

MORE THAN A FEELING: AFFECT, NARRATIVE, NEOLIBERALISM

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## ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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This project examines a range of affective states as they are constructed in works of American literature and visual media. Focusing on affects that are implicated in processes of change – fear, grief, perseverance, curiosity, and love – it argues for the relevance of these transitional feelings to a cultural critique of neoliberalism. Proponents of neoliberalism emphasize values of autonomy, freedom, and progress, which paradoxically have also provided the traditional basis for humanist projects of resistance. When works of literature address change, the emotions and other bodily responses that emerge are often shaded with suffering and hesitation, and do not translate directly into recognizable forms of agency. Yet these seemingly passive modes of being are anything but static; security and predictability dissolve in these difficult states of transition. This entails pain, but also potential – sadness, but also possibility.

Literary works such as Don DeLillo's *The Body Artist* and Tony Kushner's *Angels in America* produce states of suffering that contradict the neoliberal assumption that appeals to change must call upon active expressions of individual agency. These works produce other corporeal sensations – grief and perseverance – that suggest modes

of collective feeling at once strongly tied to transformative experiences and withdrawn from conventional forms of active production. Works of visual media from sources as diverse as television, contemporary cinema, and medical imaging produce other affects, among them fear and curiosity, which play pivotal roles in the neoliberal naturalization of progress. Yet some cultural constructions of curiosity, for example, also suggest that the desire for knowledge might produce new forms of social connection even within the very practices of neoliberal control.

As cultural critics contend with these states of feeling, the affects produced by critique itself are at stake. This project concludes with an exploration of contemporary experiments in critical form that envision critique as a practice of love, forging unexpected links and untimely encounters with the world of events. The dissertation thus pursues a loose narrative that traces one possible affective trajectory from crisis to continuity, from breaking habitual structures of experience to forming new modes of social engagement and thought.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*“Each of us is several.”*

*-Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari*

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Many people populate this work, as they have populated me throughout the process of writing. Fellow students at Rutgers and at the CUNY Graduate Center provided valuable advice, inspiring conversations, and empathy throughout the writing process. Each member of my committee, Patricia Clough, Marianne DeKoven, and John McClure, has offered unique feedback at various stages of the writing process as well as vital encouragement and support. Richard Dienst has been a truly exemplary director. In his fierce support, rigorous critique, and tireless guidance, he has been a phenomenal editor, untiring advocate, and friend. In very concrete terms, I could not have completed this work if it were not for the support of the Graduate School at Rutgers – New Brunswick, the English Department at Rutgers, and the Mellon Foundation. A different version of the “Grief” chapter appeared in *Polygraph* 18 (2006) and benefited from the thoughtful feedback and editing of Rodger Frey and Alex Ruch.

Sometime in the middle of tangling with this project, I realized that I was, in part, channeling the weird and wonderful collision of my parents’ affective orientations toward the world: my father’s astonishing capacity to hold despair and optimism in equal proportions in his emotional, therapeutic, and creative work and my mother’s critical

brilliance, which expresses itself in a restless refusal to accept easy answers. Writing in their shadow has been terrifying and exhilarating, and my attempt to give their perspectives voice, I'm afraid, is woefully inadequate. My sister, Sophie, has offered the indefinable camaraderie in the darkest times of this project that only a sibling can express. Her sense of humor and her piercing intellect continue to be equally crucial in keeping me sane and intellectually honest.

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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

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<b>ABSTRACT</b>	<b>ii</b>
<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>	<b>iv</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>FEAR</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>GRIEF</b>	<b>55</b>
<b>PERSEVERANCE</b>	<b>92</b>
<b>CURIOSITY</b>	<b>124</b>
<b>LOVE</b>	<b>160</b>
<b>WORKS CITED</b>	<b>200</b>
<b>CURRICULUM VITAE</b>	<b>206</b>

## INTRODUCTION

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What is the relationship between our time and our manner of thinking? It seems erroneous at the very least to say that a crisis in the fundamental assumptions of critical thought appeared as a direct result of the events of September 11, 2001, as if the postmodern cultural dominant did, as some critics at the time suggested, end then and there, as if a mode of thought so entrenched could melt like steel from the sudden impact of the blunt reality of global politics. Yet the practice of critique has undergone a powerful self-reckoning in the past several years, which all signs suggest was on its way even before the intervention of world events. Already in the 1990s, a growing focus on issues of trauma, ethics, and biopolitics signaled a new interest in expanding the possibilities latent in less commonly considered works of European poststructuralism – most prominently, the late texts of Michel Foucault – to questions of emotions, practices of social engagement, and bodily experience. The terrain that was once dominated by the expressions and dilemmas of identity politics – questions of agency, identity, and subjectivity – had already begun to come into contact with modes of criticism that tend to take as their point of departure suspicion toward those very constructions. The critical current that has grown from these collisions over the past several years has been defined



broadly and variously as a turn to ethics, a turn to the question of “life,” and a turn to affect.<sup>1</sup>

While the multifarious explosion of interest in these questions can be understood to appear out of evolutionary currents in criticism itself, there is no question that the increasing mediated presence of violence and the political catastrophes of the past seven years have contributed to a renewed commitment to thinking through the position of bodily forces within the social and political spheres. If our time is, as Wendy Brown suggests, a “dark” one, it has generated a set of critical concerns driven toward describing the structures of experience most vulnerable to that darkness – those that occur on corporeal registers.<sup>2</sup> There has thus been a particularly strong turn to the question of affect in the wake of the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the mishandling of Hurricane Katrina just to name a few examples of startling threats to corporeal stability that have had direct ties to the United States over the past decade. Affect, in this sense, can be understood to indicate not only emotion but, as Patricia Clough suggests, “bodily capacities to affect and affected” (*The Affective Turn 2*). Ethical dilemmas around acts of violence, problems of agency in the context of physical deprivation, and the social structures that enable or disable forms of activity and life are all, in this sense, affective questions. These questions are certainly not new, but recent innovations in ways of theorizing the complex connections between what were once

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<sup>1</sup> The various conference panel topics and anthologies that have given rise to the establishment of these “turns” are too numerous to account for here, but noteworthy interventions have included Giorgio Agamben, “Absolute Immanence,” *Potentialities*, trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000), Todd F. Davis and Kenneth Womack, *Mapping the Ethical Turn* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2001), and Patricia Clough, *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

<sup>2</sup> Brown argues that such “dark times” are precisely the most important moments for innovative critical theory to come forth. See “Untimeliness and Punctuality: Critical Theory in Dark Times” in *Edgework: Critical Essays on Knowledge and Politics*.

considered to be subjective emotional states and information technologies, media, and political structures on the other have inflected recent attempts to address these dilemmas. The contemporary interest in questions of affect thus tends to move toward an understanding of bodily experience that is not limited to the individual, the subjective, or even to the organic.

Strikingly, while the contemporary critical current has taken up questions of affect at least partially in response to pressing questions of the present, much of this interest has been directed at forging new genealogies of the history of criticism in the service of finding new approaches to the contemporary. One of the most powerful of these genealogies has been the trajectory of thinkers that take the work of Baruch Spinoza as their focal point of departure.<sup>3</sup> The cluster of philosophers who tend to populate this new story of the history of philosophy include Friedrich Nietzsche, Henri Bergson, Gilles Deleuze, and recent commentators such as Elizabeth Grosz, Brian Massumi, and Antonio Negri. These thinkers are joined by a contemporary cast of more cautiously allied and ambivalent inheritors such as Giorgio Agamben and Alain Badiou. Taken together, this loosely-cobbled group tend to share several characteristics: an interest in developing a concept of “life” that often flirts with the biological; the principle that ethics and politics are deeply intertwined; a belief in affect and sensation as possessing unique value for thought; and a desire to cultivate an affirmative critical posture toward the world.

This assemblage of affirmative commitments – to a concept of “life”, to ethics, to the affects, and to the world – often has the unfortunate consequence of appearing naively

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<sup>3</sup> This is, of course, only one of the many different theoretical legacies that affective criticism claims today. Fascinating work on the affects continues to emerge from feminist scholarship, psychoanalytic approaches, and Foucauldian influence in particular. My focus on this cluster of theorists stems from my inquiry into the contemporary interest in recreating an entire lineage of philosophy in the name of forging new structures in the present. In that sense, this way of developing an affective criticism is unique.

optimistic in the face of the most horrifying and demanding political concerns. Yet the radical insistence of many of these thinkers upon commitment and action in a seemingly disconnected and fragmentary cultural space offers a point of departure for critique in the darkest of circumstances. In their focus upon the affects, these philosophers offer a basis from which to begin thinking through the possibility for criticism to confront the prospects of political change in inventive and untimely ways.<sup>4</sup> Much of this potential resides in the manner in which this theoretical inheritance emphasizes creativity on one hand and diminishes concepts of subjective agency on the other. As Elizabeth Grosz argues, this strange demand can reorient political positions that appear to be reliant upon the vocabulary of the subject. Speaking of the tendency for political discourse to focus on issues of identity, she explains, “we have tended, in feminist and other political and social discourses, to understand this more intimate domain as the realm of agency” (*Time Travels* 6). She argues, however, that a turn to the theoretical terrain of Nietzsche and Deleuze suggests that “subjectivity, sexuality, intimate social relations are in part structured not only by institutions and social networks but also by impersonal or pre-personal, subhuman, or inhuman forces” (6). Questions of creativity, generation, and change thus become at least partially detached from questions of agency and the subject and instead become imbued with registers of biology, technology, media, and coincidental, singular, temporary, and fragmentary modes of communal existence.

The contemporary inheritors of this philosophical trajectory tend to agree that this displacement is necessary not only because, as Nietzsche suggests, when we assume that

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<sup>4</sup> Both Wendy Brown in *Edgework* and Elizabeth Grosz in *The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely* argue for the value of the untimely in critical thought. While Brown departs from a messianic model and Grosz from a Darwinian orientation, two theoretical trajectories that at first seem at odds, both arrive at the necessity for creativity to emerge out of an untimely disruption to the continuity of the past and the present.

activity belongs to a subject we diminish the force of the deed itself, but because contemporary forms of power in the United States tend to function by seizing upon the rhetoric of agency, freedom, and self-same subjectivity while violently imposing impediments to generative action. While these forms of power have various names – Negri, drawing from Foucault, proceeds from a concept of “biopower” while Deleuze discusses the present in terms of a turn to “control societies” – recent literature that departs from a historical examination of the systematic application of neoliberal economic concepts to the global market indicates that the contemporary phenomenon of neoliberalism shares many characteristics with these theoretical concepts of power. For instance, David Harvey suggests that policies driven at the widening of the income gap between rich and poor find popular support because of the invocation of the concept of freedom, and that consequently we can understand neoliberalism as becoming “hegemonic as a mode of discourse” (3). This discursive dominance of neoliberal appeals to freedom echoes analyses of the biopolitical need to “produce producers” (Hardt and Negri 32) and the tendency for control societies to function through the opening of enclosures, disciplines, and confinements. The collisions between neoliberalism and other concepts of power defined by these thinkers, therefore, indicate that we are currently in need of a vocabulary through which to imagine forms of activity that do not rely upon traditional concepts of agency, freedom, and progress. A turn to the affects helps in this process of invention, without distancing action from the corporeal circumstances of the forces that produce it.

Much work remains in bringing a critical sensibility informed by this genealogy to bear on specific events and cultural expressions. This thread of critical inquiry offers a

basis for critique to imagine new ways of understanding activity and change by engaging the affective positions of bodies in the process of transformation, thinking of affective states broadly construed as the physical expressions of life in common, and envisioning the emergence of new forms of the social through the relation of those affective postures. It offers an untimely orientation to a world in crisis – ripe for change but also violently fortified against it. Yet too often work informed by these thinkers, intoxicated by the hope of an affirmative orientation toward the world, skips over an important interval between the crisis that generates potential and the construction of active political possibility.<sup>5</sup> What this interval often contains is precisely the most difficult affective material to encounter in criticism – states of pain, loss, confusion, and vulnerability. If affective critique indicates a “movement... from psychoanalytically informed criticism of subject identity, representation, and trauma” (Clough 2), work remains in understanding how the centrality of these states of corporeal vulnerability can be maintained within the context of this affirmative legacy of thinkers.

This dissertation takes up the project of probing the tensions, disappointments, and possibilities that emerge from putting this affirmative genealogy of critique in contact with affective states of crisis, distress, and vulnerability. These states are often understood to occur at an interval between one form of life and another. They are thus often in the ambivalent position of being painful, paralyzing, and even perilous while being essential to the possibility of change for the better; they often call into question

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<sup>5</sup> This critique, often waged against Hardt and Negri’s *Empire* after its publication, was made perhaps most forcefully by Timothy Brennan in his series of articles in *Critical Inquiry*. Brennan argues that Hardt and Negri assume that the revolutionary multitude already exist, and thus diminish the necessary role of state-based politics in pursuing radical change. While I will make a similar argument regarding the lack of transformational interval in Negri’s work broadly construed, I see potential within the theoretical matrix that Hardt and Negri engage to both attend to the duration between crisis and change and to imagine new forms of political engagement.

common assumptions about the ethical and political significance of various affective states. For that reason, while most of the various affects I examine largely appear to fall neatly into categories of good and bad (we tend to think of fear and grief as bad, curiosity and love as good, and perseverance as somewhere in between), there turns out to be a great amount of potential in some of the states of relative deprivation just as there is danger in the more joyful affects. A close look at Don DeLillo's *The Body Artist* exposes the potential for active transformation and creativity inherent in grief, while the playful curiosity in *Being John Malkovich* turns out to be deeply fraught with problems of authority and control. While the chapters are organized around single affective states (each chapter is titled simply after the affect it takes as its object of inquiry) other emotions, physical postures, and ontological dilemmas emerge with them. Fear, for instance, turns out to occur in tandem with neoliberal values of freedom, while perseverance invokes both an active form of decision and a seemingly passive state of corporeal habit. My aim in these studies is to maintain the tensions, pluralities, and multivalence of these affects even as I develop concepts around specific affective states.

