

The Indeterminacy of Viruses

By Roberta Buiani

On June 5, 2009 the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) aired a documentary titled "Webwarriors" for the series Doc Zone. As the title implies, the documentary surveyed the latest wars against computer viruses and cyber-threats. According to this documentary, organized crime and international espionage have reached new heights. Increasingly complex computer viruses are now able to take control of the machines of the unaware users and turn them into weapons at the service of money thirsty cybercrooks; sophisticated spyware could already be breaking into top-secret databases, searching for sensitive information. All these new cyber-threats have transformed the Internet into an increasingly dangerous place, only waiting for the ultimate information accident to happen.

While intimidating, this scenario does not sound completely unfamiliar. In fact, one doesn't have to travel far to encounter a scenario whose descriptive patterns resemble the one above. This time, the culprit is a different category of virus that doesn't affect digital material, but our very bodies made of flesh and blood. On the very night the above documentary was aired, for instance, similar bleak tones were used elsewhere in the news to announce the upcoming potential pandemic caused by the H1N1 virus strain (formerly known as Swine flu). Before H1N1 it was the turn of H5N1 (the Bird Flu or Avian influenza),¹ which, apparently, is no longer newsworthy. Despite failing to manifest the same life-threatening symptoms of its "Avian" peer, H1N1 is perceived as anything but mild. Concerns for its spread arise from its medical effects amongst particularly vulnerable individuals, rather than on the entire population and on its fast spread across considerable geographical areas, a feature that has "elevated" it from the previous rank of epidemic to the one of "pandemic." Interestingly, comments on the disruptive potentials it carries for the economy and human productivity (people will have to miss days of work etc..) magnify even more its perceived harmful effects: the culprit (the H1N1 virus) could exacerbate the already weak conditions of the economy, by bringing a whole series of everyday activities to a halt (schools, services, businesses). Circulating a few months before "flu season," this mild form of flu has now become the subject of lengthy controversies and disquisitions that question its acuteness and effective danger, or that sets it in competition with the seasonal flu: which of the two viral threats, H1N1 or the seasonal flu (H3N2),

deserves the title of "most dangerous"? How many vaccines should a person be inoculated with in order to feel safe?

The above descriptions paint the milieu of cyber-security and global-health with dark colours. This initial affinity suggests that multiple connections have been established at various degrees between viruses living in the wired world and those that populate the world of flesh and blood. First, the descriptions connect the effects of computer pests and virus-caused human pandemics by depicting them in negative terms as dangerous threats, tying them to a common notion of security and safety that conceptualizes the world as idealistically risk-free or contagion-free, and to a notion of biological or informational threat as something "looming" and constantly "about to happen," but that, nonetheless, might not occur. As a result, any threat to the cyberspace or to the carbon-based world showing similar significant potentials for spread and damage is treated as if it were about to unleash the next massive pandemic. Second, the above accounts link the two distinct domains (biology and informatics) by using the same language and rhetoric as if the terms used to describe them could circulate undisturbed, and exchange across domains; indeed, the two substances could be placed side by side on the same plane. Third, they assume the existence of material affinities between the two substances: for instance, they ascribe the potential economic damages that have always been attributed to the action of computer viruses to biological viruses.

The perception, rhetoric and anxiety towards the two categories of viruses appear to run parallel. Whether the resemblance between computer viruses and biological viruses and the derivation of the former from the latter is partially constructed/metaphoric or effective, one cannot deny that it has become almost common sense to think they share key aspects. The type and nature of these similarities may explain why, in the last few years, the anxiety connected to the spread of viruses has increased to the extent that it has become one of the most prominent in the Western world. The behavior of viruses as aleatory and unpredictable substances profoundly connected with each other, with technology and with culture, contravene science and society's confidence in prediction and calculation and its obsession with precautionary politics (Wilson

2002). In addition, their behavioral patterns, which tend to disappoint any attempt to delimit them into a defined and controllable domain, are able to simultaneously embody two of the most feared threats and risks, namely the plague, and terrorism.

Viruses as entangled agents

Despite the factual and easily discernible discrepancies existing between computer and biological viruses, the first are affiliated with the latter, to the extent that, in most cases, their existence appears intimately entangled. In fact, technically speaking, computer and biological viruses belong to two unbridgeable and well-separated spheres, one pertaining to the domain of information and the other to carbon-based life. Their material formation contributes to such divergence: while computer viruses are partially dependent on human agency, biological viruses are mostly understood as naturally flourishing substances. Worms, Trojan horses and *malware* in general are often described as if they were digital versions of their peers strolling the natural, carbon-based ecosystem. However, their actual intertwining and merging with such system is still confined to the domain of science fiction.² The two realms do not speak to each other. While the first only understands the lingo specific to information technologies, the second takes in the language of the biological. Communicating by means of binary code, computer viruses are a separate category. Their circulation in the world of electronic networks makes them unquestionably distinct from their biological counterparts. There seems to be no real intersection between the two categories.

Despite their material separation, computer and biological viruses are incorporated into a unified discourse that legitimates the use of a set of shared metaphors to describe simultaneously their impact on human and digital networks. Frederick Cohen's first official definition of computer viruses as "programs that can 'infect' other programs by modifying them to include a possibly evolved version of themselves" (Cohen 1994: 2), for instance, implied the existence of an untold, yet assumed, correlation between computer and biological viruses. Following an intuitive thread linking the biological and the informational realms, the code composing these self-replicating programs had the potential to throw into disarray the entire information network, in the same way their biological counterparts could spread death and disease among carbon-based organisms.

"When we talk about viruses in the deepest sense," Cohen explains at the beginning of his *Short Course on Computer Viruses*, "we are talking about symbols and sequences in the memory of a machine whatever that maybe, main memory" (1994: 1). Rather than devising a specific technical definition, Cohen preferred to utilize a "working definition" of viruses, that is, an open definition devoid of any specific technical detail. By allowing an easier and more immediate recognition of viruses (viruses are programs that can "infect" other programs), this definition suited the pedagogical and informative goals of his *course*, a "short course" addressed to undergraduate students and audience only partially familiar with the subject matter. In addition, it implicitly authorized the application of the term "virus" to many other substances or coded agents manifesting similar behavioral patterns. For instance, parallel to the dissemination of computer viruses (and worms), and infectious (or viral) diseases, phenomena that do not necessarily have lots in common but do carry the attribute "viral" have emerged. "Viral videos," "viral marketing," "viral media" are phenomena not immediately classified as "viruses" but indirectly associated with them and, thus, tagged with "viral."

Following this tendency, one can observe the existence of a spontaneous sharing and cross-disciplinary circulation not only of terminology and

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vocabulary, but also of methodologies used to study the composition and configuration of viruses, as well as their behavioral patterns. The application of epidemiology and immunology to computer networks confirms such a tendency (White and Swimmer 2000). This phenomenon is certainly caused by the affiliation of computer-biological viruses described above. However, this interconnection is more than metaphorical, involving a considerable amount of both elusive, yet very explicit material elements shared across the two realms. Thus, material similarities should not be interpreted as signs of compatibilities between such different domains as the informational and the biological realms. Nonetheless, they indicate that all viral entities belong to the same discursive apparatus.

Computer and biological viruses, as well as other “viral” phenomena, exist in strict relation to each other (biological and computer viruses, viral videos and viral marketing), the domain they inhabit (online, off-line or in the lab) and the hosts they visit or they engage with (computers, human beings, the anti-virus companies or the health organizations). The result is a general notion that fails to identify viruses as circumscribed, closed objects that can be observed from a privileged position, as if they were located inside a *petri dish*. Instead, when we name viruses we are pointing to a variety of dynamic agents inscribed in a system entangled with all elements of culture, media, and technology. While the very material features and affinities of computer and biological viruses hinder their possible identification as pure distinct objects, the entanglement of viruses with the historical tradition on infectious diseases, the technologies used to analyze and map them and the communities they affect and by which they are affected makes their study as separate objects or as products of a single instance of culture (e.g. the products of information technologies or life sciences) unfeasible.

This material and conceptual complexity is the source of frustration for many. In fact, formulating a comprehensive definition of a computer or a biological virus is not possible except by using general designations, as the term indicates and incorporates too many sub-categories (worm, spyware, Trojan horse, antivirus, poxvirus). In addition, predicting the patterns of diffusion that regulate viruses can be a difficult, if not impossible enterprise, subject to errors and faulty hypotheses, as too many variables intervene to influence their trajectory (changes in human or network density, individuals or groups diversified immune responses). Thus, while it is possible to identify a number of recurring threads that shape the identification and the perceptions of viruses, their nature and characteristics are neither fully satisfactory nor definite.

Viral threads and the path to indeterminacy

A number of thematic threads recur constantly in any disquisition focusing on viruses. All viruses share similar historical or genealogical roots. Despite the diversity of viruses (biological versus informational, HIV versus common flu, H1N1 versus H5N1, worm versus spyware), a limited, although overall consistent, variety of military terms and metaphors drawn from older traditions have filtered into and survived in the literature about computer and biological viruses. Ancient texts such as Thucydides’ detailed description of the 431 BC plague of Athens have become not only stylistic and descriptive models, but also conceptual prototypes for more recent writers reporting on epidemics and viral spread.³ Descriptions of infectious incidents portrayed viruses as invisible, “poisonous” fluids that attacked the body. Thus, the encounter between human beings and infectious diseases was conceived as a battle, a form of war, where the body as citadel (Martin 1990) succumbed to the attack of the disease caused by a mysterious ailment. These military terms and the attacker/victim binary have survived today and can be found in accounts of biological threats as much as in computer virus episodes.

While the use of military metaphors and recurring tropes facilitates the connection between such heterogeneous objects, by evoking their qualities as negative agents or as malicious enemies, the conflation of information and biology can be considered responsible for the assimilation of coded self-reproducing agents (computer viruses) to biological viruses. The latter is a second thread crisscrossing the whole variety of discourses on viruses. As part of this second thread, many of the similarities between biological and computer viruses were established as the result of the convergence of biology and information that took place in the 1950s. Lily Kay notes how, in this period, the relation between biology and computer

science was made explicit by describing the information discourse as a system of coded representations. At that point, by combining the notions of information described by Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver as a quantifiable mathematical concept devoid of semantics, and the theory of cybernetics formulated by Norbert Wiener, designating the human genome, and, thus, the biological realm as an information system, became intuitive. Kay describes this “implosion of informatics and biologics” (Haraway 1997: 133) as a new form of biopower, where “material control was supplemented by the control of genetic information” (Kay 2000: 19). With humans described in terms of information, message and code, and “heredity function[ing] like the memory of a computer, organs, cells etc., all united by a communication network” (Jacob 1973: 254), the connection between carbon-based and non-carbon based life, and, thus, between biological and computer viruses, became almost automatic.

The above conflation certainly makes possible the association of the biological and the informational, and the connection between computer and biological viruses. However, one has to credit the discovery of HIV (Human immunodeficiency virus) and the disease called AIDS (Acquired immune deficiency syndrome) as a crucial element in the realization of the connection between the two viral categories. In fact, computer viruses rose to popularity in the mid-1980s, when it was not only recognized that the patterns of spread of computer viruses through computer networks could be compared to the spread of the HIV virus, but that their effects could be as damaging for computer networks as the very AIDS pandemic was for human beings (Ross, 1991; Galloway, 2005).

Of course, computer networks have little to do with human networks. However, material, physical similarities (distributed diffusion patterns and potential to cause damage) between computer and biological viruses, combined with the deliberate attempt to magnify these similarities to attract attention to potential viral threats were sufficient to consolidate the notion of computer viruses as the ultimate “information disease” (Burger, 1989). The above blurring and combining of materiality (computer and biological viruses share concrete, observed elements) and design (computer and biological viruses are also partially constructed by social, technological and political vectors) constitutes a third thread. Viruses are classified, treated and ousted through increasingly different medical procedures and anti-virus software tools, by monitoring, mapping, and visualizing them. Attempting to delimit viruses within given constraints through technological or conceptual filters, these procedures clarify and reveal newer qualities of viruses. In addition, they constantly transform, re-define and re-configure them. This factor not only shows that viruses take part in a common discourse, but it also suggests an active interest in maintaining and helping this discourse stay alive.

