I owe this point to Ben Nichols and I am grateful for his astute comments.

it.[8] It seems that we can only be conscious spectators of our day-to-day life if we manage to treat it as a spectacle and step outside of it,[9] into what Susan Sontag once called 'a degraded experience of pure possibility'.[10] How can we possibly create an awareness and linger on potentially meaningful perceptions of the everyday? As Nikos Papastergiadis points out, it was the avant-garde who helped 'to lead in the transformation of everyday consciousness':[11]

> At various points in the twentieth century, the concept of the everyday shifted from a mere descriptor of the prosaic elements in social life, to becoming a critical category for not only confronting the materiality and totality of the contemporary culture, but also a means of redefining reality for the purposes of social transformation.[12]

The Surrealists and Dadaists, and later the Lettrists and Situationists, focused on everyday experience and everyday objects by shifting the emphasis 'from the museum object to the provisory nature of lived experience'.[13] Roland Barthes, Michel de Certeau, Annie Ernaux, Henri Lefebvre, and Georges Perec famously contributed to the rise of the *quotidien* as a phenomenon and as a discourse.[14] Exploring its numerous notions and contexts in French culture, they encouraged readers to ask why everyday objects have the meaning they do and highlighted how difficult it is to question the most obvious things.

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8 Michael Sheringham, *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present* (Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 193.

9 Minna Salmi, 'Autonomy and Time in Home-Based Work', in *Gendered Practices in Working Life*, ed. by Liisa Rantalaiho and Tuula Heiskanen (Macmillan, 1997), pp. 101–16 (p. 114).

10 Susan Sontag, *The Volcano Lover* (Penguin, 1992), p. 4.

11 Nikos Papastergiadis, *Spatial Aesthetics: Art, Place, and the Everyday* (Institute of Network Cultures, 2010), p. 22 <https://www.networkcultures.org/_uploads/tod/TOD%235.pdf> [accessed 7 September 2026].

12 Ibid., p. 21.

13 Rosa Barotsi, *Time and the Everyday in Slow Cinema*, Cultural Inquiry, 34 (ICI Berlin Press, 2025), p. 165 <https://doi.org/10.37050/ci-34>.

14 This is to name only a few of the most prominent French theorists and writers. Sheringham provides a great overview, especially of the everyday in French culture in the last four decades of the twentieth century. See Sheringham, *Everyday Life*, especially chapter 5 on Roland Barthes, 'All that Falls: Barthes and the Everyday', pp. 175–207. Another great overview is offered in Barotsi, *Time and the Everyday in Slow Cinema*, pp. 161–224.

The ability to challenge familiar perceptions by changing scale or proportion — a transformation that modifies the potency of attention and observation — emerged as a central element in Barthes's exploration of quotidian experience, beginning in the 1970s.[15] Sharing everyday personal experience enhanced feminist consciousness-raising to understand broader patriarchal patterns and systems. As Papastergiadis highlights, the everyday fuelled not only feminist and artistic debates on praxis but sociological and philosophical ones as well:

> The concept of the everyday was not a retreat or an escape from the social, but a means of rethinking the relationship between the particular and the general, or how attention to the details of daily life can reveal an insight into the broader system.[16]

What role do social relations, time, and structures play in shaping and reproducing the everyday? One could argue that the everyday automatically divides life into two categories: things that are part of our everyday life, and things that are not.[17] 'The everyday is [ … ] the most universal and the most unique condition, the most social and the most individuated, the most obvious and the best hidden.'[18] We barely realize how many different ways everyday scenes are depicted and reproduced in the world that surrounds us — in literature, film, art, telenovelas, and advertising — and what defamiliarization a change in scale can provoke.

*Powers of Ten*, a short and paradigmatic educational film from 1977, written and directed by Charles and Ray Eames, opens with two people enjoying a picnic.[19] The camera then zooms upwards to show their surroundings, revealing, via the narrator, that the woman and man are in a park on Chicago's waterfront. It moves further and further away into the universe, before zooming back in to show a close-up of

15 Sheringham, *Everyday Life*, p. 194.

16 Papastergiadis, *Spatial Aesthetics*, p. 22.

17 Here I draw on an observation made by John Searle regarding the creation of lists. See John Searle, 'The Storm over the University', *The New York Review of Books*, 6 December 1990 <https://www.nybooks.com/articles/1990/12/06/the-storm-over-the-university/> [accessed 21 July 2026].

18 Lefebvre, 'The Everyday and Everydayness', p. 9.

19 *Powers of Ten*, dir. by Charles and Ray Eames (USA, 1977) <https://www.eamesoffice.com/the-work/powers-of-ten/> [accessed 8 September 2026].

the picnicking man's hand and then delving deep into the microscopic realm.[20] The film depicts the relative scale of the universe in powers of ten and serves as a tool for understanding different scales in relation to the human. Though it was skilfully edited and not simply filmed with a zoom lens, the film offers a glimpse into the compositional possibilities and dramatic effects of zoom.[21] As Paul Joannides observes, 'A zoom generally singles out a detail in a setting or reveals a setting by moving out of a detail'; it makes the process of attention visible but 'unlike a tracking shot a zoom presents a denial of perspective'.[22] By focusing primarily on the visual effects and seemingly effortless expandability created by the cosmic zoom, *Powers of Ten* offers an unusual approach to proximity and distance, detail and the bigger picture, emphasizing a Sunday ritual that had become all the rage, whilst pushing other aspects, such as gender and ethnicity, into the background. Thus, in its opening scene, *Powers of Ten* captures the Anglo-American zeitgeist of the 1960s and 1970s, when white people were both the privileged subject and the target audience, as Colson Whitehead notes in his novel *Harlem Shuffle*: 'White folks on picnics were everywhere in ads these days.'[23] In the context of this everyday scene as a reference point, the cosmic zoom offers, in retrospect, a space for reflection, keeping Papastergiadis's questions in mind: 'Whose everyday is being referenced in contemporary art? What can be taken for granted in everyday life?'[24]

20 For more on the so-called cosmic zoom in *Powers of Ten*, see the introduction to this volume by Christoph F. E. Holzhey and Marietta Kesting, p. 3. Many thanks to Christoph F. E. Holzhey and Marietta Kesting for their careful reading of this text and for their thought-provoking and most helpful comments.

21 See Nick Hall, *The Zoom: Drama at the Touch of a Lever* (Rutgers University Press, 2018), p. 15: 'the term *zoom* has been adopted by scholars in other disciplines and by journalists in the wider media landscape as a flexible metaphor for concepts including magnification, bending, and the focusing of attention on a subset within a whole.'

22 Paul Joannides, 'The Aesthetics of the Zoom Lens', *Sight & Sound*, 40.1 (1970), pp. 40–42 (pp. 40, 41).

23 Colson Whitehead, *Harlem Shuffle* (Anchor Books, 2021), p. 145. The line follows the narrator's observation, 'Everybody was talking about Polaroid and their instant film, it was the new thing. In the Polaroid Pathfinder display, a white family enjoyed a picnic by a deep blue lake.'

24 Papastergiadis, *Spatial Aesthetics*, p. 14.

When do we start to look at what we see, not at what we know?[25] This is what the exhibition 'The Everyday in Dramatic Closeness', held at the ICI Berlin from 3 December 2025 until 21 January 2026, set out to explore, in order to track the everyday via 'the act of attention'.[26] The following overview features a selection of artists and their works that formed part of this group exhibition. The works presented re-evaluate the agency of the size, proportion, and scale of everyday objects. Annette Messager's and Mona Hatoum's works were major sources of inspiration,[27] in particular Hatoum's steel sculpture *Grater Divide* (2002), which is more than two metres high, and which serves as a great example of how a significant change in size can affect perception and provoke unease.

> Mona Hatoum's *Grater Divide* [...] is a cheese-grater nearly seven feet high. Either it's a kitchen utensil for giants or human beings have suddenly been reduced in stature. Or both. On the one hand, it's laugh-out-loud funny. On the other, it's lethal. It takes the form of a paravent or room-divider, one full of huge holes, and it demonstrates that an everyday kitchen object [...] could slice us into bloody shreds in seconds.[28]

Hatoum's life-size sculptures of kitchen utensils transform domestic objects into eerie things and question whether the home, or the everyday, can be considered a safe space. Also on a domestic theme, the series *Mes maisons* (2007) by Jean-François Fourtou served as another key inspiration. For this, the artist recreated his childhood bedroom at his great-grandmother's house at three different scales, fitting his adult-size self into the miniature rooms and taking photographs of the

25 See Willem Popelier, 'Digital Narcissism: This Is Willem Popelier — An Introduction', in *Auto: Self-Representation and Digital Photography*, pp. 25–55 (p. 30).

26 Sheringham, *Everyday Life*, p. 85.

27 For Messager's explorations of the everyday, see, for example, the works *Mes trophées* (1987) and *Histoire des petites effigies* (1990), featured in Sheryl Conkelton and Carol S. Eliel, *Annette Messager* (Los Angeles County Museum of Art and The Museum of Modern Art, 1995), pp. 16, 32 <https://assets.moma.org/documents/moma_catalogue_471_300063148.pdf> [accessed 7 September 2026].

28 Ali Smith, '"Never Take Anything for What It Appears to Be": Ali Smith on Mona Hatoum', *Tate Etc.*, 37 (2016), pp. 78–81 <https://www.tate.org.uk/tate-etc/issue-37-summer-2016/never-take-anything-what-it-appears-be-ali-smith-on-mona-hatoum> [accessed 7 September 2026].

scenes with the double power of documentation and imagination.[29] The settings provide an uncomfortable proximity and strongly recall the change in size that the protagonist of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* experiences, reaching a height of more than nine feet and becoming too tall to fit through the door of the hall: 'Poor Alice! It was as much she could do, lying down on one side, to look through into the garden with one eye.'[30]

> When assessing scale, we view a piece of art as life-size, miniature, or large, and then we relate it back to ourselves or the object's own natural size. It becomes more evocative when the artist uses scale to open up certain possibilities of interpretation.[31]

On show at the ICI Berlin were photographic works as well as paintings, art books, and one sculptural object. The exhibition announcement highlighted that

> Scale operates relationally: between the object and the image, between images themselves, and as part of the viewers' imaginations. What new perspectives and reflections arise from playing with scale and what role does scale play in creative and technical processes, as material, gesture, and resolution intersect to allow new shapes, patterns, and figures to emerge? Artistic techniques do not merely reproduce scale; they enact it, becoming a site in which figuration and abstraction are modified through enlargement, reduction, or superimposition. These transformations can evoke different effects and often oscillate between attraction and repulsion, intimacy and distance. Both the everyday and scale mediate the passage between the personal and the collective, the ephemeral and the iconic.[32]

29 See 'Réalisations', Jean-François Fourtou https://www.jffourtou.com/fr/realisations#2007 [accessed 29 July 2026].

30 Lewis Carroll, *Alice in Wonderland: Authoritative Texts of 'Alice's Adventures in Wonderland', 'Through the Looking-Glass', 'The Hunting of the Snark', Backgrounds, Essays in Criticism*, ed. by Donald J. Gray, 2nd edn (Norton, 1992), p. 14.

31 Kristine Somerville, 'Extremes: The Power of Scale in Art', *The Missouri Review*, 41.3 (2018), pp. 17–33 (p. 24) <https://doi.org/10.1353/mis.2018.0030>.

32 'The Everyday in Dramatic Closeness' (3 December 2025 – 21 January 2026), ICI Berlin <https://www.ici-berlin.org/events/the-everyday-in-dramatic-closeness/> [accessed 7 September 2026]. The exhibition was a group endeavour. The curators,



Fig. 1. Christoph Breuer, *Kontaktpflege 2*, 2006, oil on canvas, 150 × 120 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

Filippo Bosco, Christoph Breuer, Louisa Elderton, Claudia Peppel, Jasmine Pisapia, Silke Schwarz, Verónica Stedile Luna, and Anna R. Winder, are grateful to the ICI Berlin for the generous support and would like to thank again all the contributing artists, Filippo Bosco, Christoph Breuer, Delfina Cabrera, Neta Choli-Avidan, Y. Ariadne Collins, Yuri Di Liberto, Sarath Jakka, Claudia Peppel, Jasmine Pisapia, Silke Schwarz, Verónica Stedile Luna, and Anna R. Winder, for their amazing works. Besides the selection featured in this essay, some works are now part of individual chapters within this volume. See Jasmine Clotilde Pisapia, 'Dust, Death, and the Body of the

A notable example is Christoph Breuer's painting *Kontaktpflege 2* (2006), which presents a pill in the form of a minimalist still life (Figure 1). Realistic and enraptured at the same time, its proportions are difficult to estimate. The empty space surrounding it recalls an endless nirvana, while the increased size of the pill, which is about that of an apple, appears to be floating and fixed at the same time. With his particularly subtle style, presenting objects with close attention and stillness, Breuer challenges our viewing habits. Realistically depicted yet transfigured, it dominates a vast sky-like space that looks tiny at the same time. In the tradition of the *trompe l'oeil* painting, Breuer's still life is linked to the concept of vanitas. The pill appears to be exempt from transience and simultaneously serves as a reminder of it. Like a promise of happiness, it seems to fall from a leaden sky and yet remain firmly anchored to it. If there is such a thing as a colour for the everyday, it is this background.

Can the *trompe l'oeil* fantasy of the isolated or lost pill be understood as a deliberately crafted alternative to the tangible reality of everyday life, or does it suggest a deceptive sense of permanence and immortality? Breuer's hyperrealist painting explores a conceptual tension between perception, imagination, and reality, and is at the same time reminiscent of close-up shots in films. At the point when we realize that the everyday is fleeting and that we ourselves are subject to transformation and decay, it is the hallucinatory precision of the pill that offers us the recurring promise of relaxation, cure, and relief from pain.

Silke Schwarz, another artist in the exhibition, took pictures of various people in New York, as well as of their apartment interiors. These works were created during a residency in New York City fourteen years ago. The series comprises eighteen portraits, eighteen corresponding interiors, and eighteen letters, written by the individuals featured. The artist met her subjects by chance and was particularly

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Earth: Notes on the Scales of Ecological Disaster', in this volume (pp. 405–27); and Verónica Stedile Luna, 'Editorial Writings from a Scalar Perspective: Reduction and Expansion as Publishing Procedures', in this volume (pp. 453–83). Photos of the opening are available on the ICI Berlin website; see 'A Night for the Everyday', ICI Berlin <https://www.ici-berlin.org/events/a-night-for-the-everyday/> [accessed 7 September 2026].



FIG. 2. Silke Schwarz, *Home (Ruby Portrait)*, 2011, photograph, 100 × 100 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

interested in people who, like many in New York, were not originally from there, but had come to pursue their version of the American Dream, of building a new and successful life for themselves. Schwarz wanted to capture this specific mood, and her photographic project was guided by the questions: How do the interiors and the individuals' daily lives evolve in line with their dreams and aspirations? What role do everyday life and personal circumstances play in the context of New York's promises of happiness and success?

The two works selected for the exhibition, *Home (Ruby Portrait)* and *Home (Ruby Interior)*, offer a glimpse into the domestic situation of Ruby: the first (Figure 2) shows a human figure seen from behind and a cat seen from the front; the second shows a window with a view of a building across the street. In *Home (Ruby Portrait)*, the cat is in the foreground, appearing larger than Ruby herself. The composition reveals conflicting lines of sight, the standing figure contrasting with the seated cat. Attention is also drawn to the edges of the furniture, especially of the table and cabinet but also of other objects in the room, which can be read as evidence of a plot. It seems as though the presence of the photographer is sensed as part of the scenery. We are seeing Ruby from behind, as she stands next to the open cupboard and looks into the mirror in front of her (though we can't see her reflection and therefore her face). We are also looking into the eyes of the cat on the table, and the composition is divided internally between the two figures. Ruby does not seem very invested in being photographed and minds her own business in her glamourous outfit, while the cat seems in control of what is happening and appears as the main character, whose gaze not only reveals the photographer as an invisible presence but also captivates the viewer. In an oscillation between anonymity and intimacy, front and back, human and animal, turning away and turning towards the viewer, different ideas come to the fore within a single shot.

The second picture, *Home (Ruby Interior)*, incorporates the outside world — as a vague notion — behind the plant, serving as an intimate backdrop to Ruby's daily life (Figure 3). There are two plants and one amethyst fossil on the windowsill. One plant is centred within the frame, while the other is placed at the bottom right, with the fossil on the left. The branch of a large *Ficus benjamina* covers the top of the window, making it much harder to distinguish between the interior



Fig. 3. Silke Schwarz, *Home (Ruby Interior)*, 2011, photograph, 100 × 100 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

and the nebulous exterior, and for a moment the two seem to merge into one another. This tension between interior and exterior is also manifested in other details: the branch of the large ficus has the dimensions of an outdoor tree while the shape of the tiny plant on the windowsill is that of a proper tree. Both compositions combine activity and passivity as well as a play with proportion by focusing on details — in this photo, of the plants and objects on the windowsill and the view, and in the first photo, the interplay between the cat's fancy fur and Ruby's glamorous dress, in each case details that, at the same time, are not the main focus of attention.

Anna R. Winder's sculptural piece, a tiny red couch (Figure 4), is a tribute to Hazel Brown, the she-dandy protagonist of Lisa Robertson's semi-autobiographical novel *The Baudelaire Fractal*.[33] The object's shape, colour, and velvety materiality seem of great importance in Winder's romantic piece, as it reveals a very soft, almost fleshy texture.

Winder mentions in an interview that she had a similar couch in her studio, which she thought of as a special place for reflection. It somehow enabled her to think differently than at her desk, perhaps because of the couch's connection to psychoanalysis, where it is supposed to help elicit free association. Before the work's first exhibition, she found an old pinhole photograph, a self-portrait she had taken at the age of nineteen at her first art school, which reminded her of the uncompromised ideas about art and being an artist that she had at the time. When she then read about Hazel Brown, who in Robertson's book travels to Paris to lead an artistic life in the style of Baudelaire, whilst harbouring the megalomaniacal idea that she is the author of Baudelaire's entire body of work, she thought, that's me, with my romantic and slightly grand artistic notions. The miniature sculpture *A Couch for Hazel Brown* therefore seems to function as a condensation, loaded with various strands of artistic endeavours, and its intimacy almost becomes phantasmagorical. As Jack Davy and Charlotte Dixon suggest, there is an ongoing 'dissonance that lies at the heart of miniaturization'. While we intuitively understand 'that they are not quite of our own reality', miniature objects are at the same time able to trigger the imagination, 'for there is an intrinsic desire to play with these tiny

33 Lisa Robertson, *The Baudelaire Fractal* (Coach House Books, 2020).



Fig. 4. Anna R. Winder, *A Couch for Hazel Brown (The Baudelaire Fractal)*, 2022, wood and velvet, 18 × 26 × 15 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

objects, to manipulate and rearrange them and to imagine ourselves, impossibly, inside or alongside them.'[34]

Winder's red velvet couch was accompanied in the exhibition by a photograph of it, revealing how difficult it is to gauge the actual size of an object from a photograph and the important role that imagination plays in the act of viewing. A comparison only works when two objects are placed side by side — that is, when a small object is placed next

34 Jack Davy and Charlotte Dixon, 'What Makes a Miniature? An Introduction', in *Worlds in Miniature: Contemplating Miniaturisation in Global Material Culture*, ed. by Jack Davy and Charlotte Dixon (UCL Press, 2019), pp. 1–17 (p. 1) <https://doi.org/10.14324/111.9781787356481>.

to a life-size one — or when an object is measured against a human body. Just as giant objects can make us feel small, miniature objects can make us feel gigantic. Linda Conze, curator of the exhibition 'Size Matters: Scale in Photography', which engaged with similar themes to 'The Everyday in Dramatic Closeness', writes that 'changes in size significantly influence perception':[35]

> Any tinkering with size in an image is bound to alter our perception of it completely: objects are accentuated, plucked out of context, magnified and reinterpreted. They draw closer, inviting scrutiny, or dissolve into a blur before our eyes.[36]

The two photographs I contributed to the exhibition close in on a similar experience. One of these (Figure 5) depicts a group of soybean sprouts in a hydroponic cabinet, illustrating the 'farm-to-table' trend from a few years ago, when many restaurants grew herbs or salad greens within the dining room, usually under artificial light. The close-up shot of soybeans conveys an eerie, somewhat menacing sci-fi atmosphere reminiscent of the macrophotography of insects, where the reproduced subject is much larger than actual size.

> On one hand, enlargement greatly contributed to photography's reputation as a tool of revelation. Things too small to be seen by the naked eye could be made visible, and images circulating in private circles could be made large enough to enter the public sphere. On the other hand, miniaturization played an equally central role as an agent of knowledge: by reducing and accumulating data, it allowed for a new condensation and availability of information.[37]

The second photograph (Figure 6) is, in part, a reproduction of a poster that was used as part of a waste prevention campaign to keep

35 Linda Conze, 'Size Matters: Scale in Photography' (1 February – 20 May 2024), Kunstpalast, Düsseldorf <https://www.kunstpalast.de/en/press-event/presslounge-size-matters/> [accessed 7 September 2026].

36 Linda Conze, 'Size Matters: Scale in Photography' (1 February – 20 May 2024), Kunstpalast, Düsseldorf <https://www.kunstpalast.de/en/event/sizematters/> [accessed 7 September 2026].

37 Olivier Lugon, 'Photography and Scale: Projection, Exhibition, Collection', *Art History*, 38.2 (2015), pp. 386–403 (p. 387) <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-8365.12155>.



Fig. 5. Claudia Peppel, *Soy Sprouts at Restaurant Neni, Berlin, Germany*, 2018, photograph, 84.1 × 59.4 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

the beaches in the Basque city of Donostia/San Sebastián clean.[38] *Itsa* is the Basque word for 'sea'; combined with the 'SOS', it signals that the sea is in distress and calling out for help. Two enormous cigarette butts are shown; their exaggerated contrast with the actual life-size butts littering the beach promenade serves the campaign, and also illustrates the indifference of some beachgoers towards it. Do the oversize butts

38 'ITSASOS project for the prevention of waste on the beaches of Donostia-San Sebastián', Ados Sostenibilidad y Clima (2025) <https://adossc.eus/en/portfolio-item/itsasos-project-for-the-prevention-of-waste-on-the-beaches-of-donostia-san-sebastian/> [accessed 7 September 2026].




Fig. 6. Claudia Peppel, *Anti-Waste Campaign, Donostia/San Sebastián, Basque Country*, 2025, photograph, 59.4 × 84.1 cm. Courtesy of the artist.

fail to persuade beachgoers not to throw away their own butts on account of their unrealistic size? Is there something about the scale that seems too fictional or toy-like to make people realize that they are being addressed? Here, a tension arises once again between unremarkable everyday life and the dramatic closeness that results from the act of zooming in to focus on individual elements.