In committing to the messiness of the affects, I forge these concepts through encounters with contemporary cultural examples drawn from television, fiction, drama, film, poetry, and critique itself. These cultural works often complicate the assumptions of criticism considerably through the complexities of their affective content and the particularities of their generic construction. Rather than reading various affects as represented by these works of literature, visual media, and performance, I approach these cultural expressions as examples that both emerge out of and generate new theoretical concepts. In this sense, I draw a great deal of inspiration from Massumi's "exemplary

method,” which he suggests attaches itself to the humanities by drawing concepts out of the disciplines, but rather than applying those concepts “confronting them with the example or detail” (18-19). He argues that within this confrontation between the concept and the example, “the activity of the example will transmit to the concept, more or less violently. The concept will start to deviate under the force. Let it” (19). In the case of the concepts I draw from affirmative critical theory and the cultural examples I draw from contemporary American media, there is often a great deal of violence in the encounter, but the generative force of these confrontations ultimately suggests an active role for literary and cultural studies in confronting the concerns of political, ethical, and social theory.

My interest in cultural examples also surfaces from my interest in questions of form. If affects are produced in a variety of ways ranging from the biological to the technological, they are deeply connected with cultural media. Media, however, produce affects differently in relation to the formal properties from which they depart. While affects are in no way determined by generic form, the cultural work of the affect can be significantly altered depending upon the formal conventions through which it emerges. I suggest, for instance, that in *The Body Artist*, grief draws both its pain and its promise from the disruption of narrative forms of experience. DeLillo’s temporal experimentation with the form of prose fiction generates new ways of thinking about the potential inherent in loss. Yet when the disruption of narrative occurs on television, a medium whose dominance is strengthened by periodic crises, a different affective quality tends to emerge – fear – a state of being which has markedly different political implications. In efforts to seize upon the potential generated by the formal properties of these affective inventions,

each chapter of this dissertation focuses upon a single media form and a single affective state. These pairings reflect how the particularity of cultural genres can produce specific affective states in uniquely illuminating ways. These examples are also limited in geographical location and historical period – all of the cultural works were first published, performed, released, or broadcast after 1990 in the United States. The concepts I draw from them are thus to be understood as peculiar excursions into the unique affective topography of the contemporary American cultural landscape.

I begin with a discussion of fear. My inquiry departs from a strange paradox in recent media events. While in the period between 2001 and the present there appears to be a glut of mediated catastrophes, none seem to take on the qualities of disasters that substantively threaten the ways that dominant forms of media function. While Maurice Blanchot suggests that the disaster destroys stable systems of signification and subjectivity, contemporary catastrophic events in fact appear to strengthen many of these structures. This problem leads to two questions: first, how do mediated catastrophes reinforce systems of control and second, if these catastrophes do not effect change, what other ways of thinking about media might lead in a more promising direction? In pursuing these questions, I argue that a particular type of fear is produced by the construction of disasters on television, a fear that establishes television itself as the final authority in the midst of catastrophe. Through a reading of the televised events of September 11, 2001 and their aftermath, I link this form of fear to Walter Benjamin's suggestion in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" that the aestheticization of politics tends to lead towards militarism. In this sense, the post-



September 11<sup>th</sup> political climate can be understood to emerge partially out of this problem, since mediated catastrophes are merely aesthetic representations of disasters. Just as Benjamin replaces the aestheticization of politics with the politicization of aesthetics, I suggest that the representation of disasters should be answered with the disastrous wrecking of representations – a practice that persists in challenging media forms, such as television, which thrive upon the management of chaos. Drawing from the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, I suggest that a turn to other cultural works that tend to undo the expectations of their own forms might offer a more fertile ground from which to conceptualize forces of change.

Fear stems from the appearance of disaster within a cultural medium that gains power through the construction of catastrophes. But when mediated forms of authority are interrupted, the loss of a sense of stability and a horizon of expectations that occurs brings grief, not fear. In this sense, grief is one of many affects that populate the interval between the disruption of norms and the resumption of new structures of experience. It is thus paradoxically more terrifying than fear and more potentially generative. Prose fiction, which epitomizes the power of narrative to forge continuity, is particularly altered on the level of form by the construction of grief. In order to explore this formal quality of grief, my second chapter offers a reading of Don DeLillo's novella *The Body Artist*, where grief becomes more than an event or a theme of the narrative. Rather, the work can be read as an experiment that tests how the narrative prose of a grief-state might unfold. Disjointed, tangential, fragmented, and preoccupied with time and bodily sensation over plot or argument, DeLillo's work challenges the expectations of traditional narrative. In particular, the novella shows that grief interrupts the trajectory by which narrative moves

into the future by constructing moments of fragmentation and stasis that threaten to break the causal links that typically push a narrative forward. These hesitations, however, do not prevent life from moving forward entirely. Instead, they disrupt the textual process by which the future appears to happen automatically, thus highlighting the chance encounters, unconscious choices, and willful decisions that bring about new forms of life, loosened from the habits of the past.

In this terrifyingly unstable state of grief, a commitment to action cannot be predicated upon the obligations of the past or the expectation of a certain future. In my third chapter, I argue that the eventual actions that emerge out of grief can thus only be accomplished by the cultivation of an affective state of perseverance in the absence of any stable structures of meaning or hope. Tony Kushner's play, *Angels in America*, repeatedly presents the body of Prior, an AIDS patient, to emphasize a painful excess of sickness and mortality while continually expanding this condition synecdochically to the social fact of the epidemic and even to the ecological health of the planet. The play thus grounds its ethical and political claims in the blunt fact of presenting a body, which is an essential characteristic of drama itself, but suggests that the affective quality of that body is not entirely contained within it. In the midst of his relentless exposure, Prior is forced by an angel to make a decision on behalf of humanity between a call for stable forms of authority and a laissez-faire ethic of irresponsibility, echoing a commonly construed false choice between a reactionary institution of social limits and the participation in neoliberal appeals for the unrestrained freedom to exploit in the name of profit. I suggest that Prior's eventual decision, a call for "more life," which elides both the backward-looking fear of the unknown and facile embraces of progress, emerges out of the demands of physically

embodied perseverance. The ethical potential invoked by perseverance cannot claim the promise of a better future or freedom from the certainty of death. Yet by seizing upon the continued commitment to action invoked by the repetitive presentation of Prior's body, perseverance does offer a model of engagement that moves beyond both the fearful cautions of authoritarianism and the dazzling promises of commodity capitalism.

In persevering, and thus becoming actively present to others, bodies are often opened to the curiosity of strangers as well as to the general constraints of the social. This openness is most extreme when the part of the body that is exposed is the part that thinks, believes, and acts: the brain. The opening of the brain to curiosity thus allows for unprecedented political encounters. In my fourth chapter, I look at two ways of presenting the brain as an image: in film and through brain imaging technology. On one hand, I look at two recent films, both associated with screenwriter Charlie Kaufman, *Being John Malkovich* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*, which oscillate between thematizing and formalizing the brain. On the other hand I look at the way contemporary practices of neural scanning offer image slices of the brain that are quickly progressing toward becoming moving images of organic brain function. In the two films, brains persistently exceed scientific attempts to contain them by being curiously permeable to others and thus open to extraordinary forms of connection. Characters move through each other's brains, forcing relations that seem impossible and thwarting systems of control as they chase each other, literally at times, through ever-changing neural pathways. Nevertheless, these curious encounters are possible only within a visual space that threatens to produce forms of mastery over the brain. Curiosity as a form of relation tends to push up against the possibility for the brain to become "a curiosity" – a reified,

commodified space of control and exploitation. Both the evolution of neural imaging and these films concern the complex issue of authority's access to the organic basis of thought and emotion. In both cases, exposing the brain as an image allows for unprecedented potential control over the body as well as new forms of curious relation with others.

Each of these cultural examples call critique itself into question, as critique seems to violently limit the messiness of the body and its affects. Thankfully, affect always exceeds critique's forces of description, and yet theorizing these affective states is essential to understanding the social relevance of the states they express. The fifth and final chapter of the dissertation therefore explores the possibility of opposing the violence of critique with a critical practice of love. Looking closely at the relationship between violence and love in the work of Spinoza, Nietzsche, and Deleuze and Guattari, I suggest that this affirmative trajectory of thought encounters difficulty maintaining the tension between violence and love when it confronts crisis in the form of cultural invention or political event. Inquiring into some contemporary examples of experimental critique, including the phenomenological experiments of Antonio Negri, the mathematical ontological method of Alain Badiou, and the poetic-theoretical hybrid of contemporary poet Ben Lerner, I address the difficult process of forming common ethical and political theories of affect from cultural works and suggest the need for an ongoing, irresolvable, tense engagement between the literary and the philosophical, culture and critique.

These investigations form a loose narrative that traces one possible affective trajectory from crisis to continuity, from the breaking of structures of experience to the formation of new modes of social engagement and thought. In this sense, this project is aimed toward a larger project of thinking through the complex affective vibrations of change. It now seems that there might be a popular cultural current moving towards a more affirmative way of thinking about politics. Yet change is slippery. If we do decide that it is within our power to seek a new and better world, to erupt out of the darkness of the past eight years with a new commitment to transformation, generation, and creativity, it is essential that change be understood in terms that might at once temper our optimism and incite our pursuit in the critical enterprise with renewed vigor. Questions of affect – of sensation, emotion, activity and commonality – do not resolve into easy categories from which philosophy or politics can directly proceed, nor do the ways in which media transmit, construct, and incorporate those affective states. All the better. If change occurs, it does so by obstinately challenging the apparatuses we bring to bear upon it. In response, critical inquiry might seek moments of affective contact with the world of events, in hopes to explode their possibilities and temper their threats.

## I. FEAR

*“There is clearly something relatively devastating happening this morning.”*  
*-Carol Lin, CNN*  
*9/11/01 7:50am*

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Maurice Blanchot begins *The Writing of the Disaster* with a paradox: “The disaster ruins everything, all the while leaving everything intact” (1). This begins an analysis of the disaster that explodes the possibilities of significance in the face of catastrophe. For Blanchot, the disaster must ruin everything, or it becomes swallowed up in what it does not ruin: the capacity to describe, as opposed to the disaster’s force of description. The disaster must undermine systems of codification – it must wreck them entirely – in order to leave intact what the disaster exposes: the instability of the present, the singularity of being, and the fundamental ontological presence of others. The disaster, for Blanchot, is thus chaos, the outside, the un-knowledge that guarantees the impossibility of total knowledge: “it disorients the absolute. It comes and goes, errant disarray” (4). Blanchot’s disaster is an extreme expression of a kind of force understood to be at work for many theorists interested in the possibility for change within the context of discursive forms of authority. For a genealogy of thinkers who inherit from Nietzsche a suspicion toward description, knowledge, and mastery and an interest in affirmation, creation, and joy, potential resides precisely in the possibility that there is a ruinous, unpredictable, nonsensical aspect to every project of sense-making, and thus a presence

of potential in every site of domination.<sup>6</sup> For Blanchot, this translates into an affirmation of not-writing within the practice of writing. He argues,

Not writing is among the effects of writing: it is something like a sign of passivity, a means of expression at grief's disposal. How many efforts are required in order not to write – in order that, writing, I not write, in spite of everything. And finally I cease writing, in an ultimate moment of concession – not in despair, but as if this were the un hoped for: the favor the disaster grants.... There is nothing negative in “not to write”; it is intensity without mastery, without sovereignty.... (11)

An ethical dilemma is at work in this concept of writing. Blanchot asks, “may words cease to be arms; means of action, means of salvation. Let us count, rather, on disarray” (11) and in this plea, many of the uses to which language is commonly put are exposed as potentially violent. The “intensity” of “not writing,” as opposed to the impulse for “mastery” that writing often fulfills, offers one way of thinking of writing that undoes categories of domination rather than reinforcing them. But how can we think of writing as disastrous? For Blanchot, this is what the disaster does for thought (or as thought): it strips away the authority of writing, of knowledge, and of resulting stable forms of subjectivity.

It appears that we live in a disastrous time. It is unclear whether the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> simply inaugurated a new age of catastrophe reporting on television that had lay dormant during the jubilant Clinton years<sup>7</sup> or whether in fact US foreign and

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<sup>6</sup> Blanchot emerges out of a distinctly different critical tradition than the genealogy of Spinozan/Nietzschean thinkers that I am predominately concerned with here. Yet in this case his Heideggarean orientation is useful in order to point to a limit-case of thinking through the possibility of discursive destruction. Later in this chapter, when I turn to the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, who, like Blanchot, draws largely from the work of Heidegger, it is to serve the same purpose – in order to put questions of language and signification into contact with questions of affect and culture.

<sup>7</sup> This is a false jubilation, of course, facilitated by the construction of banal “catastrophes” (sexual misconduct, financial mishandlings) that masked the permanent US military presence globally and its logic of management, policing, and limited intervention that led up to the present state of very visible war we are

environmental policy have finally produced apocalyptic consequences in the form of acts of war and so-called “natural disasters.” It may be that this distinction is itself meaningless. What we call “disasters” are always constructed through mediation. While widespread death and destruction can occur outside the media gaze, the disaster is a form of signification, a mediated event. Regardless of whether or not there are, in truth, more catastrophic events now than ever before, it is clear that there has been a rash of mediated disaster events since the turn of the millennium.

And yet, these “disasters” do not “ruin everything” – not even close. Far from being forces of de-scription, they play a vital role in a global codification regime, proliferating categorizations of life and narrativizing experience into binaries of fear and conquest, victimhood and heroism. If the disaster, in Blanchot’s terms, is the ultimate disruption of systems of law and signification – the potential for a kind of writing that carries the force of disarray – how is it that the recent explosion of “disasters” actually results in the precise opposite of this imagined chaos? If there is productive potential in a concept of the perpetual threat of the wrecking of representational structures, it seems that the power of that concept is also put to work in the service of political authority. Blanchot’s work effectively negotiates between the ethical potential of the disaster and the dread that it inspires – both seem to be at work in the concept of chaos that might lurk behind our capacity to construct meaning. But when “disasters” are constructed in popular media, particularly when they are produced under the specific formal mechanisms of television, this ambivalence between affirmation and disorientation coalesces into the production of an emotional state that is itself paradoxically defined by

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now experiencing. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s *Empire* offers an analysis of this spectral politics of control that exists, perhaps most menacingly, in peacetime.



the feeling of instability even as it is constituted as a surprisingly stable affective experience: fear.