Finally, the blurring and confusion of material (materiality) and constructed (design) features would not be possible without the existence of principles of cohesion between information and biology. Nor would it be as effective without the use of metaphors and tropes originating from some early literature on plagues and infectious diseases, as well as the literature on HIV/AIDS. All the connections identified above would probably fail if there were no flexibility allowing the spilling of terminology and metaphors into different discursive fields and if viruses did not have a special status as neither-dead-nor-alive organisms or as self-replicating, distributed strings of code. A combination of elements pertaining to their nature, as well as to the way they are interpreted or “instrumentalized” has permeated viruses with indeterminacy. Viruses still constitute a great deal of mystery for scientists and biologists and are aleatory agents for computer scientists and analysts. However, the difficulty of describing and understanding them intertwines with the convenience of keeping them mysterious and inscrutable. For instance, viruses are difficult to visualize using conventional instruments (biological viruses are very small, and computer viruses are made of abstract code), or to separate from the host and the rest of the environment they inhabit (they are only active in combination with their host). In both cases, viruses emerge as agents permeated by “material” indeterminacy. In addition, the scientific (life sciences) and technological research (including security experts, but also hackers and virus writers) that studies viruses appears to thrive on professional secrecy and on the unfamiliarity the general public has with viruses. Fostering a substantially blurred and

indistinct concept of viruses promotes on the part of the public an increasing dependence on consultations from experts and on software that promises to keep the user inconvenience-free. At the same time, it maintains intact the general perception of viruses as looming predators that might attack their unaware victim at any time. The general public is then in a constant state of stand-by, always waiting for an imminent catastrophe.

Indeterminacy (a fourth thread) has afforded viruses great flexibility in terms of their capacity to absorb assumptions, transcend different realms, easily transform and be appropriated by scientists, analysts and creative individuals. In addition, indeterminacy is formed by, and at the same time fuels, the existence of tensions and contradictions between statements describing and defining viruses. In fact, viruses are neither exclusively affecting our society, nor are they just being manipulated by their technosocial context. Furthermore, it is almost impossible to tell when anxiety evoked by the inherent qualities of viruses is magnified to fit political agendas. What we see is a series of statements in popular science magazines and websites that, on the one hand, reassure us by applauding the effectiveness of the methods used to fight viruses, and, on the other hand, alarm us with catastrophic news about their unpredictable spread. Thus, indeterminacy becomes a major pervasive theme that effectively keeps together the bits forming a range of diverse discourses on viruses.

Drawing from a Foucauldian analysis, the persistence of indeterminacy in viruses is the point where power and knowledge clash and converge. Given a set of culturally established (or stereotypical) assumptions, as well as observed material features, diverging perceptions locate viruses in relation to their territory of influence (the society they affect, the media they transform) and in relation to the communities that study them (how these communities approach and regard viruses). Pre-existing knowledge (what we know of viruses and who knows or disseminates such knowledge) and dynamic power-relations (how this knowledge is disseminated and imposed) converge when they agree and settle on the idea of indeterminacy. The very survival and the transformation of viruses is not limited to their unique ability (which no doubt exists) to infect hosts, disrupt networks, cause worry in individuals and scientists. Rather, it lies in the ability of the territory or the individuals affected (or infected) by viruses to contribute to their diffusion, adaptation (or transformation in the case of computer viruses) and the inheritance and appropriation of viral characteristics. In other words, as the concrete configuration and nature of viruses is crucial in their definition and perception, so is their location within social and technological networks. It is inevitable that viruses mutate (they become worms and Trojan horses, Bird Flu and Swine flu etc.), take different connotations (from annoyances they become lethal threats, they can be interpreted as vandalism, crime or even terrorism) and literally, morph into something else (biological viruses become computer viruses, viral marketing, viral videos etc.), according to the society and the culture they affect and by which they are in turn affected.

Indeterminacy as absence of security and source of anxiety

Indeterminacy dominates all areas concerning the study of viruses, from their naming and classification (virologies), to mapping and predicting their projected trajectories (epidemiologies), as well as representing their morphology and visual appearance (visualizations). Whether coming from the inherent or material characteristics of viruses, or constructed for business or political purposes, indeterminacy is a cohesive element that unifies the entire discourse of viruses. It satisfies and supports, at the same time, a whole range of sometimes-opposed perspectives and reactions: it equally sustains remarks arising from the scientific observations of the spread of viruses, and from the pursuit and fulfillment of political or commercial mandates.

The halo of indeterminacy that seems to constantly govern viruses is one of the major factors in their status as perceived threats. Of course, this perception is certainly enhanced by the most excessive consideration that Western society has given to measurable data as the guarantee of accurate and objective knowledge. If knowing is associated with control and mastery over the unknown, then not-knowing is connected with uncertainty. The unfolding of the indeterminacy of viruses hinders this type of knowledge, thus magnifying, rather than attenuating, the sense of fear

of, and anxiety for, their free spread.

For instance, to communicate information about incoming viral threats, and to persuade a prospective public or professional audience to take measures against viruses, statistical collections of data, mapping, descriptions and other types of information about viruses have been gathered on web sites, reports, and bulletins by public health agencies (The Center for Disease Control and the World Health Organization), information security organizations (Computer Emergency Response Team) and anti-virus vendors (F-Secure and Panda anti-virus, Symantec and McAfee), and inundate our mailboxes on a daily basis. However, it is not clear whether the amount and type of information provided by these organizations instills a sense of security and confidence in its recipients, or if their anxiety is actually magnified. Even when the trajectories of viruses are mapped, their behavior measured, and predictions made about them, viruses still appear to be dominated by a lingering sense of indeterminacy, as if they still contained a great deal of mystery or were substantially unknowable.

Accompanying commentaries, graphics and visual maps supposedly make data about viruses more accessible and user friendly. However, these accompaniments are neither consistent across the different sources analyzed, nor are the statements uniform within the same source. For instance, information deemed “unquestionable,” or 100% reliable is always accompanied by tentative comments that contradict the validity of such information. Statements claiming “everything is under control” are located side by side alarming reports about the upcoming and unexpected spread of new viral threats (CERT, n.d; WHO, 2006). In addition, firms producing anti-virus software provide graphic and interactive maps that show the directions taken by a specific virus or worm. However, the apparent accuracy behind such data provided by these maps is undermined by acknowledgements of their ultimate unreliability, because determining the future trajectory of viruses is dependent on too many factors (Tufte 2001). Finally, information from different sources lacks consistency. Different anti-virus companies will provide different results and will use different mapping techniques that reflect the priority they have given to a particular *malware* or the different goals they have set for their firm (whether they specialize on mobile *malware*, or on computer worms). Information coming from the World Health Organization will prioritize a variety of infectious diseases that represent little or no immediate concern for the US-based Center for Disease Control.

Not only is indeterminacy recurring, it is also far from being unwelcome. In fact, it is perpetuated, and, often, amplified by the contradictory interpretations and statements generated by anti-virus companies and health organizations and often coexist side by side in studies on the spread of viruses and in discussions about their alleged dangerous potentials. As long as a general idea of indeterminacy regarding viruses is preserved, Colarik suggests (2006: 37), there will always be tendencies to both respond to, or to opportunistically build on it. This encompassing aspect echoes the current difficulty in analyzing and classifying viruses as isolated entities, and it establishes a continuity with the past historical traditions that have conventionally presented/seen viruses as invisible (too small, too immaterial) and unknown threats (for lack of expertise or instruments). Finally, it endorses, simultaneously, differing positions that present viruses either as threats or mere annoyances, entities to be feared or challenges to be conquered. In sum, it agrees with just about any attempt to describe, visualize or warn about viruses.

The constant sense of indeterminacy that dominates most documents pertaining to biological and informational viruses leaves a lot of questions unanswered: should users trust those claims that tell them that H1N1 or the seasonal flu might become the next human pandemic or those that say that it is not possible to predict whether or when we are nearing such pandemic? Should they trust warnings about the damages caused by the latest circulating worm or those that reassure them that the anti-virus solutions from Symantec or F-Secure will keep their computers worm-free? For every reassuring sentence that downplays the dangerous potential of viruses there are corresponding statements that undermine or contradict it.

Indeterminacy reinforces the perception of the dangerous potentials of viruses through the very application of precautionary measures. After having detected the first unfortunate incidents that could

spark an epidemic (or having identified patient zero), preventative measures are applied immediately to prevent the spread of viruses even before they become empirically dangerous. Viruses are confirmed as a threat to be avoided at any cost, no matter how mild or serious their effects. However, when the cause and specific identity of viruses are not apparent, or at least not easily identifiable, with no empirical evidence of their real danger, we are dealing with a dubious idea of what viruses are and their effects entail. On the other hand, neither are we not willing to take any risks (Massumi 2005: 12).

It is very tempting to describe the use of contradictions and excessive security measures as products of calculated intentions that underscore a particular feature of viruses in order to obtain some (political or financial) benefits, or as the product of an external design, or as a coherent logic of power that uni-directionally imposes indeterminacy upon the reader (Foucault 1989). For instance, fear caused by the difficulty of predicting the spread of viruses is consistent with the decisions of governments to enhance security, surveillance and monitoring systems that manage and “protect” the population against potential risks of various forms of viral outbreaks. The very hypothesis of the existence of a lingering threat that can cause a great deal of damage authorizes fear mongering and the deployment of all sorts of security measures (Ross 1991; Massumi 2005). The perception of risks meets the political when these very risks are managed as a convenient move “out of the need of industrial societies to regulate technologies and to protect citizens from hazards” (Van Loon 2005: 89). However, this atmosphere is also dictated by real concerns caused by past and current difficulties in predicting the outcome of viruses or the failure to provide definite information about their spread.

Conclusion

The above use (planned or inadvertent) of contradictory and incoherent statements coloring viruses with indeterminacy unveils the intertwining of (or the struggle between) political ambitions, convenient motivations and the very material features of viruses themselves. This battle, Galloway and Thacker argue, can be explicated through a clash of “sovereignty and design.” In other words, viruses, in both their informational and biological incarnations, reveal themselves as entities that reflect how distributed networks can be understood “as a dominant form describing the nature of control today, as well as the resistance to it” (2007: 4), and as a form that is both a welcome representative of complex systems as well as a reject for this same reason.

Both computer and biological viruses appear to use homologous tactics of diffusion. While biological viruses travel through airlines and airport hubs in “a matter of hours,” computer viruses reach distant locations “in a matter of seconds” using the wired media as their means of transportation (Galloway & Thacker 2007: 37). In both cases, diffusion happens in a non-linear and decentralized way. In addition, it appears to happen autonomously. Prevention and control intervene to domesticate the uncontrolled spread of viruses. With the emergence of practices that successfully exploit the decentralized features of distributed networks, it has become clear that control is not achievable by superimposing a top-down solution, but by deploying a combination of solutions that use the same networks that have engendered and facilitated the spread of viruses. Thus, networks are “battled with networks” (Galloway 2004). While computer viruses and worms are fought through online updates, medical surveillance networks are used against infectious diseases.

One would think that the above structure that juxtaposes “networks to networks,” distributed information to distributed information, would promote a more sustained mastery of the problems related to the rise of infectious diseases or the incessant emergence of computer *malware*. However, attempts to direct or dominate a system based on a distributed network are destined to fade, as:

one’s ability to superimpose top down control on that emergent structure evaporates in the blossoming of the network form, itself bent on eradicating the importance of any distinct or isolated node (Galloway & Thacker 2007: 5).

The fact that the above agents might go out of control is a “most disorienting” frustration.

If, as Galloway and Thacker observe, viruses and infectious diseases constitute distributed networks that

work well, then we should not define them as accidents or networks out of control, as some might call them. In fact, they are feared and ousted in an often-aggressive daily battle. The contraposition between distributed networks and the need to control them is an expression of a “clash” between materiality and design, sovereignty and structure. In other words, the way viruses behave or spread, because of their inherent and material features, is in conflict with the attempt to control, predict and dominate them. In a similar way, this clash reflects and extends the major tenets that have led to the intersection of information and biology. In fact, the trend of turning biology into quantifiable information bits reflects a conception that equates information with control and biology with distribution and complexity. Conversely, information is assimilated into and utilized to imitate biology. Thus, the drive to control and measure the complex matter of life is counterbalanced by an opposite tendency to ascribe biological features to information.

Roberta Buiani received her doctorate from the Graduate Programme in Communication and Culture at York University in 2009.

Notes

1 Both viruses are type A Influenzavirus (CDC 2008, CDC n.d.)

2 In both *Snow Crash* (Neal Stephenson) and *Blood Music* (Greg Bear, see the short story of 1983 and the novel of 1985) computer viruses end up affecting human beings.

3 Longrigg (2000) describes Thucydides’ example as witnessing not only “the effect of the Plague over Athenians, but also the effect of the Greeks over Plague.”

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Deleuze and the Signs of Truth

By Chris Drohan

When one reads, one likes to be transported into a new world.

Marcel Proust¹

In his first major semiotic work, *Proust and Signs*, Deleuze not only ignores the whole field of semiotics, but the entire history of the philosophy of the sign. In a bold affront to both, he instead uses Proust's masterwork *In Search of Lost Time* as if it were some authority on signs. Nothing short of scandalous, Deleuze wrestles the sign away from analytic scholarship towards an existential theory that is consistent with his material realism.