This overview closes with the work of Yuri Di Liberto and its ambivalent take on scale and lived experience (Figure 7). Di Liberto's photograph creates a sense of tension through its depiction of chessboards and their pieces in two different sizes, the duplication operating as a form of direct comparison. While playing chess, Di Liberto realized that some activities — like games — take place within the limits of established rules and are less sensitive to enlargement or reduction than others. He refers to what Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari called 'striated space',[39] that which is delineated, rationalized, and partitioned, and he states that, in chess, 'the rules are so structured that the game is immune to changes in the physical medium on which it takes place, such as an increase or decrease in the size of the board or the chess pieces. In fact, chess can be played entirely in your head.' Here, chess reveals its duality at the intersection of mental engagement and embodied presence, between the individual and the social, that is reminiscent of the indeterminacy inherent in everyday life — the unstable space that it occupies. However, I would argue that the size of a chessboard and its pieces can influence the game if the pieces are much bigger than usual — as with giant outdoor chess sets — so that one cannot see the whole board at once. In this case, the unusual dimensions may also play a part in making the game seem less serious. Indeed, resizing may lead to defamiliarization and disadvantage insofar as some players might overlook things if the size of the chessboard does not match that of the board they normally use. With particularly large pieces and boards, it might be harder to play due to a loss of overview and, thereby, the ability to keep track of the game.

39 See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, '1440: The Smooth and the Striated', in Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* [1980], trans. by Brian Massumi (University of Minnesota Press, 1987), pp. 474–500.

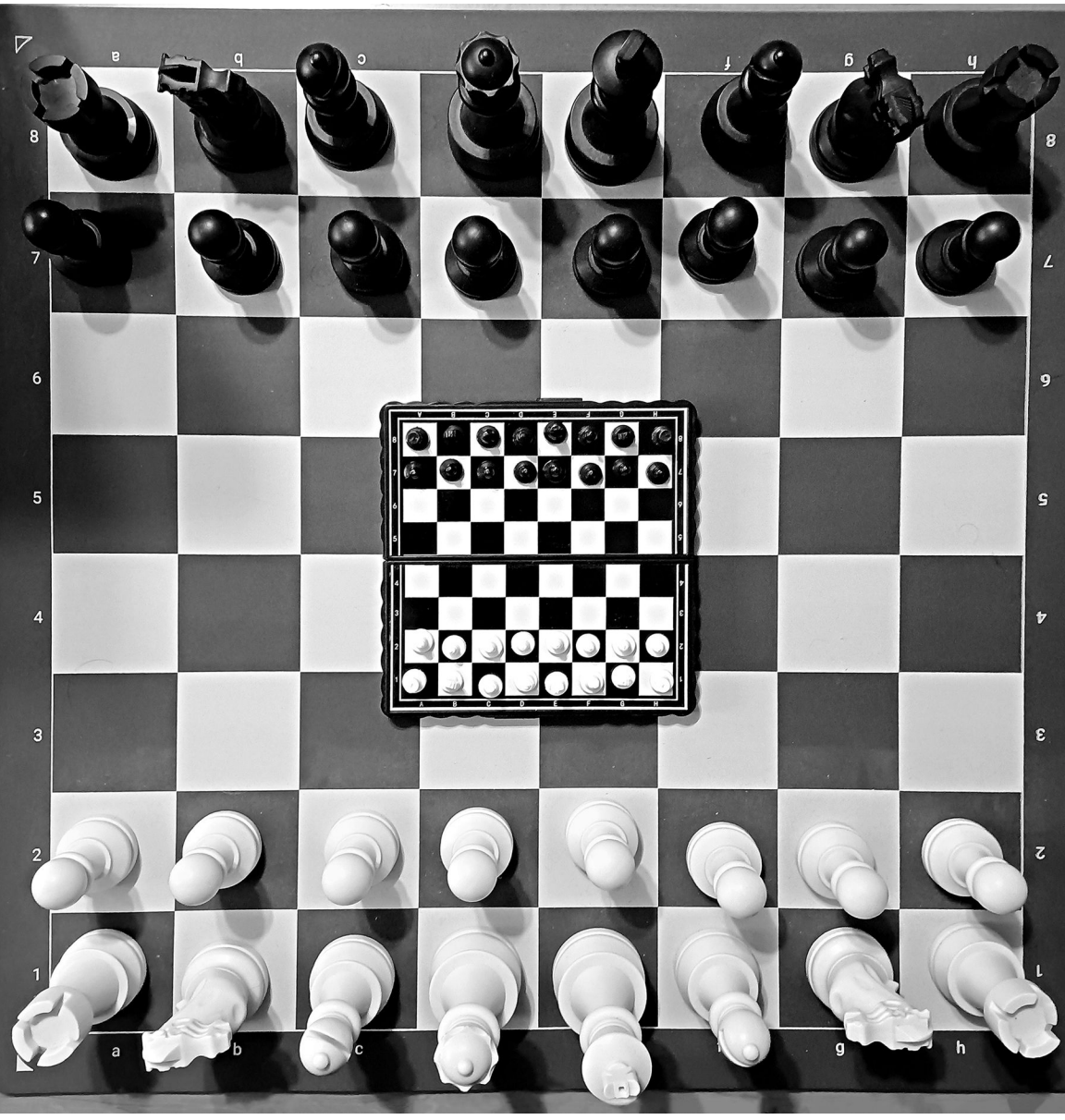

Fig. 7. Yuri Di Liberto, *Scale Indifference*, 2026, photograph, 30 × 30 cm.
Courtesy of the artist.

The aim of 'The Everyday in Dramatic Closeness' was to inspire curiosity in order to develop a greater awareness towards our everyday physical environment, and to show how much our perception owes to scale. Standardized body height is part of the spatial scale and a key reference dimension in architecture and daily life with which most people are familiar, when it comes, for example, to planning interiors or sitting comfortably on a plane. The exhibition aimed to show how a change of parameters — such as viewpoint, degree of distortion, or field of view — can have major effects on how we perceive the complexity of everyday objects and environments, and that these effects can, at the same time, serve as a site of tension between alienation and appropriation.[40] Sontag once suggested that 'an aesthetic distance seems built into the very experience of looking at photographs'.[41] Similarly, Gil Hochberg states that 'the gaze of the spectator in meeting the image and rendering it aesthetically [ … ] is considered key to the performativity of the medium'.[42] 'The Everyday in Dramatic Closeness' sought to explore this imaginative appropriation and to consider what is needed in order to intensify the viewing experience, to be surprised, and to thereby gain new insights into this supposedly stable yet fleeting notion of the everyday, which one can only encounter 'at the fringes of consciousness'[43] — to embrace ambiguity and the transformative potentiality of the everyday until it becomes a mystery again.

40 Sheringham, *Everyday Life*, p. 360.

41 Susan Sontag, *On Photography* [1977] (Picador, 2001), p. 21.

42 Gil Hochberg, 'Performance and Transformation: Photographic (Re)visions of Subjectivity', in *Imagining Everyday Life*, ed. by Campt and others, pp. 195–99 (p. 195).

43 Sheringham, *Everyday Life*, p. 20.

# Dust, Death, and the Body of the Earth

## Notes on the Scales of Ecological Disaster*

JASMINE CLOTILDE PISAPIA

> The last night in our beds, you will remember
> our dreams: warm mouths swollen with sleep,
> soft eyes closed, trapped somewhere else.
>
> Emily Fragos, 'Pompeii, A.D. 79'

What follows is a set of notes that dwell, like dust, in the gaps between image and text — what anthropologist and filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha has called the 'interval'.[1] They move across scales — *spatially*, from

* These preliminary reflections are part of a broader ongoing project on the timescales of ecological disaster. A few paragraphs draw on a published piece: Jasmine Clotilde Pisapia, 'Poisonous Images: Taranto's Environmental Crisis between the Visible and the Invisible', *Cultural Anthropology*, 41.2 (2026), pp. 247–74 <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca41.2.03>. For their valuable comments on this specific piece, I thank Marietta Kesting, Christoph F. E. Holzhey, and Kirill Chepurin. I also wish to thank others who have engaged with parts or versions of this essay: Rosalind Morris, Lisa Stevenson, Valentina Bonifacio, Ulrich van Loyen, Jean-Ernest Joos, Filippo Bosco, Hélène Quiniou. This essay was developed during my fellowship at the ICI Berlin Institute for Cultural Inquiry. There, I extend my deepest gratitude to Nicolas Helm-Grovas, Verónica Stedile Luna, Angelica Stathopoulos, Tobi Haslett, Franco Costantini, Yuri Di Liberto, Magdalena Krysztoforska, Cat Dawson, Federica Di Blasio, José Antonio Magalhães, Claudia Peppel, and Manuele Gragnolati.

1 Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Cinema Interval* (Routledge, 1999). Film theorist Nicolas Helm-Grovas has kindly lent me this book, letting it rest on the shelf of my office for a few months. I thank him for many conversations around the images of disaster, and in particular films featuring volcanoes shown in our co-curated programme 'The Screening Room'.

infinitesimal particulate matter to volcanic magnitude, and *temporally*, from the slow accumulation of toxic exposure to the sudden force of catastrophe. Dust here is both the materialization of an event and the residual trace of crisis.[2] While it settles gradually, almost imperceptibly, it also marks moments of rupture. Both slow processes and catastrophic events produce dust, and it is through this particulate matter that their apparent opposition begins to blur. To begin from dust, then, is to ask how different scales of disaster come to oscillate and coexist in times of environmental crisis.

These reflections emerged during a period of intense collective thinking in Berlin around questions of scale. Drawing on a constellation of texts, images, and encounters, this chapter explores the scalar relations between ecological disaster and the everyday, the presumed temporal disjuncture between slow violence and catastrophic events, and the paradoxes at the heart of two perspectives often taken for granted across disciplines, including anthropology: 'situatedness' and 'the everyday'.[3] This text gathers fragments and scenes from my fieldwork as an anthropologist in zones of environmental instability, alongside archival sources and the writings and artworks of others. This meandering juxtaposition follows the trajectories of dust itself: particulate, dispersed, and somewhat *formless* — what Georges Bataille called *l'informe*,[4] that which refuses stable shape even as it takes on the contours of the surfaces it settles upon.

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2 This point resonates with the seminal work of Carolyn Steedman, for whom dust is the material remainder through which history persists. See Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History* (Rutgers University Press, 2001).

3 This gesture is by no means exhaustive or conclusive, nor does it traverse the full range of what anthropology has already so generatively done on the topic of scale. For key interventions, see E. Summerson Carr and Michael Lempert, eds, *Scale: Discourse and Dimensions of Social Life* (University of California Press, 2016); Michael Lempert, *From Small Talk to Microaggression: A History of Scale* (University of Chicago Press, 2024); Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton University Press, 2005); and Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, 'On Nonscalability: The Living World Is Not Amenable to Precision-Nested Scales', *Common Knowledge*, 18.3 (2012), pp. 505–24 <https://doi.org/10.1215/0961754X-1630424>; as well as Lisa Messeri, *Placing Outer Space: An Earthly Ethnography of Other Worlds* (Duke University Press, 2016).

4 Georges Bataille, 'Formless', in Bataille and others, *Encyclopædia Acephalica*, ed. by Robert Lebel and Isabelle Waldberg, trans. by Iain White and others (Atlas Press, 1995), pp. 51–52.



Fig. 1. Satellite image of Taranto taken from Google Maps.

These notes also proceed as a kind of woolgathering — what Lisa Stevenson describes, drawing on Margaret Atwood's image of the 'slut's wool', as a way of writing that proceeds through aimless wandering and the gleaning of dust balls which have sedimented along the way.[5] They follow what returns and persists, where dust carries traces of death across scales, from the infinitesimal to the cosmic — something that flickers at the threshold between life and death as much as between the visible and the invisible.

My point of departure is situated in place — visible here through a disembodied image taken from above by a satellite: Taranto, a city in southern Italy, known for being one of the most polluted in Europe

5 Lisa Stevenson, in Rima Praspaliauskiene, 'Interview with Lisa Stevenson', *Write What You Like*, Substack, 18 February 2026 <https://open.substack.com/pub/writewhatyoulike/p/interview-with-lisa-stevenson> [accessed 9 July 2026].

due to the presence there of the continent's largest and most hazardous steel factory (Figure 1). The factory can be seen on the left, its area (almost three times larger than the city itself) rendered in a saturated palette of oxidized reds and rust browns. As an anthropologist who lived in Taranto for roughly three years, I have often found this machinic view from above to be a helpful reminder of the factory's overwhelming scale, of its sheer physical presence, which, in everyday life, slipped out of view — momentarily stepping back through something like the scalar operation famously staged in the film *Powers of Ten*.[6] The satellite image risks reproducing the disembodied distance that feminist critiques of the 'god trick' have taught us to distrust.[7] Yet it also performs a necessary scalar operation. It makes visible a magnitude that exceeds lived perception, while requiring, as Lisa Messeri's work on planetary place-making suggests, a return from abstract scale to situated experience.[8]

I lived for several years in Taranto, which meant entering the scale and rhythm of everyday life, where my own body was directly involved. Although I did not frame it this way at the time, I was grappling with the challenge of connecting seemingly incommensurable scales: establishing a relation between the slow unfolding of an imperceptible disaster and everyday embodied experience. Minute details — from overheard stories to the uncannily sweet, chemical taste in my mouth — became objects of suspicious scrutiny. Were these small-scale manifestations, like symptoms, of the larger crisis unfolding? These paradoxical scales of experience involving the presence of infinitesimal poisons day to day, gesture towards what Max Liboiron has described as 'scalar mismatches'.[9]

In spaces of environmental uncertainty, where material harms are known to cause premature deaths and illness, yet etiological connections remain difficult to prove, everyday life fluctuates between the

6 *Powers of Ten*, dir. by Charles and Ray Eames (USA, 1977) <https://www.eamesoffice.com/the-work/powers-of-ten/> [accessed 8 September 2026].

7 Donna J. Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies*, 14.3 (1988), pp. 575–99.

8 See Messeri, *Placing Outer Space*.

9 Max Liboiron and Josh Lepawsky, 'The Scales of Waste: A Theory of Relationality', in Liboiron and Lepawsky, *Discard Studies: Wasting, Systems, and Power* (MIT Press, 2022), pp. 35–60 <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/12442.001.0001>.

denial of toxic threats and the tacit knowledge that they determine individual trajectories and the fabric of an entire social world. This radical uncertainty is condensed in a frequent expression in town: 'In Taranto, we all have deaths in the family' (A Taranto, abbiamo tutti i morti in famiglia). Of course, everyone has deaths in the family; but here, the saying signalled an entanglement of death with the everyday (alongside, of course, the recognition that most families are tied to the factory across generations). What was at stake, then, was not only the negotiation of spatial scale — the relation between one's singular embodied trajectory and global industrial processes — but also a confrontation with another kind of temporality. During the fieldwork I conducted when living in Taranto from 2017 to 2020, stories of illness and death circulated constantly: a neighbour who lost her dog to cancer and asked to see its lung scans; a young man recounting the deaths of both his parents; a woman on the bus showing me a photograph of a child who had died in hospital. Over time, I came to understand this intense storytelling as a kind of collective intuition — people looking for signs, providing interpretations, working things out through experimental forms of knowledge and assessment.

Long-term fieldwork opens a window onto the everyday, allowing for a *situated* kind of knowledge, as Donna Haraway would have it. My own body became enmeshed over time: a listening body, porous to the affects and stories of others, as much as to the poisons they inherit. At the same time, ethnography of toxicity calls for another scale. The view from above, despite its disembodied distance, remains necessary to grasp the magnitude of industrial processes that exceed lived perception. What is at stake, then, is not only the negotiation of spatial scale, but also a movement between forms of situatedness and what Joshua DiCaglio has called a 'situated dislocation': a transcendence outside the logic of the god trick. This is a scale that meets the realm of the dead, of dreams, and of spectral presences that are, in some profound ways, nowhere and everywhere at the same time.

This raises a broader question that runs throughout these notes: How might one sustain a relation to scales that exceed lived perception without abandoning the situated experience of the body? For DiCaglio, 'Scale demands that already *within your everyday experiences* are other scales of being. Looking at this hand, you are already seeing cells,





Figs 2 and 3. Anonymous photographs taken in the cemetery of Taranto, c. 2004.

atoms, ecological relations, bits of stardust.'[10] And yet, if stardust gestures towards a cosmic scale embedded within the everyday, in Taranto this scale returns in a far more immediate, earthly form. Dust particles made of iron residues and heavy metals (lead, cadmium, arsenic) accumulate. They cling, are breathed in, tasted in one's mouth.[11] It is at the threshold between the planetary and the particulate that my attention turns to a series of images taken inside the city's cemetery — so close to the factory that their edges touch. On the right, immediately adjacent to the factory's darkest rust-red structures, a tightly packed grid of pale, stone-coloured rectangles marks the graveyard. Upon closer inspection, one can see it set within a patch of green.

These photographs were taken by custodians on guard duty at night in the cemetery of Taranto (Figures 2–5).[12] Rumour had it that

10 Joshua DiCaglio, *Scale Theory: A Nondisciplinary Inquiry* (University of Minnesota Press, 2021), p. 5.

11 For an insightful political anthropology of dust as a scalar and relational medium between air, bodies, and environmental governance, see Jerry C. Zee, *Continent in Dust: Experiments in a Chinese Weather System* (University of California Press, 2022).

12 These photographs were presented in 'The Everyday in Dramatic Closeness', a group exhibition at the ICI Berlin Institute for Cultural Inquiry, Berlin (December 2025–January 2026), co-curated by Filippo Bosco, Christoph Breuer, Louisa Elderton, Claudia Peppel, Jasmine Pisapia, Anna R. Winder Salling, Silke Schwarz, and Verónica Stedile Luna.

some of the workers were falling asleep during nightshifts. To ensure they were awake, the office managers had them take pictures every two hours from different locations inside the cemetery. A date and time signature marks each digital file, proving that the custodians were not being paid to sleep. Thousands of images like these were systematically archived over a period of roughly four years.[13] They are gritty, often out of focus. Light flares and architectural fragments appear in the frames, at times exiting their contours or receding into the darkness of night. The shots enact an auto-surveillance, where those surveilled do not themselves appear in the frame. What *does* appear through the camera's flash is the glitter of dust.[14] This dust is transported by the wind, over the cemetery walls, from a massive factory located a few metres away.

In Taranto's social imaginary, toxicity has the consistency of pervasive dust. To distinguish it from regular domestic dust, it is called *minerale* (*mineral'* in the Tarantino dialect), an ambiguous expression evoking both nourishment and poison. White tombs are coloured with the muted pink hue of the volatile iron ores imported from Brazilian mines — containing lead, cadmium, and arsenic. The ores are stocked in expansive, open-air 'mineral parks', where they await the wind that will carry them inside the graveyard. Dust enters your mouth, your eyes. If you caress a tomb, it stains the palm of your hand. Depending on time, oxidation, and the surface it lands on, ore dust can shift colour from grey-black to orange, ochre, burnt sienna, or brownish red.

13 We must think about this accumulation of images (akin to surveillance cameras) and the repetitive gesture of taking photographs in terms of the more general upscaling of the production of images in the contemporary everyday. See Jussi Parikka and Tomáš Dvořák, 'Introduction: On the Scale, Quantity and Measure of Images', in *Photography Off the Scale: Technologies and Theories of the Mass Image*, ed. by Tomáš Dvořák and Jussi Parikka (Edinburgh University Press, 2021), pp. 1–20. Regarding the massification of images and their temporal compression, the authors discuss Erik Kessels's installation *24 Hrs in Photos*, which materializes the overwhelming accumulation of images produced within a single day.

14 On the ambivalent aesthetics of seemingly harmless or playful materials such as glitter (often associated with childhood, femininity, or queer celebration, yet composed of persistent microplastics), see Nicole Seymour, *Bad Environmentalism: Irony and Irreverence in the Ecological Age* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018); Heather Davis, *Plastic Matter* (Duke University Press, 2022) <https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478022374>; and Mel Y. Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Duke University Press, 2012) <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822395447>.

Dust does not only settle on surfaces, but also circulates through speech, images, jokes, and forms of social exclusion. In 2017, a video shot in Taranto went viral on YouTube.[15] Filmed in the Tamburi neighbourhood, it featured an interview with a woman named Annapia, who was asked to comment on windy days and their effect on residents. To describe the avalanche of toxic dust — *minerale* — that fell over people's houses, she resorted to a forceful interjection in the Tarantino dialect: '*quanda mineral*'!' (so much dust!). The video circulated widely, often as a joke, among Taranto residents and those living abroad who recognized that familiar speech. Her accent, her gestures, the simplicity of her outcry elicited laughter and mockery. Two years later, in 2019, Annapia was reported dead of cancer at the age of fifty-three — a piece of news that went largely unnoticed in comparison to the earlier circulation of her image.[16]

This was not the first time I had seen videos produced by Taranto residents that approached the environmental catastrophe through humour, irony, or self-ridicule. And yet this one struck me as a different form of derision, one marked by gendered and classed violence — the violence that likewise underlies the unequal distribution of toxicity. What was being mocked was not only the content of her speech, but her way of speaking, her gestures, her being marked as coming from one of the most marginal areas of the city (and, further, she was marginalized within her own neighbourhood for having a mental illness). The discomfort eliciting laughter also had to do with this material substance — dust — being a strangely familiar thing. *Minerale*, uttered in dialect, is both incredibly intimate and external: this is the same dust one can find extracted in the Brazilian mines of Minas Gerais. Zooming out from the infinitesimal iron ore and its utterance in a hyperlocal dialect to global extractive chains allows us to sense the scalar overlap between what Liboiron distinguishes as *harm* — namely the measurable effects of pollution as a process on the ground — and *violence* — the structural

15 'Taranto, mineral, quanda mineral', YouTube, 10 November 2017 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s703tEh3PyE> [accessed 12 June 2026].

16 'Addio ad Annapia, la sua denuncia "Quanda Mineral" era diventata virale sul web', *Rai News Puglia*, 22 March 2019 <https://www.rainews.it/tgr/puglia/video/2019/03/pug-morte-annapia-video-quanda-mineral-ilva-taranto-manifestazione-romano-tap-514ee24e-a5e2-4b8a-a57f-6435e4c95d3b.html> [accessed 12 June 2026].