The role of fear in political manipulation is well documented and has been revisited in highly productive ways in the contemporary American context.<sup>8</sup> But the way in which the cultural production of fear also results in the disempowering of other competing concepts of chaos and disruption is less commonly taken up. This second set of political implications of the construction of fear in contemporary American culture should lead to a dual consideration: both into the process by which the televisual medium is put to work in the production of fear and into the potential inherent in other cultural productions of crisis that fear so powerfully masks. Attending to the first problem requires an analysis of the relationship between television and expressions of power in the United States today. Drawing from several different ways of describing contemporary mechanisms of cultural and economic authority, the concept of “freedom” emerges as a central rhetorical trope of dominant power structures. A close analysis of the formal properties of television, particularly as it differs from film, shows that a parallel concept of “freedom” from set narratives and time schedules is at work in television, and epitomized in the case of catastrophe reporting. Televised disasters, exemplified in the case of September 11<sup>th</sup>, thus appear to exemplify a certain formal logic of freedom even as they produce a parallel emotional state of fear. Freedom and fear, two powerful concepts that marshal chaos toward particular political goals, cloak the potential for that chaos to pose a threat to existing systems of domination. The second part of the inquiry turns toward some potential cultural sites for other expressions of disorder – gesturing

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<sup>8</sup> The post-September 11<sup>th</sup> era and the ensuing “war on terrorism” have spawned a wealth of literature and film on this precise property of fear in the contemporary United States. See in particular Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine*, Susan Faludi, *The Terror Dream*, and Michael Moore’s *Fahrenheit 9/11*.

away from televised disasters and toward disastrous writing – away from representations of disaster and toward the wrecking of representational forms.

### Freedom, Capitalism, and the Cultural Logic of Television

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In the United States today, power increasingly seems to function through a model of freedom (rather than restraint) and production (rather than restriction). Several different ways of engaging with the question of power and the present converge at this point. Foucault's concept of biopower suggests that power functions on the level of the production of life rather than the threat of death. This, in turn, leads expressions of political power to produce a range of choices that give the illusion of freedom rather than a series of laws that emphasize prohibition. Late in his career, Gilles Deleuze develops his concept of the control society in which the various disciplinary institutions (the school, the prison, the hospital) begin to open up, producing a smoother type of power that moves among and beyond the institutions, all the while seeming to free the citizenry from their strict requirements. Theorists such as David Harvey who are currently tangling with ways of describing the economic phenomenon of neoliberalism emphasize the mobilization of a rhetoric of freedom to justify policies aimed at extending the wealth of the affluent. This is, therefore, one point on which theorists beginning from very different sets of assumptions agree: the concept of freedom has become a powerful means of cultural control in the United States today.

Each of these disparate theoretical approaches begins from the belief that capitalism functions on what appears to be a model of freedom. From Marx's ironic use of the word "free" to describe "the 'setting free' of a part of the agricultural population"

and the subsequent implication that “their former means of nourishment were also set free” (908) to George W. Bush’s linking of basic human freedom to rights to the spoils of capital in arguing that “people everywhere want to be able to speak freely; choose who will govern them; worship as they please; educate their children – male and female; own property; and enjoy the benefits of their labor” (1), capitalism’s most passionate defenders and most seminal critics seem to agree that the rhetoric of freedom, at the very least, is fundamental to capitalism. Foucault seizes upon this feature of capitalist economic practices in order to provide the basis for his concept of biopower, a model of power that, he argues, emerges contemporaneously with capitalism as a general logic of control. Just as the freed serfs, as Marx points out, are free of institutionalized slavery but immediately enslaved as laborers out of economic necessity, Foucault argues that the advent of capitalism leads to the dissolution of absolute power, understood as “the right to *take* life or *let* live” and the production of seemingly more moderate “power bent on generating forces, making them grow, and ordering them, rather than one dedicated to impeding them, making them submit, or destroying them” (*History of Sexuality, Volume I* 136). While that generative power entails freedom from the punitive forces of authoritarian rule, it also produces the particular valence of freedom that fuels capitalism, “optimizing forces, aptitudes, and life in general without at the same time making them more difficult to govern,” and ultimately producing a body necessary for capitalism to function. Foucault argues, “the investment of the body, its valorization, and the distributive management of its forces were at the time indispensable” (141). For Foucault, biopower, as it occurs in tandem with capitalism, translates power from the ideological/prohibitive to the tactical/productive; it grants freedom from authority and

law while expanding networks of control into the production of everyday life. Foucault figures this historical transition as moving from modes of control that utilize strategies of punishment, prohibition, and specific ideological or religious content, toward power that controls with equal violence through discipline, appropriation, limited policing, and strategic rather than content-based goals. In other words, freedom from prohibitory forms of power was central to the development of capitalism, which in turn entailed a new kind of power – one all the more problematic because it looked so much like the absence of power.<sup>9</sup>

In his late essay, “Postscript on Control Societies,” Deleuze responds to Foucault’s work on the waning of repressive sovereignty and the advent of disciplinary societies aimed at producing certain types of producers, arguing that yet another transition has taken place in dominant properties of power since the end of World War II. He argues that the various “confinements” of the sites of disciplinary power have opened up, expanding the reach of power even as the location of its harshest expressions seem to be undergoing crisis. He explains, “with the breakdown of the hospital as a site of confinement, for instance, community psychiatry, day hospitals, and homecare initially presented new freedoms, while at the same time contributing to mechanisms of control as rigorous as the harshest confinement” (178). On one hand, the subject of contemporary capitalism is often freed from the lingering presence of restrictions – expressed through the molding power of the disciplines – but on the other hand she is under constant

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<sup>9</sup> Marx offers an early analysis of the process of normalization in his discussion of primitive accumulation. His argument that while the agricultural population experienced a violent expropriation from their land, the transition into capitalist forms of labor would not have worked if they had not also been made to see their new status as wage laborers as “natural”: “the advance of capitalist production develops a working class which by education, tradition, and habit looks upon the requirements of that mode of production as natural laws” (899). In this way, Marx anticipates Foucault’s analysis of biopower from a position within the historical explosion of capital.

modulation, conforming to a subtly shifting demand for consumption; while earlier forms of capitalism primarily needed bodies shaped for the purpose of different types of production, contemporary capitalism in the United States and Europe increasingly relies upon subjects as more fluidly constituted consumers.<sup>10</sup> Deleuze explains, “family, school, army, and factory are no longer so many analogous but different sites converging in an owner, whether the state or some private power, but transmutable or transformable coded configurations of a single business where the only people left are administrators” (181). This nightmare of the continuity of capitalism suggests that at the exact point where freedom seems to be at hand, authority is deepened, extended, and reinforced: “this is a fairly limited range of examples, but enough to convey what it means to talk of institutions breaking down: the widespread progressive introduction of a new system of domination” (182), one that seizes upon the appearance of freedom in new and increasingly coercive ways.

This exploitation of the concept of freedom to mask the expansion of capitalist domination is, as David Harvey suggests in his *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, key to the development of neoliberal economic policies that blatantly foster the growth of the disparity in the distribution of wealth in the 1970s and 1980s. Harvey’s definition of neoliberalism has noteworthy echoes of Deleuze’s concept of the control society. He argues, “neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual

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<sup>10</sup> Clearly Deleuze’s analysis should be put in the context of global shifts in modes of production and expressions of stages of capitalism. The advent of consumer-based forms of capitalism in the United States relies upon the strength of disciplinary forms of production elsewhere. Deleuze does concede in “Control Societies” that, “one thing, it’s true, hasn’t changed – capitalism still keeps three quarters of humanity in extreme poverty, too poor to have debts and too numerous to be confined: control will have to deal not only with vanishing frontiers, but with mushrooming shantytowns and ghettos” (181).

entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (2). But the destruction of “ways of life and thought” (3) that neoliberalism entails is accomplished only through “a conceptual apparatus... that appeals to our institutions and instincts, to our values and desires, as well as to the possibilities inherent in the social world we inhabit” (5). Harvey argues that the concept of freedom provides this backing to the strategic implementation of neoliberal practices and to the construction of consent among a wide swatch of voters against their own enlightened self-interest. This is accomplished, first and foremost, because “the word ‘freedom’ resonates so widely within the common-sense understanding of Americans that it becomes ‘a button that elites can press to open the door to the masses’ to justify almost anything” (39 qtd. Rapley 55). But the success of this use of freedom, he argues, also relies upon tensions inherent in concepts of freedom used in the progressive interventions of the 1960s. While the student movements provided a momentary fusion of concepts of social justice and freedom, the incompatibility of certain versions of freedom (particularly those associated with freedom from the universalizing tendencies of social solidarity movements) prove incompatible with agendas of widespread social justice. As a result, “neoliberal rhetoric, with its foundational emphasis upon individual freedoms, has the power to split off libertarianism, identity politics, multiculturalism, and eventually narcissistic consumerism from the social forces arranged in pursuit of social justice through the conquest of state power” (41). The development of a specific concept of freedom thus seizes upon the commonplace power of the word in American life, but also appropriates the very rhetoric of liberation movements in order to destroy provisional alliances

between them. This aspect of the capitalist concept of freedom and its power to divert projects of political opposition is, I will suggest, particularly relevant to the mechanisms of televised disasters, which also harness the power of disruption of the status quo in favor of its maintenance.

In each instance, the freedom that capitalism promises is never complete, not even in a dystopian sense. Even in Deleuze's nightmarish control society, there is potential inherent in the smoothing of power and new forms of political engagement are understood to percolate within the fluidity of capitalism. The binary between constraint and freedom is never tidy, and while contemporary capitalist forms of control seem to sit with the latter, content-based bans are still very much a part of contemporary practices of domination.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, there remains a chasm between forms of control that insist upon content-based conformity and those that will tolerate, even embrace, difference as long as it fuels capitalist expansion. It seems fairly evident that the latter is the dominant logic of capitalist control, particularly in the social and cultural domains.

Television, which emerges as a significant cultural force in the post-war period, extends this logic of management rather than law, freedom rather than prohibition into the recreational time of the global populace. It accomplishes this both by making "free time" increasingly a part of capitalist valorization and, especially in the case of catastrophe reporting, by appearing to break through aspects of other media that formally rely upon content-based "enclosures": narrative, advance planning, and prescribed content. Television both brings capitalism into the home in unprecedented ways, and, by

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<sup>11</sup> This is a major flaw in some works that apply theories of biopower to the contemporary geopolitical order. Hardt and Negri, for instance, have been widely criticized for glossing over the very real power of the nation state and prohibitory forms of control in much of the world. Timothy Brennan's famous response to *Empire* in the Winter 2003 issue of *Critical Inquiry* is perhaps the most thorough voicing of that concern.

working on a principle of “real time,” gives the appearance of a freer eye onto the world of events. Catastrophe reporting offers this appearance of unrestrained visual power in the extreme. Interrupting scheduled programming and consisting of improvised structures of narration, it seems to free the apparatus of television from its remaining attachment to fixed narratives. Thus while television produces the catastrophe as an exception to the rule of scheduled programming, catastrophe reporting actually epitomizes certain aspects of what television is capable of being. As a result, televised catastrophes strengthen television as a media form, and coextensively strengthen its capacity to construct emotional states of instability and fear in ways that appear to be discontinuous, but are actually deeply connected with the requirements of capitalism’s effective maintenance.

In his analysis of the relationship between television and political economy, Richard Dienst argues that there is a particular “intimacy between television and late capital” (53). He explains, “television appeared at a certain historical moment to incorporate everyday life and culture as ‘free’ time into the body of capital through the mediation of the image” (58). The television thus brings capitalist production into the home, subsuming leisure time in the living room and appropriating it into processes of valorization. But while television does turn recreational time into labor time by interpellating the viewer into the field of capital through advertisements and product placements, Dienst suggests that this process is not monolithic. Insofar as it transmits specific images,

television can be distinguished from other machines of its age (such as the computer) by the fact that it must pass through the variable times of visibility, that is, it can only perform its tasks for capital in the old, stubbornly slow perceptual and affective time of human subjects.... its diffusion may be instantaneous... but its reception as images must still be lived moment by moment. (58)



Television harnesses the human body's capacity to perceive and imagine and directs those forces into the process of capitalist production, but it is limited in its capacity to do so by the temporality of the body and the slow process of sensation. Television can thus neither be flattened into a pure instrument of capital, nor can it be imagined to exist, or to have ever existed, outside the requirements of the capitalist system. While television primarily fuels capital, it does not have a smooth ideological content. Rather, it is constantly in the process of contending with, managing, and optimizing human life through the everyday existence of corporeal subjects.

This process proceeds primarily through the production of forms of lived time. Television does not simply allow for the buying and selling of advertising time; it produces temporal experience that does not appear to be market-driven while all the while, as Dienst explains, "television offers the advantage of turning the subjective thrills of recognition and the jolt of interpellation into commodified moments of choice, letting ideology pass as a matter of taste rather than coercion" (62). Television thus extends the reach of capital beyond labor time and into "free" time: "television, by delimiting and monopolizing the time of imagination, allows us to offer up our social lives as free contributions to capitalist power" (62). In this way, Dienst suggests that we do not consume television as much as "television consumes our time, producing value and reproducing social relations along the way" (62). If our current moment is marked by forms of control that look like freedom, television is therefore its cultural agent par excellence. In so far as television constitutes *both* a cultural force with content contingent upon ideological, formal, and aesthetic preference *and* a capitalist machine that produces value out of the seemingly voluntary participation of people during their "free" time,

television puts exploitation and liberation, the amoral capitalist ethic of management and ideological control, into astonishingly intimate contact.