Now, the semiotician knows that literature is full of signs. Saussure himself, the accredited founder of the discipline, called language "a system of signs expressing ideas and hence comparable to writing" (Saussure 2005: 15). This concept, inherited from a long philosophic trend, idealizes the sign as a linguistic phenomenon and places the sign's truth within linguistic structure.²

Deleuze, on the other hand, approaches this history and discipline from a different angle. For him, the work of literature abounds in signs. Therefore, by analyzing a text we can trace the emergence of those signs, both within the worlds of that book and before the readers of them. The question of the sign has been reversed: if signs are systems comparable to writing, literature will be full of systems of signs ripe for investigation. Different texts will use different sign systems or, as Deleuze will later call them, different "regimes" of signs, complete with their own rules and limitations.³

Proust is rich material for such a study. The *Search* overflows with signs and sign systems, the manifestation of which is painstakingly detailed in the narrator's desperate attempts to uncover the truth of his past. Reading Proust, one must question not only what the narrator is searching for, but why he is searching in the first place. For if we take this search as seriously as Proust does, we see that "the *Search* is not simply an effort of recall, an exploration of memory: search, *recherche*, is to be taken in the strong sense of the term, as we say "the search for truth" (Deleuze 1972: 3).

It is precisely because we do not know the 'truth' of a sign that it strikes us existentially as being more than just an object that we understand, but as something that we must investigate and spend time with in order to unravel its meaning. To get to the 'truth' of a sign and to know it, we must 'apprentice' to that sign. We must ponder its relation to the world and to other signs. In fact, without signs we would not be able to learn at all:

Learning is essentially concerned with signs. Signs are the object of a temporal apprenticeship, not of an abstract knowledge. To learn is first of all to consider a substance, an object, a being as if they emitted signs to be deciphered,

interpreted. There is no apprentice who is not "the Egyptologist" of something. One becomes a carpenter only by becoming sensitive to the signs of wood, a physician by becoming sensitive to the signs of disease. Vocation is always predestination with regard to signs. Everything which teaches us something emits signs, every act of learning is an interpretation of signs or hieroglyphs. Proust's work is based not on the exposition of memory, but on the apprenticeship to signs (1972: 4).

Already, with these notions of the sign as a 'search' and learning as an 'interpretation of signs', Deleuze has begun wrestling the sign away from analytic definitions of its phenomenon, towards a pragmatic and existential probing of its nature. Instead of asking *what* a sign is, he asks *how* it is that we discover, interpret, and use signs in the first place.

On the one hand, his concepts fit the work done by Peirce. It was Peirce that declared, "a sign is something by knowing which we know something more," and that "all reasoning is an interpretation of signs of some kind" (Peirce: 332). Deleuze agrees with these ideas, and gladly declares that signs lead us to new knowledge. However he surpasses these notions by questioning the process of knowledge itself that the sign inaugurates. If knowing the sign brings more knowledge, and this is a process of 'learning,' what does the process of 'learning' the sign entail? First and foremost, Deleuze asserts that there must be an interpretation of those signs. To know signs, one must interpret them. In other words, one must *search* for that knowledge. There is a radical shift taking place here. Deleuze is wrestling the sign away from a strictly analytic definition, towards a pragmatic and existential probing of its nature. More than abstractly saying what a sign is equivalent to (i.e. knowledge, knowing, and knowing more), or what a sign is (i.e. some knowledge in excess of the sign), Deleuze pushes the sign towards questions of praxis.⁴ Towards this end, he allies himself with existentialists like Heidegger:

We shall never learn what "is called" swimming, for example, or what it "calls for," by reading a treatise on swimming. Only the leap into the river tells us what is called swimming. The question "What is called thinking?" can never be answered by proposing a definition of the concept *thinking*, and then diligently explaining what is contained in that definition. In what follows, we shall not think *about* what thinking is. We remain outside that mere reflection which makes thinking its object (Heidegger 1972: 21).

Above and beyond the sign's definition, we need to trace its emergence and the entire process that leads

from its existence to a rudimentary knowledge of its place in the world. By focusing on this search, Deleuze is recognizing that the question of the sign is much broader than it has usually been treated in the history of philosophy and semiotics. Understanding the concept of the sign is inseparable from understanding how it exists before us and how that existence comes to pass. *Proust and Signs* is Deleuze's first attempt at tracing these movements, and the book represents his first articulation of the fundamental arguments and positions that dominate all his writings on the sign.

He begins this work by pointing out that a sign is a sign on account of our engagement with it. The sign *affects* us. In its presence we are filled with feelings that set it apart from other objects and which make us aware that there is much more to it than its mere presence at hand. Deleuze observes that a sign can fill us with "nervous exaltation" (Deleuze 1972: 7), "jealousy", or the "joys" and "sufferings" of many different "sensuous impressions" (11, 12). Its signing is constituted by this existential grip on us that demands we overcome its mere appearance in order to fully explore its relation, both to the feeling it conjures within us, and to the other actions and thoughts surrounding it.

Think of the narrator of the *Search* with his "petite madeleine" and tea. Upon tasting it, he declares that its sensation:

had the effect, which love has, of filling me with a precious essence; or rather this essence was not in me, it *was* me. I had ceased now to feel mediocre, contingent, mortal. Whence could it have come to me, this all-powerful joy? I sensed that it was connected with the taste of the tea and the cake, but that it infinitely transcended those savours, [and] could not, indeed, be of the same nature. Where did it come from? What did it mean? How could I seize and apprehend it? (Proust I: 60).

Deleuze loved this example because everything is there: the sign overwhelming us, filling us with both joy and apprehension, compelling us to find its meaning. What does it mean? What is it that overwhelms us and surpasses this cake, this taste, this joy?:

I put down the cup and examine my own mind. It alone can discover the truth. But how? What an abyss of uncertainty, whenever the mind feels overtaken by itself; when it, the seeker, is at the same time the dark region through which it must go seeking and where all its equipment will avail it nothing. See? More than that: create. It is face to face with something which does not yet exist, which it alone can make actual, which it alone can bring into the light of day (Proust I: 61).

The narrator must 'seek' out the answers to these questions, not so much to find them, but to 'create' their meaning. Meanwhile, the sign is revealed as the production of meaning and of the various incarnations of an invisible essence assaulting us.

The first thing we can say *a posteriori* of the sign is that even though it emerges in relation to what we already know, it assails us because it has no place in that knowledge. Otherwise it would not *sign* to us, but would be understood immediately. Instead, it brutally exists before us as a recognizable but amorphous material, but also as a feeling that drives us beyond that material, motivating us to grasp its significance.

In the presence of a sign, though, the question remains: to what world, if not our own, does this sign belong? If the sign immediately has no place in our understanding and in the world we know, it necessarily represents *another* world with which we are not familiar. But upon its arrival, we are blocked from this foreign world of the sign. The sign seems caught between worlds, struggling to find expression in our understanding, but remaining attached to some other. It expresses some truth about both, but in a vague relation that needs to be exposed. Consequently, every sign inaugurates a search that may propel us into a new world, one with which we are, prior to the apprenticeship, unacquainted:

The *Search* is presented as the exploration of different worlds of signs which are organized in circles and intersect at certain points, for the signs are specific and constitute the substance of one world or another (Deleuze 1972: 5).

From this perspective, the *Search* can be seen as an exploration of the different worlds of the narrator's past (e.g. the world of the Verdurins, Swann's world, the world of the Méséglise Way versus that of the Guermantes Way, or the worlds of Combray, Balbec, Doncières, etc.). As he follows their signs, the narrator builds these worlds in his own mind, blending them in and out of each other in ever increasing complexity. The narrator's hypermnesia immediately transforms him into a kind of astronaut, deep-sea diver, or spelunker of different worlds.⁵

Now, a world is a world because it has some degree of consistency, that is to say, some coherence in the meanings of its signs. If worlds are organized 'in circles', it is because of the different codes of meaning between them. We must keep in mind that what a sign means in one world is not what it means in another; and it is the consistency of these distinct meanings that keeps these worlds apart, allowing them to function in different ways:

The worlds are unified by the formation of sign systems, emitted by persons, objects, substances; we discover no truth, we learn nothing except by deciphering and interpreting. But the plurality of worlds is such that these signs are not of the same kind, do not have the same way of appearing, do not allow themselves to be deciphered in the same manner, do not have an identical relation with their meaning. The hypothesis that the signs form both the unity and the plurality of the *Search* must be verified by considering the worlds in which the hero participates directly (1972: 5).

Epistemologically, a world remains a closed 'circle' or 'system' which preserves its space only by sustaining its individual codes and series of meanings. Signs and objects that do not adhere to these codes must be excluded, or else the circle can be opened and become part of another world. For example, think of how the 'little clan' of the Verdurins is defined by what the narrator can only call the "tacit" "Creed" of Mme. Verdurin and her husband (Proust I: 265). But Swann's strange codes do not always fit in there, as his worldly mannerisms, which have been assembled from other influential circles of acquaintance, threaten Mme. Verdurin. She begins to distrust him the moment she realizes his popularity and his sphere of influence, which link him to worlds larger than her own (Proust I: 307). Jealous, she breaks ties with Swann before he can sweep away any member of her clan into these other worlds.⁶

It is only by deciphering the codes and relations of a sign that we begin to understand its systems of meaning (that is, its worlds and their

plurality), and thus begin to see its grander significance. But we have not as yet reached the truth of the sign, for the truth of the sign exceeds its significance, both in the amorphous material of the sign, as well as in the insignificant search preceding and positing its meaning. The sign is more than its worlds and its concrete impressions: it is a "*precious essence*" (Proust I: 60),⁷ which not only solicits materials, but also conducts their meaningful relations to each other. Meanwhile, this essence somehow also manages to evade these concrete instantiations, allowing it to continue repeating its invisible production of these differences.

Proust's hero discovers firsthand how signs evade their concrete meanings and how they repeatedly reveal new 'truths' as they are pursued. While circulating among the upper echelons of French society, and in the subjective worlds of his memories, the narrator discovers signs that repeat from one world to the next. With every leap, though, the meaning of any particular sign can either change or become infinitely more complex. What he thinks he knows in one circle of acquaintances fails in another, and in the array of different circles the meaning of every sign becomes layered.⁸ Consider the 'petite madeleine' again: its sign means the object of the cake, but also elicits the memory of aunt Léonie and Sunday mornings in Combray, and:

the old grey house upon the street [...] the garden which had been built out behind it [...] and with the house the town, from morning to night and in all weathers, the Square where I used to be sent before lunch, the streets along which I used to run errands, the country roads we took when it was fine (Proust I: 64).

So many different meanings are at play here, all charging towards their own worlds, "moved as if by magic" (Proust VI: 255). Accordingly, in Proust, Deleuze uncovers four basic kinds of signs which in turn correspond to four different kinds of worlds. These signs differ in kind from each other primarily because of our existential disposition towards them and the extent to which we are willing to tarry in their search.

The sign always already materializes within an entire existential framework. Its meaning is composed both within what we already know, as well as in the context of our desire to know it; this is the insignificant intensity we bear towards it. Insignificant, because existentially the sign agitates us, but the meaning of that agitation is unspecified until we have apprenticed with it. Instead, our search expresses a plethora of ways that we can relate to it. On a strictly material level, it is not that the sign perpetually changes, but instead that in our search we change our relation to that sign, thus altering both its significant meaning and its insignificant desire.

Of this multiplicity, the most basic expression of meaning occurs in what Deleuze calls the "worldly sign". Let us trace its movement. We stumble upon a sign. This sign, in turn, is a sign because it is coupled with a feeling that obliges us to search for its meaning. It leaps out at us from materiality and demands that we apprentice with it until we can discover its 'truth'. But what is it that is leaping out at us? What is a 'worldly sign':

The worldly sign appears as the replacement of an action or thought. It stands for action and for thought. It is therefore a sign which does not refer to something else, to a transcendent signification or to an ideal content, but which has usurped the supposed value of its meaning. This is why worldliness, judged from the viewpoint of actions, appears to be disappointing and cruel; and from the viewpoint of thought, it appears stupid. One does not think and one does not act, but one makes signs (Deleuze 1972: 6).

To begin with, the sign is still somewhat attached to the significant action or thought from which it sprung. However, by 'replacing' this action or thought, Deleuze means that the sign refuses this signification, instead signifying something else. Where a sign replaces a thought, it 'appears stupid' because it no longer shares the meaning of the thought it replaces. It is meaningless and nonsensical. Where a sign replaces an action, it 'appears to be disappointing and cruel'

because it has no connection to the course of actions hitherto. It is clumsy or awkward, the sign of an action with no bearing.

Although materially identical to them, the sign cannot be declared a specific action or thought because it does not yet have significance. It is entirely meaningless, only becoming an action or thought after it relates to other materials. There is no transcendent signifier at work, no ideal correspondence of the sign to a preordained set of materials; there is only a coincidence of material relations which somehow express each other so as to become actions and thoughts.