Figs 4 and 5. Anonymous photographs taken in the cemetery of Taranto, c. 2004.

conditions of exploitation and colonial histories that make that process possible.[17]

But let us stay with those cemetery images, with the situated surfaces where global extractive chains settle as intermittently visible dust. Initially, the images were meant to serve as proof of the night watchman's 'being there', of his open eyes. Every two hours of that night, the guardian of the city of the dead was alive and awake, hard at work and not asleep. It was only later, during 'Ambiente svenduto' (Environment Sold Off), the decade-long criminal trial brought against former owners and executives of the steel factory for environmental disaster and widespread toxic contamination, that these photographs came to be seen as potential proof. Yet prosecutors deemed them unfit for the trial, too elusive and unreliable to serve as forensic evidence. After a decade of legal struggle, the trial itself has now been dissolved, this time because the prosecutors *themselves* were deemed unfit. In September 2024, the verdict was overturned on appeal. The reasoning is significant: the judges, being Taranto citizens, were deemed subject to toxic exposure, which made them potential victims of pollution and thus

17 See, in particular, Max Liboiron, 'Scale, Harm, Violence, Land', in Liboiron, *Pollution Is Colonialism* (Duke University Press, 2021), pp. 61–92 <https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478021445>.

unable to judge the situation objectively. The verdict was overturned on appeal in September 2024, and the proceedings were transferred to Potenza for retrial, making it harder for Taranto residents to participate and testify.

In the transcriptions of the trial, now themselves gathering dust, we find a paediatric doctor recalling seeing and touching dust on children's feet, between their toes, in the folds behind their ears. We find gravediggers struggling to describe in words the unnameable experience their labour entails: 'I noticed that when I was shovelling the earth one day, the ground would shine from the inside', one man said when interrogated. 'It was strange. The dust has the consistency of flour. If you touch it, it rises. All it takes is a gust of wind; it accumulates on the surrounding cypresses. You find yourself chewing on it. On windy days, you feel it in your eyes, in your mouth.'[18] Echoing this gravedigger's words, the cemetery photographs belatedly reveal inscriptions of poison. They are — along with the dust itself — 'material witnesses' of an elusive environmental harm, even if the trial deemed them too unreliable for forensic evidence.[19] The issue was not only one of visibility, but of temporality: these photographs seemed to arrive either

18 '3e Dossier Processo Ilva: Parlano I lavoratori Ilva e cimitero, gli abitanti dei Tamburi, parti civili' to the 'Ambiente svenduto' trial, made on 8–9 January 2019, by Slai Cobas.

19 Susan Schuppli, *Material Witness: Media, Forensics, Evidence* (MIT Press, 2020) <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9953.001.0001>. Recent work has explored the material presence and aesthetic-political form of toxic dust. See Rosario Talevi, *Toxic Dust: A Field Guide to Ostrava's Altered Landscapes* (Plato, 2025). In addition, see Rebecca Comay, 'When the Dust Settles', and Natascha Sadr Haghighian, 'Composed of Many', video-recorded papers delivered at the conference 'Minima Formalia: Minor Details and Empty Gestures', ICI Berlin Institute for Cultural Inquiry, 20 May 2026, organized by Nicolas Helm-Grovas, Jasmine Pisapia, Angelica Stathopoulos, and Verónica Stedile Luna, <https://doi.org/10.25620/e260520_12> and <https://doi.org/10.25620/e260520_11>, respectively. Both presentations foregrounded dust in relation to the unfolding destruction and pulverization of Gaza. Although I cannot develop this analysis in the present context, I would like to invoke here Palestinian artist Raeda Saadeh's video performance *Vacuum* (2007), in which Saadeh is shown vacuuming the barren hills of Palestine, displacing the domestic labour traditionally associated with women onto a landscape marked by dispossession. In this astonishing work made twenty years ago, dust is at once an environmental phenomenon, the haunting residue of violence, and the object of endless reproductive labour. José Segebre has written beautifully on waiting in Saadeh's work *Penelope* (2012), where the artist is seen knitting while sitting over a pile of rubble.

too early or too late, caught in what Peter Szendy might understand as their *heterochronic* condition.[20]

As we scrolled through the full collection of thousands of dust images one afternoon in the cemetery office, the cemetery employees continued to ponder on their signification: Was the factory tormenting the dead, manifesting in the form of dust? Was dust their signal for a general awakening? 'They poisoned this entire city slowly, they said, *while we were asleep*.' On those nightshifts, taking photographs was meant literally to prohibit sleep — to hold the body within a forced register of wakefulness, suspending the rhythms through which the everyday ordinarily unfolds, as Marietta Kesting makes clear in her own piece in this volume.[21] This in itself might have constituted what Maurice Blanchot sees, in *The Writing of the Disaster*, as one of the multiple facets of disaster: 'sleepless night — such is the disaster: the night lacking darkness but brightened by no light.'[22]

If the injunction to remain awake marks these nocturnal images of dust, Georges Bataille's brief dictionary entry 'Dust' (*Poussière*) offers a counterpoint.[23] In this entry, he notes that 'the storytellers have not realised that the Sleeping Beauty would have awoken covered in a thick layer of dust', as 'dismal sheets of dust constantly invade earthly habitations' and nourish 'phantoms, spectres' (Figure 6).[24] Teresa Stoppani, in her reading of Bataille, posits dust as the formless — *l'informe* — that does not possess its own form, and instead takes on that of the surfaces it coats, even as it alters them: a 'performative process of form-making'.[25] In her reading, dust reveals an 'architecture

20 Peter Szendy develops the notion of a heterochrony of images within a broader discussion of scale and of a general 'iconomy', in Peter Szendy, *For an Ecology of Images*, trans. by Marco Roth (Verso, 2025).

21 In her essay for this volume, on 'Scaling Sleep', Marietta Kesting approaches sleep as a scalar phenomenon, moving between the microphysiology of the body and planetary temporalities. She foregrounds sleep as a site of suspended time, non-eventfulness, and the disruption of everyday rhythms — an insight that resonates with the enforced wakefulness and temporal dislocation at stake in these nocturnal photographs.

22 Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, trans. by Ann Smock (University of Nebraska Press, 1995), p. 2.

23 Many thanks to literary scholar Verónica Stedile Luna for drawing my attention to this reference early on.

24 Georges Bataille, 'Dust', in Bataille and others, Encyclopædia Acephalica, pp. 42–43.

25 Teresa Stoppani, 'Dust Revolutions: Dust, *Informe*, Architecture (Notes for a Reading of Dust in Bataille)', *The Journal of Architecture*, 12.4 (2007), pp. 437–47 <https:

of becoming' that challenges its norms and economies of order, even while liveliness itself is suspended or at a standstill.

In Taranto, dust indeed blurs the boundaries traditionally enacted by the cemetery, which, as Michel Foucault writes in his short text on heterotopias, were meant to separate the living from the stuff of death — human corpses having long been considered *in themselves* a source of toxic contamination to be kept at bay.[26] In one striking photograph from the cemetery by Taranto artist Isabella Mongelli, the body of Christ itself appears covered in toxic residue, as environmental contamination settles directly onto a representation of suffering and death (Figure 7). In the toxic city, dust infiltrates the graveyard's porous borders, as well as the physical boundaries of its labourers. The many cemetery workers I met there insisted on their corporeal enmeshment with this dusty environment. 'I am like a living dead', one grave caretaker once told me. 'I hear they are planning a decontamination here, but what exactly will they decontaminate? Will they have to decontaminate my body as well?'

If the image of being poisoned while asleep was a metaphor summoned by Taranto cemetery employees, then 'to be asleep' meant that something was happening out of consciousness, a state implied by a change in scale, not only materially but temporally, into the everyday (or the *everynight*) where nothing happens, where events themselves disappear. The night photographs taken day by day mark the continuity of an unspectacular accumulation of dust.[27] Here a strange redoubling takes place: the slowness of toxicity begins to share qualities with the

//doi.org/10.1080/13602360701614714>. I thank Angelica Stathopoulos for kindly introducing me to this body of work. See also Teresa Stoppani, 'Venetian Dusts', *Log*, 17 (2009), pp. 109–18; and, for an analysis of the gendered dimensions of dust, Teresa Stoppani, 'Dusty Stories of Woman: Notes for a Re-definition of Dust', in *The Issues: Contemporary Culture and Aesthetics*, ed. by Sue Golding (Nerve, 2005), pp. 125–32.

26 Michel Foucault, 'Of Other Spaces', trans. by Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics*, 16.1 (1986), pp. 22–27.

27 This is, of course, a timescale — or temporality — that aligns with what Rob Nixon has called 'slow violence': forms of environmental harm that are gradual, dispersed, and therefore often imperceptible, in contrast to spectacular, immediately visible events such as oil spills or explosions. Nixon's central concern is how such attritional processes (because they lack visibility) pose significant challenges for representation and political mobilization. I draw on this important work to complicate the apparent opposition between slow violence and the event. See Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Harvard University Press, 2011).




FIGS 6 and 7. Taranto cemetery. Left: Statue of a woman adorning the tomb of 'Ginetta', November 2017. Photograph by the author. Right: Statue of the Pietà over a tomb, with the body of Christ covered in toxic dust, 2012. Photograph: Isabella Mongelli, from the series *Visions in Tarànto*. © Isabella Mongelli.

very temporality of the everyday itself. Yet what might it mean to consider the everyday of toxic materialities (such as dust) as a timescale through which to think planetary environmental disasters?

If the cemetery photographs bring us into the timescale of slow toxic accumulation, volcanic environments ask us to remain with particulate matter while shifting towards another scalar threshold, where dust and ash are not only linked to day-to-day exposure, but also to the sudden, eventful temporality of eruption. Of late, I have begun ethnographic research in the so-called Land of Fires — an area near Naples known today for an environmental disaster of a completely different nature,[28] where such contradictory timescales — different

28 The *Terra dei Fuochi* (Land of Fires) designates a contaminated area near Naples and around Mount Vesuvius marked by the illegal dumping and burning of toxic waste, with significant environmental and health consequences. See Gabriella Corona, 'La "Terra dei fuochi": ambiente, storia e percezione sociale', in *Storia e ambiente: città, risorse e territori dell'Italia contemporanea*, ed. by Gabriella Corona and Simone Neri Serneri (Carocci, 2010), pp. 195–217; Marco Armiero, *Wasteocene: Stories from the Global Dump* (Cambridge University Press, 2021); and Ilenia Iengo, 'Endometriosis and Environmental Violence: An Embodied, Situated Ecopolitics from the Land of Fires in Campania, Italy', *Environmental Humanities*, 14.2 (2022), pp. 341–60 <https://doi.org/10.1215/22011919-9712412>.

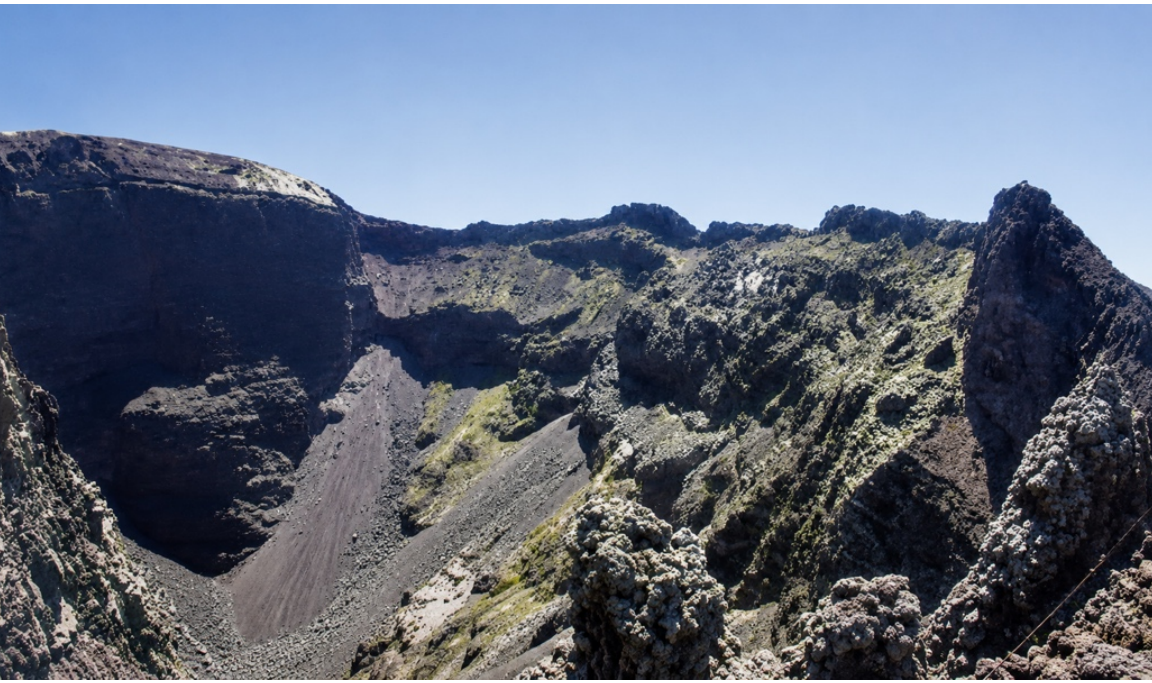


Fig. 8. Livestream of Mount Vesuvius crater. Still taken from a video made of the monitor displaying the livestream by the author inside the Osservatorio Vesuviano in Naples on 24 April 2023.

temporal densities, rhythms, velocities — materially overlap. Here, layers of toxic waste have been buried on the slopes of a dormant volcano. I took this photograph (Figure 8) at the monitoring centre of the Vesuvius Observatory. It is an image of the livestream, one of the many techniques used to monitor its activity from day to day. Although it is 'asleep', as many residents of the area say, the volcano undergoes its own micro-variations. The vulcanologist and director of the observatory pointed out things I could not perceive in this image, such as tiny fumaroles — small volcanic holes from which hot gases and vapours issue in little puffs — indicating seismic swarms: minuscule, persistent tremors that occur beneath the ground over days or months, a continuous movement that takes place at a small scale, yet that could provide oracular warning signs of a large-scale eruption to come. The obser-

vatory cameras capture this uncanny sleep of the volcano: an interval, a gap — the non-eventfulness of anticipation, seismic latency, and surface tension. This dormancy is punctuated by histories of eruption: the most recent occurred in March 1944, during the Second World War, as captured in a photograph by American soldiers (Figure 9).

In his study of dust, Joseph Amato notes that 'volcanoes shower the earth with fine particles of dust'.[29] One can also think of Pompeii, where volcanic ash left cast traces of physical bodies.[30] By contrast, the cemetery of Taranto has given rise to an ongoing struggle for vision, and for the identification and inscription of traces — where what emerges, even in writing and second-hand testimonies, is a form of intimate material intrusion, such as in the observations of doctors in Taranto, who describe dust on children's bodies in similarly minute and invasive ways. Temporality, here, is stretched: we are in the space of slow catastrophe unfolding, in the folds behind one's ears, in the micro-events of everyday life, in the realm of the infinitesimal and of ethnography — in other words, of dust.

Let us circle back to cemetery nights, via Georges Bataille and his short text entitled 'The Ascent of Mount Etna'. If dust has appeared throughout this essay as a medium through which disparate scales come into relation, the volcano is, for Bataille, a fundamental image: one where the scale of the human body meets the body of the world. Across his writings, volcanoes repeatedly appear at moments when the intimate, geological, and cosmic are brought into relation. In 'The Solar Anus', he famously writes that 'the terrestrial globe is covered with volcanoes, which serve as its anus'. In 'The Ascent of Mount Etna', originally a diary entry, this encounter takes place at the threshold between grave and crater, death and cosmos. On 15 September 1939

29 Joseph A. Amato, *Dust: A History of the Small and the Invisible* (University of California Press, 2000), p. 5.

30 Walter Benjamin visualizes the details of this traumatic invasion by material forces in ways that insist on the penetration of dust into the most infinitesimal parts of the body: 'Ash managed to insinuate itself into every wrinkle of clothing, every whorl of the ear, and everywhere between people's fingers, hair, and lips.' Walter Benjamin, 'The Fall of Herculaneum and Pompeii', in Benjamin, *Radio Benjamin*, ed. by Lecia Rosenthal, trans. by Jonathan Lutes (Verso, 2014), pp. 152–57 (p. 155). In his recent film on life on volcanic ground in and around Naples, Gianfranco Rosi also insists visually and metaphorically on the persistence of dust. See *Sotto le nuvole* (Below the Clouds), dir. by Gianfranco Rosi (Italy, 2025).




Fig. 9. Photograph taken by American soldiers of the last eruption of Mount Vesuvius, during World War II. The main street of San Giuseppe, Italy, showing the 'black snowfall' caused by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius (in the background) on 23 March 1944 (US Air Force Number 68320AC). The National Archives Catalog <https://catalog.archives.gov/id/204910969>.

— two weeks after the beginning of World War II, and less than a year after the death of his lover Colette Peignot, otherwise known as Laure — Bataille recounts exiting his home in the night on a journey to reach her grave.

Yet as he makes his way towards the region of death in the darkness of the night, walking along the uphill slope towards the cemetery of Fourqueux, he is suddenly disoriented, interrupted, taken by a forceful vision: that of the terror he felt when ascending Mount Etna with Laure, only a year prior — a vision in which death is not encountered at a distance, but as an intimate force that binds body and environment into disorienting relation. 'There was that shattering moment', he writes, 'when we leaned over the gaping wound, the crack in that star on which we drew breath.'[31]

Laure later described their volcanic excursion, this shattering and anguishing moment, to their friend, the Surrealist painter André Masson, who translated her account into a small painting made of oil and dusty sand. This painting, likely the one reproduced in Figure 10, hung in Bataille's room, over the bed where Laure died.[32] My own attention is drawn to a detail in its lower right corner: a foot that protrudes from the image, reminiscent of Bataille's obsession with the big toes photographed up close by Jacques-André Boiffard for the journal *Documents*.[33] The upright toes in the painting almost touch, ever so lightly, the undulating flow of dark lava descending on the slopes. What interests me in Masson's painting is the peculiar scalar operation it performs. It is impossible to fully discern, in the painting, the representation of an actual foot from that of a footprint — that mark which, as Radhika Subramaniam suggests, has long served to bind human, planetary, and cosmic scales. From the tracks preserved in volcanic ash at Laetoli, to boot prints on the moon, and the diffuse measure of carbon footprints, the footprint oscillates between a fleeting sign of passage and a measure

31 Georges Bataille, 'The Ascent of Mount Aetna', trans. by Annette Michelson, *October*, 36 (Spring 1986), pp. 103–05 (p. 103) <https://doi.org/10.2307/778557>.

32 I would like to thank art historian Filippo Bosco for identifying the painting as Masson's *Empédocle* (1937) in the André Masson catalogue held at the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin.

33 Georges Bataille, 'The Big Toe', in Bataille and others, *Encyclopædia Acephalica*, pp. 88–89.



Fig. 10. André Masson, *Empédocle*, 1937, oil and sand on canvas, Georges Bataille Collection, location unknown. © VG Bild-Kunst, Bonn 2026. Creative Commons license terms for re-use do not apply to this picture and further permission may be required from the right holder.

of planetary burden.[34] Masson's image suspends the scalar relation between a human step and volcanic ground, rendering the toes and the flow of lava at the same size, as if body and earth (as in the anus and the crater) occupied a single plane of measure.

34 See Radhika Subramaniam, 'Footprint: An Itinerary', *Borderlands*, 21.1 (2022), pp. 117–37; and Radhika Subramaniam, *Footprint: Four Itineraries* (np:, 2025).

Such a scalar collapse — which often translates, in Bataille's writing more generally, into an oscillating movement between ascent and descent — appears at the very moment of his encounter with Laure's grave, when he is irresistibly drawn to Mount Etna, whose image interrupts and diverts his walk towards the cemetery. In this nocturnal passage between grave and crater, the volcano appears here as a threshold figure mediating between the lovers and death. Interrupting Bataille's walk towards the cemetery, it opens a passage beyond the everyday, which he repeatedly describes as an enclosure within human particularity. Loving beyond the grave, he writes, frees one from the 'vulgarity of daily relation',[35] and from a condition of estrangement that separates the human from the universe. Such moments are *threshold* experiences in which the human is violently exposed to scales that exceed it, suspending the ordinary coordinates of existence.[36] How, then, can the human reconnect to scales from which the everyday estranges it? It is precisely this estrangement, and the everyday forms through which it is sustained, that becomes the object of reflection in the 'incomplete' chapter of his book *Guilty* (first published in French in 1944).

Here, a riveting *mise en scène*, not to say *mise en abyme* of scales takes place when a tiny ladybird falls on his philosophy papers, crawling its way onto big Hegelian concepts, 'from *allgemeiner Geist* to *sinnliches Bewusstsein* (*Einzelheit*)', all the way to the 'column marked *Leben*'.[37] This small creature, which causes in the philosopher a feeling of deep humiliation, is the opening of a text that will reflect on the everyday as something that locks humans in their particularity — in other words, in a state of absolute estrangement from the universe. Ordinary things — such as objects, meals, newspapers — leave us, he writes, ignorant of *all else*. 'What connects existence to *all else* (*tout le reste*) is death; looking at death, you stop belonging to your room,

35 Bataille, 'The Ascent of Mount Aetna', p. 104.

36 Kirill Chepurin also identifies such threshold moments in his own reading of Bataille for this volume. See Kirill Chepurin, 'Solar Figuration: Thinking the Human at the Scale of the Universe with Georges Bataille', in this volume, pp. 53–90.

37 Georges Bataille, *Guilty* [1944], trans. by Bruce Boone (The Lapis Press, 1988), p. 46. The translation of the German expressions is given in footnotes: 'From universal mind to sensory consciousness (individuality)' and 'Life'.

to family and friend — you're part of heaven's free play.'[38] Death, for Bataille, is what interrupts the enclosure of particularity, connecting the everyday to cosmic scales. To look at death is to enter a kind of cosmic exposure, 'heaven's free play' (*les jeux du ciel*).

But what happens when death is not an interruption of the everyday, but is already woven into it? What happens in a place like Taranto, where death is not held at a distance but lived as an intimate, corporeal presence in the everyday? Recall the common expression recorded during my fieldwork: 'A Taranto, abbiamo tutti I morti in famiglia.'[39] Perhaps the daily accumulation of toxic dust — captured in photographs where it settles in zebra-like streaks, a *flickering of death within the living* — opens a pathway towards what Bataille called *le reste*, understood both as the totality of the universe and as residual matter, *lo scarto*. Dust, as particulate matter, might seem to confirm a logic of division into corpuscles, a fragmentation that severs connection to the cosmos. And yet dust, DiCaglio reminds us, recalls stardust.

If toxicity is the physical and spectral presence of death blurring the boundaries of the cemetery itself, these particles subvert all division and become a medium of relation across scales. In this sense, death operates as a passage — from the particular to the universal — so that what appears as minute and dispersed matter becomes the very site of a renewed, excessive relation to the cosmos. This resonates with what Michael Taussig calls the 'mastery of non-mastery': in conditions of ecological breakdown, the granular details of toxicity intensify a mimetic entanglement with planetary processes, a kind of 'dark re-enchantment' in which the body, no longer a bounded corpuscle, dissolves into and with the world.[40]

In 'The Ascent of Mount Etna', the vision of the crater, of an opening of the earth, certainly triggers anguish, but for Bataille, it is also a necessity, the source of subterranean glory. Perhaps it is this ability to swiftly shift between scales — as he ecstatically encounters death in a more-than-human, volcanic vision — that protects him from the risk of

38 Ibid.

39 See above, p. 409.

40 See Michael Taussig, *Mastery of Non-Mastery in the Age of Meltdown* (University of Chicago Press, 2020), where he evokes 'my body, your body, and the body of the world' as entangled in interscalar, mimetic relation.