Television thus seizes upon the appearance of “freedom” and contributes directly to the ongoing expansion of commodity capitalism. In this sense, television acts as a form of primitive accumulation, gathering new markets, new bodies, and new socially defined time for labor. And yet this contemporary form of primitive accumulation is far from the bloody force required to “free” the serfs from their land and allow for the appropriation of both the land and the bodies of future wage laborers into the machinery of capital. Instead, television provides a medium to fuel the expansion of capitalism by a false choice on the part of the laborer. It does so by “freeing” the global subjects of capital from forms of labor that do not produce surplus value: political activism, aesthetic production, religious belief, and philosophical thought. Television accomplishes this through the production of social time that appears voluntary or even necessary but, in fact, expropriates time that may have otherwise been used toward these commitments and puts it instead at the service of the production of value.

This process occurs regardless of the content of the actual images we see. The specific content and form of those images, however, is ultimately what occupies us, harnesses our attention, and consumes our time. This is where television breaks with the pure logic of capital and produces its own forms of codification and authority. Because it must occupy viewers on the level of bodily temporality and sensation, television produces narratives. These narratives, whether in the form of talk shows or soap operas, sitcoms or news broadcasts, occupy the imagination, emotions, and thought in specifically coded ways. Television thus does not simply reproduce and accumulate

participation in the capitalist system. It also produces fixed ideologies and cultural representations. While capital can be imagined as purely axiomatic, serving a specific logic and means rather than any ideological ends, it is inevitable that television must simultaneously produce value and ideology, freedom from entrenched expectations and the expectable in the form of predictable narratives and stable schedules.

If this double logic of television is its dominant mode, then catastrophe coverage seems to push that logic away from the predictable, the authoritarian, the ideological, and toward the unexpected, the new, the unfettered functioning of the machine itself. In the catastrophe, televised images appear to have as their content only pure visibility as the camera appears to act as a simple conduit from event to screen. In other words, the catastrophe appears to free the potential of television to directly transmit images in “real time” from its necessary confines of plot and schedule. For this reason, catastrophe coverage exemplifies the aspects of television that most support capital and the overall control mechanisms within contemporary life. The lingering narrative requirements of television as a surrogate for other narrative cultural forms (the novel, film, etc.) give way to live footage, where television simply scans and transmits moments as they occur, seemingly free from over-coding in advance. When Blanchot argues, “The disaster... is what escapes the very possibility of experience – it is the limit of writing... the disaster de-scribes” (7), he does not address television, and perhaps for good reason. On television, the catastrophe does disrupt, but it does not de-cribe, or undo images. It rather subsumes them with images proposed to be of greater importance, of more pressing immediacy. In appearing to abandon specific content in favor of the freedom of a purely visual present, it does, nevertheless, continue to produce bodily sensation. The affective

state of fear that emerges from televised catastrophes, however, is one that falsely appears to be a direct consequence of the catastrophic event, and not of the formal medium that transmits it. Furthermore, fear consists of a sensation of instability. It therefore seems to indicate chaos and indeterminacy where, in the case of televised catastrophes, the medium that produces the fear in the first place is often at its strongest and most stable. In no way do catastrophic images destroy the functioning of television and the forms of capitalist production that rely upon it. To the contrary: catastrophic images testify to the usefulness of television and its particular affective constructions to the stability of forms of political authority.

The argument that the logic of catastrophe matches the logic of television has been made, famously, by Mary Ann Doane in her influential essay, “Information, Crisis, Catastrophe.” Doane begins by suggesting that television and catastrophe are both primarily temporal operations; they engage with life on the level of time. Not only do they both participate in the construction of temporal experience, they both point to the vulnerability and volatility of the present: “Television deals not with the weight of the dead past but with the potential trauma and explosiveness of the present. And the ultimate drama of the instantaneous – catastrophe – constitutes the very limit of its discourse” (222). Thus, both television and catastrophe appear to resist the temporal structures of traditional forms of authority. Television does not engage with the historical past; it does not even construct a tactical past as basis for its present operation. Since television resists limits of all kinds, it is to its benefit to construct history anew with every report. The catastrophe, which can easily justify the imagined end of history or the birth of a new era, assists in this process. This temporal disruption is central to the performance of total

freedom within the context of the catastrophic event. Doane explains, “catastrophe is defined as unexpected discontinuity in an otherwise continuous system... The emphasis upon suddenness suggests that catastrophe is of a temporal order.” This “unexpected discontinuity” would indeed interrupt the remnants of narrative in televisual discourse if television, like most novels, plays, or many mainstream cinematic works, relied upon “a continuous system.” As it sheds “the dead past,” however, television is also discontinuous by its very nature. Thus, “catastrophe could be said to be at one level the condensation of all the attributes and aspirations of ‘normal’ television (immediacy, urgency, presence, discontinuity, the instantaneous, and hence forgettable)” (238). Television thrives on removing limits. Just as it supports capital through the blurring of the distinction between free time and labor time, on a formal level television also produces a constant state of freedom from the past. The catastrophe epitomizes this process by producing content that also appears to construct a present moment detached from history. The temporalities of catastrophe and television, according to Doane, both appear to be disruptive to structures of discourse and actually support one another: the catastrophe constructs television and television constructs the catastrophe.

According to Doane, however, even in the disruptive temporality of the catastrophe, television does not function purely through interruption, fragmentation, and the threat of the unknown; it also has a fundamentally myth-making, codifying, stabilizing function. While television constructs and seizes upon the instability of catastrophic time, it also works on a model of information, which necessitates a logical flow of images. In this way, “television tends to blur the differences between what seem to be absolutely incompatible temporal modes, between the flow and continuity of

information and the punctual discontinuity of catastrophe” (233). Far from incidental to the functioning of televisual discourse, Doane argues, “indeed, the obscuring of these temporal distinctions may constitute the specificity of television’s operation” (233). In this case, the repetition of the catastrophic event actually works *both* to point to the singularity of the instant (the moment when everything changed), and to subdue its influence by returning the catastrophe to durational time. The repetition of images of the catastrophic event “is characterized by its very duration, seemingly compensating for the suddenness, the unexpected nature of the event” (232). This repetition, along with the synthesis of fragmented images into “stories” through the unified subject-position of the anchor, returns time to its narrative flow, while preserving enough of the catastrophic atmosphere to produce an enduring state of fear.

Hence the seemingly contradictory position that television inhabits in relation to the catastrophe: “the televisual construction of catastrophe seeks both to preserve and to annihilate indeterminacy, discontinuity” (234). In this way, televised catastrophes do interrupt representational structures, but do so only superficially. The stability of fear lingers behind the appearance of instability that the “real time” interference of catastrophe seems to bring. Moreover, the repetition of the images of the catastrophic event both destabilizes existing narratives and reestablishes new ones without the interval of affirmation and commonality that Blanchot’s definition of disaster, for instance, has as its productive core. This closing of the gap between the dissolution of old structures and the establishment of the new actually increases the likelihood for particularly destructive forms of authority to emerge. Television thus both “frees” us from the constraints of the past by constructing catastrophes that appear to indicate that the present is entirely new

*and* produces the conditions for the almost instantaneous establishment of new forms of ideology, unencumbered by history.<sup>12</sup> The televised disaster thus inaugurates the worst of commodity capitalism (the luxury of the abolition of history in favor of the instant gratification of the present) and the worst of ideological conservatism (the fervent ideological commitment to a strategically constructed image of a fixed past). In this way, the post-September 11<sup>th</sup> American political current runs in accord with the formal logic of the televised catastrophe.

Catastrophe, television, and capitalism form a tight nexus around the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. In a sense, the event exemplified the possibility that the perceived freedom from history embodied in the catastrophic could open a space for the rewriting of the past in favor of the needs of the present. This, predictably, led to the inauguration of new forms of power in the name of freedom. If we understand the logics of television, global capitalism, and catastrophe to all entail an apparent freedom from the constraints of the past paired with a quiet yet vigorous institution of authority that looks like liberation, we must understand the televised events of September 11<sup>th</sup> as the most potent contemporary example of that dynamic – a dynamic that has at its core the construction of a state of fear that appears discontinuous, even out of control, but is, in fact, a key element of the process by which freedom asserts itself as a form of domination.

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<sup>12</sup> Of course, catastrophe coverage does make significant use of forms of historicity, using the weight of comparisons to the past to substantiate the event. These comparisons, however, fail to engage with the complexity and specificity of history proper in order to make simple analogies. As a result, these analogies often result in twisted ethical and political formulations. For instance, the comparison between 9/11 and Pearl Harbor was a precursor to justifications for preemptive military action in the Middle East despite the very different nature of the two events.

Groundhog Day  
*Case Study: 9/11*

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September 11<sup>th</sup> was constructed on television, like most catastrophic events, primarily through a process of repetition.<sup>13</sup> The repetition of images of the events seemed, at first, to perform a good faith struggle to understand what had happened, an effort to make sense of it, and to find a way to present the persistent non-sense of the tragedy that had occurred. During the first 48 hours, television coverage was dominated by the repetition of the catastrophe itself – of the second plane crashing into the south tower and of the subsequent collapse of the World Trade Center. Images were shown at different speeds, at different angles, and in various explanatory contexts, all seemingly directed at a project of understanding the physical properties of the events. Experts were called in to describe the structural nuances of the towers, to discuss the particularities of the jets involved, and to analyze the probable environmental consequences of the ensuing explosions. The repetition of images was part of a performance of the attempt to make sense of the physical properties of the catastrophe in lieu of any existential meaning. In other words, it was a project aimed at mastering the event, but mastering it only at its most basic material roots: in steel, dust, and gasoline. As these images played again and again, it was as if the entire nation was on a feedback loop that would not allow anyone to turn away or to move beyond the tragedy. In this sense, the catastrophe of September 11<sup>th</sup> was, like any traumatic event, a catastrophe of time.<sup>14</sup> The narrative progression of

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<sup>13</sup> In the process of writing this section, I consulted archival footage from ABC, NBC, and CNN through the Vanderbilt University Television News Archive.

<sup>14</sup> That trauma constitutes a crisis in normal temporal reference is implicit in Freud's *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* where he argues that, "our abstract of time seems to be wholly derived from the method of working of the system *Pcpt.-Cs.* and to correspond to a perception on its own part of that method of working. This mode of functioning may constitute another way of providing a shield against stimuli" (31).



life was suspended as “9/11” seemed to extend into September 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup>. Like Bill Murray in the film *Groundhog Day*, we all woke up to the same radio broadcast every morning.<sup>15</sup>

It was not, however, the same radio broadcast, the same image, the same event that repeated in the days following September 11<sup>th</sup>. That emotionally vulnerable people are easily manipulated is true; even truer is that the media spectacle called “9/11” constituted a total reorganization of the dominant American mass-mediated temporal imagination. In an unprecedented collision of the logics of television, global capitalism, and the peculiarities of the Bush presidency, “9/11” provided an interval seemingly outside of time and history during which language, ethics, and law could be reordered as if the reorganization was a natural consequence of the trauma. To say that the exploitation of the tragic events of September 11<sup>th</sup> was primarily an exploitation of temporality is to argue that what was at stake in the television coverage of the catastrophe was not as simple as the emotions of a traumatized populace, but a fundamental ontological structure of everyday life. In order for this radical reorganization to occur, the repetition of the images of the catastrophe underwent subtle shifts that locked the events into an ideological context before history had a chance to resume.

As early as September 13<sup>th</sup>, images of the catastrophe itself began to disappear from the coverage of the major networks. The repetitive structure of the reporting did not stop, but the content was slowly replaced by new images. As days passed, footage of the

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Since trauma is defined by a rupture in this “shield,” and the subsequent initiation of a process of repetition, Freud’s work offers the possibility of understanding trauma as an essentially temporal disorder.

<sup>15</sup> In his timely editorial response to the relationship between critical theory and the events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, W.J.T. Mitchell suggests similarly that “9/11, however, does not name the Event. It is Day One of an event whose days are unnumbered, indefinite, an emergency in which the emergent order has yet to make itself clear” (568).

catastrophe was therefore definitively, though almost imperceptibly, replaced by other footage: first memorial services, then sweeping patriotic shots of flag displays in small towns across America, then troops readying for undetermined conflict, anthrax attacks, preparation for the invasion of Afghanistan, and finally the spectacular first week of the war in Iraq. That we thought we were seeing the same thing again and again was the ultimate political trick. As images of the World Trade Center were replaced by images of flag waving and military drills, “9/11” became all of these images: not only the catastrophe itself, but the necessity of simplistic patriotism, militarism, and the intolerance of dissent.

By September 19<sup>th</sup>, when ABC became the first network to officially stop showing footage of the collisions and collapse of the towers, broadcast networks had already returned to their normal scheduled programming. The content of the cable news networks was already dominated by images of troop preparation, having long since abandoned images of the World Trade Center in favor of new versions of “The Attack on America,” seemingly constructed in order to keep the catastrophe from moving into the past. The eventual banning of the images of the towers by a coalition of news networks, which was said to be a protective measure for children who were prone to thinking that the event was happening over and over again, only occurred once the networks had decided that the footage was no longer useful. In fact, it seems more likely that the footage disappeared from the networks because adults are prone to stop thinking that the event is occurring over and over again if they are shown images of it too many times. The shock of the event was maintained less by its repetition than by the eventual absence of its image from television. The repetition of the images of the catastrophe was not as

simple, then, as a traumatic compulsion to repeat the original trauma, nor did it follow the typical televisual trajectory of constructing trauma out of repetition in order to heal the trauma through information and narrative that we have seen in televised catastrophes since the assassination of John F. Kennedy.<sup>16</sup> This traditional circuit of catastrophe-repetition-information-narrative was extended much farther in the case of September 11<sup>th</sup> so that the temporal suspension of the catastrophic event lasted longer. With the substitution of new images for the structure of repetition to act upon, “9/11” actually consisted of seemingly infinite nested traumatic circuits, each pushing toward the formation of a menacing state of fear.