Deleuze's emphasis on the amorphousness of the sign, and its ability to depose meaningful actions and thoughts, discloses his implicit concept of meaning: namely that a meaning is forged when one concrete material correlates to another. The 'search' is this process, wherein materiality spontaneously creates these correlative bonds, these simple codes of meaning.

First, the sign correlates immediately to its own material, while our affection expresses itself in that material. And that is when "the sign's meaning appears, yielding to us the concealed object" (1972: 11-12). When the amorphous feeling of a sign and the amorphous material eliciting that feeling correlate, both 'meaning' and the 'object' are produced. They mutually articulate each other, creating a meaning that is entirely redundant. Deleuze calls this redundancy "*objectivism*" (26). Objectivism is not to be confused with 'objectivity', which has its own concept and history in philosophy. Nor is it an obscure reference to Ayn Rand.⁹ No, Deleuze's concept is uniquely his own, and has a very particular sense. In Deleuze's objectivism, we "attribute to the object the signs it bears" and "we think that the "object" itself has the secret of the signs it emits" (26-27). For instance, the narrator realizes that the madeleine and tea are the object of the sign he receives, but this tells him nothing, and he devours the cake knowing there is something more there (i.e. the memories haunting him) (Proust I: 64).

To succumb to objectivism and to interpret the sign only in terms of its own object does not bring us any new knowledge about the sign. Rather, it is more like a habitual association or the natural tendency to associate the sign with what is closest to hand.¹² At most, it gives us a mere image of the sign, but this is an image without significance, a mere correlation of perceptions.

In contrast, if we are to know this sign's *significance*, we must surpass this superficial meaning and explore the sign's relation to *other* signs and objects. Deleuze says:

Each sign has two halves: it *designates* an object, it *signifies* something different. The objective side is the side of pleasure, of immediate delight and of practice. Taking this way, we have already sacrificed the "truth" side. We recognize things, but we never know them. What the sign signifies we identify with the person or object it designates. We miss our finest encounters, we avoid the imperatives which emanate from them: to the exploration of encounters we have preferred the facility of recognitions (Deleuze 1972: 26).

In objectivism, we 'designate' the sign by correlating its feeling to the particular object that existentially strikes us. This gives new meaning to both, for they are now understood in terms of each other and we are filled with the immediate pleasure of knowing the sign's reference. Coupled with the feeling of the sign, the object takes on a greater significance and the potential to reveal even more signs, objects and worlds. On this account, Deleuze calls them "worldly signs" (5-6), for they represent our passage into another world and our first contact with the unfamiliar essence that signifies so much more.

However, in light of the worldly sign's greater significance, its meaning-as-object quickly becomes nothing but a "disappointment". Let us consider, for example, all the narrator's disappointments: "Disappointment on first hearing Vinteuil, on first meeting Bergotte, on first seeing the Balbec church" or "[w]hen he sees, then comes to know Mme. de Guermantes" (32-33). The sign of them all, which could mean so much, attaches itself onto these base materials, these first impressions; but this does little to help us know them beyond this completely superficial meaning. Instead, the same existential compulsion that

led us to associate the sign with its designated object now pushes us to understand that object in terms of others; and beyond the sign's designation, we begin looking for its significance, that is, its meaning relative to other meaningful objects and signs. Instead of an amorphous material signing to us, it is as if the entire object becomes a sign and we begin correlating it to other objects, learning more about its place in the world as we go.

We encounter a different type of sign at this point, a sign which allows us to extend its meaning. This other side of the sign is entirely subjective, for it emerges from within our feeling that the sign means more than its object and bears a personal significance above and beyond objective associations. Accordingly, Deleuze calls these the signs "of love", for, in Proust, these are best exemplified by those characters possessed by "love's signs" (7-9). The lover refuses to take their beloved's signs at face value, imagining all sorts of hidden worlds they could possibly signify. Consider the signs the narrator receives from Albertine: touches, glances, notes, all of which he interprets to mean some affection, but which he ultimately misreads (Proust V: 684). Or, the signs Swann receives from Odette: are these genuine signs of affection, or is she hiding a secret affair? The signs of love are open to interpretation, as if their truth resides in an unknown sphere:

Love's signs are not like the signs of worldliness; they are not empty signs, standing for thought and action. They are deceptive signs which can be addressed to us only by concealing what they express: the origin of unknown worlds, of unknown actions and thoughts which give them a meaning. [...] The interpreter of love's signs is necessarily the interpreter of lies (Deleuze 1972: 9).

We are forever blocked from our beloved's inner worlds which they reveal to us as signs and objects whose exact meaning we do not know. Instead, we interpret them through our own understanding and give them a meaning that is entirely artificial and subjective, drawn from our own experience. Our search is confined to the objects it knows, linking them in all sorts of series of expression, trying frantically to get to the truth of them. But the more we search them, the more interpretations we reach. Swann reels in conspiracies when he finds a letter from Odette to Forcheville:

His jealousy, like an octopus which throws out a first, then a second, and finally a third tentacle, fastened itself firmly to that particular moment, five o'clock in the afternoon, then to another, then to another again [...], the perpetuation of a suffering that had come from without (Proust I: 402-03).

The signs of love indicate hidden worlds which all come 'from without' so that they cannot be revealed by any object we know.

We encounter a third type of sign here, an inversion of the first two and their worlds. Insofar as the sign has meaning in an object or in a subjective series of objects, this meaning is achieved only by what it simultaneously excludes, namely the sign's relation to other objects and understandings. The sign still signifies these, only differently and in different series. The more we search this sign, the more we are led past its subjective meanings into its universality and its ability to express and signify infinite objects and worlds.

Deleuze calls them "sensuous qualities" or "sensuous signs" (Deleuze 1972: 39, 54). The feeling produced by the sign becomes perpetual, expressed in one object then another, one world then the next. It becomes a quality of them all, universally shared by them, but bearing different and even contradictory meanings in each. For instance, the narrator's love of the name Guermantes implies a range of ideas: the memory of the Guermantes Way, the social worlds of the Hôtel de Guermantes, the opera, Mme. de Villeparisis', not to mention Mme. de Guermantes' style of dress and different ways of conducting herself (Proust I: 188, 256-62).¹³ The 'place-name' Guermantes is not just an object of a subjective infatuation, but the sign and quality of all these strange worlds.

These sensuous signs each allude to a much more profound essence at work, incarnated by their search and by all the meanings produced through them. Beneath them is a fourth kind of sign, a sign with the

infinite potential to be taken up again and again and searched all over, producing endless concrete meanings without succumbing to any one of them. This fourth type of sign, this essence, is not so much a sign as much as it is the power of signing itself. Unlike sensuous signs or qualities, which always have a concrete sense, the essences are instead the immaterial forces that produce these concrete phenomena in the first place. Deleuze calls them "signs of art" (1972: 39), denoting their productive capacity which is ontological and which imparts signs, objects, significations and worlds all at once:

What is the superiority of the signs of art over all the others? It is that the others are material. Material, first of all, by their emission: they are half sheathed in the object bearing them. Sensuous qualities, loved faces are still matter. (It is no accident that the significant sensuous qualities are above all odors and flavors: the most material of qualities.) *Only the signs of art are immaterial* [...], art gives us the true unity: unity of an immaterial sign and of an entirely spiritual meaning. The essence is precisely this unity of sign and meaning as it is revealed in the work of art (39-41).

Art becomes the object just as it becomes the qualities and meanings associated with that object. Yet, when we consider all of these material substantiations individually, we see that none of them capture the immaterial spirit of their creation. In contrast, when taken holistically, all of these materials vaguely outline a work of art that constantly exceeds its own dimensions, erupting in new impressions, signs, and insights at every moment.

Not coincidentally, Proust's anecdotes about art all allude to the explosive power of these essences. For example, the dramatic art of La Berma is more than a presentation on stage: it is the narrator's love and infatuation, her myth and charisma, the social circles at the opera, and the private worlds of the Guermantes. Or consider the musical art of Vinteuil, which symbolizes "another world" for Swann and still another for the narrator (Proust I: 308). Meanwhile, the paintings of Elstir display countless worlds that forever alter the way the narrator views Balbec (Proust II: 479). Regardless of its form or medium, art leads us to these radical transformations and creations which change our worlds and divulge an essence that surpasses all our understanding.

Accordingly, Deleuze conceives of all signs as ontologically being part of two different levels. On the one hand, the sign is concrete, distinctly perceived as some feeling, objectively articulated by some object and significantly related to other objects and multiple worlds. This concrete level is hierarchized epistemologically into its own levels of meaning: amorphous concrete materials and signs express each other to become meaningful objects; objects express each other to become significations; while significations express each other to create individual worlds, each with their own codes and "over-codes" that preserve them from each other (Deleuze & Guattari 1987: 8-9, 62).

On the other hand, and at another level, the sign is completely immaterial, amorphous, and virtual. In Proust's words, it is "real without being actual, ideal without being abstract" (Proust IV: 264). It is an essence which inheres within all the materials it expresses, but which is not signified completely by any one of them. It is "pure matter which is entirely distinct from the matter of the common things that we see and touch but of which [...] they too had seemed to me to be composed" (Proust IV: 270). This sign is rather searched *through* all of these 'common things' and expressed significantly by all of them simultaneously, so that its truth is multifarious, inter-subjective, multi-worldly, infinite, and utterly schizophrenic.

For Deleuze, the *Search* displays all these levels at once, but only as we relate to it, and only insofar as we are willing to search its signs ourselves and chase their essences. In light of Deleuze's account, we cannot help but read Proust differently. To begin with, we never read Proust, we search Proust. *In Search of Lost Time* is not so much a significant work of literature, but a sort of anti-literature, a collection of signs that explode into worlds. We search Proust at least four times: first as a collection of powerful signs and objects, bound by a literary essence that gathers signs capable of generating their own worlds and series. Rather than scenes and

chapters in Proust, we find worlds which fold over one another and into one another in all directions. Second, as lovers of Proust, we should give him a paranoid reading that strives to understand everything about his hidden worlds: how all the worlds relate literally and the signs that unite them; the references implied by the text and the historical context in which it was written; the structures and motifs of language that he uses to produce his effects, etc. In other words, we should undertake a scholastic reading of this master of literature. Third, we must give Proust a sensuous reading, allowing him to overwhelm our faculties until we see the signs and qualities of his worlds in our own. Only then can we embrace Proust and his worlds as techniques of living and responding to life: Guelph as Combray or Toronto as Balbec. Finally, we must produce through, and with, the essence of Proust. We must allow Proust to inspire us towards art, towards an infinite creation that is never our own, but neither is it his. Rather, it is something in-between, an altogether different essence which blossoms between them throughout our lives.

Towards an Existential Concept of the Sign: The Worldly Search

The sign grips us and impresses upon us because we are not familiar with its meaning. All at once it fills us with excitement and apprehension, playfulness and fear. In turn, these feelings conjure up all sorts of memories, soliciting them in the desperate attempt to give the sign some sort of concrete relation to our very being.

To encounter a sign is to experience an illuminated universe, wherein amorphous feelings and impressions dance about in a space somewhere between the sign and our knowledge of it. Searching the sign, we trace these relations, and in so doing we discover more about the world itself. The sign is therefore a becoming, not only of its own meaning, but of the entire world in which we live. This is why Deleuze declares that all learning "is essentially concerned with signs" (Deleuze 1972: 4). It is signs that expose new relations in our world, and it is the search of signs that creates the most basic meanings through which we know the world:

The first world of the *Search* is the world of, precisely, worldliness. There is no milieu which emits and concentrates so many signs, in such reduced space, at so great a rate. It is true that these signs themselves are not homogeneous. At one and the same moment they are differentiated, not only according to classes but according to even more fundamental "families of mind". From one moment to the next, they evolve, crystallize, or give way to other signs (5-6).

Worldliness is the heterogeneity of all materials, and therefore the origin of all signs. These worldly signs get compounded and exchanged through the powers of worldliness into various 'families of mind'. By 'families of mind', Deleuze refers to the various series of understandings that we make of worldliness. Signs join these in order to gain different meanings and to help us extend our overall knowledge of the world.

Ironically, the meaninglessness of the sign stems more from an excess of meaning than some sort of lack. Signs are entirely positive in nature, signifying the overwhelming powers of worldliness, which gives forth the sign in addition to its plurality of associations. After all, this is what compels us to search the sign: although we do not know where or to what the sign belongs, existentially we feel that it is rife with potential, associated not only to those feelings, but to everything else we know. Rather painstakingly we must play with the sign, following all its associations until its meaning is revealed in some action or thought, or until its search is surrendered to another one.