Fig. 11. Philippe Parreno, *Firefly*, 2014, ink on paper, 27.9 × 21.6 cm, private collection, London © Philippe Parreno. This blown-up firefly is part of a series drawing on Pier Paolo Pasolini's evocation, which directly prompted philosopher Vinciane Despret's writings on fireflies in uncertain times.

madness. It is striking that, in the final moments of the text, two fireflies appear in the darkness of the cemetery. Barely perceptible, flickering at the threshold of vision, they emerge just before the encounter with Laure's grave as a zone of absolute darkness. These minute points of light do not illuminate so much as interrupt the surrounding obscurity, marking a fragile persistence of the visible. Neither aligned with the overwhelming scale of the volcanic nor with the enclosed particularity of the everyday, the fireflies occupy an intermediate register, barely perceptible, yet capable of sustaining a relation across scales. If they seem to belong to the logic of corpuscles, of division into ever smaller units, they in fact do something else — they flicker between scales; they hold open a tenuous passage.

In this sense, they prefigure what Pier Paolo Pasolini would later evoke, in the mid-1970s, as the disappearance of fireflies under conditions of environmental pollution — an allegory for cultural loss that *also* referred to the material effects of industrial toxicity on environments (Figure 11). Their faint glow, here, reads as an uncanny anticipation, or even a poetic resurrection, of those vanishing lights: fragile signals resisting, at the threshold of perception. As I have argued elsewhere, following Vinciane Despret, such flickering forms are not simply visual phenomena but modes of relation, attuned to what remains uncertain, ungraspable, or not yet legible as evidence.[41] Bataille's fireflies do enact a passage across scales, between the infinitesimal and the cosmic. They hold together heterogeneous temporalities, from the slow violence of toxic exposure to the belated recognition of its effects. They flicker, not only in space but in time, between latency and apparition, as they keep open the possibility of relation at the very limits of visibility and life.

What my work seeks to follow are these flickering thresholds — where dust and death open unstable passages between scales, binding the most minute traces to the vastness of the cosmos, the situated experience of bodily processes in the everyday to the broader planetary and cosmic crises we endure today, yet struggle to grasp. It asks what it

41 Vinciane Despret, 'Fireflies in Uncertain Times (With a Rhythmic Instinction to Be Able to Travel Beyond Existing Forces of Life)', in Philippe Parreno, *Fireflies* (HENI, 2019), pp. 129–35. I also use 'flickering' as an anthropological method attentive to intermittence — to what appears and disappears across gaps and intervals.

means to inhabit the condition that the southern Italian anthropologist Ernesto de Martino termed *spaesamento*: not simply disorientation, but, as he explores in his reflections on apocalypse, a crisis of presence in which the coordinates of existence begin to dissolve, and which demands a rewriting of the body's relation to the world. To dwell within this condition means to remain with its instability, where an often-incommensurable relation between scales must be continually reconstituted at the threshold where it risks coming undone.[42]

42 Ernesto de Martino, *The End of the World: Cultural Apocalypse and Transcendence*, trans. by Dorothy Louise Zinn (University of Chicago Press, 2023).

# sweet nothings

ANGELICA STATHOPOULOS

## WHAT IS THE POINT?

*I* [*J/e*] am physically incapable of writing 'I' [*Je*], *I* [*J/e*] have no desire to do so.

Monique Wittig, *The Lesbian Body*[1]

I demand i, not as the only art form, but as a special form.

Kurt Schwitters, *Me and My Aims*[2]

What were two brown boys dancing in the forest of northern Alberta but glistening accidents, lowercase letters scribbled down for no one to see, that somehow, against all odds, came to life? What was I if not a disobedient blur?

Billy-Ray Belcourt, *A Minor Chorus*[3]

1 Monique Wittig, 'Author's Note', in *The Lesbian Body*, trans. by David Le Vay (Peter Owen, 1975), pp. 9–11 (p. 11). In this translation, *j/e* is rendered as 'I', and *m/a* as 'm/y', *m/on* as 'm/y', and so on.

2 Kurt Schwitters, *Myself and My Aims: Writings on Art and Criticism*, ed. by Megan R. Luke, trans. by Timothy Grundy (University of Chicago Press, 2021), p. 122.

3 Billy-Ray Belcourt, *A Minor Chorus* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2022), p. 46.

Let us begin with the smallest point. 'i' is the smallest letter of the Latin alphabet, and its little dot, the tittle, the ˙, is the smallest diacritic mark. i might be the simplest letter, as Kurt Schwitters argued in his i-project, but it is also adorned, decorated. The tittle ornaments the i, endows it with makeup. Like 'title', the tittle signifies a label or mark placed over a letter or text. Originally it had a practical function and was used to distinguish the i from other vowels that looked similar at the hands of medieval scribes. But since texts are no longer products of the hand, the tittle doesn't serve a practical point. The tittle is beside the point: extra. Quite like the feminine, known for being too much, or for wearing too much makeup, the tittle stands out in a system where everything has a discrete place, and a concrete function.[4] But being beside the point, the tittle points out, is not to be pointless.

What a small point though, you might be thinking. Why should we even care one tittle about something so tiny? About the fate and status of the i and its dot? Because scrutinizing small parts can help us see, as well as deconstruct, large structures. This was Schwitters's intention homing in on the i as both form, method, and subject. The Hanover-based artist was a poet, Surrealist, typographer, and graphic designer, best known for his collages labelled with the term *Merz*. Merz alludes to the German *Commerz*, to *März*, and to *ausmerzen*, which means to eradicate or eliminate.[5] Schwitters's Merz-pictures used everyday debris, litter, and garbage, which for the artist were as suited as conventional materials for composing the work of art.[6] The i-drawings were also collages created using debris, but unlike the Merz-pictures, which were composed using a collection of found parts, the i-drawings resisted alteration; they 'posit the found fragment itself as the whole'.[7] In his 'i manifesto', Schwitters describes this difference in the following way:

4 Some of these thoughts on the i are discussed in my essay 'iota • kurum, küçülme, feminenlik ve diger ince noktalar', translated to Turkish from English by Alâra Kuset, in *Sanat Dünyamiz*, 207 (2026), pp. 30–34.

5 Megan R. Luke, 'An Introduction to Merz-Thought', in Schwitters, *Myself and My Aims*, pp. xiii–xxvi (p. xv).

6 Ibid., p. xvi.

7 Schwitters, *Myself and My Aims*, p. 122.

> Every child today knows what Merz is. But what is i? i is the middle vowel of the alphabet and a term for what happens when Merz intensely grasps artistic form. Merz makes use of large, existing complexes that can be treated as material to form a work of art in order to reduce the path from the intuition to the visualization of the artistic idea as much as possible, thereby avoiding loss of heat from friction. i sets this path to = zero. Idea, material, and artwork are identical. i grasps the art-work in nature. Here the act of artistic form-creation is the recognition of rhythm and expression in a part of nature. Hence, there is no loss of friction, i.e., there is no possible disruptive interference during creation.[8]

There is a simplicity to i that Schwitters wants to capture with his collages. In i, the artist reduces his own involvement by seizing upon an existing rhythm in the material. Even though he contests that the i of the i-project relates to the English first-person pronoun 'I' ('it is not the "I"'),[9] he simultaneously plays with this confluence by accentuating the i in *ich* with a bold typeface, or with his distinct i-logo, which appears for example in his first i-poem, and in the poem '/i/ am the artist of /i/' (Figures 1 and 2).[10]

The i-project spans many years, and even though the drawings would be easy — and quick — to mass-produce, the production — as if echoing the form — remained small (very small compared to Merz).[11] The artist played a reduced role in their formation, as a mere composer of what is already there, aiming, as Schwitters put it, to accentuate their intrinsic rhythm. Schwitters, Megan R. Luke writes, 'does not wield sovereign control over his materials and is rather more a medium through which forces of difference [...] may cohere into form'.[12] He wanted to harmonize with the material — to allow for difference to proliferate within the work of art, yet in the end, Max Boersma argues, the artist asserts his dominance over the small found parts. Schwitters designates 'creative activity solely to

8 Ibid., p. 122.

9 Ibid., p. 145.

10 Ibid., pp. 141–42.

11 The i-drawings are called *i* 'to indicate the quickness of their production', as Schwitters puts it. See Dorothea Dietrich, *The Collages of Kurt Schwitters: Tradition and Innovation* (Cambridge University Press, 1993), p. 219, note 9.

12 Luke, 'An Introduction to Merz-Thought', p. xviii.



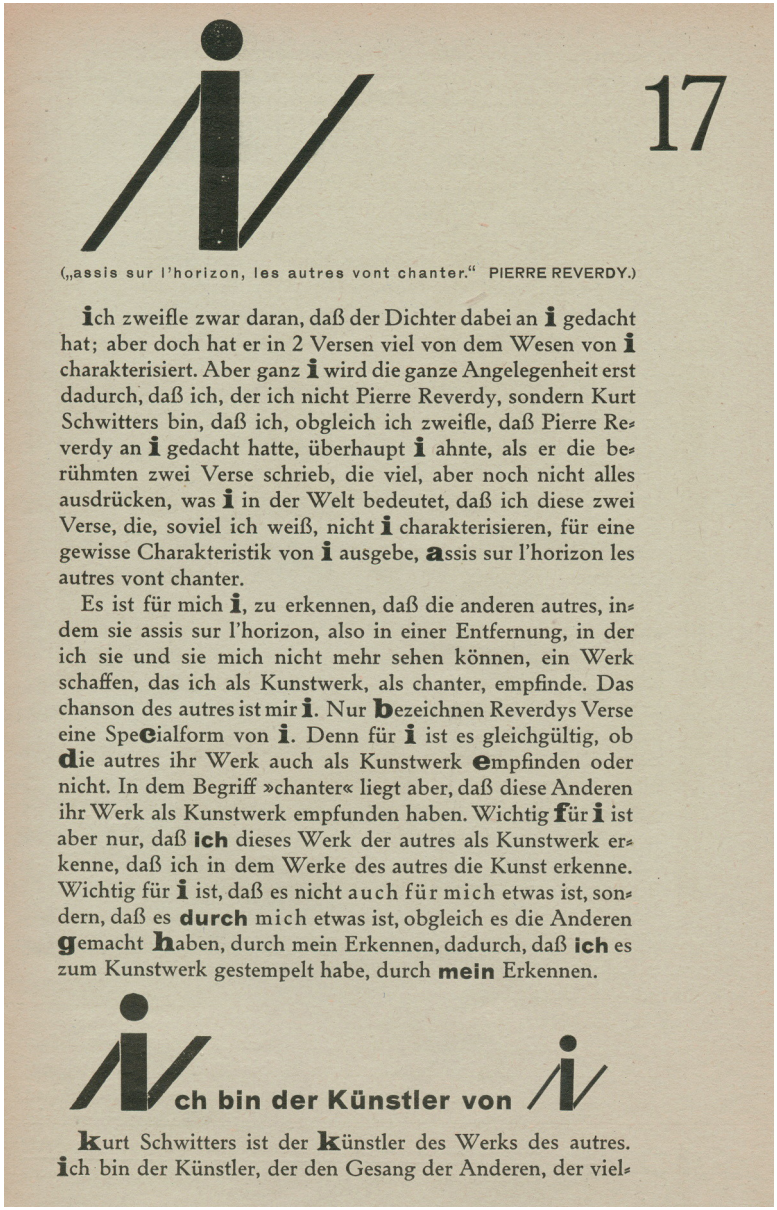

Fig 1. Schwitters's i-logo as part of his i-poem, modelled on a children's rhyme: 'up, down, up, little dot on top', in Kurt Schwitters, 'Das i-Gedicht' (The i-Poem), in *Elementar: Die Blume Anna: Die neue Anna Blume* (Der Sturm, 1922), p. 30.

himself'.[13] 'In short,' Boersma explains, 'the concept of *i* — in its most developed articulation — manifested for Schwitters a model of artistic making premised exclusively on the visual authority of the artist and its metaphorical impress, realized directly *through* and *upon* others' labor.'[14] Despite the promise of the i-project to intimate idea, material, and artwork on the same lateral plane, the artist eventually assumed the augmented, frontal role of I.

Even though, or perhaps because Schwitters failed to remain at the level of the i, his project continues to be a source of inspiration for thinking about the relation between form, subjectivity, and ethics. What does the role of the interpreter look like when it doesn't assert its dominance over the material? How is the subject to be responsibly

13 Max Boersma, *Technical Implications: The Making of Interwar Abstraction in Russia and Germany* (University of Chicago Press, forthcoming), p. 217.

14 Ibid., p. 168.



i

17

(„assis sur l'horizon, les autres vont chanter." PIERRE REVERDY.)

ich zweifle zwar daran, daß der Dichter dabei an i gedacht hat; aber doch hat er in 2 Versen viel von dem Wesen von i charakterisiert. Aber ganz i wird die ganze Angelegenheit erst dadurch, daß ich, der ich nicht Pierre Reverdy, sondern Kurt Schwitters bin, daß ich, obgleich ich zweifle, daß Pierre Reverdy an i gedacht hatte, überhaupt i ahnte, als er die berühmten zwei Verse schrieb, die viel, aber noch nicht alles ausdrücken, was i in der Welt bedeutet, daß ich diese zwei Verse, die, soviel ich weiß, nicht i charakterisieren, für eine gewisse Charakteristik von i ausgebe, assis sur l'horizon les autres vont chanter.

Es ist für mich i, zu erkennen, daß die anderen autres, indem sie assis sur l'horizon, also in einer Entfernung, in der ich sie und sie mich nicht mehr sehen können, ein Werk schaffen, das ich als Kunstwerk, als chanter, empfinde. Das chanson des autres ist mir i. Nur bezeichnen Reverdys Verse eine Specialform von i. Denn für i ist es gleichgültig, ob die autres ihr Werk auch als Kunstwerk empfinden oder nicht. In dem Begriff »chanter« liegt aber, daß diese Anderen ihr Werk als Kunstwerk empfunden haben. Wichtig für i ist aber nur, daß **ich** dieses Werk der autres als Kunstwerk erkenne, daß ich in dem Werke des autres die Kunst erkenne. Wichtig für i ist, daß es nicht auch für mich etwas ist, sondern, daß es **durch** mich etwas ist, obgleich es die Anderen gemacht haben, durch mein Erkennen, dadurch, daß **ich** es zum Kunstwerk gestempelt habe, durch **mein** Erkennen.

**Ich bin der Künstler von i**

Kurt Schwitters ist der künstler des Werks des autres. ich bin der Künstler, der den Gesang der Anderen, der viel-

Fig 2. The i-logo in Schwitters's poem 'Ich bin der Künstler von i' (I am the artist of i), in Kurt Schwitters, *Merz 2: Nummer i*, 1923. Photograph: Herling, Herling, Werner, Sprengel Museum Hannover.

with and in form? What is the relation between form and experience? Minoritarian beings, this essay attempts to show, possess a special relationship to minor forms — to what a majoritarian gaze might call insignificant details, futile gestures, or mere sweet nothings — one that tends to, adapts to, the lateral promise of the material. The lowercase i, for Billy-Ray Belcourt, becomes the aesthetic representation for a way of living beyond capital forms of selfhood, illustrating a queer, indigenous existence described as both a 'glistening accident' and a 'disobedient blur'. The 'I' is for Belcourt a site of experimentation and contestation. '[W]hat remains queer about queerness', he writes in *A History of My Brief Body*, 'is that it entices us to gamble with the "I" in the name of love, sex, friendship, art, and so forth.'[15] The minoritized subject doesn't identify as an I, but places the I in brackets, in the oblique or diminutive case, or performs, as Monique Wittig in *Le Corps lesbien*, a cut, slashing the *j/e* down the middle, in order to experiment with its potential for being, seeing, and relating differently. *J/e* is a way of typographically expressing the lived reality of the lesbian I, who glances at the world sideways, who encounters the other obliquely, laterally, rather than head-on.[16] The I or *je* only communicates the first-person reality of the neutral masculine subject, who by way of saying I appropriates all of language, everything.[17] The political importance of language — of saying I — cannot for Wittig be overstated: 'the personal and impersonal pronouns are the subject, the subject matter of all my books.'[18] To play with the i is not to erase the subject position, but the picture that emerges when we home in on jots and tittles, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak cautions in her preface to Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology*, is also a no-picture: something becomes nothing. Minor life balances at the edge of this nothing, as something that has come to life 'against all odds'.

15 Billy-Ray Belcourt, *A History of My Brief Body* (Two Dollar Radio, 2020), p. 101.

16 Cf. Monique Wittig, *The Straight Mind and Other Essays* (Beacon Press, 1992), p. 62: 'All minority writers (who are conscious of being so) enter into literature obliquely, if I may say so.'

17 Monique Wittig, *Le chantier littéraire* (Presses universitaires de Lyon, 2010), p. 138; Wittig, *The Lesbian Body*, p. 11.

18 Wittig, *Le chantier littéraire*, p. 141; my translation ('les pronoms personnels et impersonnels sont le sujet, la matière de tous mes livres').

The Derridean school of deconstruction was known for its excessive attention to detail, elucidating how the role and function of one letter can change our understanding of a whole word/sentence/paragraph/text/institution/world. In a self-conscious reflection on the role of preface-writing, Spivak wonders about her own role prefacing Derrida's book, and, in doing so, she elucidates the meaning of grammatology and its deconstructive heart:

> Why must we worry over so simple a thing as preface-making? There is, of course, no real answer to questions of this sort. The most that can be said, and Derrida has reminded us to say it anew, is that a certain view of the world, of consciousness, and of language has been accepted as the correct one, and, if the minute particulars of that view are examined, a rather different picture (that is also a no-picture, as we shall see) emerges. That examination involves an enquiry into the 'operation' of our most familiar gestures.[19]

Zooming in on minute particulars, on sweet nothings, on 'our most familiar gestures', can have large-scale effects for how we understand our world and its language. That is why we care about the tittle and other inconsequential iotas. But to home in on the tittle, in Spivak's Derridean language, is also to reckon with its escape. To name a topic, as Spivak says about setting out to write on *De la grammatologie*, is to determine a point of origin, but this origin story is never definitive; it is instead always inaccurate, even though it is necessary.[20] Spivak calls this double-sidedness writing 'under erasure' (*sous rature*): 'This is to write a word, cross it out, and then print both word and deletion.'[21] A picture and a no-picture. In her work on what she names the 'I?', Sandra Stephens calls this escape a 'magic remainder', which alerts us to that which 'we are never able to fully conceptualize' about our being, about I. Stephens's work on the decolonial, feminist 'I?' reminds us that to creatively and critically renegotiate the terms of the I is to grapple with the 'you'. '[C]onceptualizing their multiple universal *Is*,' Stephens says

19 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Translator's Preface', in Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* [1967], trans. by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (John Hopkins University Press, 1997), pp. ix–ixxxvii (p. xiii).

20 Ibid., p. xiv.

21 Ibid.

about her work on the 'I?' in relation to Frantz Fanon, Luce Irigaray, and Jean-Luc Nancy, 'provides the space to put "you" on the plain of *I*' and 'to create a world of *I and Is*', whereby she evokes the relationality, the ethics, of the Rastafarian phrase 'I and I'.[22] Zooming in on the i, *I*, or I?, then, is also to zoom out to the you. What this essay will call a 'diminutive ethics' begins by way of unpointing that which Western thought has nominated as the starting point for understanding: I.[23]

Gambling with the I is fun and games — love, sex, friendship, art — but it is never just about language (just as language is never just language). To challenge the I is to challenge the very structure of being, and to structure a new way of being together. These ontological and ethical aspects are felt in a major way in minor stories.

## FROM AN ABSOLUTE TO A VANISHING POINT

But not every little thing is of speculative interest, and philosophers — in particular certain structuralists — are, according to Michel Pêcheux, prone to overinterpretation. Overinterpretation, Pêcheux writes in 'Discourse: Structure or Event?', 'functions as a translating device, transposing "common empirical statements" into "conceptual structural statements"'.[24] Suspicious of the I, of psychology and egoically focused models of knowing, structuralists, Pêcheux argues, have turned an 'anti-narcissistic movement' into 'a new form of theoretical narcissism — a narcissism of structure'.[25] This narcissism of structure is how Pêcheux identifies overinterpretation, which 'applies the "theoretical" as a kind of metalanguage, organized as a network of paradigms'.[26] These structuralists care about form in the wrong way, or — to echo Boersma's critique of Schwitters — assert their dominance over the material. Pêcheux urges us to describe rather than interpret in

22 Sandra Hope Stephens, 'The I?: Decolonizing the I through Art and EmDisEmbodiment' (unpublished doctoral dissertation, Institute for Doctoral Studies in the Visual Arts, 2021), p. 38.

23 The term 'unpointing' is borrowed from Peter Szendy, and i will return to it in the final part of this essay.

24 Michel Pêcheux, 'Discourse: Structure or Event?', trans. by Warren Montag, in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. by Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 77–97 (p. 90).

25 Ibid., p. 90.

26 Ibid.

order to get at the ordinary register of meaning. Description is not a phenomenological methodology, since phenomenology for Pêcheux always turns description into interpretation, but a way of tending to the real of *langue. Langue* is how he names the condition of existence of language:

> I say *langue*, that is, neither language, speech, discourse, text, nor conversational interaction, but rather what has been posed by linguists as its condition of existence (in principle) in the form of the existence of the Symbolic as Jakobson and Lacan understood it.[27]

This understanding of *langue* is an attempt to acknowledge the equivocity of language and move away from a linguistic attachment to the either/or. Discourse is *both* structure *and* event. Language has a fluctuating or poetic side to it, which for Pêcheux has been fetishized in structuralism and rendered exceptional, when in fact it is ordinary, material, and real. One must begin not with 'a series of points of definition'.[28] Or, in other words, one does not get to the point by moving through definitions or theoretical concepts, but by stumbling upon what is 'taking place before your very eyes like a film that cannot be rewound or edited':[29] common empeiria. Overinterpretation erases the event of *langue*, or buries it in metalanguage.