The rest, as they say, is history. Or rather, the rest becomes normalized history in this shroud of timelessness. The Patriot Act had amended aspects of the Constitution that we were encouraged to forget had existed, the economic boom of the 1990s seemed a mere fantasy, and even the old conservative guard was erased from the political map. Instead, according to most mainstream sources, American history seemed to begin on September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001, and the logical extension of this temporal trick provided the basis for the horrors of American domestic and foreign policy that would follow. If the history of the American project had simply ceased to be pertinent in the wake of this event, the present could be tactically employed to the service of anything deemed useful: the systematic unraveling of civil rights, human rights, and international law that still continues today. The dominant narratives of the present are stronger than ever, and now exist seemingly unhampered by the accumulated intelligence and wreckage of the past.

In this way, the construction of “9/11” illustrates the danger of televised disruptions of normative structures of time and history: rather than pointing to the chaos

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<sup>16</sup> See Patricia Mellencamp, “TV Time and Catastrophe.”

that lurks behind forms of signification – Blanchot’s disaster – they construct a stable emotional state built upon the illusion of crisis: fear. While, as Blanchot argues, the breaking of habitual experience and norms can provide a context for new forms of thought and action, the imagined freedom from the constraints of law and history that constitute this particular state of fear can also usher in the very worst of ideological distortions, restrictions on individual rights, and state based violence. And as television and global capitalism appear to follow a logic of incessant opening of communication, possibility, markets, and consumption that seems to be diametrically opposed to the restrictive logic of authority, the construction of “9/11” shows how closely linked these two processes can be. When the potential for disaster becomes a state of fear, far from being a force of destruction, a sense of instability and the “freedom” it evokes becomes a force of inscription, codification, and the production of new and terrifying forms of control.

#### Disaster in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction

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This is not to say, however, that the dismantling of stable structures of time and history cannot be employed in the service of change. To the contrary, it is still necessary to pursue disruption, discontinuity, and disaster, because the maintenance of stable structures of narrative tends to lead to the conservative worship of the past and a limiting anxiety toward the future. While televised representations of disaster and the fear that they construct can result in the destruction of the past in favor of new ideological structures of control in the present, a politics of the disaster seizes upon the precise opposite possibility: that the valuation of creativity and freedom can be used to break

through the confines of law and authority, while simultaneously redirecting and unhinging the flows and circuits of commodity capitalism. The distinction between these two possibilities seems to rest in the distinction between *fear*, which can be defined as the affective consequence of *the representation of disaster* and something quite different: *the disastering of representation*.

The events of September 11<sup>th</sup> were molded into a representation of a disaster on television, but the state of fear that the events produced was also a direct result of the tactical basis of the attacks themselves, which equally relied upon a representation of disaster to produce a political effect; the logic of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks also depended upon the use of representation and symbol. The use of the World Trade Center and Pentagon as symbolic sites of power, the harnessing of American television media toward a spectacle beyond its control, and most of all the production of symbolic and sacrificial death all attest to the fundamental assumption that the destruction of American hegemony could proceed from a representation of its destruction. And in this way, the events did challenge the dominant structures of both American politics and American media. It did so first and foremost by bringing American deaths onto television in unprecedented ways. This is, as Jean Baudrillard articulately notes, the essential terrorist strategy against a system of control based on technological force and the denial of death. Therefore, he argues, “it is the tactic of the terrorist model to bring about an excess of reality, and have the system collapse beneath that excess of reality.... terrorist acts are both the exorbitant mirror of [that system’s] violence and the model of a symbolic violence forbidden to it, the only violence it cannot exert – that of its own death” (*The Spirit of Terrorism* 18). In this sense, the images of those who jumped from the top

stories of the World Trade Center (the only images almost instantly banned from American television coverage) were the ultimate challenge to the global capitalist myth: not only did they symbolize the death of the American business person, but his forced suicide, an ironic mirror between the immorality of the terrorist and the immorality of systems of globalization. Yet it would be a mistake to understand this challenge to the geopolitical order as an intrusion of the unmediated real upon mediation. Rather, as Baudrillard suggests, “the terrorist violence here is not, then, a blowback of reality, any more than it is a blowback of history. It is not ‘real’. In a sense, it is worse: it is symbolic. Violence in itself may be perfectly banal and inoffensive. Only symbolic violence is generative of singularity” (29). In this sense, symbolic violence can only occur in forms that challenge existing assumptions about what kind of violence is possible within an contemporary context and in a mediated form that emerges on the level of dominant symbolic structures. The events of September 11<sup>th</sup> accomplished both.

The catastrophe that ensued, however, challenged those myths only at the level of representation and not on the level of the formal requirements of television. In actuality, they epitomized the logic of the televised disaster and consequentially only strengthened the control of the televisual spectacle. In this sense, the attacks proceeded from a misidentification of the power of television. Materialist collective Retort argues that the terrorist logic follows from the premise set forth by Guy Debord that capital is sustained by the spectacle. The spectacle, which is simply the commodity fetish exploded to the level of the media (“a social relation among people, mediated by images” (Debord 1)), is vital to the functioning of capitalist control. As we have seen, this is precisely the role that television plays in a capitalist society – it takes up “free” time outside of labor and

valorizes it. Therefore, Retort argues that this Debordian analysis matches the central analysis of spectacular terrorism – that “at the level of the image... the state is vulnerable” (27). Nevertheless, they argue that this logic, extended to the symbolic gestures of September 11<sup>th</sup>, is not successful because of its reliance upon representation rather than material change. They explain, “as materialists, *we do not believe that one can destroy the society of the spectacle by producing the spectacle of its destruction*” (34). But this seems to miss the point of the chiasmus they invoke. Just as Debord argues that the spectacle is a collection of images or representations that is simultaneously material, the spectacle of its destruction would be material as well, insofar as images act materially in the world of production. For this reason, Retort’s argument that their objection to this project is a “tactical dissent,” seems to address only the surface of the problem. The schism between the destruction of spectacular media and the spectacle of this destruction does not open between material and aesthetic politics. It rather relates much more closely to Walter Benjamin’s distinction between politicized aesthetics and aestheticized politics, both of which are simultaneously material and aesthetic but exist on entirely different ethical registers.

Benjamin famously argues that aestheticized politics, or a politics of representation, is always in danger of becoming a politics of death regardless of its aims. In 1936, Benjamin could not imagine the coordinated use of technology that would allow for the destruction of the World Trade Center to appear on television, live, with such extensive global reach. Watching the rise of fascism across Europe, however, he was able to see that “all efforts to render politics aesthetic culminate in one thing: war” (241). Likewise, when the necessity to disaster representation, to disrupt the functioning of the

spectacle, becomes transformed into the production of representations of disasters, political justifications for sacrificial murder are the inevitable result. This logic extends across the imagined battle line between the defenders of the spectacle and its opponents, from the haunting flashes of missile launches to the shattering gesture of televised beheadings. When the aestheticization of politics is mistaken for a politicization of aesthetics, the goal of the disaster becomes a spectacular description of human death rather than a de-description of the spectacle.

In Benjamin's time, however, the material relations of production and the representational structures of appearance were more distinct than they are today. In that context, it was easier to see how fascism offered appearance over actual change – “giving these masses not their right, but instead a chance to express themselves” (241). Today, it seems that certain forms of appearance do constitute a legitimate battleground for political change. Media institutions are perhaps some of the most important locations of social control in the contemporary United States. Nevertheless, Benjamin's analysis is still salient even if the question is no longer posed regarding the object of change. Both the process of representing disasters for the purpose of cultivating fear *and* disastering forms of representation take as their object the mediated construction of experience. But while the former wages war on mediated control through representation, the latter strikes deeply on the level of form. The former thus develops a counter-aesthetic within the formal rules of the aesthetic target, while the latter politicizes the aesthetic terrain by disobeying the authority of the form itself.

The events of September 11<sup>th</sup> and the televised construction of “9/11” sit on one side of an almost imperceptible but absolutely vital border between the representation of



disaster that leads to a status-quo insuring state of fear and the disastering of representation that might lead to the productive reconsideration of structures of control. To object ethically to the attacks is thus not simply a matter of objecting to strategies of violence on moral or tactical grounds. It is a matter of recognizing that spectacular violence is itself fuel for the machine of television and, by extension, global capitalism, which so closely shares its logic. Mechanisms of contemporary control, whether we call them biopower, aspects of the control society, or neoliberalism, thrive on representations of disasters. These representations epitomize the way television supports illusions of freedom by producing a field that appears to be purely visual, discontinuous, and unscripted. More importantly, the fear that these representations of disasters engender provides a reason to abstain from projects of change in the name of the maintenance of security. Perhaps most menacingly of all, however, the emotional state of fear feels like it indicates instability even if the situation that generates that fear is, in fact, terrifyingly stable. It is thus the perfect emotional simulacrum for any deeper form of instability that might pose a challenge to hegemonic control.

#### A Common Contagion

##### *Case Study: Jean Luc Nancy's Inoperable Community*

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What affective states and conceptual inventions might emerge from the turn away from fear? What would the disastering of representation look like? If televised catastrophes ultimately fuel rather than challenge structures of management and domination, what would a force be that actually dismantles structures of habitual perception, forms of codification, and political structures of control? These questions

demand a reckoning with the relationship between language and community, systems of signification and systems of social life. The work of Jean-Luc Nancy offers a theoretical basis for thinking through practices of discourse and politics that emerge out of the structural systems of culture itself. A close look at Nancy's work is useful in bringing questions of language into contact with questions of media and affect. In *The Inoperable Community*, Nancy begins to point to the necessity of maintaining a constant tension between the construction of meaning and the dismantling of it in order to escape the wholesale abuse of tactical "freedom" on one side and authoritarian rigidity on the other – a tension that he sees as vital to new forms of political engagement.

While the word only appears once in his inquiry, Nancy defines the disaster, it seems, almost by accident. He begins by linking the possibility of community as we understand it to the possibility of stable mythic structures, and maintains consequently that "myth's force and foundation are essential to community... there can be, therefore, no community outside myth" (57). Since myth, according to Nancy, can no longer exist in the contemporary world because foundational speech immediately "implodes in its own fiction" (56) (we now know that "myth is a myth"), community as we have historically understood it, has, along with myth, been "interrupted" (55). Interrupted, but not lost entirely. Nancy's argument rests on the assumption that forms of being only exist as they are defined through being-in-common. As a result, the total obliteration of myth, and accordingly of community, can only exist coextensively with the end of being as such. As a result, Nancy equates the imagined total loss of community with disaster: "And yet, the pure and simple effacement of community, without remainder, is a misfortune. Not a sentimental misfortune, nor even an ethical one, but an ontological

misfortune—or disaster. For beings who are essentially, and more than essentially, beings *in common*, it is a privation of being” (57). The disaster, according to Nancy, is the impossible stripping of the essential conditions of existence, since “singular beings are, present themselves, and appear only to the extent that they compear, to the extent that they are exposed, presented, or offered to one another” (58). Commonality in the sense of compearance, or the emergence of singular being in common, cannot be dissolved without total loss of being—disaster. What the interruption of myth engenders, then, is almost-disaster: the disappearance of anything that “communicates the common” (50) but not the common itself.

Rather than obliterating the common, the interruption of myth has the capacity to unveil more radical forms of community than are visible within the context of stable mythic forms. Community therefore emerges out of the radical singularity that the very interruption of myth insists upon. Nancy explains:

Singular beings compear: their compearance constitutes their being, puts them in communication with one another. But the interruption of community, the interruption of the totality that would fulfill it, is the very law of compearance. The singular being appears to other singular beings; it is communicated to them in the singular. It is a contact, it is a contagion: a touching, the transmission of a trembling on the edge of being, the communication of a passion that makes us fellows, or the communication of a passion to be fellows, to be *in common*. (59-60)

Compearance, the coming into singular being in the presence of others that characterizes all forms of existence, can inhabit its potential fully only in the absence of the structures of identity that often obscure it. In other words, myth and community as we understand them codify and limit the potential for being in common inherent in the ontological conditions of life. Once those structures are interrupted, commonality is unleashed that exceeds the limits of identity and instead emerges out of singularity, ecstasy, and passion.

The interruption of myth, therefore, insures that a better understanding of community is possible, one that does not persistently threaten to become, as Nancy suggests mythic thought does, totalitarian. If communion occurs through the transmission of absolute singularity, through the exposure of singularity “to its limit, which is to say, to other singularities” (60), there can be no illusion of a total fulfillment of the communal. This imagined fulfillment, Nancy argues, catalyses the apocalypticism often characterizes totalitarian communism. The perpetual interruption of myth without the total dissolution of community is thus necessary in order to avoid disaster, the total absence of being, on one hand, or totalitarianism, the total fulfillment of being, on the other.

The contemporary American situation suggests, however, that the avoidance of both disaster and totalitarianism cannot be as simple as taking a middle ground between them. The early twenty-first century has been particularly marked by the collision of both nihilism and ideological totality in the form of the strange partnership of the management ethic of global capitalism on one hand and mythic religious and nationalist commitments on the other. This is nowhere more apparent than in the United States, where the person of George W. Bush embodies these twin horrors and testifies to their devastating compatibility. Similarly, if the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> ensured that the most extreme theories of postmodern relativism were rejected, it did so by momentarily checking the “postmodern logic” of global capitalism itself. It did not, however, as some immediate responses to the tragedy suggested, necessitate a regressive recapturing of essential notions of truth any more than it dismantled projects of globalization. It simply served as a reminder, for theory and economics alike, that both the dissolution of mythic community structures and attempts to reclaim totalizing myths against the emptying of

community life that global capitalism entails hold overwhelming destructive power in the world today.