The very fact that Deleuze can judge the sign from the viewpoint of actions or thoughts insinuates that it is something like an action/thought. However, Deleuze never explicitly calls it such, precisely because he cannot. When he says that one "does not think and one does not act, but one makes signs," he implies that the sign comes from outside of the various series of actions and thoughts, and although materially identical to them, cannot be declared a specific action/thought because it does not yet have a specific meaning (6). The sign is entirely meaningless, and only becomes an action/thought in relation to other actions and

thoughts. Whereas thinking and acting merely recycle known thoughts and actions, the sign emerges between them as some other meaningless thing. We recognize this affect and we are distinctly conscious of the thing that emerges from the action/thought, but it has yet to take its place in the series of all actions or thoughts, wherein it would find meaning by allowing these to express it and give it overall relation to our worlds.

Understanding and meaning come subsequent to signs, after they have been formed into series with each other. Insofar as signs are associated with other impressions, they begin to correlate to these impressions in mutual expressions. The sign expresses its impressions as much as those impressions express it, such that all of them are bound in series with each other. It is at this point that we can speak of actions and thoughts, for the sign now relates to a particular set of materials, which give it explicit meaning.

As the search facilitates these meaningful correlations, it spontaneously reveals materiality's ability to create meaning itself. The search, therefore, existentially unites our world and all our understandings with materiality, if only briefly, towards the creation of new meanings and understandings. Signs, in turn, are the precursors of these openings and of the redistribution and extension of our knowledge. Fundamentally though, we are indebted to materiality, the powers of which supply the very signs and meanings that we consider.

Thus the search is none other than our ability to identify and distinguish actions/thoughts from actions/thoughts, uniting them in meaningful correlations. Were it not for signs, our universe would remain inert, undistinguished, and meaningless, for the search of them differentiates *materiality* into individual *materials*. Throughout this process, more signs may appear, such that a vicious circle repeats between signs and searches, despite the meaningful actions and thoughts they reveal. Accordingly, the search is resolved in meaning just as much as it is unresolved in the spontaneous emergence of new signs. It really all depends on materiality. Sometimes a meaning is found for a sign, and that is the end of the matter. However, there is nothing to say that something meaningful will not become a sign once more. The perpetual emergence of signs and searches forces us to constantly rearrange our understandings, rendering meaningful signs meaningless again.

That there are multiple series of these understandings implies an explicit difference in kind between a sign's 'meaning' and its 'understanding'. In Proust, a sign means different things depending on the series of understanding in which it is engaged (e.g. the madeleine, and its many senses). These series exclude each other by the limitations they put on their signs. Relative to each series, every sign is correlated to a different set of materials than any other series of understanding. Meanwhile, these codified sets of materials are what constitute the differences between one understanding of a sign and another. Therefore, the specific meaning of a sign is relative to its composite series of understanding, while series of understanding encompass multiple meanings, but only a particular and codified meaning for every sign they contain.

Let us reserve the term 'meaning' for the most basic correlation of one material to another, regardless of whether it is in series with others or not. The sign becomes meaningful the moment its impression correlates to another and the two share a mutual expression. Meaning is essentially 'binary' in that it requires at least two distinct materials paired to each other. In contrast, we shall reserve the term 'understanding' for compound series of these basic meanings. We understand when basic meanings begin to correlate to each other, implicating an entire set of meanings, or a 'series' of understanding.

For the most part, Deleuze uses the term 'knowledge' synonymously with 'understanding' (26). To know is therefore to know something according to a series of understanding. In his later writings though, knowledge is distinguished from understanding as belonging more to those abstract series of understanding that encompass and organize multiple series of understandings together in broader relations. These relations are entirely abstract in that they 'understand' understandings themselves. Knowledge, therefore, becomes a higher degree of intelligent organization, the point where understanding represents itself to itself. Just like meanings represent meanings so that they are understood, understandings represent understandings so that we can abstract and separate them into various disciplines and domains of knowledge.

In *Proust and Signs*, Deleuze lays down the foundations of an intellectual hierarchy that is elemental to his entire semiotics. Basic meanings build themselves into series of understanding, which in turn unite and divide into worlds. All meanings, understandings, and worlds holistically constitute our 'knowledge' of the world, while our knowledge of the world ultimately depends on the extent to which we are willing to search materiality and our willingness to be open to new signs and new meanings from out of worldliness.

Aside from neglecting the argument for how it is that these worlds are composed (which is found much later in *A Thousand Plateaus*), Deleuze also neglects to explain our compulsion to search and our dissatisfaction with our own knowledge. Instead, these are both simply attributed to the sign and its effects on us. Meanwhile, the precise relation between the sign and our desire to search is elaborated no further than mere insinuation. At the same time, Deleuze insists that our ability to understand and our desire for more knowledge come to us entirely from the level of materiality, yet he does not delve into how this level is the ontological source of both our desire and our ability to learn.

Furthermore, Deleuze fails to develop another important conclusion of this argument, namely that it is a meaningless materiality that ontologically produces real meaning. The various arguments for this position are not fully developed until he writes *Logic of Sense*, years later. Suffice to say, understanding and meaning come entirely from the meaningless chaos of materiality. Materiality supplies both the signs (i.e. meaningless impressions) and the correlations of them that allow for the meanings that we understand.

Thirdly, Deleuze never really explains what a sign is generally, neither in *Proust and Signs*, nor in any of his works. Fortunately, it is not hard to deduce. If actions/thoughts give way to signs, and those signs are meaningless until they correlate to other actions/thoughts, the sign is like a solitary impression or affect that is associated with others, without specifically correlating to any of them. *Signs are therefore infinitely meaningful impressions, which are simultaneously associated with all the other impressions and objects surrounding them. In searching signs, we surpass their infinite associations and give them specific correlations to other materials, at which point they become finite actions/thoughts.* These actions/thoughts are then free to correlate to others, in series of understanding radiating out from the initial impressions of their signs. Together these series make up the worlds of signs, the extent of which depends on the overall relation of each sign to our entire knowledge, as well as the even greater context of its place in the world. Different times, spaces, desires, and prior knowledge will create different actions and thoughts through and with the same sign. *Therefore, no sign can claim to have a universal or 'ideal' meaning, namely because its meaning is relative to the signs, actions/thoughts, and worlds surrounding it.*

Accordingly, there are different types of signs depending on the context in which a sign unfolds. In tracing his concept of the sign, Deleuze first takes stock of the different types of signs, so as to expose their common traits and how they become an infinite variety of materials and worlds. He begins with those found in the worlds of Proust, narrowing them down into four basic genera.

Throughout this taxonomy, Deleuze's analysis remains primarily existential, which means that his reduction neglects the *a priori* arguments for the existence of signs and their searches. These he will later borrow from Spinoza, from whom he will gather a more general material concept of the sign. Nonetheless, in *Proust and Signs* he maintains that the different types of signs have much in common, and that they all share in a common essence and truth. Although the different types of signs and their relations introduce and sustain different worlds respectively, Deleuze holds that they are all still fundamentally part of the same material stratum. Thus, even in *Proust and Signs* Deleuze champions material realism, observing and asserting that all worlds share a common materiality.

Deleuze describes this worldliness in a variety of different ways. Moreover, we will see how he shows that worldliness is as much material and concrete as it is immaterial and productive. For now though, Deleuze merely wants to draw a difference in terminology, referring to the material world in general as 'worldliness' or 'the world,' while the various material signs within it become part of their own singular 'world' (as in 'a world'). A world is characterized by its system of signs and semiotic relations, while the world is the material

reality in which all these systems participate and are simultaneously connected:

the world has no significant contents according to which we could systematize it, nor ideal significations according to which we could regulate and hierarchize it (Deleuze 1972: 143).

The world concurrently encompasses all systems, in addition to all those signs, materials, and material relations that are not systematized, but which exist along side systems, still relatively meaningless. The world is, therefore, simultaneously both the significant and insignificant materiality in and from which all things are wrought, which ontologically subsists before and within them all.

This infinite and chaotic materiality organizes itself into these various things, which in turn form relations with each other in order to constitute individual worlds. These individual worlds are entirely significant, abounding with their own chains of significations and meanings. But, in order to understand how this process of self-organization works, we need to trace the existential unfolding of the sign as it emerges for us in a particular world. In other words, we need to discover the threshold at which the most basic meanings are being created, for it is there that the sign is at work and there that we will find its concept.

Chris Drohan is the author of *Deleuze and the Sign* reviewed in this issue of the SRB. This essay is a revised version of a paper delivered at a meeting of the Toronto Semiotic Circle at Victoria University in the University of Toronto in 2009.

Notes

1 Proust VI: 280.

2 Proust VI: 280.

3 Thomas Sebeok offers a convenient summary in *Signs: An Introduction to Semiotics* (Sebeok 2001: 4-11).

4 Later, in *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze will also discover four regimes of signs that represent four socio-political regimes that result when the state itself controls its signs differently, namely: the primitive state and pre-signifying semiotic, where signs use up their names and significations as soon as they are found; the despotic state and signifying regime, where all signs must correspond to explicit meanings that are enforced by law in the state that desires to signify everything and have nothing outside its domain; the counter-signifying semiotic and nomadic war machine, which is always against the despotic state, mixing empires and regimes of signs, and destroying or hybridizing them; and the post-signifying regime, where everything is subject to its own proceeding, judged in a virtual tyrannical model. The four different types of signs in Proust become these four different types of semiotics and politics. For instance, the worldly sign is like its own pre-signifying regime; the signs of love are the beginning of signification and the signifying regime; the sensuous signs all function in a mixed and counter-signifying semiotic; while the signs of art each represent a virtual and infinite world which becomes so many significant and subjective worlds and proceedings (*TP*, pp.111-35).

5 On the importance of amnesia and hypermnesia see Deleuze's *Negotiations* (138).

6 This line of argument is echoed in Barthes when he says, "the goal of literary work (of literature as work) is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text" (Barthes: 4).

7 On the importance of amnesia and hypermnesia see Deleuze's *Negotiations* (138).

8 In contrast, consider Saint-Loup's little circle at Balbec, which the narrator gains entrance to by repeating all the same styles and codes of behavior, but which Bloch fails in because he has not mastered the rules (Proust II: 308-359).

9 These are Proust's words, but Deleuze takes the term for his own and launches into a complete philosophical treatment of them, both in *Proust and Signs* and in all his subsequent works (39-51). See in particular *Expressionism and Philosophy: Spinoza* (Deleuze 1992: 191-200).

10 For instance, in vol. I alone, the narrator explicitly declares the existence of various worlds: the inner “world” of the narrator’s bedroom (7), “the unknown world” of women (119), the two “planes” of the narrator’s image of Mme. de Guermantes and her actual presence (247-49), the little phrase by Vinteuil which was “another world” for Swann (308), and the world of emotions vs the “world of colours” induced in the narrator by Gilberte (591). But every episode and scene within the work constitutes its own world, made up of its own objects and signs: Combray, Mme. de Villeparisis’s house, Swann’s Way, the Guermantes Way, the Verdurins’ Circle, the Marquise de Saint-Euverte’s, the Champs-Élysées, the Bois de Boulogne, the Méséglise Way, Balbec, etc.

11 Rand developed both an ethical and epistemological theory called “Objectivism” throughout her writings. Specifically, see her *Introduction to Objectivist Epistemology*.

12 One cannot help but see a connection between Deleuze’s account of objectivism and Hume’s “association of ideas” in *A Treatise of Human Nature*. The “constant conjunction of resembling perceptions” are the “causes of our ideas”, the meaning of which are extended and compounded in the faculties of memory and imagination (Hume: 14-25).

13 However, it is not until vol. III that these worlds are firmly established and begin to take on a life different from what the narrator imagined in his youth.

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The Apprenticeship to Signs

Chris Drohan, *Deleuze and the Sign, New York: Atropos Press, 2009.*

By Kane X. Faucher

Chris Drohan bequeaths to semiotics a hitherto under-explored analysis of Gilles Deleuze’s relationship to the sign. Beginning with Deleuze’s *Proust and Signs*, Drohan clearly states Deleuze’s method; namely, bypassing the sign’s quiddity in favour of examining its nature and qualities. The method of interpretation Deleuze uses is roughly patterned on Nietzsche’s, albeit placed under the service of signs rather than values. The only way we can truly “know” the sign is through our engagement with it, and this engagement opens up the way for what Drohan will call a material realist basis of the sign. To seek the meaning of signs is indistinguishable from creating their meaning, thereby rendering the very act of exploration and analysis the basis of subjective involvement in the world that simultaneously constructs the meaning of what is encountered. The importance of apprenticing to the sign opens up a multiplicity of worlds, and these worlds are connected by an appeal to a particular sign, but these signs contain unique codes in each world that differentiate their meaning structure. Our relationship to signs is what constitutes the formation of these different worlds where signs flash and materialize in variegated meanings specific to our encounters and our desire to understand their meanings.