Pêcheux's scale critique is not only epistemological, but ethical and political. Describing the intellectual milieu of twentieth-century

27 He continues: 'Certain recent tendencies in linguistics are rather encouraging from this point of view. Beyond Harrisian distributionalism and Chomskyan generativism, trends have emerged that call into question the primacy of the logical proposition as well as the limitations imposed on linguistic analysis as sentence analysis. Thus, linguistic research might begin to free itself from its obsession with ambiguity (meant as the logic of "either/or") in order to grasp what is proper to *langue* through the role of equivocity, ellipsis, lack, and so on. This play of differences, alternations, and contradictions cannot be seen as the softening of a logical hard core: the equivocity, the "constitutive heterogeneity" (the expression is J. Authier's) of *langue* corresponds to Milner's "articles of faith": "Nothing of poetry is foreign to *langue*"; and "No language can be completely understood without integrating the possibility of its poetry"' (ibid., p. 91).

28 Ibid., p. 77.

29 Ibid., p. 78. 'One says in French that someone does not need to beat around the bush when he is getting right to the point (*n'y va pas par quatre chemins quand il se dirige droit sur l'essentiel*). But in these circumstances, what would this wonderful way to the point be when the "affair" of which I speak is taking place before your very eyes like a film that cannot be rewound or edited?'

France, he notes that as political structuralism fades out of fashion, space becomes liberated 'to reckon with the below'.[30] The below is the ordinary language of the masses and what he calls the 'ordinary of meaning'. Reckoning with the below entails finding a way of combining ordinary language philosophy with structuralist forms of reading. Structuralism, by theorizing from above, failed at describing what Pêcheux calls the 'equivocity of meaning'. Structuralists, he continues, not only place the unintelligible beyond the purview of the masses, but they also — in and by way of the very same gesture — fetishize the common as an extra-linguistic space: 'Ultimately, the proletariat, the masses, the people, have such a vital need for logically stabilized universes that the play of the symbolic order does not concern them at all!'[31] They have no unconscious, no poetry, no symbolic universe. This erasure is an effect of overinterpretation. Against overinterpretation, Pêcheux presents description as a way of interpreting responsibly. Freed from the superstructure of overinterpretation, perhaps every little thing — or, rather, whatever thing that takes 'place before your eyes like a film' — could be of interpretive interest. As far as points go, what matters is that the interpreter doesn't act 'as an absolute point, without any other or real'. This, Pêcheux says, ending his essay, is 'a matter of ethics and politics: a question of responsibility'.[32] It was this responsibility that Schwitters failed to undertake in his i-project when he, in the end, asserted his own interpretive role as resolutely as an absolute point.

Similarly to Pêcheux, Derrida also makes a point against what he calls 'ultra-structuralism', which he charges with a form of interpretive closure.[33] When structure becomes the subject as opposed to a method, it takes on that hyperbolic form. But unlike Pêcheux, Derrida finds a way out of the dead end of ultra-structuralism through phenomenology. To recover the aliveness of *langue* and lived experience, Derrida turns to Edmund Husserl. In *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas*, Simon Critchley describes this as a strategy: 'he

30 Ibid., p. 91.
31 Ibid., p. 92.
32 Ibid., p. 94.
33 Jacques Derrida, *L'écriture et la différence* (Éditions du Sueil, 1967), p. 28.

employs the resources of phenomenology and puts on the mask of the phenomenologist in order to make a veiled attack on structuralism and the notion of finite totality which it presupposes. Phenomenology is the overcoming of structural closure.'[34] Against structuralism and borrowing from phenomenology, deconstruction emerges as a practice of reading, of interpreting responsibly.

An absolute point is one that encapsulates everything, that makes no distinction between a picture and a no-picture, or, as Peter Szendy puts it, 'between an I and non-I'.[35] Unlike overinterpretation and ultrastructuralism, which solidify the role of the interpreter, what Szendy calls 'overpunctuation' diffuses it. Szendy's prefix doesn't mean 'from above' or 'dead end'. 'Over' for Szendy points to something hyper; he describes how overpunctuation 'by dint of detailed articulation, atomizes, pulverizes, and granularizes phrases and forms'.[36] In other words, overpunctuation is a kind of formal hysteria that scrutinizes every little thing precisely to — as Pêcheux wanted — reckon with the below. The point, Szendy shows in *Of Stigmatology: Punctuation as Experience*, in fact always falls prey to overpunctuation, and yet never becomes a hard kernel. Punctuation, because of its relation to breath, to the body, and to the other in its promise to serve the reader, has a more direct relation to meaning than words. Punctuation incarnates the principle of description or deconstruction, namely to interpret responsibly, in order to serve the other. In this way, punctuation echoes what Pêcheux called *langue*, an aspect of language that is poetic, affective, and alive. 'Any description', Pêcheux writes, 'is intrinsically exposed to the equivocity of langue: any utterance is intrinsically able to become other than itself, to split discursively from its meaning in order then to drift toward another.'[37] If *langue* is a point, it is intrinsically split, or at drift — uncertain rather than definite.[38]

34 Simon Critchley, *The Ethics of Deconstruction: Derrida and Levinas* (Edinburgh University Press, 2014), p. 68.

35 Peter Szendy, *Of Stigmatology: Punctuation as Experience*, trans. by Jan Plug (Fordham University Press, 2018), p. 95.

36 Ibid., p. 104.

37 Pêcheux, 'Discourse: Structure or Event?', pp. 92–93.

38 'Any utterance or sequence of utterances is thus linguistically describable as a series (lexico-syntactically determined) of the possible points of drift, leaving room for interpretation. It is in this space that discourse analysis claims to work' (ibid., p. 93).

Szendy's understanding of overpunctuation is explained by way of the point, which epitomizes all typographic marks, which is to say that all punctuation marks are forms of points. The point that punctuation is is one, but also both+and. The point, the atom, was in ancient Greek an indivisible or literally uncut unity (ἀ-τέμνω, a-témnō). But, as Rebecca Comay and Frank Ruda note in their meditation on the dash — which echoes Szendy's conception of overpunctuation —

> there is no atom without the void, no atom (and no void) that is not the result of a prior splitting. The atoms are already split when they co-emerge with the void as their flipside. The atom is itself the pulverization of every atomic unit.[39]

It is precisely the 'divisibility of the point' that Szendy names 'overpunctuation'.[40] Overpunctuation simultaneously performs excess and lack: it is everything, and nothing.

In contemporary Greek, άτομο (átomo) also just means 'person'. When we read the person, the self, across ancient and modern Greek conceptions of the point, what emerges is both what Szendy calls 'punctuation as experience', as well as a different understanding of the subject that is internally fractured rather than hermetically sealed — a vanishing rather than absolute point.

## WHICH POINT?

> To write is to research chance.
>
> Chance animates the smallest parts of the universe: the scintillation of the stars is its power, a flower in the field its incantation.
>
> Georges Bataille, *The Little One*[41]

What does the i look like? For Szendy, the i becomes an overpunctuated expression of a monarch that asserts its authority by dotting the

39 Rebecca Comay and Frank Ruda, *The Dash — The Other Side of Absolute Knowing* (MIT Press, 2018) <https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/10877.001.0001>, p. 61.

40 Szendy, *Of Stigmatology*, p. 94.

41 Georges Bataille, *Louis XXX: The Little One and The Tomb of Louis XXX*, trans. by Stuart Kendall (Equus Press, 2013), p. 47; see also Georges Bataille, *Le Petit* (Pauvert,

i.[42] But since the tittle is over the top, extra, it is also 'prosthetic'.[43] Applying the logic of overpunctuation to the i, it comes to represent not the absolute sovereign, but the decapitated ruler. The i looks like a head hovering above a small body, and the tittle, more a dead end than a crown. For Georges Bataille, the point with his Society for Cutting Off Heads was to wholly leave that top part behind. Rumour has it that all the members of the secret society Acéphale agreed to be sacrificial victims, but none agreed to be the executioner. On the diminutive side of life, less is done, fewer (things) are executed. Were Bataille a graphic designer like Schwitters, he would have left that part out, or simply let it fall to the side: ı.

What are the stories of ı? Which are the images that take place before its eyes like a film? What does the eye see from that point? From below, as gravity would have it, or from above, dissolved into the air as dust or drops? Bataille's work de-situates and re-situates the gaze by way of scalar play. Enacting the convergence between form and experience, his writing takes the shape of philosophical treatises, aphoristic poetry, and erotic novels. Bataille is best known for his *Story of the Eye*, which was written under the pseudonym 'Lord Auch' and published in 1928.[44] *Histoire de l'oeil* begins as a tale about the sexual endeavours of three teenagers during one summer in a French coastal city: Simone, Marcel, and an unnamed protagonist who looks back at their perverted adventures to tell their story. The tale proceeds by way of metaphors, which is why Roland Barthes calls it a constellation of images, or a poem. The eye holds a special place in Bataille's iconography, alluding at once to his father's blindness and to the ecstatic white eye, where the pupil or the whole eyeball is rolled back in experiences of pleasure or pain, as well as to a scene that Bataille witnessed during a bullfight in Spain, where the bullfighter Manuel Granero was killed, his right

1985), p. 43: 'Écrire est rechercher la chance. | La chance anime les plus petites parties de l'univers: le scintillement des étoiles est son pouvoir, une fleur des champs son incantation.'

42 '[T]he stakes of the point and punctuation are also those of sovereignty and sovereign decisions' (Szendy, *Of Stigmatology*, pp. 95–96).

43 Ibid.

44 'Lord Auch', Bataille explains, is borrowed from an expression that his friend would use when going to the loo: *aux chiottes!* Thus: lord of the shithouse.

eye gored by the bull's horn:[45] 'The "eye" in *Story of the Eye* is Granero's eye', Stuart Kendall affirms in his biography of Bataille. 'But the event also informed his fascination with bulls and with their sacrificial slaughter, as in the Mithraic cult, and by extension his understanding of sacrifice and the sacred in general.'[46] The sacred and the sacrificial, the high and the low, converge in *Story of the Eye*, which also culminates in a bullfight. In the novel, Bataille makes use of a decentralized textual geography that channels the local capacity for deliberation of each testicle, eye, or egg. These ovoid 'subjects', as Evi Roumani refers to Bataille's images,[47] are connected formally by way of their shape and colour, and experientially in Bataille's life and work, notably in his story of the eye, *Ei*, or *Eier*.[48]

In the middle of *Ei's Story* — its heart, core, yolk, or pupil — the reader is invited to witness Simone's egg-play. Eggs are floating in the toilet, broken into the bidet, pissed on, and swallowed by various corporeal cracks. *Ei's Story* is formless; it vacillates in meaning by way of its metaphoric and metonymic structure, where each 'quality and action' is exchanged for another — the sun is an eye is an egg is a testicle; or piss as rain as blood as vomit as milk as tears… The 'transgression of values', as Barthes writes, 'corresponds to or even establishes a technical transgression of the forms of language'.[49] By way of this new form, the erotic can be reimagined. This is not true of all erotica. Sade's eroticism, Barthes exemplifies, 'is encyclopedic'.[50] 'Bataille's erotic language', on the other hand, Barthes concludes, 'is connoted by Georges Bataille's very being, it is a style; between the

45 Bataille describes these scenes in the section entitled 'Réminiscences' at the end of Georges Bataille, *Histoire de l'oeil* (Gallimard, 2022), pp. 97–103.

46 Stuart Kendall, *Georges Bataille* (Reaktion, 2007), p. 33.

47 Evi Roumani, 'The Devouring Eye', *Journal for Cultural Research*, 29.1–2 (2025), pp. 161–73 (p. 163) <https://doi.org/10.1080/14797585.2024.2406397>.

48 In my talk 'A Grammar of Diminution: (the I, the i, the eye, the Ei)', i also address the confluence between self, egg, eye, and testicle in Bataille's work. See Angelica Stathopoulos, 'A Grammar of Diminution: (the I, the i, the eye, the Ei)', talk presented at the panel 'Form' of the workshop *Scale: A Fragmentary Atlas for the Humanities*, ICI Berlin, 6–7 October 2025, video recording, mp4, 20:00 <https://doi.org/10.25620/e251006_6>.

49 Roland Barthes, 'The Metaphor of the Eye', in Barthes, *Critical Essays*, trans. by Richard Howard (Northwestern University Press, 1972), pp. 239–47 (p. 246).

50 Ibid., p. 246.

two, something is born, something which transforms every experience into a warped language and which is literature.'[51] Between the subject and the story, experience is turned into language, and language into experience. Bataille's little book echoes and is echoed by small, warped experiences. An embodied linguistic manipulation that sees the interpretive i akin to Szendy's logic of overpunctuation, and to Belcourt's glistening accidents. Something at the verge of nothing.

How does Georges Bataille's 'very being' hold up to this ephemeral style? 'Bataille's thought, his work, is inseparable from his life,' Kendall writes, in stark agreement with Barthes.[52] Bataille — the philosopher, the prolific writer, the avid client of the brothel as only a white, straight cis-man could be. Lord Auch, Pierre Angélique, Louis Trente, Dianus — pseudonymic personas, experimental erotica, posthumous publications… Bataille's work mirrors the ways in which he was both a major and a minor figure, internally split like a Greek atom. Yet all his face(t)s, for Kendall, gleam with one and the same guiding principle: friendship. The principle of friendship can be seen as an ethical communion between form and subject, which Kendall exemplifies by turning to Bataille's *Guilty*: 'If I utter a word, I bring into play the thought of *other people.* This is a thought, it so happens, I've gleaned from the human substance surrounding me.'[53] To write is to echo that human substance, by way of a form that devastates form. 'He wrote to ruin words,' Kendall explains in his discussion of Bataille's style, 'to reveal the ultimate impossibility of complete communication and to open a sphere wherein the impossible — the heterogeneous, the different, the sacred — could be communicated.'[54] Bataille's formless call for heterogeneity echoes Belcourt's minor chorus. 'How do you intend to write both an autobiography and a novel?' one of the characters in *A Minor Chorus* asks the protagonist.[55] 'Well,' he replies, 'I believe every person is a repository of a community's memories.' By way of interviewing people from the small town in rural Alberta where he grew up, the protagonist explains that he seeks to 'summon an honest

51 Ibid., p. 247.
52 Kendall, *Georges Bataille*, p. 10.
53 Georges Bataille, *Guilty* [1944], trans. by Bruce Boone (The Lapis Press, 1988), p. 108.
54 Kendall, *Georges Bataille*, p. 8.
55 Belcourt, *A Minor Chorus*, p. 53.

emotional voice'.[56] '[T]he autobiographical', he meditates, 'was rarely an individualistic mode; all of its wonder and devastation was social.'[57] The i, being already fractured, already two, communicates the principle of friendship or community in both form and content.[58]

## NO POINT

> … she wants nothing, truly she wants nothing.
>
> Hélène Cixous[59]

'Let's start with these small points,' Hélène Cixous suggests at the beginning of her essay 'Castration or Decapitation?'. The points that she begins to explore relate to sexual difference and jouissance. The dominant masculine sexual economy, Cixous notes, is lived in relation

56 'This is what I know about where I come from: it's a place where history begins and ends. Before it was part of Alberta, it was the District of Athabasca, and before that it didn't have an English name. It's the homeland of the Cree and Dene and Métis, and for centuries my ancestors lived in harmony with the land and water and forests and animals. At the close of one century and the start of another, those from whom I descend signed a treaty near the shores of the lake around which many reserves are now located, including my own. They signed in the spirit of communality and peace and in the name of future generations, though what followed was an era defined by a systematic assault on Indigenous livability: death schools, open-air prisons, child abductions. Many sick experiments were carried out by the federal government and its henchmen from which we're still recovering; though recovery isn't always an option. All the while people resisted, loudly and quietly, but always creatively. This was one way to tell a story about northern Alberta. There was another way, one that was embodied and consequential for the living, one that zoomed in on emotions and intimacy. It was this more corporeal mode of storytelling that enticed me' (Belcourt, *A Minor Chorus*, p. 30).

57 Ibid., p. 53.

58 At this moment i would like to echo the community and friendship that brought this text to life, and express my big gratitude to my fellow fellows at the ICI Berlin — Filippo Bosco, Kirill Chepurin, Franco Costantini, Cat Dawson, Federica Di Blasio, Yuri Di Liberto, Tobi Haslett, Nicolas Helm-Grovas, Magdalena Krysztoforska, José Antonio Magalhães, Jasmine Pisapia, and Verónica Stedile Luna — for their invaluable feedback on different versions of this essay. I would in particular like to extend gratitude to Filippo Bosco for introducing me to Schwitters, to Yuri Di Liberto for talking to me about Pêcheux, to Verónica Stedile Luna and Nicolas Helm-Grovas for all our discussions about form, and to the Bataille Reading Group for teaching me about the formless. Thank you also to the editors Christoph Holzhey and Marietta Kesting for their careful comments on this text, and to Claudia Peppel and Manuele Gragnolati for their reflections and support. *Grazie mille a tutti voi.*

59 Hélène Cixous, 'Castration or Decapitation?', *Signs*, 7. 1 (1981), pp. 41–55 (p. 49).

to a permanent castration anxiety. With regard to feminine life, this logic is displaced and functions instead 'as decapitation, execution', 'as loss of her head'.[60] Language is the necessary starting point for Cixous, and reimagining its expression is the intuitive beginning for a theory of feminine existence. Signification, by way of determining, naming, always excludes one thing in favour of another. 'What is it?' is a masculine question. A question for ontology. Meaning. Law. I's questions. What women are, and what they want, is the prevailing anxiety of psychoanalysis, unable to fathom what being is without being with the phallus. The prevailing anxiety for feminine beings is not to lose lack, but to express in the language of ontology that which remains elusive to its meaning. Her experience cannot be said in a masculine syntax. She cannot make sense, so she loses her head, and with it, the point. Being beside an already predetermined point is not possible within a masculine economy. There is no margin, which means that feminine life measured according to masculine parameters has no point. Nothing. Truly, nothing. For Cixous, the hysteric is the archetype for this acephalic creature. The hysteric is a decapitated woman, someone who has had her tongue as well as head cut off, and who can't be heard by the symbolic order since she speaks through her body, which man never listens to, and writes with her body, texts that he never reads. It strikes us that with just one 'l', the cephalic and phallic logic at the heart of the masculine economy become one. 'Cephallic' would be another spelling for its name.

The point resurfaces in Cixous's text under the guise of the period, which she uses to characterize both what feminine writing is, and what it isn't. A picture and a no-picture. Periods punctuate some feminine lives, and for Cixous, the period that bleeds becomes a metaphor for the fluidity of feminine writing, where the text becomes a menstrual flow. Poetically renegotiating syntax. Meaning. Law. Feminine writing is written in red ink, using droplets of periodically disgorged blood and tissue, or, providing a more democratic and less cis-centric image, in green ink, collecting droplets of spewing vomit.[61] What matters is the viscosity, borderlessness, flow, fluidity… 'Let's look not at syntax,'

60 Ibid., p. 43.
61 Ibid., p. 54.

Cixous urges, 'but at fantasy, at the unconscious: all the feminine texts I've read are very close to the voice, very close to the flesh of language'; they are, she writes, 'at the threshold of feeling'.[62] Feminine texts break grammatical norms to privilege fantasy over syntax. Cixous's feminine writing goes on and on. At a certain moment it stops, but it's never a full stop; it lives on in the reader. Feminine texts, for Cixous, have an end that is a no-end, and they have a beginning, but they are not preoccupied with origins. 'The quest for origins', she writes, 'doesn't haunt a feminine unconscious.'

The problem of origins lies at the heart of Hortense Spillers's essay 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book', which rewrites the role of personal pronouns like 'I', like 'hers', like 'his' from the perspective of the African American woman. 'Though there is no absolute point of chronological initiation,' Spillers notes, 'we might repeat certain familiar impression points that lend shape to the business of dehumanized naming.'[63] Such impression points constellate in the 'initiative strikes which open the Atlantic Slave Trade in the fifteenth century of our Christ'.[64] Spillers's grammar shows that the metaphorically split subject of psychoanalysis has a real material referent in the subject ruptured, rendered no-subject by colonial violence. Her deconstructive writing unveils the solipsism and force of the nominative case. Everyone that is not the white European ego becomes, as she puts it, an 'altered human factor'.[65] When everything is about the I, all other stories are without I. For those whose stories are told as non-I, who hold the non-subject position in grammar and history, the split self of psychoanalysis seems both apolitical and ahistorical. To tell one's story, for Spillers, is to gain nominative authority; it is to gain, as she says 'the insurgent ground as female social subject'.[66] One with the potential to name.

Expression and experience become intertwined phenomena the moment we recognize the power that stories have for making his-

62 Ibid.

63 Hortense J. Spillers, 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book', *Diacritics*, 17.2 (1987), pp. 64–81 (p. 69) <https://doi.org/10.2307/464747>.

64 Ibid., p. 68.

65 Ibid., p. 70.

66 Ibid., p. 80.

tory. Spillers introduces the terms 'flesh' and 'body' to address the distinction between 'captive and liberated subject-positions'.[67] This distinction is what she calls the 'zero degree of social conceptualization',[68] which underwrites our cultural script, or 'cultural conspiracy' — our discourse, language, grammar.[69] Writing about the origin, to recall Spivak's contention about writing under erasure, is necessary, even if it is also inaccurate. The Black woman, for Spillers, 'stands *in the flesh*, both mother and mother-dispossessed'.[70] She inhabits the both+and, which marks a difference with regard to the dominating story about the gender binary, conceptualized through a strict either/or. Spillers's 'female social subject' is 'insurgent'; she occupies the female subject position while at the same time deconstructing the coordinates that delimit it.

There is no absolute point of knowing; every starting point also evaporates, or, to echo Belcourt, becomes a social repository. '[T]he disregarded sometimes live the most remarkable lives, but there's so much we have to unsee to see that in its entirety,' Belcourt writes in *A Minor Chorus*.[71] And earlier in the novel, he exemplifies the relation between experience and expression by way of punctuation: 'Suppose a body were trapped between two parentheses, I thought, made out to be an aside, a distraction, a trace of another narrative possibility. Would you set it free, set it loose on the world?'[72] The point is not for the marginalized subject to become centralized, to contribute to The Story. To release the body from being trapped in a parenthesis lodged somewhere at the middle of another's story is to tell a different story. '[W]hat is it like in the interstitial spaces where you fall between everyone who has a name, a category, a sponsor, an agenda, spokespersons, people looking out for them — but you don't have anybody?' Spillers asks in an interview about 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe', re-

67 Ibid., p. 67.

68 Ibid.

69 Hortense J. Spillers, '"The Permanent Obliquity of an In(pha)llibly Straight": In the Time of the Daughters and the Fathers', in Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (University of Chicago Press, 2003), pp. 230–50 (p. 230).