For Nancy, the threat to commonality comes from both of these sites: management and the abdication of a project of commonality that it entails on the one hand and totalitarianism and the solid mythic foundations it relies upon on the other. He poses his argument primarily against the mythmakers, turning the humanist project, which he argues makes a transcendent out of the immanent, on its head and instead suggests that the principle that underlies his argument “consists on the contrary in the immanence of a ‘transcendence’—that of finite existence as such, which is to say, of its ‘exposition’” (xxxix). The transcendence that Nancy suggests is always immanent is nothing more than the fundamental fact of ontological commonality – which needs only to be “exposed” as community. Thus, exposing the commonality of singular being becomes the core of any “left” political project.<sup>17</sup> This exposure requires the interruption of myth, and thus the shedding of forms of imagined community that verge on the totalitarian. Nevertheless, while attending to the need to interrupt myth, he is equally aware of the opposite threat—the total loss of awareness of commonality at the core of being. Pointing to both dangers, he argues:

By inverting the ‘principle’ stated a moment ago, we get totalitarianism. By ignoring it, we condemn the political to management and to power (and to the management of power, and to the power of management). By taking it as a rule of analysis and thought, we raise the question: how can the community without essence (the community that is neither “people” nor “nation,” neither “destiny” nor “generic humanity,” etc.) be presented as such? That is, what might a politics be that does not stem from the will to realize an essence? (xxxix)

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<sup>17</sup> Nancy uses the term “left” as a historically specific marker of the belief that “the political, as such, is receptive to what is at stake in community” (xxvi). Nevertheless, his call to “revolutionize what the term ‘left’ means” (xxxvi) seems particularly relevant in the context of neoliberalism, which muddles the distinctions between right and left in mainstream politics.

The politics Nancy outlines relies upon a perpetual interruption of any stable notion of community, since, he suggests, politics can only both find communal expression and resist codification into essential structures if it is interrupted again and again, otherwise that very interruption can become mythic. This model of interruption implicitly suggests the breaking of traditional models of historical time. Nancy cites Levi-Strauss's claim that "myth... is primarily defined as that with which or in which time turns into space" (45), and yet he does not explicitly outline a temporal model to replace it. Nancy's focus on the endless interruption and reassertion of myth, however, points to a temporal core to the political project that he does not directly name: repetition.

Repetition, in its traditional traumatic form, is the temporal feature that ushers in the very worst of the televisual spectacle of "9/11". The emotional vulnerability that it constructs through the subtly shifting contexts of proposed crisis, leads to a stable state of fear that supports structures of authority even as it looks as if it indicates the precise opposite. In contrast to the repetition that constructs this state of fear, however, Nancy's repetitive interruption escapes this danger insofar as it does not resume a traditional fixed mythic narrative. Literature, Nancy's term for this force of interruption, "is composed only in the act that interrupts, with a single stroke—by an incision and/or an inscription—the shaping of the scene of myth" (71-2). Literature is also the force, however, behind the founding of myths. Thus, while "myth is simply the invention of literature," Nancy argues, "the stroke of writing, bravely confronting this haunting memory, must never stop interrupting it again" (71). The only distinction between myth and the literary interruption of myth, between the institution of fear and the productive destruction of representational structures, then, is one of repetition. While myth spatializes time and

renders it stable, literature repetitively interrupts its own mythic process. As a result, it convokes a non-essential politics of the singular, and this politics is itself repetitive: “Community without community is *to come*, in the sense that it is always *coming*” (71). This is why the interrupted community resists a politics of fulfillment: within it, the future is not a teleological goal but a perpetual repetitive construction that emerges out of the affirmation of ontological commonality. We can thus use Nancy’s understanding of interruption in order to imagine a politics of the disaster that has repetition at its core; one that does not rely upon the representation of a catastrophic event and the dual concepts of freedom and fear which catalyze and emerge from that representation, but instead understands representation as itself perpetually wrecked by its own formal creation.

### Disastrous Politics

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Nancy’s work offers some starting points for thinking through a political mode of engagement based upon the continual dismantling of stable representative forms, one based in the mythic innovations and interruptions of cultural media. Returning to the context of contemporary American capitalism and its various expressions, how can this perpetual “disastering” of myth express itself? How does it escape the double bind of imagined freedom, or avoidance of any structure of commonality, on one hand, and fear, or the institution of stable forms of authority, on the other?

1 *The disaster always fails.* While Nancy defines the disaster as “an ontological misfortune... the privation of being,” Blanchot suggests, “there is disaster only because, ceaselessly, it falls short of disaster. The end of nature, the end of

culture” (41). A politics of the disaster, then, does not entail an attempt to find, construct, or embrace the possibility of a disaster occurring. Rather, it entails the valuation of the approach to the disaster, the attempt to reach it with the understanding that the disaster is unreachable. And for good reason. It seems that the only concrete disaster that Blanchot can call upon is genocide, and perhaps that is what results when disaster is pushed to succeed. A fidelity to the process of dismantling mythic structures thus must, as Alain Badiou suggests, remain aware of the necessity of the unnamable, and thus unattainable, element within the idea of the disaster. Badiou defines Evil as “the will to name *at any price*” (50) the unnamable element within a truth. It is necessary, in order to avoid this Evil, to “recognize the unnamable as a *limitation*” (50). In a politics of disaster, the disaster itself is this unnamable element. This is what Deleuze and Guattari find when they distinguish between totalitarianism and fascism. While totalitarianism is built upon the success of stable myths, fascism occurs when the undoing of myths becomes an end in and of itself; it occurs when a line of flight becomes its own goal, when a war machine, rather than deterritorializing repressive state apparatuses, produces war for its own sake: “in fascism, the State is far less totalitarian than it is *suicidal*. There is in fascism a realized nihilism... it was this reversion of the line of flight into a line of destruction that already animated the molecular focuses of fascism... *a war machine that no longer had anything but war as its object* and would rather annihilate its own servants than stop the destruction” (230-1).<sup>18</sup> Therefore, a politics of disaster must proceed with the

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<sup>18</sup> Interestingly, though they do not connect the two explicitly here, when the war machine takes itself as its own object, it becomes fascism, but when its deterritorializing logic simply dominates the political scene



knowledge that the disaster will fail, and thus the idea of the disaster stands in as a limit, and should be pursued only without the hope of its fulfillment.

- 2 *Disaster is a process, not a goal.* This distinction is necessary to avoid the trap of valuing destruction for its own sake, and thus imagining that it might be fulfilled rather than understanding destruction as an essential aspect of an ongoing process of undoing, which is implicit in creating the new. At stake is the destruction of mythic structures and codifying forms that obscure the undeniable presence of others, the openness and potential of the present, and the creative potential of life itself. The politics of the disaster, therefore, is a valuation of the process of dismantling structures as such, but insofar as it is understood as an ongoing and impossible project, it can never be accomplished or fulfilled. It is understood that the very forces that undo myth simultaneously re-establish myth and thus must themselves be undone. This is not, however, to say that the specific content of the works that produce the undoing of myth is unnecessary or irrelevant. To the contrary, the attempt to communicate itself begins to gesture toward the common in ways not bound by ideological limits. The interruption of myth “communicates – in the sense that what it puts into play, sets to work, and destines to unworking, is nothing but communication itself, the passage from one to another, the sharing of one by the other” (Nancy 65). This process is akin to a process of *gesture*, whereby, according to Giorgio Agamben, “*The gesture is the exhibition of a*

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without any content or goal, it becomes global capitalism. Therefore, a double opposition occurs between the logics of myth and the dismantling of it: both totalitarianism vs. fascism and totalitarianism vs. capitalism.

*mediality: it is the process of making a means visible as such.* It allows the emergence of the being-in-a-medium of human beings and thus it opens the ethical dimension for them” (*Means Without End* 58). Though it lacks stable ideological content, a politics of the disaster addresses what appears to be a much more pressing question in contemporary American politics: how to imagine a process of making-common within the fragmentary structures of capitalist life.

- 3 *The disaster is mediated.* The disaster is impossible, and insofar as it exists only as that which is gestured toward, those gestures occur culturally. Nancy calls the works that interrupt myth “literature,” but he insists that this term is not intended to indicate sole relevance to the medium of print. Rather, “‘literature’ does not designate here what this word ordinarily indicates. What is in fact involved is the following: that there is an *inscription* of the communitarian exposition, and that this exposition, as such, can *only* be inscribed, or can be offered only by way of an inscription” (39). This means that insofar as the distinction still concerns us, we must understand the politics of the disaster to be a cultural process. At stake are media-constructions and the ways in which they do or do not interrupt the processes of mythification and codification through which contemporary forms of power function. If the primary operation of control is discourse, discourse is also the primary operation of challenging responses to that control. This does not, however, suggest that a refusal of the status quo can occur through a matter of speaking, writing, or creating images about any particular thing; unfortunately, the usefulness of truth-telling in our current political environment has been

seriously called into question. Instead, it is a matter of introducing discourse that dismantles discursive control – disastrous discourse. And insofar as the disaster is a process of repetition, no single cultural work can be understood to convoke a politics of the disaster. Rather, there is disastrous cultural potential in ongoing movements, processes, chains of linking and delinking cultural moments of myth-making, interruption, codification and incoherence.

- 4 *The disaster repeats.* One way the disaster breaks apart myth is by destroying the cause and effect temporality of narrative. If myth “shapes” time, the disaster shatters that shape and restores instability and freedom to the force of time. It does this by replacing a temporality of cause and effect with repetition. The very impossibility of the disaster constructs this temporality – since the disaster can never be achieved, there can be no fulfillment or imagined end to the process of disastering. Thus, instead of a cause... effect arc, the disaster constructs a cause... cause... cause... circuit that disrupts the temporal process of subjugating life to myth, experience to goal, commonality to community, and time to space. In order to avoid becoming either mythically colonized or fascistically fulfilled by itself, the disaster must repeat. Blanchot arrives at this conclusion while discussing qualities of fragmentary discourse. He argues, “There cannot be a successful, a satisfactory fragment, or one indicating the end at last, the cessation of error, and this would be the case if for no other reason that every fragment, though unique, repeats, and is undone by repetition” (42). The fragment, like Nancy’s “literature,” is singular, and yet repetitive in its insistence upon its own

singularity. Thus, the repetition of disaster is never repetition of the same, but repetition that points to and affirms the incessant singularity of being, and insofar as that singularity is essential to being, the fragment, literature, and the disastrous discourse that it constructs, points to the universality of that singularity: “a single clamour of Being for all beings” (Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 304).

It is no coincidence that a turn away from the politics of representation, and the co-opting of the potential inherent in instability into the representation of disasters, also entails turning away from televised catastrophes. By introducing an incessant “flow” of “free” images, televised catastrophes are the perfect simulacra of a politics of the disaster; they draw much of their power from the same source as that which might fuel the possibility for change: crisis, interruption, and the destruction of stable narratives. By mimicking this process, catastrophe coverage and the emotion of fear that it entails provides a tempting mirage for those who are in search of ruptures, potential, and creativity. But what precisely is the potential that this mimicry cloaks? What can repetition do when freed from the set narrative outcome that fear invokes, and what other, possibly more volatile but also more evocative emotions might emerge? What can disaster do if it is understood as an impossible concept that only serves as a beacon to follow in the perpetual destruction of myth? To ask these questions is, in a larger sense, to examine the fraught consequences of change and the bodily states that accompany them, for emotions can often attest to the most complex political consequences of various forms of art, thought, and life. Any move to create a future that is qualitatively different from the present entails a process of ripping away, of breaking, of loss. But in order to

affirm the possibility of change, this process must not be trapped within categories of passivity, victimhood, or pathology. Equally dangerous is the avoidance of the shattering at the heart of change – this too often leads to an irresponsible utopianism in revolutionary ideology. If change is ambivalent, fragmentary, partial, painful, and mediated, an exploration of cultural projections of change and their affective constructions is absolutely vital to contemporary political thought.

## II. GRIEF

*“Where now? Who now? When now?”*

*–Samuel Beckett*

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Change entails loss, even if that loss is welcome. The possibility of change relies upon the possibility of breaking various structures that stabilize the status quo, be it gradually through slow evolution and measured reforms or abruptly through sudden ruptures and revolutionary upheavals. While political, intellectual, and emotional change all converge at this core structural process – of breaking the old in order to invent the new – the way we speak about political change differs considerably from the way we tend to speak about emotional change. It is often politically expedient, if not necessary, to talk about change as if it might occur without loss. This elision occurs in political rhetoric of the right and the left, in that of moderates and radicals alike. The avoidance of what fades away in the process of change is even more pronounced in the context of neoliberal capitalism where productivity is a core ethic; the invocation of loss is potentially menacing to the neoliberal set of values because it threatens to introduce inactivity or deprivation into a system dependent upon a widespread belief in the continuous active construction of successes.

While political and economic discourses tend to gloss over any loss that might occur in the process of change, emotional discourse, on the other hand, tends to

emphasize the presence of sadness even in moments of great possibility in ways that border on equally problematic sentimentality. Commonplaces around rituals ranging from commencements to funerals often invoke these clichés. The danger of these commonplaces is visible, for instance, in the practice of giving the bride away in marriage ceremonies. While it does invoke the simultaneity of loss and generation, it does so as a way of reinforcing the passing of patriarchal privilege from the father to the husband. Therefore in both of these discourses, in the rhetoric and rituals of both politics and emotional life, the scrambled elements of change – the joy of transformation for the better and the pain of losing – are filtered through neat categories that fuel social expressions of dominance and commodity capitalism as antidotes to the difficulty of coming to terms with the volatility of the new.