There are four types or registers by which we simultaneously encounter and comprehend the amorphousness of the sign. The first type are the worldly signs which emerges from the raw state of materiality. The attribution of a sign to the object which bears that sign comes about in the correlation between the impression and the emotion it elicits in us. The “objectivism” which results in a redundant loop of co-designation between the sign and the object, but which also contextually brings about the first order meaning of correlation between the designated object and the feeling it elicits. This redundancy tells us nothing about the true nature of the object or the sign since their meaning is co-designated, but this dissatisfaction will prompt us to engage in a further search. What forces us out of the objectivist impasse is what Drohan cites as a “subjective compensation,” embodied by the second type of sign. The raw simplicity of the worldly sign is still bereft of meaning, a series of signs in infinite relation that are both profound and meaningless which leads to a delirium of semiosis.

The second type of signs are those of love which step beyond objective meanings and conceal what they express whilst also barring our access to the origin of their meanings. With access to the materiality of the sign blocked, our attention turns to signification

and, eventually, to over-signification. The ennui of designation and the objective ground gives way to a somewhat phenomenological bent as the sign of love is pure significance *for us*, yet our subjective compensations for the objective absence inaugurates a multiple series of speculative constructions as to the meaning of those signs. Rather than understand this sign’s otherness, we are condemned only to impose new interpretations that reveal ourselves, thusly creating a scenario of jealousy - in the case of a lover - since we are without the truth of these signs. The lover cannot have done with trying to “figure out” the other, and in so doing rejects the multiplying interpretations as being deficient and unsatisfactory explanations of the sign. At this level, there is still insufficient reason to graft truth and meaning to the sign given the turmoil of subjective fragmentation and being frustrated at every turn by the motley of significations. The delirium of infinite meanings eventually gives way when we return to a new level of material origin of the sign. It makes no difference whether the signs \tilde{n} which refer to other signs ad infinitum \tilde{n} are in a state of excess signification or lack thereof, if they hitch to a supreme signifier or not: we are still mired in a redundancy that is purely formal and bereft of meaning.

The third type are the sensuous signs which returns designation to the sign but in a way where what is designated and signified is a multiplicity of objects united under one designation (the coupling of signification and designation is called denotation proper). This type of sign is the closest to what can be called a shared affinity of qualities that link many objects and their senses in a series, but there is still a distinct lack of a definite sense. Sensuous signs are multi-subjective, and qualify as a sign-based simulacrum. The sign and the object, when considered as a relation between an idea and its objective copy, is patterned on resemblance; however, “the simulacrum is an image without resemblance” (Deleuze 1990: 257). The internalized dissimilarity results in a becoming-mad, leaving only the image of the sign’s expression upon us as a multiplicity of sense. This image without resemblance is pithily described by Ezra Pound as phanopoeia, and its exemplar is the Chinese ideogram which “*means* the thing or the action or situation, or quality germane to the several things it pictures.” (Ezra Pound 1987: 21). As Pound develops this idea further, he too eschews the model of resemblance that links an ideogrammatic sign to the object, declaring that the sign is not a movement toward abstraction but quite the opposite. The sensuous signs are signal-systems composed of disparate components: “the sign is what

flashes across the boundary of two levels.... All physical systems are signals; all qualities are signs” (Deleuze 1990: 261). By internalizing differences, the qualities are raised out of their repression with phantasmatic force, a becoming-unlimited of sense where the sign’s difference is that which differs from itself. However, we are still here stuck in *differenciation* as opposed to *differentiation*, two rough halves of the object given that differentiation concerns “the qualities or diverse species which actualize the varieties” (Deleuze 1994: 210). Sensuous signs enter into a progressive and reciprocal determination that opens up the field of the sign and its series to global integration, establishing the relations between signs. However, this seemingly pluralist objectivism of sensuous signs is still devoid of determining the sufficient reason of signs without further qualification. This mirrors Cassirer’s insight that thought “cannot manifest and assert domination over the sensory world without, as it were, taking on the colour of the sensory world, without being made sensible and corporeal” (Cassirer 1957: 46). The story of the sensuous signs is lent credibility with an appeal to the virtual and essences, organizing the problem according to the process that undergirds the sign relations.

The fourth type of signs are those of art which function as the crown of Deleuzian semiotics. At this level, objects and qualities are not equivalences ideationally or materially, but are correlative. The coincidence between the two and the formation of the multiple worlds is demonstrated through art. Not surprisingly, Deleuze’s method for revealing the meaning of signs is strongly inflected by his own engagement with the anti-Cartesianism of Spinoza and, to a slightly lesser degree, Leibniz. Negotiating a path that does not appeal to transcendence of the sign via *propria*, the only available method for (re) discovering the profound depth and nature of signs is through expression, bringing the “arcana” of signs into their properly expressed light as immanent. Heidegger himself signals this ambiguous essence that inheres in art, a consideration that is neither subjective nor objective since these impose an exclusively disjunctive limitation on the phenomenon of the expressive function of art as a “sign system.” The goal of the signs of art is to, as Deleuze and Guattari state, “raise lived perceptions to the percept and lived affections to the affect” (Deleuze and Guattari 1994:170). There is no return to origins since that would be to repeat the errors of resemblance; instead, the signs of art do not actualize the virtual, but through blocs of sensation come to embody it. The signs of art in particular

attempt to compose the finite that would reproduce the infinite, expressing the becoming-unlimited of semiosis as a bloc of sensations.

The essence of virtuality appears to function as a *hypokeimenon*, but the dynamism of the virtual and its immanence proscribes any regulative “outside” or “underneath” that would only serve to repeat the formula of transcendence. In Deleuze’s view, transcendence fails to achieve the sufficient reason for the relations of signs and objects. Drohan’s explication of Deleuze’s material realism seems to describe transcendental empiricism. Deleuze’s empiricism is an effort to demonstrate the concrete richness of the sensible, wherein what makes transcendental empiricism “transcendental” is that it is a necessary condition without providing a foundation for knowledge claims, and it is an empiricism because it focuses on the real conditions of actual experience (Baugh 1992:133). Drohan’s appellation of Deleuze as a “material realist” still courts the same possibility for negative or confused connotation as “transcendental empiricist.” Drohan substantiates this through an immediate appeal to Deleuze’s nuanced definition of the virtual. To simply call Deleuze any sort of “realist” requires further elaboration as to how he distinguishes the real from hitherto incarnations of the term. Conceptual rather than real difference of signs would seek to ground an equivalence between varying actualizations of the same sign across the many “worlds” in which it is instantiated. This appeal to a transcendent explanation for signification cannot furnish an explanation for any particular signification, and so accordingly can only furnish us with an empty form.

One of the most intriguing claims Drohan makes is in equating thinking with semiosis. In his view, if semiosis is indeed immanent to meaning, thought pursues this meaning through acts of interpretation. And, as Deleuze demonstrates, if interpretation of the sign is to apprentice to its multiplicity, ultimate meaning is never secured. Instead, interpretation opens the sign up to its constant material expression of the virtual. This particular image of thought portrays the act of thinking in a dynamic and isomorphic relation to the succession of signs and their multiple senses. This particular type of thinking-as-semiosis must do away with the three prejudicial errors of hitherto thought: 1. the belief that thought has truth as a formal precondition to its process; 2. the distrust of external forces that impinge upon thought such as the passions, sensations, etc.; 3. the belief that there is some corrective method that will police our thinking into locating a single truth. These three errors keep us locked upon a dogmatic plane of referentiality that makes its truth the essential element and goal of thinking.

Drohan’s revealing study can be furthered in its aims of grounding an existentially-based semiotics if it contends with the proverbial elephant in the room; namely, the role transcendental empiricism plays in portraying the “higher lived” life of the sign and the ways in which our signs are embodiments of the virtual

that is maximally determined in every insinuation of its expression. Signs are neither opinions nor a chaos, but a chaosmos where the signs of art illuminate a bloc of sensations for those signs to flash their intermittent meanings. Drohan grants us the contour of this formulation subsequent to outlining Deleuze’s onto-semiotic schematic, and so offers us as well a synopsis of transcendental empiricism that goes unnamed.

Arguably, Deleuze’s semiotics reached its clarified apogee in collaboration with Guattari. The gains Deleuze makes in *Proust and Signs* as well as *Expressionism in Philosophy* are made to veer into a rhizomal framework when Deleuze and Guattari explore four of the (many) regimes of signs. The essence that emanates and inheres in expression is the same *ishadowī* that projects itself across the *iamorphous* atmospheric continuum as that which accompanies philosophy, art and science in the preparation for a *ipeople* to come. Although art occupies a seemingly privileged position in the interpretation of signs, Deleuze and Guattari are careful to include and acknowledge the specific lines of flight inherent to philosophy’s concepts and science’s *functives*. Each domain contends with chaos differently, and no one way is better than the other. The story of materiality that Drohan tells us could be of stronger appeal if we consider what Deleuze and Guattari call *faciality*; namely, that *faciality* is the substance of expression which *ireigns* materially over that whole constellation of *signifiances* and *interpretationsī* (Deleuze and Guattari 1987:115). The counterpoint presented by *faciality* as the regulative redundancy of the despotic regime of signs opens the way to discussing what it means to de- and reterritorialize the sign. The assumed centrality of *signifiante* in a circular network of signs is displaced by a different kind of search, one that begins with pragmatics. How do expressions become formalized? How are regimes of signs generated? How are they transformed? How do we break with the superlinearity of language? An open engagement with the signs of art and the appreciation of virtual essences is one way to usher thought into the domain of semiosis, to realize that signifying is already at work before we know what the sign is signifying. However, pragmatics offers us the ability to track the symptoms of existing regimes of signs so that thought can avoid falling back into prejudicial habits.

Those who are not convinced by Deleuze’s study of the sign and its strong basis in a quasi-materialist ontology may also take issue with Drohan’s emphasis on an apparent existential semiotics patterned more on external relations and the dynamism this has in our own existential correlation with signs. Claims that Deleuze is dressing up relativism by another name can be fairly addressed when we consider that the virtual is the milieu of complete determination, but the move in making semiosis an immanent driver of expression and thought does not completely resolve the ambiguities of the sign. There is still in the notion of the virtual a nebulous quality that is a few measured paces beyond what Locke called the *il know not whatī*. Another possible objection would be that semiotics under Deleuze’s treatment leans too far into existential

considerations; however, as Drohan carefully elaborates, Deleuze bypasses the argument of whether existence or essence is primary by insisting on their dynamic correlation.

Given its svelte dimensions and organized approach, Drohan’s text is a formidable springboard to convene a more lengthy discussion on the possibility of brokering an existential semiotics proper. Drohan’s claims and careful appeal to Deleuze’s characterization of the sign in its different registers is cleanly presented, yet what is gesturally indicated as a project remains here in an incipient stage since in following how the sign works in reference to different meaning registers we may still be left with the question of the value of the meanings we obtain in these interactions, and if these meanings produced by this dynamic correlation will reveal to us a more robust understanding of the sign or if meaning must depend on exporting the sign itself to a domain of sense. If in the latter way, then we might not ever attain to how the sign really works, but remain in the space of re-determining the question on how it works. We might also ask how the sign in its transduction of sense applies to even banal, everyday situations outside of literature and love. The evaluation of the sign-sense process could be further developed by this appeal to the quotidian as a means of anticipating the objections of more analytic semiotics which uses the everyday as a litmus or test to support claims on how signs connect.

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Two-Fisted Reading

By Paul Hegarty

Christophe Halsberghe, *La Fascination du Commandeur: le sacré et l'écriture en France à partir du débat Bataille*. New York and Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006.
Sylvain Santi, *Georges Bataille à l'extrémité fuyante de la poésie*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2007.
Laurent Ferri and Christophe Gauthier (eds.), *L'Histoire-Bataille: l'écriture de l'histoire dans l'œuvre de Georges Bataille*. Paris: École des Chartes, 2006.
Stuart Kendall, *Georges Bataille*. London: Reaktion Books, 2007.
Patrick ffrench, *After Bataille: Sacrifice, Exposure, Community*. London: Legenda, 2007.

As the list of recent books affirms, Georges Bataille is undergoing another period of intense attention, inspired perhaps by the Pléiade edition of his fiction (2004), or the slow burn of Michel Surya’s exercise in bad faith, *Georges Bataille: la mort à l'œuvre*

(1992, translated into English in 2002), where he uses Bataille’s writings to read his life and then uses this ‘life’ to interpret the writings. Reception of Bataille falls into two major stages: the first, the ‘golden age’ of French interpretations, runs from the obituary edition of *Critique* in 1963 to Denis Hollier’s *Prise de la Concorde* (1973), a period in which seemingly every major theorist and/or literary critic commented on Bataille. In English, reception is tied in to translations that gradually appeared from the mid 1980s, even for writers who had access to the French texts. The first period is the highpoint of French theory, the second marks the spread of ‘Theory’, notably in North America. Readings of Bataille continue to offer a barometer of inventive theoretical writing (or its absence) in France, as today the woeful ‘literary’ accounts of his work flourish, alongside anal (in a non-Bataillean sense...) retreads of influence, meetings and political

groupings. This rancid flowering can be seen in the books by Halsberghe and Santi. Ferri and Gauthier’s book tries something interesting but fails (again, in a non-Bataillean way, where a sovereign failure akin to that seen in Beckett, is the only height to be aspired to). Kendall’s biographising shows the malign influence of Surya, and out of this crop of analyses, ffrench is the only one to emerge with more than a passing moment of originality, offering an authentic critical and philosophical engagement.