70 Spillers, 'Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe', p. 80.

71 Belcourt, *A Minor Chorus*, p. 119.

72 Ibid., p. 64.

corded twenty years after its publication (which is almost twenty years from today).[73] What is it like in the parentheses? And how do we find ways of telling those stories? Spillers wrote her grammar in search of a vocabulary that could communicate the *I* of the Black woman. She describes this discourse as a way of being in battle, to 'actually go to war with a whole repertoire of violent behavior that was always performed in a very genteel way'.[74] The point, the atom, as we have been talking about it, is not split in the psychoanalytic sense, but fractured nonetheless in the Greek sense. Spillers's American grammar comes through this wound, echoing Belcourt's contention that 'Desire, like writing, initiates a war waged against the "I", its permanency regime'.[75] To tell the stories of the disregarded is to write against the absolute point from within.

## HOW IS THE POINT?

> I am… something formless and
> dull, indeterminate and inconsistent.
>
> Henri-Frédéric Amiel, *Private Journal*[76]

> When you think of me, picture a glistening
> wreck, something of a piece with the subliminal.
>
> Billy-Ray Belcourt, *A Minor Chorus*[77]

Sweet nothings are what we call those sayings, those words and expressions that are small and inconsequential, which the i utters to the other. What matters is not so much their *what*, but their *how*. Sweet nothings are diminutive declarations expressed in the form of the whisper, the other being so close as to feel every vibration of breath, intuit every

73 Hortense J. Spillers and others, '"Whatcha Gonna Do?": Revisiting "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book": A Conversation with Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, Farah Jasmine Griffin, Shelly Eversley, and Jennifer L. Morgan', *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 35.1–2 (2007), pp. 299–309 (p. 308).

74 Ibid., p. 301.

75 Belcourt, *A History of My Brief Body*, p. 80.

76 In Georges Poulet, *La pensée indeterminée 2: Du Romantisme au début du xx-ème siècle* (Presses universitaires de France, 1987), p. 135; my translation ('Je suis… une chose amorphe et atone, indeterminée et inconsistante').

77 Belcourt, *A Minor Chorus*, p. 67.

murmur or hum. Sweet nothings only exist in the context of the other, the lover. Sweetness occupies the space between other and i; it points to a way of 'being together', as Anne Dufourmantelle writes in her book on *douceur*.[78] Dufourmantelle turns to the etymology of *douceur* to recover meanings that have been lost. For the ancient Greeks, *douceur* served as a contrary or counterweight to hubris. But rather than a moral principle, sweetness for Dufourmantelle is an intervalic modality:

> in a certain way gentleness belongs more to the gods than to humans. Although it is tangible just as much as it is intelligible, it comprises the good without being the good, the relationship without being a relationship, the spiritual without being a divine attribute, or matter in its pure receptivity.[79]

Sweetness, by way of balancing nothing and something, performs an ethics of overpunctuation. Like Dufourmantelle, Roland Barthes relates sweetness to the body, to tact, and he also emphasizes its 'non-paradigmatizable' quality. Sweetness seems to be that thing which evades dogma, which evades reducing things to preconceived notions: an un-stigmatizable point. Sweetness opens a space for reflection, and is thus for Barthes philosophically resident in scepticism. Sweetness is no-thing rather than one thing.

> I would suggest calling the nonviolent refusal of reduction, the parrying of generality by inventive, unexpected, nonparadigmatizable behavior, the elegant and discreet flight in the face of dogmatism, in short, the principle of tact, I would call it, all being said: sweetness. Thus, as far as I am concerned, I do not find it the least surprising that one of the philosophical 'orientations' that presents the most affinity with the Neutral, to wit,

78 See Anne Dufourmantelle, *Power of Gentleness: Meditations on the Risk of Living*, trans. by Katherine Payne and Vincent Sallé (Fordham University Press, 2018), p. 28: 'From the outset, gentleness involves the question of "being together", the close circle of politics and ethics. But *praos* also means gentleness, a more sensibility-laden term meaning good-natured that the Vulgate will translate into Latin as *mites* (in English, "meek" — "poor and gentle")'. For the French original, see Anne Dufourmantelle, *Puissance de la douceur* (Éditions Payot et Rivages, 2013), p. 45.

79 Dufourmantelle, *Power of Gentleness*, p. 28. Cf. Dufourmantelle, *Puissance de la douceur*, p. 45: 'la douceur appartient d'une certain manière aux dieux plus qu'aux hommes. Bien qu'elle soit tangible tout autant qu'intelligible, elle inclut le bien sans être le bien, la relation sans être une relation, le spirituel sans être un attribut divin et la matière dans sa pure réceptivité.'

> Pyrrhonism, was at some point defined by gentleness: 'Sweetness is the final word of Skepticism,' and Diogenes Laertius: 'According to some authorities the end proposed by the Sceptics is insensibility [*apatheia*]; according to others, gentleness [*praotès*].'[80]

To evacuate the decision, to withhold judgement, are characteristics of what Barthes calls 'the Neutral', which is a diminutive principle in its promise to reduce harmful activity. When less is done, fewer (things) are executed. As an un-stigmatizable or vanishing point — diffuse and blurry rather than absolute — sweetness embodies that principle which Barthes links to tact, and which is an ethics: an ethics that balances its something with nothing, that can never be formalized into a moral code, but that remains a living ethos, in relation to and for the other. The i is the starting point for this ethics, an i that affirms its diminution so that the other has more space to live, to laugh, to love.

Like sweetness, punctuation only exists in the context of the other, the reader. And like the point, sweetness is felt as a moment of nothingness that glimpses itself. This point does not coincide with the hard shell of the I that casts its shadow onto all the other letters of the page and all the other people in the room,[81] but with a point that is a ruin more than a monument. '[T]he final full stop,' as Szendy puts it, 'the grandest of all the monuments, remains *divisible*, exposed to its overpunctuation to come, which it already contains and comprehends, which from the start already begins to *(un)point* it.'[82] The subjectivity that is intimated by way of this point is extra-ordinary, over the top, being at the same time too much and too little. Evading the either/or, affirming the both+and, the fact that there is no something without nothing. *Nothing*, Comay and Ruda remind us, is but an amalgamation of *not one thing*, modelled on the Greek οὐδέν, a double negative. Only one thing cannot change the way we understand the world, but 'some-

80 Roland Barthes, *The Neutral: Lecture Course at the Collège de France (1977–1978)*, trans. by Rosalind E. Krauss and Denis Hollier (Columbia University Press, 2005), p. 36.

81 From Adriana Cavarero's reading of Virginia Woolf in Adriana Cavarero, 'Virginia Woolf and the Shadow of the "I"', in Cavarero, *Inclinations: A Critique of Rectitude*, trans. by Amanda Minervini and Adam Sitze (Stanford University Press, 2016), pp. 35–44.

82 Szendy, *Of Stigmatology*, p. 29.

thing that is less than nothing can generate a world'.[83] Οὐδέν: 'Stripped of its substantifying prefix,' Comay and Ruda continue, 'the particle [δέν] points to what is neither one nor not one — something that is even less than nothing, "a decapitation of nothing"'.[84] This acephalic gesture, this tiny detail, becomes the starting point for what, with Anne Carson, we could call a 'bittersweet ethics'. Eros, like overpunctuation, splits the ά-τομο in two. Its divergent forces of pleasure and pain rupture the i. In her analysis of Sappho's poem, where she heralds the sweetbitter — γλυκύπικρον — Carson notes: '"Sweetbitter eros" is what hits the raw film of the lover's mind. Paradox is what takes shape on the sensitized plate of the poem, a negative image from which positive pictures can be created.'[85] What takes place before the lover's very eyes like a film is both a picture and a no-picture.

Similarly to Barthes, Carson also touches upon the connections between sweetness and nothingness, but in her vocabulary they are named 'love' and 'hole':

> The experience of eros as lack alerts a person to the boundaries of himself, of other people, of things in general. It is the edge separating my tongue from the taste for which it longs that teaches me what edge is. Like Sappho's addictive *glykopikron*, the moment of desire is one that defies proper edge, being a compound of opposites forced together at pressure. Pleasure and pain at once register upon the lover, inasmuch as the desirability of the love object derives, in part, from its lack. To whom is it lacking? To the lover. If we follow the trajectory of eros we consistently find it tracing out this same route: it moves out from the lover toward the beloved, then ricochets back to the lover himself and the hole in him, unnoticed before. Who is the real subject of most love poems? Not the beloved. It is that hole.[86]

Love burrs holes in the lover, eroding their sense of self, which renders the I more unstable, looking and feeling more like an i, a sweet nothing. Eros 'robs the body of limbs, substance, integrity and leaves the lover,

83 Comay and Ruda, *The Dash*, p. 61.
84 Ibid., p. 60.
85 Anne Carson, *Eros, the Bittersweet* (Dalkey Archive Press, 1998), p. 9.
86 Ibid., p. 30.

essentially, less' — diminished.[87] To be loved is to be made small. The lover adorns the beloved with diminutives, adding suffixes or prefixes according to their linguistic culture. To be small is to be loved. The bittersweet is a split point, it opens a parenthesis, a gap, a space for breathing:

> At this point *I* invoke your help m/y incomparable Sappho, give m/e by thousands the fingers that allay the wounds, give m/e the lips the tongue the saliva which draw one into the slow sweet poisoned country from which one cannot return.[88]

Altering the status of the I by way of experimenting with its form — slashing it down the middle, literally calling it into question (?), placing it in an oblique or diminutive case — changes the relation to the other and the world. In a diminutive ethics, the i becomes an imprint for forces of difference, losing its edge so as to welcome the other and the sweet nothingness that may incur. In the 'slow sweet poisoned country' the i unpoints its self to serve the you, to let the other be

87 Ibid., p. 32.

88 Wittig, *The Lesbian Body*, p. 16. Cf. Monique Wittig, *Le Corps lesbien* (Les Éditions de Minuit, 2022), pp. 8–9: 'À ce point là j/e t'appelle à m/on aide Sappho m/on incomparable, donne m/oi les doigts par milliers qui adoucissent les plaies, donne m/oi les lèvres la langue la salive qui attire dans le lent le doux l'empoisonné pays d'où l'on ne peut pas revenir.'

# Editorial Writings from a Scalar Perspective

## Reduction and Expansion as Publishing Procedures

VERÓNICA STEDILE LUNA

### THREE PUBLISHING SCENES

*Experimenting with writing through editing entails processes of expansion and reduction across formats, materials, texts, and images.*

*2016*

Printed on a single A4 sheet, folded eight times and bound with cardboard collected from the street, brief and little-known texts by authors such as Judith Butler, Ursula K. Le Guin, María Martoccia, John Berger, Samuel Beckett, Giorgio Agamben, and Alfonsina Storni, among many others, began to appear in the small-scale format of ten by seven centimetres. In this cardboard-bound configuration, these texts became books (Figure 1).

The publishing design protocol that shapes their visual identity is deliberately indeterminate: there is no logo, no consistent typography, and neither the title nor the author's name appears on the cover. What we see instead is a fragment of recycled cardboard. Only upon opening




Fig. 1. Books by Oficina Perambulante, 2021. Various formats and different uses of cardboard packaging as graphic material. Photograph: Véronica Stedile Luna.

the book does its condition as a publication become legible, revealing its belonging to the publishing project 'Oficina Perambulante'. The name animates these objects: without a spine, they seem destined to circulate — too light to remain fixed — moving between towns in the province of Buenos Aires, always near other books yet never settling on a shelf.

They are destined to perambulate — the term evokes walking without a fixed destination, without a revealed purpose, and, in a certain sense, becoming lost in the very act of moving. The first published title is *Poéticas*, by Carlos Ríos, writer and publisher of the project. This is not Ríos's first engagement with publishing: by 2016, he had already released more than ten titles across Argentina, France, Spain, Brazil, Chile, Uruguay, and Mexico, in more conventional book formats.[1]

Since then, Ríos has redefined the formats of Oficina Perambulante publications on multiple occasions. One element, however, has remained consistent since 2016: the use of cardboard as a graphic and linguistic semiotic device. It functions not merely as support or cover but enters the book as visual rhetoric in transformation. When scanned or photocopied, it becomes a template for the blank page, or a raw material for new compositions that replicate its texture and aesthetic in another medium.

As of 2026, Oficina Perambulante has published more than five hundred titles, including books by Ríos himself as well as by well-known authors and emerging and first-time writers, alongside non-authorial and pseudonymous texts, rewritings, and assembled works.

*2019*

In a space measuring five by six metres and six metres in height, with unpainted grey cement walls, the Argentine artist, poet, and publisher Andrea Iriart writes, with a brush and white latex, one line per day: one line per day distributed across the walls in a clockwise direction; one line per day drawn from old notebooks where texts and poems are kept, only to be torn apart and recomposed as lines; one line per day that interrupts the previous notebook-writing in order to compose — over the years this work has been unfolding — new poems that overlay and mutate through their encounter with subsequent lines; one line per day oriented towards a limit-condition of writing: achieving an unbroken white through letters; one line per day in which writing ascends and meaning disperses at the edges of the letters, as Iriart balances painting

1 His novels *Manigua* and *Cuaderno de Pripyat* were published by Entropía Editorial during the flourishing of alternative publishing in Argentina between 2009 and 2012.

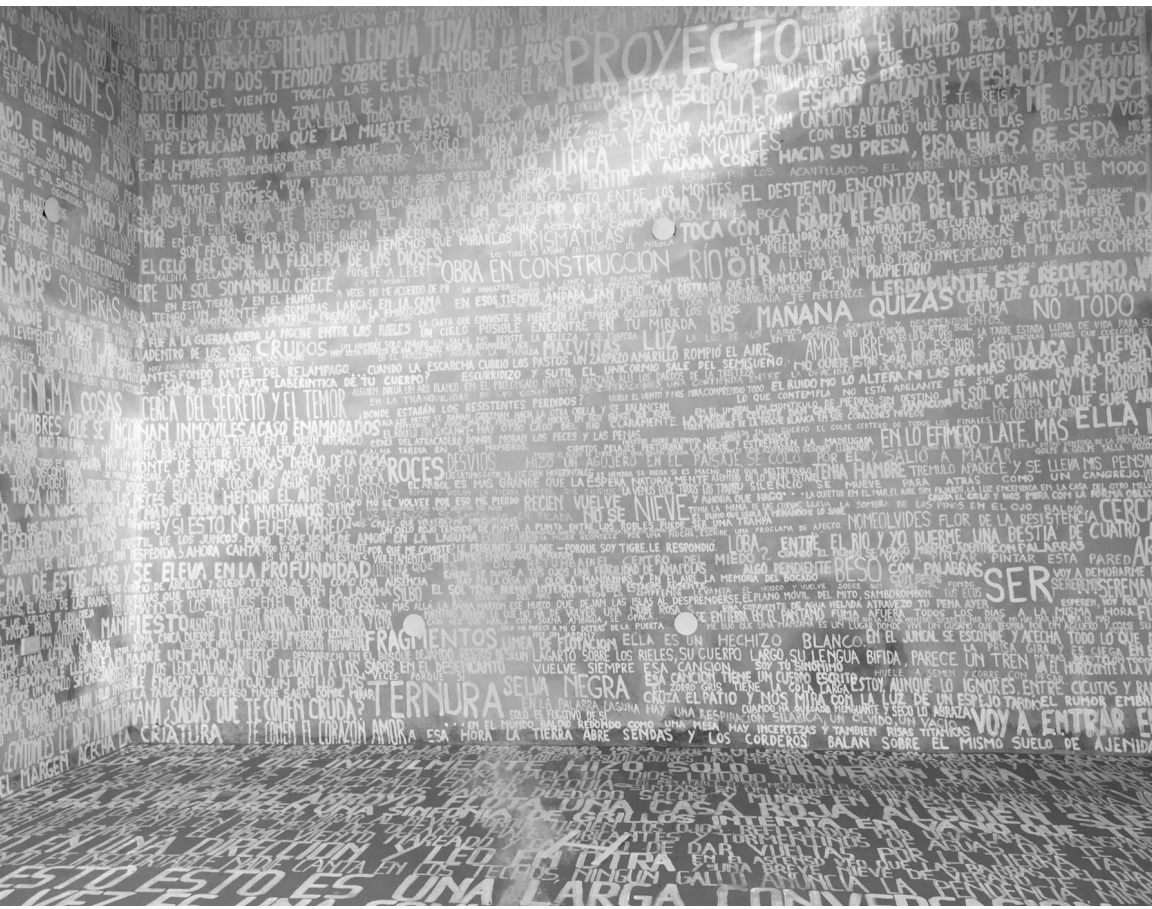



Fig. 2. Andrea Iriart, *Líneas Móviles*, 2023, white paint on unrendered grey cement wall. Photograph: Diana Fonseca.

while climbing a ladder: 'I look at my hands as I write on a large scale, and at times I see them as independent of me, as if each word detached itself from the body and set out on a journey of its own,' Iriart writes.[2]

The studio space is located in the Altos de San Lorenzo neighbourhood of La Plata. The work, titled *Líneas Móviles* (Figure 2), is

2 Andrea Iriart, *Líneas Móviles* (Bruma Editorial, 2024), p. 16. In the original: 'Miro mis manos mientras escribo a gran escala y por momentos las veo independientes de mí, como si en cada palabra se desprendieran del cuerpo.'

conceived as a form of publication, as a reflection on publishing procedures, and as an inquiry into the time of writing and the time of publishing. Each week, the space opens to visitors, activating instances of reading as well as reading performances, dance, and light installations. Iriart also works at other sites, extending the same procedure onto different walls.

A book with the same title, *Líneas Móviles*, published in 2024 by Bruma Editorial, is neither a collection of the notebooks nor a facsimile of the walls, but an essay about the place of the body in the writing process, offering glimpses of a work that is still ongoing.

*2023*

A group of people gather around a table to overprint the pages of hundreds of books laid out before them with A5-sized stamps (Figure 3). Through an open call, members of the public were invited to send books that had been printed and distributed but never read: surplus copies abandoned in boxes or warehouses, awaiting entry into the reading circuit or else destined for destruction. Engraved on the stamp is a matrix composed of pages from the booklet *La Biblioteca Negra. La edición como práctica forense* (*The Black Library: Editing as Forensic Practice*), written by Gabriela Halac and published in the 'Laboratorio' series of her press, Ediciones DocumentA/Escénicas.

In this essay, the author reflects on the condition of the contemporary publishing industry by attending to the role of matter and bodies in the production of books. In contrast to the connotations of the 'blank page' — 'a territory historically conquered by a white writer with guarantees of power and recognition'[3] — the 'black pages' of this edition, conceived as a palimpsest, allude to concealed and denied existences, bearing the marks of time, inequality, and precarious conditions of production.

3 This quotation is from Gabriela Halac, *Instrucciones para ennegrecer un libro* (UNAM and Museo Universitario del Chopo, 2025), p. 13. However, a similar idea had already been outlined in her previous publication: Gabriela Halac, *Páginas en negro. La edición como práctica forense* (Ediciones de Laboratorio Documenta Escénicas, 2022), p. 10, with notes by Patricio Villarreal.



Fig. 3. Participants in the performance work *La Biblioteca Negra*, 2023, inking the stamps they will use to print pages from books considered surplus or available for disposal. Copyright: La Mutanta by Nerea Coll — BravaStudio.

Books overprinted with stamps of *La Biblioteca Negra* undergo a shift in legibility: from writing destined for disposal to illegible writing, or to writing that becomes legible only through the superimposition of another mark, ink, or textual layer.

This performative editorial intervention took place across various institutions in Spain and Mexico between 2022 and 2025 and was coordinated by Gabriela Halac and Lluc Mayol.[4] The stamped books

4 The project was launched in 2022 and has so far been implemented at various institutions: La Mutant: Espacio de Artes Vivas (Valencia); the Institute Valencià d'Art Modern (IVAM); the Library of the Faculty of Fine Arts, Complutense University of

contributed to the formation of a Black Library that seeks to infiltrate and disrupt cataloguing systems.

The differences between these three scenes are striking, as they highlight distinct aspects of the notion of 'publication'. The small format and use of recycled cardboard contrast with the enlarged and expanded writing on the wall. The nature of the texts printed on the collected cardboard — public and anonymous — seems almost at odds with the authorial effect produced by Andrea Iriart's writing. At the same time, although the performativity of the book as an actant bearing traces of its conditions and materials of production is evident both in *La Biblioteca Negra* and in Oficina Perambulante's use of cardboard, the gestures surrounding the notion of legibility foreground different concerns.

Despite this diversity, the three cases are characterized by two shared features also present in other contemporary publishing projects from Latin America:[5] first, a notion of writing shaped by publishing procedures, which can be described as 'editorial writing'; and second, an interplay between writing and editing based on operations of scalar expansion and reduction.

Within this outline, 'scale' implies at least three approaches: first, scale as a property of the book itself, attending to processes of mutation in measures, quantitative differences, and material divisions that affect the meaning of what a book is,[6] and the relation between writing and its conditions of legibility; second, scale as a mode of observation, in which changes in the resolution at which objects are observed not only transform the objects themselves but also produce meaningful

Madrid; La Caldera (Barcelona); Salamanca Public Library 'Casa de las Conchas'; and Espai Nyamnyam (Mières, Girona).

5 It is important to note that the two features common to these scenes are not confined to them; rather, they unfold within the framework of broader artistic publishing projects and may be extended to others with similar characteristics — for example, Reunión, Industria Mínima, Esto es un Libro, Barba de Abejas, Tercera Persona, and N Direcciones.

6 A special relation between scale and meaning is articulated in Rachel Wells, *Scale in Contemporary Sculpture: Enlargement, Miniaturisation and the Life*-Size (Ashgate, 2013). Wells highlights that the experience of scaled objects exceeds the body's experience, revealing 'a memory standing outside the self and thus presenting both a surplus and lack of significance'. That said, the 'experience of the object [...] is saturated with meanings that will never be fully revealed to us' (Susan Stewart, quoted in ibid., p. 16).

disjunctions;[7] and third, scale as a dimension of production and excess, related to modes of production, visual excess, and loss of meaning, following Peter Szendy's notion of 'general iconomy',[8] which extends Georges Bataille's concept of 'general economy'.[9]

This disjunction becomes visible when considering the relation between mass-scale publishing production and commercial writing printed on packaging. Within the logic of large-scale production, this writing may appear continuous with the regime of mass reproduction; however, once these cardboard packages are cut and reused as covers for books by Oficina Perambulante, the same commercial writing is not only reduced or miniaturized but also singularized, now bound to a specific literary-artistic text.

Further disjunctions in terms of resolution and meaning can be observed in *Líneas Móviles*, between publishing and meaning at the level of the text and at the level of the letter; and in the performances of *La Biblioteca Negra*, between what remains unread — an excess destined for disposal within the publishing process, where its connection to the conditions and materials of production is erased — and that which becomes illegible in a situated, contingent gesture.

From these three approaches to scale, we may observe how operations of expansion and reduction connect alterations in the nature of the book and of writing with ways of reading the conditions of publishing. Within this interaction, their status as editorial writing emerges — that is, as publishing objects that engage the conditions in which they circulate through their formal and material procedures.