If political discourse is often sanitized from the complexity of the possibility of pain that accompanies change for the better, and if emotional discourse is often overly codified, appropriating that ambivalence to support structures of control, how can we talk about change in ways that might acknowledge the complexity of moving away from the past and into the future? Acknowledging that change does not occur cleanly, that the future does not emerge automatically and without the disintegration of prior structures of support, involves recognizing the presence of grief at the heart of change. But just as change is never simple, neither is grief. For this reason, it is important to tread carefully: since our emotional vocabulary around loss is often as impoverished as our political vocabulary, applying one to another can have catastrophic results. This is apparent in many expressions of politicized mourning, which often only serve to bolster the power of the dominant political imaginary. Instead, the construction of a useful concept of grief as

a necessary component of change entails looking closely not only at traditional modes of bereavement and mourning, but at what it means to disrupt forms of narrative temporality, since this is often what change entails. The loss and instability that emerges from change often appears when the expectations of the past are not fulfilled – when instead, something new emerges. This unexpected production of the future can only occur when narrative time does not carry out its promises – when the past does not fully anticipate the future. Grief can thus be understood as an affective state that corresponds to a break in narrative.<sup>19</sup> Consequently, prose fiction, which culturally exemplifies narrative form, can provide potentially generative material through which to explore breaks in expectation and the grief that might emerge.

Don DeLillo's novella, *The Body Artist*, constructs a grief-state both thematically and formally. The work is about a woman's experience living in the aftermath of her husband's suicide, but it goes beyond simply narrating her process of mourning. In fact, the novella performs grief precisely by not-narrating a mourning process. Remarkably for a work of prose fiction, *The Body Artist* consists primarily of sensations, experiences, and images that do not contribute to a traditional plot. It thus constructs grief through the breaking of its own narrative structure and provides fertile material through which to start constructing a more complex understanding of the relationship between grief and change. This relationship between narrative time, rupture, and the potential of futurity also draws

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<sup>19</sup> My concept of grief thus shares some important ground with work on trauma and writing by theorists such as Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman and Dori Laub. Caruth, Felman, and Laub all look at the difficult relationship between trauma and literature in efforts to examine the tension between the ineffable qualities of trauma and the attempt to bear witness to it. Yet my interest in grief as a formal property of prose fiction differs from concepts of trauma because rather than seeing grief as an exceptional experience, I see it as internal to processes and cultural constructions of change – traumatic and otherwise. My choice to turn to a different group of theorists – whose tendency to take an affirmative posture admittedly puts them in a complicated position in regards to loss – is based upon my interest in examining grief as one of many affective constructs that appears in contemporary American cultural work that addresses the often fraught political and ethical consequences of change.



from the work of theorists Henri Bergson, Gilles Deleuze, and Elizabeth Grosz who consider temporality to be a key aspect of both affective experience and of politics. These theorists offer a context through which to develop grief as a concept that offers a bodily model for understanding transformative decisions – one that suggests the possibility that certain forms of bodily sensation might be as important as structures of knowledge in understanding ethical and political choices. Returning to *The Body Artist*, this relationship between the impulses of the body and the rational understanding of the mind can be seen to undergo a crisis in the state of grief, pointing to the productive possibilities of loss toward a project of change – a project that finds political relevance in the cultivation of an a-rational commitment to a world that promises no salvation, that consists primarily of danger, but that nevertheless is the staging ground for any appeal to the possibility for a better future.

#### *The Body Artist* I: Narrative and Grief

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One reason why Don DeLillo's *The Body Artist* provides such an interesting case study in what narrative disruption might offer to a concept of grief is that it constructs a deeply felt affective state through some highly experimental work in narrative subjectivity. While the novella tells the story of one woman's evolving creative, emotional, and intellectual relationship with the loss of her husband, it does not, like other novels of this type, rest on a stable central subject. The loose construction of Lauren Hartke, the novella's central character, as a psychologically unified subject challenges psychological readings of grief – presenting grief as instead a question of narrative and

meaning-making. As Lauren moves through different ways of thinking about narrative and identity, the process of moving from one way of life to another is exposed as deeply painful, threatening, but also fundamental to the creative generation of new forms of life. Thus thematically and formally, *The Body Artist* engages with grief as a crucial aspect of the production of new forms of life, one that is both deeply centered in corporeal sensation and also somewhat displaced from a particular psychological center of consciousness.

This peculiar relationship between the establishment of Lauren as at once a specific corporeal sensory consciousness and a strangely desubjectified narrator is visible particularly in the first chapter of the novella. While the narrative voice is primarily centered in Lauren's perceptions, it is oddly devoid of self-conscious meditation or introspection. Instead, the narrative is almost compulsively outward-looking as it categorizes and notes the minutia of daily life through a self-conscious attempt to use narrative effectively, even though language often fails. The meticulous account of the last morning Lauren and her husband, Rey, will have together constructs Lauren as the consciousness behind a radically singular third person voice while she is also intensely objectified by the narrative. This odd narrative center often causes interruptions and edits in the middle of phrases, intervening in what is otherwise a string of simple perceptions:

She went to the counter and poured soya over the cereal and fruit. The lever sprang or sprung and he got up and took his toast back to the table and then went for the butter and she had to lean away from the counter when he approached, her milk carton poised, so he could open the drawer and get a butter knife. (10)

In this short passage, the confusion between "sprang or sprung" highlights the assumption that the record of experience in this chapter, while seemingly encyclopedic in its attention to detail, is also profoundly limited by the capacity of a single consciousness

to not only notice, but to put into language, the stream of daily experience. This very issue recurs with a repetition of the same scene several pages later when the action is recalled: “she’d had to sort of jackknife away from the counter when he approached to get the butter knife” (12). The reiteration of the exact same moment, this time as a linguistic pun, points to a single narrative center, Lauren, as mediator between world and record and yet it also describes the posture of Lauren’s body from an oddly decentered position. In this way, Lauren as narrative consciousness appears to be a single perspective through which the story unfolds but Lauren’s body seems to be object, as much as subject, of the narrative.

Lauren-as-subject, therefore, is a very tricky matter. While there is clearly a single perceptive consciousness in the narrative, there is insufficient self-consciousness to anchor Lauren’s identity. The few self-conscious descriptions we get of Lauren’s mental state offer little help. We know that “she tended lately to place herself, to insert herself into certain stories in the newspaper,” but this capacity to turn outward reflects on her inner life as well: “she carried a voice in her head that was hers and it was dialogue or monologue and she went to the cabinet where she got the honey and the tea bags – a voice that flowed from a story in the paper” (16). This reflexive relationship between Lauren and the strangers in the newspaper undermines the stability of the single-narrative perspective considerably. Not only can Lauren inhabit others, but she is chronically inhabited as well. While her narrative is limited by her vocabulary and capacity to notice, her sense of self appears to be uniquely permeable, and, subsequently, the novella cannot resolve into a character analysis of Lauren because it is never clear exactly who Lauren is... or isn’t.

This tension in the relationship between Lauren as a perceptive consciousness and Lauren as an individual subject explodes in the context of loss. Breaking from the narrative structures that give her perceptions shape in the beginning of the novella (making breakfast, for instance), Lauren is confronted with the possibility of losing herself from those narrative structures altogether and thus with the possibility of throwing off any subjective shape to her experience. Directly after Rey's suicide, Lauren immediately recognizes the problem of grief as connected to the problem of narrative. She passes her days mechanically, compulsively attached to markers of time such as ferry schedules and breathing exercises. Her plan to "organize time until she could live again" (37) rests on a disassociation between life and time, as if her narrative might proceed regardless of whether or not her life moves it forward. In this sense, Lauren uncharacteristically subordinates herself to an imagined, automatic, narrative temporality.

The assumption that this narrative will occur automatically, however, is called into question by the appearance of a strange young man in Lauren's home. He has no name or identity, he speaks only through citations of others, and even his physical appearance is washed out and ageless. His lack of stable subject position is linked to his lack of capacity to distinguish between past, present, and future. As a result, he experiences past and future moments through others, becoming them through speech and gesture. This recalls the voices in the paper that inhabit Lauren at the beginning of the novella, but pushes that tendency to the point of total desubjectification. After the young man becomes Rey in this manner, uncannily speaking his words in his voice, Lauren looks to this possibility of stopping time, of living perpetually in a group of always-present and palpable simultaneous moments, as a way of life that could allow her to avoid

leaving the dead behind. Confronted by the possibility of living in co-existent presents without moving into the future, away from Rey and into his absence, Lauren experiments with giving herself over to grief and thus begins a process aimed at the dissolution of her identity. As she allies herself with the young man, Lauren literally scrubs layers off of her skin, bleaches her hair, and de-pigments herself to the point where she becomes “colorless, bloodless and ageless” (103). As she connects the young man’s capacity to live in overlapping temporal states with an inability to experience time as a stable fabric of normative duration, she too rejects both identity and narrative in favor of retreat, stretching the present until it encompasses past and future.

This pausing in the present, however, threatens to become stasis. This is apparent in the young man, who cries in his room late at night, “alone and unable to improvise, make himself up” (90). The helplessness of the young man shows that while pushing forward against the unknown and resisting narrative conceptions of time is vital to innovation and production, bivouacking oneself in the void hinders ethical action just as much as traditional complacency does. This demonstrates the danger of abandoning signification and subjectification entirely. Life must exist through means other than either total rejection of normative experiences of time, narrative, and subjectivity or complacent participation in the status quo. *The Body Artist*, however, appears to offer these two options for possible ways of living through loss—either to “organize time” or to “[s]ink lower. . . . Let it bring you down. Go where it takes you” (116). The problem of grief in the novella is the problem of anchoring an active life in an abyss of meaninglessness. The temptation to dive into that abyss and make a home there is linked with the presence of

the dead in that place; there time does not pass, life does not push forward, and subsequently the living and the dead can coexist.

It is this empty center, where signification and subjectivity fall away, where all that is left is stammering, wailing, and despair, that the young man inhabits in *The Body Artist*. Despair, as it is materialized in the character of the young man, is essentially this stopping in the interstice, the refusal to allow time to pass into action, the inhabiting of a void of timelessness for its own sake. For that reason, while he disrupts habitual narrative assumptions, his presence ultimately threatens nihilism and suicide. At the same time, for Lauren, he is a catalyst for creative manipulation of temporality through art. Becoming the young man aesthetically—by altering her body, speaking in his voice, and eventually constructing a performance piece (her body-art) in which she lip-synchs to the conversations she has recorded with him—is, for Lauren, somewhere between capitulation to narrative norms and capitulation to despair. In this way, it embodies the ambivalence at the heart of grief and change. While her work is a failure in that it does not and cannot stall time completely (she tells an interviewer, ““It ought to be sparer, even slower than it is, even longer than it is. It ought to be three fucking hours”” (106)) in becoming art it refuses to reside in total absence of action and instead throws itself out upon the world. The creative work thus mirrors the process of grief in that it emerges out of something ineffable and yet insists that it must speak, even if that speech is like the young man’s: incoherent, high and squeaky, and cluttered with disjunctive tenses.

Lauren’s art is necessarily a failure in this sense, but the failure itself is deeply important. As Giorgio Agamben suggests, the very act of attempting to communicate and failing at that attempt exposes the communicative medium in all of its potentiality. The

gesture toward communication “is, in this sense, communication of communicability. It has precisely nothing to say because what it shows is the being-in-language of human beings as pure mediality” (59). Thus, means and ends are detached from one another in what Agamben defines as gestural work. The attempt to say becomes more important than the communication of one thing or another. In this way, by hesitating within the linear progression of narrative time, grief provides the obstruction to communication in Lauren’s piece that allows it to point towards the struggle to communicate and the impossibility of containing time, affect, and the body entirely within a single narrative system. Importantly, this gesture is not akin to nihilism. The performance of the attempt to say is as much a performance of the relentless pursuit of life as it is the performance of the impossibility to communicate. Grief in *The Body Artist*, therefore, is a deeply ambivalent state of being, producing detachment from everyday life on one hand and a vigorous commitment to it on the other.

DeLillo’s work is, in this way, itself a gesture. When the novella finally pushes Lauren out into the world, the narrative suddenly surrenders to expectations of the narrative form that it otherwise resists until the final page. In the last paragraph, just as Lauren opens her bedroom window to feel “the flow of time in her body, to tell her who she was,” she is also given a psychological history for the first time. Suddenly, the phrase “[h]er mother died when she was nine” (124) drops into the text almost as a non sequitur. While the text resists attributing grief to the emotional life of a single subject until the final lines, in order to put Lauren back into life, the form of the novella requires that she be put back into narrative, and thus the textual and ontological state of grief must become “her grief,” comfortably contained within a subject. Prose fiction is thus restricted by its

own structural constraints and ultimately succumbs to the narrative requirements of its generic form. While DeLillo's work fails in this sense, however, its very failure points to the value of the attempt to keep the tension between paralysis and action, grief and change, dynamic.

*The Body Artist* thus offers a strange portrait of grief that seizes as much upon formal experimentation with narrative as any elaboration of the psychological state of bereavement. Grief, in the novella, is one way of thinking about a strange state of almost-paralysis and almost-ineffability that exists in an interval between one way of life and another. The narrative play that DeLillo uses to illustrate Lauren's flirtation with the despair and total disidentification that the young man embodies on one hand and the illusion of the automatic passing of time on the other emphasizes the state of loss and flux at the center of change and new forms of activity. Grief is thus a state of narrative disruption that is generative of new forms of life and creativity. While *The Body Artist* does not articulate this state in political terms, the work does offer ways of thinking through the consequences of the affective state of grief for political concepts of change and progress – perhaps even more so because its invention on the level of form exceeds the boundaries of traditional political and philosophical discourse. It thus offers a contribution to work already underway that considers the relationship between forms of narrative temporality and affective states to be central to the construction of new political concepts.



In the case of *The Body Artist*, the state of grief emerges from the experience of loss; Lauren's experimentation with various modes of narrative and identity occurs in the context of a radical alienation from traditional structures of time that the death of her husband brings. Nevertheless, the state of grief, which arises out of the disruption of the apparently automatic continuity of narrative says as much about the potential for the future to be undetermined by the past as it does about any individual psychological emotional response to the loss of a particular object. Grief, in Don DeLillo's work, appears to be a condition of narrative as much as a condition of a specific thematic situation. As a result, the novella can be used to generate a concept of grief that goes beyond the subjective experience of death or the psychological condition of bereavement, and instead articulates the state of loss that can be understood to be at the center of any process of change. Grief, in this sense, remains emotional, but characterizes a state of being that is at once deeply embedded in the body and politically relevant beyond the individual. This way of thinking about the relationship between affects and politics challenges traditional distinctions between the public and the private, and contributes to contemporary theoretical projects that aim to understand various affective states as having significant cultural and political implications.