Whilst working through these books, I was also reading Paul Morley’s *Piece by Piece: Writing about Joy Division, 1977-2007*.¹ This book felt much more like a Bataille book: it does not mention him, but then often it barely seems to mention Joy Division. Morley circles around the death of Ian Curtis, circles around the period of the group’s existence, always questioning the process of making music, the process

of writing, the process of presence at a given time and space, continually eliding and sliding from straight statement. Of course, the trap I was falling into was instructive: Bataille seems to encourage a twin sense of ownership on the part of the commentator/fan/follower/theorist coming after him. Firstly, the commentator feels authorised to deal directly and only directly with Bataille, neglecting swathes of critical literature, with a few references to, say, seminal articles by Derrida and Foucault as ornamentation. This extends to the infuriating ‘all translations my own’, which even French’s very worthwhile book does. The francophone-abled reader does not need your translation and the reader without French should be led to existing translations, even if these are to be commented on as unsatisfactory, which, as far as the fiction goes, they mostly are. Secondly, the Bataille commentator finds it very hard not to want to maintain a purity for the original: this can take the form of ‘performative’ writing, or the more usual ‘what Bataille really means is’. This might seem like a very standard set of influence-anxious, position-taking set of processes, but in terms of theory they are unusual: this is largely not how people read Derrida, Agamben, Deleuze and Guattari, Kristeva, or if they do, it is generally tinged with caution (unless influenced by Bataille). Bataille seems to offer a particular possibility or even authority to those ‘coming after’ in that his theory encourages such positioning, almost forcing the commentator to make ‘my Bataille’. Bataille’s own method of commenting (on what he considered philosophically important) was both to introject and keep as other, so that a perverse and paradoxical community would emerge from his and the other thought coming together without fusing. There are good and bad versions of both exegetical and ‘performative’ readings of his work, with the best managing both.

In French readings of Bataille, the notion of there being a question about how you approach him is largely absent in recent years. His name spreads virally into public awareness as exhibitions use him to offset ‘high’ modernisms or the surrealism of Breton, none as successfully as Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss’ *Informe: mode d’emploi* (Pompidou Centre, 1996), for all its formalism. I imagine the kind of reader that can read or write the words ‘divin marquis’, referring to Sade, with a frisson of excitement rather than a shiver of embarrassment, has a passing awareness of Bataille as one of a canonised list of writers ‘maudits’. The core problem for French reception of Bataille (over the last twenty or so years, and notwithstanding Nancy and Blanchot’s debate about community in Bataille in the 1980s) is that he is institutionally positioned as part of ‘literature’ except for a few barely adequate editions of only a very few of his works that sit forlornly in philosophy sections in either libraries or bookshops, whereas in the English-speaking world, and, I am sure, beyond, his writings have found ‘proper’ locations in cultural theory, philosophy, art theory. Bataille is not alone in this, it applies just as much to peers of his such as Blanchot, or to some extent, Sartre, but for all the importance of *literary* theory, keeping Bataille in literature keeps him away from theory, in France at least.

Halsberghe’s book raises the question of the sacred within writing, as a practice of writing, and doubts its existence outside of that terrain. Bataille’s notion of the sacred always posited two realms, one of control, measure, rationality, policing, and another. This other, which took various forms through his oeuvre, is the sacred. For some bizarre reason, Halsberghe is keen to state, over and over, that Bataille did mostly realise that the sacred, consisting of violence, eroticism, death, drunkenness and so on, could only happen in literature. It is as if Bataille needed saving from his key theories which revolve around excess, waste, transgression. Furthermore, in Halsberghe’s view, Bataille needs saving from the awareness that his ‘sacred’ asks precisely the question about whether it can exist, where it can, and how literature and/or writing relates to this. Halsberghe combines an oddly rigid acceptance of Bataille’s own word on what he means with a complete refusal of his philosophical project. This leads to innumerable misreadings of central ideas. Nonetheless, the possibility of the Bataillean sacred being purely and primarily literary is more than viable: after all, Derrida wrote a very detailed account of Bataillean sovereignty (Bataille’s notion of the highest subjectivity, steeped in failure, waste, impossibility, and inherently always already deconstructive) in and as writing in 1967. Halsberghe struggles to reach the foothills of that essay, and mentions it only once. The

crowning oddity of Halsberghe’s approach is the idea that literature should somehow be apart from other social forms - an idea shared by few critics, and certainly not by Bataille. The book is overlong and chapters are often irrelevant, even taken on its own terms, and fundamentally, we would have to wonder why this book exists.

Rodopi’s other contribution to recent reception of Bataille is superior, even if equally dull and literary-fixed. Santi is interested in pursuing Bataille’s perversely double attitude to poetry, i.e., on the one hand, poetry must be destroyed, while on the other, it is often cited as one of the possible forms excess and sacrifice could take. For Santi, Bataille is endlessly lured to poetry, particularly as potential for sacrifice. But poetry never quite maps on to sacrifice: “la poésie et l’impossible, en s’exposant l’un à l’autre, s’expriment à travers leur irréductibilité rendue manifeste” (46) [“Encountering each other, poetry and the impossible express themselves through their mutual irreducibility made visible”]. At times, it seems as if poetry is a form of sacrifice itself, a practice of sacrifice, and here, I think, Santi, over-reaches, as Bataille continually points to writing as the mark of failure of sacrifice, loss, excess, etc. It occurs where sacrifice would be if it ‘worked’, but it cannot. Like Halsberghe, Santi wants to make Bataille a writer whose work is all about literature, and, more specifically, all about poetry. This leads him to conflate actual poetry with the poetic (when it suits), and to make claims about Bataille, on, for example sovereignty, only to conclude by sleight of hand that this has proven something about the status of poetry for Bataille. Santi is also perpetually amazed that readers such as Derrida, Blanchot or Jean-Luc Nancy did not pay much attention to poetry in Bataille. The simple answers are sometimes the right ones: poetry is not as important for Bataille as Santi tells us, and the longer the book the less convincing the argument, and, in addition, what Bataille has to tell us about poetry is not particularly interesting or original. All that said, once Santi actually reads poetry as poetry, rather than for content alone (see 252-75 in particular), a worthwhile contribution to the study of Bataille does take place.

L’Histoire-Bataille adopts an unusual stance in trying to take Bataille seriously as a historian. Even though many commentators on Bataille are favourable to his theories, they balk at imagining science, history, archaeology as areas where Bataille could actually contribute other than negatively (although readers are usually happy to accept his anthropology and versions of religious history). This view is based on an ultra-literal non-interpretation of a few direct criticisms he made of science, and on the more tenable view that he would be against the notion of cumulative knowledge, either horizontally (breadth or weight of knowledge) or vertically (progress), but such a position neglects the highly viable elements of his thought if one were to approach human sciences and sciences alike from the perspective of questioning the discipline itself as one addressed issues within it. Historians, for their part, like scientists (with the exception of Bruce Bagemihl) and archaeologists, have no need for Bataille, and basically no interest in his work.² This collection aims to redress the problem of the non-reading of Bataille’s historiography. It is slightly disappointing to note, given this purpose, that the unifying theme of the essays is ‘yes, he can be thought of as doing work similar to a historian’, without addressing how this works in terms of examples (there is one exception, to which I will return).

This unifying thread, then, is that Bataille can be thought of as a critical historiographer, “un maître d’une sorte de métahistoire” (25) [“master of a certain metahistorical approach”].³ He can be thought of as following Michelet and also working in a way similar to the *Annales* historians, stretching the borders of what counts or works as history (in his case, pushing these inward to infiltrate the discipline of history). The best essays are those of Jean-Claude Monod, with a philosophically sympathetic account of Bataille on the Lascaux cave paintings, and above all, Pierre Savy’s assessment of how Bataille contributes to, and is situated within, the revisited and revised history of Gilles de Rais. This essay works as history, as historiography and, most important in this context, works in a way that is Bataillean, crossing between the possibility of facts about extreme phenomena and the issue of how to think it and write it. The collection ends with a moderately interesting, scribbly *inédit* about the possibility of a ‘universal history’. As usual with French scholarship on Bataille, there is little sense of the theoretical approaches he would inspire in the 1960s generation of thinkers, nor is there any sense

that many in the English-speaking world might already be reading Bataille in just such a way, and productively so. In this, French reception of Bataille is a microcosm of a wider problem: just as English-speakers caught up with theory and its ‘precursors’ according to the pace of translation and fashionability in the 1980s and 1990s, French theory has not realised it too depends on inward translation, which has been slow in coming. Whilst France chuckled paternalistically at the reception of diverse writers as part of ‘Theory’ outside France, theory had long since developed, expanded on and applied the ideas of that particular generation of thinkers. A blissfully unaware French world of philosophy is only now beginning to notice the inversion.

This is not restricted to France, of course, but the reading of Bataille outside France tends to be theory-driven, even though this still means a highly diverse set of readings and uses. Stuart Kendall joins a short list of those who are not interested in this (i.e., Michael Richardson), perhaps in the spirit of a return to what Bataille ‘really meant’ free of the influence of all that theory. The premise of this book is that it is an intellectual biography, part of a series called ‘Critical Lives’, so it should not surprise the reader that Kendall is full of praise for Surya. For all Surya’s faults and essential bad faith, he does at least acknowledge where the ‘life’ information comes from (generally from Bataille’s *Œuvres complètes*), but Kendall has turned Surya’s ambitious rethinking of how life and work fit together into a factual account, which of course makes the project of reading Bataille’s writing through his ‘life’ that much easier.

What Kendall has to do, then, as well as talking about life and work, is to assert the validity and importance of the connection. He is particularly fixated on Bataille’s father going blind, pissing uncontrollably, and possibly abusing Bataille when he was a child. This is based on what can only tenuously be thought of as fragments of autobiography. This applies in particular to the coda to *Histoire de l’œil*, which as Kendall revealingly notes is about “Lord Auch’s father” (59). This moment of insight has not sufficiently inflected the rest of his book, where the syphilitic, pissing, mad father stumbles in continually, like a favourite quirky sitcom character, offering platitudes about Bataille. This ‘father figure’ is, as Kendall knows (on one occasion in the book), the father of the persona Lord Auch, who ‘wrote’ Bataille’s *Histoire de l’œil*. Furthermore, it is not possible to take the figure seriously, as it can only be thought of as a ragbag of psychoanalytical clichés: nowhere is Bataille’s (unconscious?) resistance to psychoanalysis more visible. For Kendall, though, it acts as some sort of key. Around this ‘key’, we have the usual summary of Bataille’s friends, groups he was involved in, arguments with surrealism, influences and so on. Whilst there is nothing of note in how the book does this, it does at least credit and deal well with Laure (Colette Peignot), a major influence on Bataille’s writing and on how he conducted his life.

Kendall falls into a trap that will be familiar to readers of Bataille criticism: the tiresome assertion of the centrality of ‘unfinishedness’. It is true that he stopped and started many projects, restructured them, wrote under different names, and sometimes used a fragmentary style. But it is commonly overstated, as if you had to be Bataille to write notes, drafts or have ideas that did not make it into book form. Many of the ‘unfinished’ works (like the second and third volumes of *La Part maudite*) are finished in all but the sense of being printed in Bataille’s lifetime. Kendall also makes some surprising claims in forming his Bataille, such as what he sees as the lack of attention given to the influence of Mauss on Bataille (even though such attention predates the majority of translations into English, e.g. Michèle Richman in 1982), and also that he had a ‘limited’ amount of information to go on for his ideas on pre-Colombian ‘America’ (67-8).⁴ Sahagún may be a problematic source for a certain literalist postcolonialism but his 12 volume *General History of the Things of New Spain* is better documentation, by itself, than is available on most cultures that no longer exist, so the fact Bataille read this and only a few other books is not quite what it is made to seem. Like the French criticism of Bataille referred to above, Kendall is both keen to take Bataille at his word and to not use Bataille’s thought as a means of doing something more interesting with the notion of a ‘critical life’ than fixing down ‘the man’ so we can better fix ‘the work’.

Thankfully, with his new book, Patrick French has provided an important contribution to the reading of Bataille. It looks to bring elements of sacrifice and

community to the fore, and in some detail. He is not immune to making his own Bataille, resorting to the dreaded 'all translations my own'. The translating is competent, but it would be more useful to the non-French speaker to have access to existing translations, flawed as they might be, and corrections to them. But French's Bataille is a more interesting and a more Bataillean one than in the other four books surveyed here. The 'after Bataille' of the title refers to the reception, take-up and development of his ideas in theory, clearly suggesting that these developments can be read back into Bataille's thought.