7 Joshua DiCaglio, *Scale Theory: A Nondisciplinary Inquiry* (University of Minnesota Press, 2021) defines scale as 'a systematic accounting for significant shifts in a measured range of observation', shifts that produce a 'change in resolution' (p. 51) — that is, a transformation in what becomes visible and what remains invisible through alterations of scale. As he further notes in 'Scale Tricks and God Tricks, or The Power of Scale in *Powers of Ten*', *Configurations*, 28.4 (2020), pp. 459–90 <https://doi.org/10.1353/con.2020.0021>, 'This idea of resolution implies a significant element of scale: if shifts in scale produce a change in resolution, then there is a real disjuncture between scales, because changing scales changes what is able to be seen within an observation' (p. 466).

8 Peter Szendy, *For an Ecology of Images*, trans. by Marco Roth (Verso, 2025).

9 See Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, trans. by Robert Hurley, 3 vols (Zone Books, 1988–92), I: *Consumption* (1988).

## EDITORIAL WRITINGS: EXPANSION AND REDUCTION AFTER PRINT CAPITALISM

The term 'editorial writing' operates on two convergent levels: on the one hand, it refers to the relation between writing and book formats; on the other, it addresses how formats, materialities, and procedures mobilized in editorial writing articulate a response to specific conditions of publishing production.

From the standpoint of the book, editorial writing designates a mode of writing shaped by the conditions of its publication, as well as publications in which writing and publishing are inextricably linked. Format, design, binding procedures, chosen materials, and printing methods are not external to the text but inseparable from experimentation with writing itself. In this sense, writing and publishing are not merely connected, but coextensive and meta-reflective.

In *Líneas Móviles*, for example, experimenting with writing involves moving between the notebook, the wall, and the book as three spaces of inscription. These spaces do not simply function as supports; rather, they actively shape what writing can become through the very procedure of producing a published text. Similarly, when Oficina Perambulante determines that a book is whatever fits on an A4 sheet, it intervenes not only in the notion of the book but also establishes constraints on writing itself. This coextensiveness further affects the semantic relationships that emerge within Oficina Perambulante, particularly between the commercial discourse of packaging — which replaces the editorial paratext of the cover — and the unexpected meanings generated through the interplay between its linguistic-graphic rhetoric and the published text.

Within this perspective, editorial writing invites a reconsideration of the inversion proposed by Roger Chartier in his well-known chiasmus, 'the hand of the author and the spirit of the printer'.[10] While Chartier interprets writing in terms of its artisanal dimension and printing in terms of thought, editorial writing extends this reflection to the broader field of publishing. From this standpoint, the book appears

10 See Roger Chartier, *The Author's Hand and the Printer's Mind: Transformations of the Written Word in Early Modern Europe* (Polity Press, 2014).

both as an object circulating across different markets and as a device capable of interpreting its own conditions of production.

Chartier's formulation also allows us to identify significant precedents, over the past three centuries, in which writing processes are inseparable from editorial and publishing procedures. From Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759) to Stéphane Mallarmé's conception of the page as an ocean through which words must navigate (*Un coup de dés jamais n'abolira le hasard*, 1897), and to Jack Kerouac's continuous scroll of *On the Road* (1957), literary history reveals what Polish historian and literary scholar Katarzyna Bazarnik has highlighted as 'liberature':[11] an approach that foregrounds the intersections between art, book design, transcription processes, and text as constitutive elements of meaning. What distinguishes these examples from editorial writing, however, is the latter's underlying engagement with the publishing ecosystem, rather than with the book as an isolated object.

In this sense, editorial writing entails a double shift. First, it transforms the notion of writing itself: a poetics of writing can no longer be confined to 'style' as an attribute of the author's relation to language, but must also encompass what has been described as the 'rhetoric of print'.[12] Second, it situates this redefinition within a publishing discourse structured by two complementary modalities. On the one hand, the mutual implication of writing and editing shifts the focus away from authorial poetics towards the effects produced by artistic publishing projects as they situate themselves within series, networks, and broader discursive formations. On the other hand, editorial writing refers to publications in which the relation between writing and editing becomes an indirect, meta-reflexive means of rendering visible the pub-

11 The Polish artist Zenon Fajfer and the literary scholar Katarzyna Bazarnik have coined the neologism 'liberature' to describe 'literature in the form of a book'. This shifts the emphasis from the letter (lat. *litera*) to the book (lat. *liber*): 'the material book, which can be of any shape and structure, ceases to be a neutral container for a text, but becomes an integral component of the literary work' (Katarzyna Bazarnik, 'Time for Liberature', in Zenon Fajfer, *Liberature or Total Literature: Collected Essays 1999–2009* (Halart, 2010), pp. 7–8).

12 See Michael Cahn, *Der Druck des Wissens. Geschichte und Medium der wissenschaftlichen Publikation* (Reichert, 1991), p. 52; and Magnus Wieland, 'Sculpture Lecture: Reading *Un coup de dés*', in *Thirteen Years: The Materialization of Ideas from 2002 to 2015*, ed. by Michalis Pichler, Annette Gilbert, and Clemens Krümmel (Spector Books, 2015), pp. 26–35.

lishing market, its regimes of production, circulation, consumption, and their inequalities.

'Indirect', in Roland Barthes's sense of the term, describes the way in which art and literature can *dramatize* or *perform* — instead of *thematize* — some subtle or non-explicit aspects that can be reshaped from artistic procedures. In his view, literature transforms what science understands as knowledge into a dramatic discourse rather than an epistemological one. The indirect thus becomes the mode through which art 'bridges the gap' between science, which is 'unrefined', and life, which is 'subtle'.[13]

From this perspective, Oficina Perambulante, *Líneas Móviles*, and *La Biblioteca Negra* may be understood as editorial practices whose procedures of expansion and reduction — across formats, writing styles, and materials — respond to conditions that exceed the individual publication. To understand what these practices intervene in, it is necessary to shift from the scale of individual projects to that of the publishing industry itself. More specifically, they respond to the enduring effects of what Benedict Anderson characterizes as 'print capitalism', understood as a process of linguistic standardization and capital accumulation.

In *Imagined Communities*, Anderson argues that the expansion of print after Gutenberg fostered both the commodification of ideas and the standardization of written language.[14] Although he situates this process within the emergence of the nation-state, his account also provides a broader way of understanding how publishing has historically linked linguistic forms to economic organization.

Today, these dynamics operate under different conditions. Rather than national publishing systems, large-scale publishing is increasingly organized through transnational multimedia conglomerates. As José Luis de Diego has shown, a series of acquisitions between 1997 and

13 Roland Barthes, 'Lecture in Inauguration of the Chair of Literary Semiology, Collège de France, January 7, 1977', trans. by Richard Howard, *October*, 8 (1979), pp. 3–16 <https://doi.org/10.2307/778222>. This understanding is complemented by T. S. Eliot's formulation of the 'objective correlative', in which artistic experience likewise operates indirectly through a set of objects, a situation, a chain of events which shall be the formula of a particular emotion.

14 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (Verso, 1991), p. 22.

2012 culminated in the merger of Penguin and Random House under the Bertelsmann umbrella, consolidating an unprecedented concentration of publishing capital.[15]

One of the main consequences of this process has been the rapid standardization of publications and a growing tendency towards formal and editorial uniformity, whereby many works have come to be conceived according to criteria shaped by business logic and the demands of short-term profit.

The projects introduced in the three initial scenes emerged in Argentina, where the consequences of publishing concentration intersected, at the beginning of the twenty-first century, with the country's broader economic, political, and social trajectories, culminating in the crisis of 2001.[16] Extremely high levels of poverty, widespread job insecurity, and the instability of democratic institutions gave rise to a state of revolt and permanent assembly that also affected the ways in which books were produced. In this context, the constraints imposed by large publishing houses — concentrated in the hands of a small number of managers and governed by high-yield business models — converged with a social environment demanding a transformation of existing modes of production. As a result, alternative ways of conceiving the book began to emerge.[17]

Against this backdrop, the phenomenon of so-called 'independent publishers' emerged in Argentina after 2001. These initiatives were characterized by small-scale structures, close editor–author–reader relations, alternative modes of circulation, low-investment models, and unconventional aesthetic and political orientations.[18]

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15 José Luis de Diego, *La otra cara de Jano. Una mirada crítica sobre el libro y la edición* (Ampersand, 2015). De Diego's analysis focuses on the Spanish publishing market; however, the mechanisms he identifies apply beyond national boundaries.

16 The Argentinian crisis of 2001 was also one of the peaks in publishing concentration in Argentina, marked by a series of sales and takeovers of small and medium-sized publishing houses by large conglomerates.

17 The convergence of these phenomena is examined in José Luis de Diego, *Editores y políticas editoriales en Argentina (1880–2010)* (Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2014); Daniela Szpilbarg, *Cartografía de la edición mundializada. Modos de hacer y pensar el libro en el siglo XXI* (Tren en Movimiento, 2019); and Iñaki Vázquez Álvarez, 'La concentración editorial: una aproximación conceptual al fenómeno', *Trama & Texturas*, 28 (2015), pp. 43–53.

18 See Ezequiel Saferstein and Daniela Szpilbarg, 'El espacio editorial "independiente": heterogeneidad, posicionamientos y debates: hacia una tipología de las editoriales en

Over time, this phenomenon proved highly effective in reshaping the sector: what was considered small, marginal, and alternative around 2004–05 has since consolidated into a professionalized field. Today, a significant part of this sector accounts for a substantial share of bookshop sales, plays an active role in the international market for rights acquisition and exchange, and increasingly participates in decision-making processes within the publishing industry.

For example, the first Feria de Editores (Publishers' Fair) was held at a community radio station in 2012, with around thirty publishers taking part. Today, that same fair has become the second most important in the region, bringing together over four hundred publishers from Argentina and Latin America, while also hosting a fellowship programme and professional conferences. This development points to a dynamism that continually reconfigures the relationships between centre and periphery, as well as between small- and medium-scale operations. As Annette Gilbert has noted in relation to art publications — often characterized as 'small ventures' — 'there is no *one* mainstream', and 'one cannot speak of *the* small press as *the* alternative'.[19]

As an offshoot of the phenomenon that began in 2001, the past decade has witnessed the emergence of another publishing formation, encompassing what I refer to here as 'editorial writings'. These projects have evolved in non-homogeneous and non-linear ways as part of this expanding scene, yet they cannot be fully defined by the logic of professionalization — or, at the very least, they maintain a critical relationship with that process of professionalization — nor are they fully defined by the concerns that shaped the early years of the twenty-

el período 1998–2010', *Primer coloquio Argentino de Estudios sobre el libro y la edición* (31 October–2 November 2012, La Plata, Argentina) <http://www.memoria.fahce.unlp.edu.ar/trab_eventos/ev.1955/ev.1955.pdf> [accessed 11 July 2026]; Hernán López Winne and Víctor Malumian, *Independientes, ¿de qué? Hablan los editores de América Latina* (Fondo de Cultura Económica, 2016); and Magalí Rabasa, *The Book in Movement: Autonomous Politics and the Lettered City Underground* (University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019).

19 Annette Gilbert, 'Publishing as Artistic Practice', in *Publishing as Artistic Practice*, ed. by Annette Gilbert (Sternberg Press, 2016), pp. 6–39 (p. 16). She adds that 'the field of publishing fragments into many diverse models and categories of publishing that operate on entirely divergent premises, business models, and forms of organization, as one can see in the differences between trade and academic publishing as well as the POD industry' (ibid.).

first century. Rather, these artistic publishing practices — emerging alongside a sector that has developed a high degree of self-awareness over the past twenty-five years — derive their specificity from a relative condition of non-assimilation, which enables a meta-reflective engagement with the field itself.

The performance *La Biblioteca Negra*, specifically, engages with one of the consequences that has intensified within the highly concentrated landscape of industrial publishing: a dynamic of overproduction and destruction of books.[20] An excess of books — books produced but not read, books that, within short purchase cycles, become waste, unstorable matter — is part of the system of print capitalism. While this is a particularly pronounced phenomenon in large-scale production, the inquiry into resources, materiality, and what it means for writing to be disposable concerns us — as a latent backdrop — in every publishing practice.

Viewed from this perspective, the processes of expansion and reduction that characterize these practices do not simply produce diversity in opposition to the standardization associated with large-scale publishing. Instead, they demonstrate that scale is never neutral in relation to writing. Within this outline, the interplay between expansion and reduction challenges narratives of linear growth and professionalization, foregrounding instead a constitutive disjunction: scalar alterations transform the object precisely by modifying the procedures through which it is produced.

'Scalar alterations', here, implies the above-mentioned two approaches to understanding how notions of the book and of writing are shaped by shifts in scale. The first considers the dynamic of the publishing market and the interplay between production models; the second scalar layer draws on 'quantitative difference' and measurement around a publishing work (whether it be a book as an object or a performance that embodies a publishing issue). According to Rachel Wells, what can be measured and the elements considered in processes

20 See Kathleen Fitzpatrick, *Planned Obsolescence: Publishing, Technology, and the Future of the Academy* (New York University Press, 2011); Halac, *Páginas en negro*; Andrew Laties, *Rebel Bookseller: How to Improvise Your Own Indie Store and Beat Back the Chains* (Vox Pop, 2005); and Temporary Services, *Book Waste Book* (Half Letter Press, 2022).

of measuring consistently produce relations of lack or surplus with respect to meaning.[21] This suggests that the composition of meaning is always, to some degree, dislocated from any stable anchoring point.

The way in which these literary and artistic publications intervene critically in the fields of conglomerated publishing and independent publishing, and in the dynamics of overproduction and destruction, should not be understood as thematic or topic-based, but rather as an indirect, formal mode of intervention. The objective is not to present new ideas about the book market at the present moment, but to consider how some apparently tiny, small, alternative, and non-market-based experimental publications can be understood as artistic responses to the ethical dimensions of materiality and bodily engagement in the experience of reading, and to a broader question concerning that market, namely: What does the manufactured life of books mean in the current publishing era?

## EXPANSION AND REDUCTION: (DE)MATERIALIZATION A CENTURY AFTER 'THE FUTURE OF THE BOOK'

In 'The Future of the Book', an essay-manifesto published by the German journal *Gutenberg-Jahrbuch* in 1927, the Soviet artist El Lissitzky outlined a political history of technical innovations in the fields of art and print, focusing on the excess of matter and on processes of what he called 'dematerialization'. Like an arrow shot towards the future, his questions now fall upon one of the most sensitive and obscure aspects of large-scale publishing production: the dynamics of overproduction and destruction of books.

While Lissitzky was advancing a cultural thesis for the form of the book — according to which 'alteration in the structure and mood of language implies a change in the usual appearance of the book'[22] — he sought to articulate this with systems of reproduction. According to Lissitzky, 'The idea moving the masses today is called materialism, but dematerialization is the characteristic of the epoch.'[23] The example

21 See Wells, *Scale in Contemporary Sculpture*, p. 16.

22 El Lissitzky, 'The Future of the Book', in *Publishing Manifestos: An International Anthology from Artists and Writers*, ed. by Michalis Pichler (MIT Press and Miss Read, 2019), pp. 24–27.

23 Ibid., p. 25.

he gives is eloquent: 'correspondence grows, so the number of letters, the quantity of writing paper, the mass of material consumed expand, until relieved by the telephone. Again, the network and material of supply grow until they are relieved by the radio.' He concludes: 'Matter diminishes, we dematerialize, sluggish masses of matter are replaced by liberated energy.'

Lissitzky's thesis addressed the following question about the future of books: Where should innovations in printing be heading if we remain within the realm of the tangible and the manufactured? He described collotype as a form of dematerialization, for the way it uses photosensitive paper and photographic negatives to print text and images simultaneously. This, together with the development of the facsimile-electrotype, paved the way for photomontage. However, the latter innovation had different implications for American and Russian posters at the level of meaning. American posters, designed for rapid viewing from a passing motor car, were driven by a 'new, optimistic mentality that laid stress on immediate events and the fleeting moment'.[24] During the Revolutionary period, Russian designers and printers, by contrast, 'ripped up the traditional book into single pages, magnified these a hundred times, printed them in colour and stuck them up as posters in the streets [ … ] to be read and to enlighten from a short distance'.[25]

There are two aspects worth highlighting in Lissitzky's political history of printing. The first concerns the interaction between procedures of printing and reproduction and the meanings that, within a political history, become a field of dispute — for example, in transformations of the space-time of reading, ranging from 'rapid perception' to 'enlightenment from a short distance'.[26] The other concerns the way in which, whenever there is a dynamic of an abundance of matter and a release of energy in the field of reproduction, we are confronted with a problem of scale in terms of disjunction and discontinuity,[27] which in turn implies a transformation in the definition of objects. What we

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid., p. 26.

26 Ibid.

27 DiCaglio refers to problems of 'resolution' as involving jumps and discontinuities, citing Timothy Clark, who argues that these 'concepts of scale are not a smooth

call 'printed matter', and its possible meanings, depends on the scale of matter and reproduction that shapes the object itself through the procedures it enables. 'Matter that increases' and 'energy that is released' are not external factors of the 'appearance of the book', to recall Lissitzky's terms, but rather an inherent dynamic, intertwined with something as sensitive as the structure of language and the meanings implied in books as makers of culture.

## EXPANSION AND REDUCTION #1: *LA BIBLIOTECA NEGRA* AND EXCESS IN GENERAL ECONOMY

In the future that Lissitzky envisioned for the book — as a process of dematerialization in its forms of reproducibility, and as variations in format that would capture changes in language — he also viewed technological advances as temptations towards innovation understood as replacement. Yet he did not anticipate another form of catastrophic literalness implicit in his own diagnosis: by remaining within the field of books as manufactured objects, the growing accumulation of matter — and its eventual diminishment — leads us to one of the most controversial and capitalistic practices in publishing: the management and disposal of excess.

Major publishing houses calibrate their print runs according to the shelf space they intend to command in bookstores. As such, the production pulse is set not by the audience but by square footage: a tactical play for market dominance, not only seeking to be seen, but also ensuring that others will not be.[28] These books often remain unread, and are eventually discarded and pulped.[29]

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zooming in and out but involve jumps and discontinuities' (DiCaglio, *Scale Theory*, p. 70).

28 Halac, *Páginas en Negro*, p. 6.

29 Two key questions that structure the publishing world are: How many copies of a new title should be printed to enter the market, and, subsequently, how many copies are sold? This focus leaves room for two other pressing questions: How many books are collected, how and why, and how many are destroyed? An estimated thirty to forty per cent of books are returned by bookstores annually. Between sixty-five and ninety-five per cent of returned books are pulped — destroyed by publishers. Information on this subject is deliberately scarce or unclear; details are provided by Laties in *Rebel Bookseller*; by Halac, based on her interviews with publishers and authors, in *Páginas en Negro*; and by Temporary Services in *Book Waste Book*.

In *Book Waste Book*, Terry McKenzie writes: 'You would faint away in horror if you understood how the bookselling/publishing industry functions.'[30] He refers to dumpsters containing books 'that no one would ever buy' as a problem related to space: 'there is not enough room in the world to archive the sheer cubic tonnage that exists.'[31] We face, then, two interconnected paradoxes. The first concerns space: the space occupied in bookshops becomes, later, a lack of space in storage. At the same time, this attempt to gain visibility through overprinting leads to another dimension of the same practice, revealing a second paradox in terms of costs. The individual cost of books decreases with larger print runs, and this is one of the reasons for increasing print runs — even when the primary intention is not to occupy space — yet the costs of circulation and stock storage rise accordingly.

What is clear is that the simultaneous overproduction and destruction of surplus books highlight an encompassing paradox between excess and biblioclasm: as book production grows, the same scale of production generates surpluses destined for destruction. The excess of books is not merely a consequence of this system, but rather a structural condition that organizes the inherent dynamics of the publishing market.

'Destruction' in the publishing industry and 'dematerialization' in the sense El Lissitzky used the term to describe processes of reproduction are, of course, not synonymous. Nonetheless, both engage with abundance and share a similar methodological perspective, revealing the extent to which upscaling and destruction are interdependent (increasing numbers of products and shorter cycles; increasing matter and released energy). This dynamic can be examined through Georges Bataille's hypothesis on the functioning of general and restricted economies, which becomes helpful for grasping how editorial writings whose procedures focus on expansion and reduction, as experimental gestures in publishing, displace and transform this problem. They move from a surplus framed within a restricted economy towards an indirect response informed by a general economy, using scale as a metaphor to ironize fixed meanings and logics in the publishing world.

30 Terry McKenzie, in Temporary Services, *Book Waste Book*, p. 30.
31 Ibid.

From a Bataillean perspective, expenditure is not an effect, but rather a cause; there is always a destruction of 'the excess energy that cannot be used', since starting from 'the radiation of the sun', this initial expenditure of energy dispenses wealth 'without any return'.[32]

'General economy' considers 'nonproductive expenditures',[33] that is, matter and energy not reduced to the sense of utility, production, or reproduction.[34] What Bataille calls 'excess' is not a matter of profit (which, in his terms, belongs to 'the ends'), nor is it simply waste as an effect of 'man's activity'. Rather, 'excess' also names what exceeds the order of meaning itself. It points towards that which escapes definition, classification, and conceptualization. In this sense, general economy is inseparable from a 'loss of meaning',[35] reminding us that beyond the 'frock-coat'[36] with which philosophical conceptualization seeks to clothe the world, there lies an excess that cannot be fully conceptualized, which Bataille calls 'heterogeneous'. That said, *excess* entails a broader notion of energy: for Bataille, energy also encompasses language and meaning.

By contrast, 'restricted economy' refers to a 'homogeneous realm' that recognizes only what can be counted, measured, and rendered legible — what belongs to a productive result, production, or reproduction. General economy, however, is not a concept, nor a 'place' outside of restricted economy. Rather, it is a way of reading what restricted economy necessarily excludes: the excess that emerges within

32 Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, I, pp. 20, 28.

33 Ibid., p. 12.

34 Ibid., pp. 19–22.

35 The expression 'loss of meaning' derives from Derrida's discussion of Bataille's notions of 'general economy' and 'sovereignty'. In the chapter 'Knowledge of Sovereignty', Bataille presents general economy as the science of relating the object of thought to sovereign moments, which implies that general economy envisages the meaning of these objects in relation to each other and finally in relation to the unknown. Derrida further elaborates this relation as 'the absolute loss of their meaning', as the 'nonmeaning which is beyond absolute meaning' and as 'expenditure without reserve'. See Jacques Derrida, 'From Restricted to General Economy: A Hegelianism without Reserve', in Derrida, *Writing and Difference* [1967], trans. by Alan Bass (Routledge Classics, 2001), pp. 317–50 (p. 339); and Bataille, 'Knowledge of Sovereignty', in *The Accursed Share*, III: *Sovereignty* (1992), pp. 197–211.