Driving French's book is the idea that Bataille's thought is above all else relational: connections precede, succeed and/or destroy identities, objects, subjects. This takes the form of 'affectivity' as something beyond and before the subject – where contagion undoes control. Bataille's task as he saw it was to mobilise this in a way that did not reduce it to power (as Fascism had done), that did not fix it. That this was not at all successful should not surprise us, because as Bataille goes on he comes to the idea that what is inherent to sacrifice is that it cannot be a means to an end, but it always is – so its fate is to fail. According to French, this is a significant move from a more or less essentialist conception of sacrifice held by the earlier Bataille, where sacrifice somehow was the ether subjects congealed in. From the war onwards, it is clear to Bataille, and very well brought out by French, that the subject first comes into being, and only then can sacrifice occur – something must be sacrificed. The problem is that there is nothing to sacrifice to, and at some moment of actual sacrifice, nothing left to be sacrificed – the subject is never present for sacrifice.

Whilst we can take the way in which sacrifice fails as the new 'essence' of sacrifice, it is also an actual failure. The conundrum is neatly summed up:

sacrifice is a trap, it gives or exposes life on the one hand and forces death with the other, but also, the *institution* of sacrifice (its ritual, its repetition) is such that it imposes the substance and duration of the 'sacred' and in doing so it creates death as work, sacrifice leads to its own degradation. (92)

From here we might expect yet another valorisation of writing as the place sacrifice really happens, but French avoids this trap, setting up a dynamic between possible actual sacrifices and those in writing, noting also that there is a twin failure of sacrifice as practice and as writing, and that this is how we should read his views on poetry (86-7), or indeed writing. The third of the four sections of the book deals at some length with Blanchot's connections to Bataille. This is good, but not as philosophically rewarding as the first two parts just outlined. The closing long section looks at the feminine as location of the sacred in Bataille, and problematises this neatly enough, but the section is very one-sided (one-eyed?) and is an outdated 'feminist' reading of Bataille's fiction, which has to be very selective. French even goes so far as to include Andrea Dworkin's 'reading' of Bataille which is woefully misrepresentative, and effectively an essay in the very misogyny she 'finds' in Bataille.⁵ Overall, though, French's book is not just way better than the other recent critical offerings, but a telling, subtle contribution to thought inspired by Bataille.⁶ Why has French criticism found this sort of approach so difficult recently? Is it that 'outsiders' are so readily canonised

but not read that they are treated with a mistaken respect? Like the return of the subject, of 'big' political ideas in French philosophy, it will pass, and a more authentic theoretical and theorised legacy of Bataille will slip quietly back into place, its face flushed, clutching (at) formless gifts.

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Notes

- 1 Paul Morley, *Piece by Piece: Writing about Joy Division, 1977-2007* (London: Plexus, 2007).
- 2 Bruce Bagemihl, *Biological Exuberance: Animal Homosexuality and Natural Diversity* (New York: St Martin's Press, 1999)
- 3 Yves-Marie Bercé, 'Bataille et l'histoire des mentalités', in *L'Histoire-Bataille*, 21-6.
- 4 Michèle Richman, *Reading Georges Bataille: Beyond the Gift* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982).
- 5 Andrea Dworkin, *Pornography: Men Possessing Women* (London: The Women's Press, 1981).
- 6 In dealing with those who are 'after Bataille', French is on firmer ground with Nancy than he is with Agamben (who receives a few fleeting but positive mentions), whose reading of the sacred and of sovereignty in Bataille, is to be polite, unsophisticated, however useful his misreading of Bataille is in developing his own theories.

White Drink

Kenneth Hayes, *Milk and Melancholy*. Toronto and Cambridge, MA: Prefix Press and The MIT Press, 2008.

By Gary Genosko

Concerns about white substances are central to cultural and political histories of food. At the turn of the twentieth century white bread was caught up in a hysterical hyper-hygienic discourse about its addictive qualities. It was not a delivery vehicle for vitamins and minerals, but a cause of social deviancy and moral decay. The fluffier the loaf, the weaker the nation. Pure hot air for a bleached and processed citizenry.

By the Second World War white bread had regained pride of place in a class system that identified wholegrain with labour and white loaves with the professional classes. The refinement of flour has a paradoxical legacy for it was at once a marker of technological progress, and sadly the abandonment of traditional, artisanal production; sometimes this was welcome in the case of smelly, gluey war bread from which suffering populations would be liberated by fast rising, speed kneaded, nicely aerated machinic loaves. Today, premium priced artisanal breads are all the rage.

One need only think of the bizarre racial culinary fantasies of the Futurists – 'Dinner of White Desire' consisting of white foods like eggs, coconuts, cold milk and mozzarella served to Ten Negroes – to grasp the toxic cultural politics of white foods. White flour, white power, as critical anthropologists in Australia have shown in explaining the magical attributes of white settler's flour in the explanations of Aboriginal mothers about the paternity of light-skinned children in the context of colonization, assimilation and white society's aversion to half-castes.

Of course, by the 1960s the counterculture had embraced brown bread with a passion and it became a potent symbol for everything that stood against whiteness's segregationist politics, suburban lifestyles, sovereign speech acts, and spiritual vacuity: up against the wall Wonder bread! In the 1970s the saccharine disease scare – replicated in today's fear of obesity – targeted refined carbohydrate foods as the culprit in many diseases caused by fibreless diets and highly concentrated sweetness.

We have barely broached the question of refined sugar: the white death that muscled out and marginalized other traditional non-white sugars. Sucrose becomes the false solution to hunger and together with salt it joins forces to scramble the

grammar of eating, as Sidney Mintz taught us in his monumental *Sweetness and Power*. It is not necessary to belabor the point that salt politics is linked historically with post-colonial struggle in Ghandi's campaigns and marches in support of popular salt collection against Britain's imperialist monopolization of the substance.

White food politics engages the bleaching of flours and salt, pasteurization, organic versus rBGH milk, criminalization of unpasteurized milk producers (see Leeder 2010), aluminum in baking powder – promoted by the Canadian government as a calcium source in the far north in bread-heavy diets, etc. The list of grievances is long. Yet at the top of the list, as the book under review shows us, is milk. Milk matters.

Kenneth Hayes in *Milk and Melancholy* uncovers the role of milk in the history of photography through the white drink's most explosive and dynamic forms: splashing, spilling and dripping. Citing foundational works like A.M Worthington's milk splash studies, Harold Edgerton's continuing interest in milk's turpitude, and the grandeur of frozen forms (coronets, breaking glass), delineating the splash as gestural form right up to Jackson Pollack, Hayes then jumps to pop art. In the early 1960s painted milk bottles appear in Joe Goode's work outside the frame, and a few years later Ed Ruscha explored in his artist's books the conceptual possibilities of glasses of milk, and soon played with the plaster/milk similarity in his bird paintings. The tipped glass of sham milk that does not spill is then finally explored in falling and breaking glasses depicting the flight of the white liquid. Bruce Nauman destroys Ruscha's book while retaining milk's symbolic value as a simple middle-american pleasure in his own photographs. However, it is only in German pop that the spillage refreezes as in Sigmar Polke's seminal 1970 piece *Overtuned Jug*. For Hayes this is an exquisite moment in which "echoing Ruscha's milk/plaster problem and Nauman's hot/cold coffee spills, the fact that the liquid is gin can only be ascertained outside of the work. Despite its crude execution and broad departure from Edgerton's tidy graphics, the scene remains recognizable as a bizarre version of the milk drop" (85). William Wegman then gets into the act with photographs and videos of overfilled glasses of milk, and dogs lapping puddles of milk on the floor;

Jack Goldstein's film *A Glass of Milk* (1972) furthers this trajectory but uses physical pounding on the table to disturb the glass; lighter and more electric are John Baldessari's photographs of a finger dipped into a glass of unspilled milk.

For Hayes photography's attempt to capture the elusive milk splash constitutes a kind of primal scene of the optical unconscious. But it is a scene in which milk and bullets mix easily in wartime science (ballistics) whose desire is "to know the mysterious workings of life" (119). The transfer point for Hayes is the shift from an investigation of the 'invisible' properties of the milk splash to the splash's social context beyond the lab and studio.

Cartons of milk splattered by cars (Braco Dimitrijevic); transference substances (semen-milk in Gilbert and George; as well as in General Idea and Andres Serrano) open the final section of the book. However, we quickly find a Canadian focal point for the cultural politics of milk in General Idea's stunning work *Nazi Milk* (1979). Evoking milk's fascism of purity and perfection, the milk moustache of young blond Billy simultaneously marks male vigor and youth as authoritarian and perfused with homosexual desire, inverting the pastoral eroticism of the milkmaid, and sully the purity and goodness of the white drink. And the Hitlerian milk moustache ensures that the universalizing and leveling of difference in what would emerge as the Got Milk? campaign cannot but function as the imposition of perfection and whiteness. Dairy ideology, as scholars of milk like E. Melanie DuPuis (2002) have pointed out, emerges through the model of white athleticism and beauty signifying the racial superiority of milk drinkers. This discourse from the 1920s is critically regained by General Idea and becomes re-applicable to later mass milk messaging.

Commercial images of milk are deftly exploited by Richard Prince in his studies of commodity fetishism (the Trix rabbit); whereas Barbara Kruger editorializes over a stock photograph of a glass of spilled milk with a caption 'You delight in the loss of others' which unfurls along the spill's vector. Notably, both General Idea and Kruger use the milk-infant formula link to explore the giving hand that holds the baby's bottle and how this interrupts desire – General Idea's *Rude Awakening*

(1982) shows a sleepy male caregiver bottle feeding an infant at 3:20am - a desexualized scene complicated by the man's exposed genitals. For Kruger, the milk dripping from the rubber nipple of an infant's formula bottle is captioned 'You are getting what you paid for' which infantilizes the viewer.

Hayes interpretive strengths are perhaps most strongly on display in his treatment of Jeff Wall's photograph *Milk* (1984). Here the dairy ideology of state sponsored, non-specific promotional culture (no specific brands are advertised) linked with the formal nuances of splashes and generic health messages are delicately undone in a photo-work in which the white drink is hidden in a brown paper bag by a somewhat disheveled consumer ('indigent') whose balance, signified by the splash, is in question. This spasm that releases the milk and the flash that freezes it in mid-air capture the unity of the white drink's multiple roles: "the semantic centrality of the milk is reinforced by the picture's formal values" (184). Yet this analysis

stops short of taking us into the spasm - 'spazzmo' - of spillage into areas explored by Istvan Kantor, for instance, in his performance machine sex works in which writhing and violently gyrating performers spew white liquids from their mouths onto tangles of wires and pneumatic devices.

A further brown paper bag of milk appears in Hayes' poignant end story, told by David Antin, in which an accountant mounts the campanile overlooking the central square of a mid-western university; he brandishes a brown paper bag and is eventually shot by police. The bag recovered from a snowbank contained the shattered remnants of a glass of milk. This re-mythologization of the white drink, linked to alcohol or perhaps even to a more dangerous hidden thing, breaks the hold that Roland Barthes put on the wine-milk distinction. Hayes has shown us that milk colludes with the sanguine and plays with fire.

Milk and Melancholy is a valuable and unique addition to the growing literature on the cultural

politics of food. It augments the few existing studies of dairy culture by bringing art's role, especially photography, into the critical discourse that injects imperfection into the world of the white drink. Hayes also draws attention to two important Canadian photographic works from the early 1980s in showing how productive it is to think about rather than cry over spilt milk.

Gary Genosko is editor of the SRB.

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The Nonsense Books of Alain Badiou

Philosopher
(hommage à Edward Lear et Lewis Carroll)

A structuralist by the name of Badiou
Whose inconsistencies are far from few
Expounding tendentious theory, de-mobilized and made us weary
And landed us straight in the stew

Terray, Althusser and Badiou
A trio of giants 'tis true
They replaced contradictions by cheap bourgeois fictions
Whilst Lacan gives them their cue

Alain Badiou qui-es-tu?
You change so often your hue
For whatever your phase, the bourgeois pays and it pays
Financially you muddle through

A rising young star named Badiou
Believed in whatever was NEW
He coveted Hegel, 'till he fell upon Schlegel
And to Duclos will soon give his due

An alchemist named Badiou
Weaves theories together for you
He bred Lévi-Strauss to the roar of a mouse
And Marx with Kant did imbue

A sage from Toulouse called Badiou
Thought philosophy he did renew
He built a new faction called the cult of non-action
For the bourgeoisie's philosophical zoo

A precious young man called Badiou
Who teaches scholastics to you
Met a worker one day, who chased him away
Crying "Action, not theory - FUCK YOU!"

No author, undated. From the scrapbook assembled by
Jean-Michel Djian, *Vincennes: une aventure de la pensée critique*, Paris:
Flammarion, 2009, p. 53.