36 Georges Bataille, 'Formless', in Bataille and others, *Encyclopædia Acephalica*, ed. by Robert Lebel and Isabelle Waldberg, trans. by Iain White and others (Atlas Press, 1995), pp. 51–52 (p. 52).

the dynamics of production and destruction, and that exceeds their immediately recognizable meaning.

Extending a Bataillean reading of excess to the economy of images, Peter Szendy analyses William Hogarth's engraving *The Battle of the Pictures* and emphasizes that 'expenditure' — the consumption of wealth as a primary object of general economy — has nothing to do with the surplus produced within the restricted economy of capitalism.[37] For Szendy, the engraving stages an *iconomy* (economy of images) from two entangled perspectives: on the one hand, the regulated circulation of images within a market; on the other, the uncontrolled proliferation of images that exceeds any system of valuation and containment.[38] These are images that cannot be regulated or reintroduced into a chain of value. This tension between regulation and excess allows us to reconsider the limits of the image market and what escapes its logic.

The two perspectives that Szendy reads as restricted and general economy in Hogarth's engraving can be reconsidered within the framework of the scales of printing, destruction, and interpretation in publishing procedures. The overproduction and mass destruction of books have a purpose: the reabsorption of that excess within the logic of production and the economy of the book (reduction of costs, profit in terms of visibility, and so on). In turn, publishing projects that experiment with editorial writings introduce a dislocation in the meaning and purpose of excess, resulting in other forms of multiplication of writing, destined to be lost in a different way — an 'infinite multiplication' of images of writing that can be thought in relation to a general economy, alongside other images and their meanings. The use of cardboard and inexpensive, easily reproducible literary forms in Oficina Perambulante, the way in which *La Biblioteca Negra* affirms the negation of readable conditions in discarded books, and the infinite possibilities of combination and recombination of writing in *Líneas Móviles* — these three initial scenes enact this displacement.

37 Szendy, *For an Ecology of Images*, pp. 45–51.

38 At the top left of the stairs, we see 'the miniaturized figure of an auctioneer, so designated by his emblem, the hammer'. Except for this person, there are no buyers, no viewers; 'there's no one apart from the paintings themselves, bumping, tearing, and scrapping with each other in a kind of aerial arena' (ibid., p. 44).

There is another point that intersects Bataille's reflections on abundance with the current destruction in the publishing world. For Bataille, even when human activity is directed towards the exploitation of resources and productive ends, an irreducible element of futility remains — an expenditure of energy without return — which follows its own laws and dynamics. The problem, Bataille insists, is how unacquainted humanity remains with the force of this 'movement'.[39] Human action, however, must reckon with both terms: with productive *ends* and the *useless and infinite fulfilment* of the universe. Conversely, the attempt to transform every excess into something profitable —into a new end, a new meaning, the success of production — leads to what Bataille describes as the catastrophic reversal of our works. [40]

These concerns of excess and catastrophe are in play in the performance *La Biblioteca Negra* (2022–25). The exercise of 'blackening' surplus publications (a procedure Gabriela Halac names *nigromantia*) consists in entirely erasing the legibility of these discarded books. The books were previously destined for destruction, not due to coercion or censorship, but as part of a publishing plan. There is no compensation here, but rather the articulation of a gesture that affirms what the publishing industry denies. Yet that very gesture of affirmation alters the relation to the meaning of the legible and enacts a relation to the loss of meaning by foregrounding the excess of those writings destined for loss.

These new black books are infiltrating public and private libraries. In this way, *La Biblioteca Negra* reacts to Lissitzky's earlier vision of the future by focusing on another form of material excess. Detached from the logic of what 'yields profit', these doubly useless books (discarded by the publishing system and covered with ink) are able to reveal the marks of that very logic.[41]

39 Bataille, *The Accursed Share*, I, p. 21.

40 '[i]f these two terms [ends and the movement that surpasses them] are to be reconciled we must cease to ignore one of them; otherwise, our works quickly turn to catastrophe' (Ibid., p. 29).

41 Halac affirms that 'black pages' are a realm of apparitions and discoveries, of densities and existences denied and concealed beneath the surface. And if we are able to engage with this black condition, a situated awareness emerges of the books that bridge their present condition with their past existences. These black pages evoke those

Rather than affirming a blank page gradually filled with writing, blackening redirects attention from the written page to the material conditions of book production, making apparent what Halac suggests is one of the least visible practices through which appropriation and precarization take shape: the so-called 'printing ships' — vessels operating in international waters, where books are produced at half the cost, yet where almost nothing is known about the labour conditions under which they are made.

There are no photographs of these printing ships, although publishers and workers have testified that such services have been offered during parties held at international book fairs. As with the overproduction of books intended simply to occupy shelf space — being 'present not only to be seen but also to prevent others from having the same opportunity' — their invisibility is not accidental. Concealing the relations of production is part of the very logic that sustains them.[42]

Blackening therefore points simultaneously to the surplus book and to its material background: the modes of production, forms of labour, and economies of extraction that remain largely invisible in the finished object. As Halac remarks, 'The question we often fail to ask ourselves is: where does [book matter] come from?'[43] The 'future of books', she insists, depends on an 'ethics of matter', understood as the network of relations between energy, material resources, and modes of production: 'It is therefore urgent to talk about books as entities that, in their creation and assemblage, deploy energies that affect and transform the world, involving politics, ethics and aesthetics.'[44]

unnameable presences, the 'literary blacks' of which Vivian Abenshushan speaks in *Permanente obra negra*. The black pages disfigure their writing as a result of the exchange that has irreversibly affected the material, and give way to the abandonment of the Platonic abstraction of a text that constantly seeks to transcend a possible body. See Halac, *La edición como práctica forense*, p. 19.

42 Ibid., p. 7.

43 Halac, *Instrucciones para ennegrecer un libro*, p. 16.

44 Ibid., p. 17.

## EXPANSION AND REDUCTION #2: SMALL INSCRIPTIONAL SURFACES / INFINITE WRITING IN OFICINA PERAMBULANTE

The use of cardboard to produce affordable books in the Oficina Perambulante project is often seen as a response to sustainability challenges in publishing. While this perspective is not inaccurate, it is worth clarifying the nature of this response. The use of cardboard is not merely a substitute for industrial or handcrafted covers; rather, it constitutes a visual and semiotic rhetoric that makes possible material experimentation, thereby opening a space to interrogate the economics of writing and the circulation of meaning.

'We might envisage cardboard books as the flip side of the publishing industry: its rough draft, its imperfect copy, a phenomenon of distortion,' writes Carlos Ríos in the essay *Ecosistema del libro cartonero*,[45] which has been published several times across various small-scale projects and translations.[46] This statement highlights one of the aspects on account of which I am basing my characterization of these artistic publishing projects as an offshoot of a broader phenomenon: the opposition is not between industrial and artisanal cardboard, but rather a way of exploring reverse sides and folds, and a mode of interpreting the system within which they circulate. Thus, the use of cardboard does not simply propose an alternative mode of production; it provides another way of reading the publishing system.

In a sense, Ríos's description of the *cartonero* book as a draft of the industrial publishing system implies a relation of inclusivity between the two: an inclusivity marked by overlaps, zones of opacity, and forms of negation that the finished book suppresses by concealing the traces of its conditions of production and circulation. This duplicitous and distorted condition places these writings in a supplementary relation to industrial publishing, as an unpredictable surplus that circulates within the book market.

Emerging from this backdrop of surpluses — referring both to discarded material and to supplementary meanings — processes of

45 Carlos Ríos, *Ecosistema del libro cartonero* (Olga Cartonera, 2022), p. 7.

46 Olga Cartonera (Chile, 2022); La liebre dorada (Rennes/La Plata, 2022); Tóxicx (Chaco, 2023); Barba de Abejas (2025); Ediciones de la Provincia de Buenos Aires (2020).

expansion and reduction articulate different scales from which the Oficina Perambulante intervenes in the publishing landscape. Firstly, a disjunction occurs at the level of meaning when elements of the mass production of consumer goods are introduced into small-format books. On the one hand, this dislocates the idea of the book as an object that conveys knowledge as the 'author's spirit': '[cardboards] add a graphic memory not only of the industrial products they transported but also preserve design marks, a series of printing codes that produce unexpected meanings on the surfaces of the books.'[47] On the other hand, it renders each book unique: 'the same title, once intervened upon, can never be an identical book.'[48] The overabundance of printed material — as waste from consumption — combined with the scale of the small format produces, as a collision between different scales, a disarticulation between the unique and the mass-produced: each book, unique, forms part of a continuum between editorial discourse and the discourse of commercial packaging.

Secondly, we need to reconsider the relationship between the abundance of printed material and the reduction in the size of books. This involves authors whose writings are cut back or selected to fit formats that can be published on A4 sheets, bound using recycled packaging, and produced either as A7 sewn booklets or as loose-leaf publications. Drawing on Ulises Carrión's idea of 'new writing' — according to which the new writers make books rather than write texts[49] — Carlos Ríos applies this to the problem of excess and waste, proposing, in response, the shrinkage of text to allow for minimal paper use.[50]

47 Ríos, *Ecosistema del libro cartonero*, p. 8.

48 Ibid.

49 Ulises Carrión, 'The New Art of Making Books', *Kontexts*, 6–7 (1975), later included in Carrión, *Second Thoughts* (Void Distributors, 1980), p. 8.

50 Some of the books are compositions — sometimes in prose, sometimes in verse — based on extensive texts or interviews. One sign of this procedure is visible in the visual relationship between author and title, where the former seems subsumed by the latter. See, for example, *Scaloni. Kilómetro Cero*, in which Oficina Perambulante composes poems from statements made by the Argentine football team manager that became particularly famous following the 2022 World Cup; *Sandro en persona*, a new prose work composed from excerpts of a long television interview from 1984; *Bad Bunny. No quiero empezar un disco con una canción triste*; and *La aventura salvaje de componer canciones* (a couple of excerpts selected and translated from *Faith, Hope and Carnage*, 2022), where the name 'Nick Cave' simultaneously forms both image and title. Similar

Ulises Carrión's idea has been further developed at the intersection of publishing and artistic practice, where the 'production-then-reproduction' formula — based on a strict division between the author's creation of the text and the publisher's subsequent production of the book — has been reconfigured as a model of 'reproduction as production'.[51] From this perspective, writing is no longer understood as a privileged process, but as one moment within the broader publishing procedure, in which 'reproduction' becomes part of the conscious process of artistic creation.[52] Oficina Perambulante foregrounds the availability of reproduction resources, directing attention to the conditions through which a book is reproduced and, in turn, produced.

The use of cardboard also provides an opportunity to reflect on the scarcity of materials and the restricted access to traditional publishing supplies such as paper. This jarring relation between overabundance and scarcity, between the mass-produced and the unique, becomes particularly evident in one of Oficina Perambulante's publications, titled *Notes of a Former Novelist*, in which the writing takes the form of a short story that reflects on its own material conditions.

This book also serves in part as an *ars poetica* of the publishing house, staging a tension between what it narrates and the material on which it is read. Its protagonist seems to be writing from Lissitzky's future: 'Why write a novel? There are no bookshops left in the country. Books are published to be destroyed.'[53] There is no paper, and there

operations are carried out with authors as diverse as H. P. Lovecraft, Ursula K. Le Guin, Ailton Krenak, and Judith Butler.

51 Following Nick Thurston, Annette Gilbert explains that, within the model 'production-then-reproduction', the text production phase has 'positive connotations arising from the emphasis on the originality of the author', while the phase of 'manufacturing and publishing books is viewed as a purely mechanical reproduction of a given text'. By contrast, the formula 'reproduction-as-production' increases the value of reproduction 'as a creative act' equal to writing, so that it loses its secondary character. This would in turn mean 'that authors implicate the processes of reproduction in the conscious processes of artistic production' (Gilbert, 'Publishing as Artistic Practice', p. 20).

52 Ibid., p. 20.

53 Carlos Ríos, *Apuntes para una exnovelista* (Oficina Perambulante, 2022), p. 2; translation by Nicolas Helm-Grovas. In the original: '¿Para qué escribir una novela? Tiene la certeza de que nadie va a comprarla, ni pedirla prestada a sus conocidos o reservarla en la biblioteca popular más próxima. En el país ya no existen librerías. Los libros se publican para ser destruidos. Sin embargo, la pregunta funciona de algún modo como

is no time; what remains are definitions of novels, among them the definition of a 'novel produced by AI through ChatGPT'.[54]

Despite this vision, the former novelist continues to write, but she re-scales both writing and the material of paper:

> Below is written, as an example, a novel like those she wrote far away and some time ago. For reasons of space (and lack of paper, moreover), said novel is transcribed at a reduced scale. A final observation: where it says 'little mice' one could write 'courtiers', 'academics', or 'the exploited'. Where it says 'the dying woman' one could write 'star', 'constitutionalist', or simply 'novel'. There is licence to substitute, out of necessity or democratic whim, whatever.[55]

In this context, the constraints of space and time challenge the stability of meaning. Writing embodies the performative act as a paradox: it does not merely thematize limitation but enacts it — acting out the lack of paper, the restriction itself; yet, in doing so, it simultaneously multiplies that limitation and generates a potentially infinite writing. Is the novel written or transcribed? Summarized or expanded? Here, reduction becomes coextensive with the ways in which language proliferates through unceasing substitutions: where it says 'little mice', one may write 'courtiers', 'academics', or 'the exploited'.

As the paper shrinks, what appears to be reduced is the level of the syntagm and the progression of the novel; yet, in fact, substitution becomes infinite, now detached from its material medium of inscription. The question arises: Which paper is lacking? Does it refer to the ex-novelist's notes, or to the very text we are reading? The text recounts that novel, but at the same time, it also writes it.

The book thus becomes a performance of the relationship between matter and dematerialization, surplus and destruction. There is a dematerialization, in the sense in which Lucy Lippard rereads Lissitzky from within 'conceptual art', where to dematerialize means that 'material form [becomes] secondary, lightweight, ephemeral, cheap, unpre-

un agente estabilizador que le permite, noche tras noche, avanzar en la escritura de tres a cinco páginas.'

54 Ibid., p. 2.

55 Ibid., p. 12.

tentious'.[56] Writing becomes ephemeral, interchangeable, produced upon a condition of scarcity and reduction that we can experience in our hands.

Nevertheless, just as dematerializing — releasing energy, as Lissitzky proposed — means bringing into the book all those graphic memories already circulating in the world, treating material as something lighter and more ephemeral, it also entails an encounter with a certain general economy of images, insofar as this likewise activates a relation to excess, to images that appear infinite and inexhaustible. All that graphic memory contained in printed and discarded materials, and which forms part of an 'expenditure regulated' by the market (a restricted economy), shifts towards a sense of general economy, where writing and image are destined to be lost in another way, in an infinite multiplication that cannot be regulated because it is oriented towards misencounter.

Lack (the scarcity of paper) produces excess (self-generative writing), which defines a particular relation to loss: the loss of meaning and of the possibility of reabsorbing excess into a new logic of production. Against the excess of production that drives matter towards its disposal, Oficina Perambulante does not oppose the unique and singular book, but rather, at a certain point, the unarchivable book within that infinite multiplication of reproduced images — the book that can affirm this excess condition of production by placing it in relation to its own object: writing. A writing also destined to be lost. Paradoxically, once again, as Ríos states, 'This condition of mutability largely determines its potential influence within the future of the publishing ecosystem.'[57]

## EXPANSION AND REDUCTION #3: *LÍNEAS MÓVILES*: SPATIO-TEMPORAL SCALES OF WRITING

'In the minuscule existence of a letter lies vertigo,' we read on the cover of the printed book *Líneas Móviles*.[58] This inscription presents us with two paradoxes. The first arises from the cover where this sentence

56 Lucy R. Lippard, 'Escape Attempts', in *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972*, ed. by Lucy R. Lippard (University of California Press, 1997), pp. vii–xxii (p. vii).

57 Carlos Ríos, *Ecosistema del libro cartonero*, p. 12

58 Andrea Iriart, *Líneas Móviles*.

is written, the cover of the printed book *Líneas Móviles*, which was published in 2024, five years after the beginning of the project, with the clear decision to render neither the texts from the notebooks nor an updated state of the walls in published form. The book explores fragments of this white writing on grey walls, and fragments of the body writing this writing; it explores traces of different materials employed around this painted writing. The cover is part of these fragments, but to read about that minuscule existence we must unfold this cover, which takes the form of a life-size poster. There is also another layer of the paradox of measure: How does 'vertigo' — an amplified feeling — lie in the smallest unit of the discrete system of our alphabet, which is by definition unmeaningful and only a *sign*?

'The work is about the world and the form of publishing,' says Andrea Iriart, speaking about the body in writing.[59] *Líneas Móviles* also deals with accounts and possible measures of publication — measures that revisit some of the obsessions of publishing in terms of scale: temporality and space as material procedures meaningfully involved as much in the process as in the outcome of publication.

As mentioned in the opening scene, *Líneas Móviles* works with alterations in the scale of the writing-object. One line per day is written on a wall, breaking the linearity of a text in notebooks while expanding the scale of letters and opening multiple possible readings. That said, scalar alterations should be considered in numerous directions, since they are not only a matter of the 'scaling of objects' as 'an operation performed externally onto objects', nor exclusively of changes in levels of observation, according to the different approaches to the notion of scale proposed by Joshua DiCaglio.[60] Rather, these alterations also result from fragmentations that call into question the progressive correspondence between letter, phrase, text, book, and what we understand as levels of legibility. If we must describe the resolution at which we consider the spatial and temporal dimensions of writing, we need to assess which quantitative differences are involved in what is measurable as a division.

59 Ibid., p. 11.

60 DiCaglio, 'Scale Tricks and God Tricks', p. 466.

To clarify these shifts, it is possible to deploy a series of editorial statements implicit in *Líneas Móviles* that engage the spatio-temporal scales of writing and blank space within an economy of writing.

Statement 1: To publish is to alter the time between the writing procedure and the editorial result. We usually speak of procedures — writing and editing — but we almost always encounter the book as their outcome. What if the published book were the procedure itself? *Líneas Móviles* reverses the long period of private writing that is revealed to the reader's eyes all at once in the printed book, placing public graphic inscription on the side of continuous, meticulous writing. It is neither a matter of turning these notebook texts into a book, nor of publishing a book with images of the walls, but of producing new fragments of the procedure.

Statement 2: Publishing alters the proportions between units and fragments. Iriart begins with her handwritten notebooks: a mass of writing in block letters, letters the size of a table — like everyone else's. That magma of writing is reduced, in a single day, to the size of a line: the minimum unit. Yet the painting on the wall turns that grammatical reduction into an expansion of the signifier: the letter becomes five, six, seven, eleven times larger on the wall, and, depending on its height, becomes vertiginous. From the notebook to the wall is not a path that moves from the small to the enlarged; it is a volumetric process of transformation between the extensive and the minimal, between the tiny and the gigantic, between the minimal signifying unit and the open ambiguity of meaning.

In *Variations on Writing*, Barthes ventures that Western writing is marked by economic calculation.[61] In manuscripts, handwritten letters and punctuation marks implied differences in payment, according to the time that the task of writing demanded of copyists. Cursive writing, for example, is more economical than printing because it involves lifting the pen from the surface fewer times; a full stop requires more time than a comma, and so on. Following Barthes, the title of a book on the economics of publishing in the West could have been *What a Comma Costs*. In the East, on the other hand, writing has been linked to drawing: the gesture of the artist and that of the writer are one and

61 Roland Barthes, *Le Plaisir du texte* [1973] (Seuil, 2000).

the same. The opposition is certainly somewhat clumsy and lacking in subtlety, but it introduces a way to think of inscriptional, economic, and publishing practices as differences in scales of temporality and space.

The work *Líneas Móviles* draws on this history while at the same time Iriart ties it to modern writing: emptiness, whiteness, volumes, narrative devices, the readymade. Taking writing as drawing and painting, Iriart makes her own white cube — a contemporary art fetish if ever there was one — driven by a gesture of reversal, inversion, and concavity, arguing that something like a *white/blank* page does not exist. Neither Kazimir Malevich's white square on a white ground nor Tony Smith's black cube, but a large cube-cave-book written from the inside in order to reach the white. In publishing, the blank is an asset (space) and a material that sustains the page. This power was part of the illusion of invisible design, like the crystal goblet imagined by Beatrice Warde: the best design is the one you do not see; the best page is the one that makes us forget that it informs rather than merely supports.[62] White space is also the territory of the margin, which regulates the outskirts of the text — its progressions and jumps. But in *Líneas Móviles* this relationship is reversed: white space does not exist; it is the fiction of a letter.

White space as a desire reveals how the measurement of limits between the letter as a minimal unit, the sentence, the text, and the book is always entangled with a fiction of emptiness and fulfilled meaning — what Wells describes as a 'superimposed division' that presupposes an ideal uniformity representing a 'whole'.[63]

## CONCLUSIONS

If scale doesn't presuppose objects but rather describes the resolution at which one observes the world, then the projects discussed here mobilize effects, materials, and practices associated with large-scale publishing and reintroduce them within smaller-scale operations as critical and ironic metaphors.

62 See Amaranth Borsuk, *The Book* (MIT Press, 2018).

63 Wells, *Scale in Contemporary Sculpture*, pp. 5–6.

Given the catastrophic form that the dynamic between materiality and dematerialization has assumed since El Lissitzky put his question on the table, these editorial writings suggest that the future of the book lies in producing meaning through the disjunction of scales that such dynamics tend to naturalize. That is: not in achieving a synthesis, but in enacting this tension within the materiality of language itself — foregrounding a material dimension that both presupposes dematerialization as catastrophe and rearticulates it as form.

In Oficina Perambulante, this scalar perspective operates at the level of format, size, and measure, while also engaging the conditions of production. It interrogates the rhetorical dimension — visual and grammatical — of commercial printed matter, and its relation to abundance and excess, in contrast to what is structurally lacking in the publishing field: paper. In *Líneas Móviles*, scale emerges through temporality and spatiality: the time of writing and publishing, and the shifting space between notebook and wall, displacing the temporal experience of publication. *La Biblioteca Negra*, in turn, emphasizes scale through the intertwined dynamics of overproduction and destruction, exploring how writing can be reconfigured through the large-scale accumulation of discarded publishing matter, and how this reshapes the conditions of legibility.

These responses, discernible only through the indirect and metareflective intervention enacted by procedures of expansion, make legible certain meanings produced by contemporary models of publishing — meanings that these same models, in the very act of their production, tend to obscure or erase under the guise of productivity. Thus, it is perhaps only by attending to the gaps, discontinuities, and shifts in meaning between small-scale projects and the dynamics of large-scale publishing that interpretation can emerge, offering an encounter with the loss of meaning that a constrained economy cannot register.

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