Theorists interested in expanding Foucault's concept of biopolitics, for instance, have recently provided a basis for rethinking the binary between private states (emotions and affects) on the one hand and public states (labor and politics) on the other. From Paolo Virno's work on the politics of opportunism to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's analysis of affective labor, the production of affects has become a central concern of

biopolitical thought. This consideration, however, has been limited in several ways. First, having freed affects from the constraints of psychological individualism, many biopolitical theorists simply reinstate the affects exclusively into the realms of labor and political economy. For instance, while Virno explains, “With the expression ‘emotional situation’ I do not refer, let it be clear, to a cluster of psychological tendencies, but to ways of being and feeling so pervasive that they end up being common to the most diverse categories of experience (work, leisure, feelings, politics, etc.),” (84) his analysis of these emotions is concerned primarily with their implications for wage labor. Similarly, while biopower, according to Hardt and Negri’s analysis of Foucault, is “expressed as a control that extends throughout the depths of the consciousness and bodies of the population—and at the same time across the entirety of social relations,” (*Empire* 24) the analysis that follows focuses on the manner in which biopower changes the conditions and meaning of labor and politics rather than examining the ways in which formerly personal aspects of life emerge as political forces.

A notable exception to this trend appears in a lesser-known work by Negri, a collection of essays spanning two decades published under the title, *Time for Revolution*. In each essay, Negri takes up the construction of forms of lived time and their relationship to revolutionary projects of change. In developing his arguments, he turns to various bodily states in order to develop phenomenological components to his theories of political transformation. According to Negri, time does not consist of a predictable linear progression, but is instead marked by an unpredictable series of ruptures that constitute creative production. Time moves forward by the construction of a *to-come* out of a confrontation with time itself that is understood as perpetually restless and immeasurable.

Thus, the future does not occur automatically, and the present is always on the brink of a great void to be filled only with the immanent production of the lives within it. Negri terms this production of the *to-come* out of the confrontation with the void of time “*kairos*.” He explains, “*kairos* is the instant, that is to say, the quality of time in the instant, the moment of rupture and opening of temporality. . . . *Kairos* is the modality of time through which being opens itself, attracted by the void at the limit of time, and it thus decides to fill that void” (152). *Kairos* is the “power to experience temporality” itself, removed from the linear spatializations we tend to impose upon it. These spatial concepts of time ordinarily limit our concepts of the *to-come* by constructing a stable concept of the future which is nothing but the sum total of past (“dead”) events. The liberation of the *to-come*, which hinges on *kairos* as “the event of real knowledge. . . precisely at the point where the restlessness of time reveals itself as power” (152), allows for the possibility of truly creative action because the emptiness at the edge of time and the lack of durational future open up the *to-come* to be filled by new modes of political life.

There is, however, a void in this theory of the void. *Kairos*, as a single concept in Negri’s theoretical matrix, does too much work. In encompassing both the moment of recognition of the restlessness of time and action upon it, it collapses the inevitable interval between leaning out over the abyss and the decision that constitutes the production of the *to-come*. While the argument that these two acts must always be simultaneous is, in some ways, essential to the development of *kairos* as praxis (Negri suggests that the concept allows for interpretation and action at once), it does so by ignoring the posture of the living body in the theory. As we see in the messy affective

content of *The Body Artist*, for instance, “[b]eing’s act of leaning out over the void of the time *to-come*” rarely offers a completely safe and seamless transition into total freedom of action, naming, and production. Instead, this very engagement with the void that is necessary for creativity often threatens to stop time entirely in face of the indeterminacy of the future rather than filling it with creative power.

Negri does momentarily consider this difficulty inherent in the present as interval between what has come before and what has yet to be produced, yet once again it seems that the difficulty is resolved automatically – a deterministic view of time that clashes, in a sense, with the Negri’s concept of time as radically open to decision and action. He argues,

The corporeal field of ontological reflection is eternal and the field that is determined by *kairos* is absolutely open. But if the body is the ‘bearer’ (*Träger*) of *kairos*, it will not be easy for it to sustain this relationship. Yet it does so because the body... is nourished by the gap that generates the immeasurable.... the corporeal reflection is thus an ontological immersion that activates the eternal through its opening on the edge of being, the point of the *to-come*. (174)

Negri concedes that the relationship between the body and the immeasurable is inevitably difficult, but rather than engaging with this difficulty, his argument proceeds by suggesting that bodies will inevitably react to emptiness by generating rather than collapsing. The case of *The Body Artist* shows, however, that creative engagement with the unknown is not always the outcome of the exposure to a void of meaninglessness.

The total temporal disorientation of Lauren’s young man, and his extreme and paralyzing despair suggest the opposite – that it takes a unique orientation to the void to creatively act upon it. It is therefore essential to take a close look at the bodies that do collapse upon inhabiting the immeasurable as well as those who can sustain the tension of meaninglessness and creativity in order to qualitatively describe the conditions that allow

for *kairos* to form a complete process and not short circuit into a suicidal attachment to indeterminacy, fragmentation, and emptiness.

Negri's lack of engagement with the complex affective content of *kairos* translates into the political argument of *Time for Revolution* even more problematically. Negri defines *love* as the force that constitutes the common out of an engagement with the unknown. For Negri, love is a force of generation, commitment to being, and creativity. He explains, "Love as biopolitical power is the name of absolute immanence, but of an immanence that generates" (214). Love is political, however, only when it is manifest socially, by generating networks of singularities on the political field. In order to provide a viable political basis for action, love must appear on the scene as a force that touches upon strangers and friends alike. Thus, the bodies that are linked through the force of love must be radically open to the possibility of this radical form of affection. This opening, Negri argues, occurs as a result of exposure to extreme instability and indeterminacy. In order to examine this necessary precondition to love, Negri develops a concept of *poverty*:

Those most exposed to the immeasurable are the poor. When he appears before us, the poor person is naked on the edge of being, without any alternative. The misery, ignorance and disease that defines poverty, along with the experience of the indigent condition of the body, of the needy biopolitical situation, of the desirous disposition of the soul – that together form the shape and arc of the bow – nevertheless constitute a point from which the arrow constitutive of time is released with increased strength. (194)

Suddenly, the violence done to the body by the posture of engagement with the void appears on the theoretical scene, but only momentarily. In the name of avoiding the "easy rhetorical game of negative dialectics, which aims to give to absolute nudity the privilege of an eminent valorization" (194), Negri argues that in fact, the poor person is not poor at

all. The exposed poor, defined by “misery, ignorance, and disease,” are described as helpless and vulnerable, but only *in a good way*. He explains, “The poor person is then not someone constituted by pain, but is *in reality* the biopolitical subject. He is not an existential trembling (or a painful dialectical differentiation): he is the naked eternity of the power of being” (194). The conceptual use of the term *poverty* is intended to invoke an economic situation (the poor replace the proletariat in Negri’s revolutionary narrative) and an ontological-affective state at once. The term has the potential to invoke the pain that change entails, but this chance is woefully missed. Once again, the interval between the difficulty of breaking prior structures and the revolutionary claiming of those structures is collapsed and fuels a relentless teleological narrative toward a utopian revolutionary climax. Negri thus avoids engaging with the difficult valences of the term *poor* at all costs, preferring to focus on the potential that the poor offer without the complexities that arise out of a consideration of poverty as an economic or an affective situation. In attempting to negotiate a compromise between economic materialism and corporeal materialism, Negri weakens both positions, thus turning *poor* into a concept that loses its economic force and its affective complexity. Though the poor are confronted with the total openness of time, and thus total loss of meaning, and though their very bodies teeter on the edge of existence, the very concept of poverty, according to Negri, “excludes that of death in as much as, in order to live, the poor have already overcome death. The poor have put death behind themselves: the common is exalted by this realization” (197). The potential inherent in the recognition of the essential ambivalence of the openness to the immeasurable, the simultaneous potential and pain, promise and danger, is thus glossed over into a thin utopianism in Negri’s argument.

When Spinoza argues that “a free man thinks of death least of all things, and his wisdom is a meditation of life, not of death” (108), he does so to persuade thought away from sadness, which, he argues, ultimately limits a being’s powers of activity and creativity. To contemplate contemporary politics, however, is to be confronted with the corporeal realities of pain and death, and to engage with the destruction of meaning is to engage with loss. The contemplation of potential and change thus must also involve the contemplation of loss or grief. The term *grief*, which retains its connection with loss, death, and disorientation, also can encompass the myriad ambivalent states of pain that emerge from creative engagement with life. The theoretical inclusion of these states of pain in concepts of change, far from limiting action, instead clarifies the challenge of thinking through processes of change for the better. When action can occur in the context of grief, transformation is possible. While grief is the affective state that occurs in the wake of having-lost, it is not synonymous with despair or paralysis because it is understood to be a part of the generation of new forms of activity. Nevertheless, grief complicates utopian revolutionary hopes because it invokes the impossibility of erasing the interval between the loss of the old and the creation of the new. It is thus the ambivalent state of in-between, the durational hesitation between habitual participation informed by the status quo and the capacity for creative production in the world. Its complex conceptual possibilities express themselves in a variety of ways:

- 1 *Grief emerges out of an event or moment of rupture.* The cloaking of the restlessness of time in narrative and spatial metaphors is not simply a philosophical misconception; it is a precondition for the survival of the

sociopolitical status quo. The productive power that can appear in the face of an indeterminate future is a threat to regimes of control precisely because it is always immanent within those very structures. The stakes are thus high for maintaining the illusion of the future as predictable, certain, and already-present. Therefore, the unveiling of the instability of the future cannot occur without a catalyst, an event, or a rupture that points to the immeasurability of time itself. Even if it does not take the form of the death of an individual, something changes dramatically, and thus something is lost, the world changes, a life no longer seems consistent, predictable, and safe. In the loosest sense, then, all ruptures are grief-producing. Recognizing this ambivalence in the disruption of control mechanisms, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari point to the inevitable difficulty of moving beyond ordering strata: “in the absence of strata we no longer have forms or substances, organization or development, content or expression. We are disarticulated. ... How could unformed matter, anorganic life, nonhuman becoming be anything but chaos pure and simple?” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 503). Disarticulation and chaos are never easily negotiated. Their very difficulty, however, makes them potentially productive.

- 2 *Grief is not limited to a subject/object relation.* As DeLillo’s novella shows in its experimental play with subjectivity, narrative, and perception, grief can be understood to be a condition of narrative forms of time and continuity. It thus can emerge as a relation between an individual and a lost object, as it is thematically expressed through Lauren’s loss of Rey, but it can also be seen in myriad



experiences of discontinuity that move beyond the bounds of a single subject and her loss. Cultural works like *The Body Artist* can construct grief as a quality of narrative – as a disruption to the linear flow of time. Grief can emerge in historical narratives whenever ruptures in expectation are understood to construct possibility. Revolutions, with the ambivalent marks of death and possibility that they retain, produce grief, as do technological innovations and territorial insurrections.

- 3 *Grief exposes the discontinuities possible in time.* Grief has the temporal quality of hesitation. It interrupts habitual narratives of life by intervening on the body. When something fundamental to the basic assumptions of a life is lost, that life no longer seems to proceed automatically; time itself appears jagged, discontinuous, and unpredictable. Grief thus delinks time from its mediating spatial structures – those that emphasize linearity and continuity by metaphorically connecting time with space – and exposes its indeterminacy. When Deleuze argues that the beginning of the time-image in cinema is contingent upon a situation which “does not extend into action,” which “makes us grasp... something intolerable and unbearable” (18), he therefore implicitly links time with an affective state akin to grief. In Deleuze’s work, the shock of grief can thus be understood as the shock of time; the disruption of movement and spatial relations in the cinematic image results in the direct exposure of time. This exposure of time, however, in Deleuze’s cinematic examples as in life, does not automatically extend into action. There is a hesitation in the absence of narrative before action can occur.

This interval is a necessary temporal addition to Negri's concept of *kairòs*. The rupture, the leaning off into the void, itself should be understood to have duration. The creation of new forms of action thus involves hesitating or stretching out the delay between perception and action, interpretation and engagement. The interval of grief, the shattering of the capacity for action, renders this temporality visible.

- 4 *Grief remains ambivalent.* Grief is always *between* one form of life and another, the past and the future. It is unsettling because it marks the end of what is known, but in so doing, it points outside of itself toward an unknown *to-come*. Grief also always vacillates between acceptance (the incorporation of the event into pre-existing structures of safety) and despair (total disintegration and paralysis in the wake of the event). While it can settle in either of those states, once it does so it ceases to be grief. Grief itself is the refusal either to accept or to be destroyed, the uncertainty that one can go on and the continuance of life in the face of that uncertainty. In this sense, it insists upon the difficult posture of the body on the brink of choice and the resistance to categorization that makes corporeal life both so difficult to theorize and so useful to theoretical discourse. The undecidability that grief produces on the brink of decision should thus not simply resolve into the sum total of a rational cause/effect analysis, nor should it result in a blind jump into the unknown. The ambivalence that vacillates between acceptance and despair must resolve into a form of active connection with the world that is neither rational-habitual nor chaotic-suicidal. This irrational will to construct links

with a painful and essentially meaningless existence can emerge only from the corporeal insistence that one go on despite so much evidence to the contrary.

Grief complicates contemporary theories of change and transformation considerably by pointing to the potential within the painful emotional state of loss that often accompanies new possibilities. The loss that produces grief, however, is not merely the loss of an object – it is, much more radically, a loss of temporal assumptions. The disruption of narrative time produces both the potential for change to occur for the better and a dangerous state of hesitation in the interval between the establishment of discontinuity and the commitment to action and resumption of new forms of narrative time. Perhaps no other theorist has been so interested in this interval than Henri Bergson, who constructs a model of the brain and its relationship to time on the basis of a process by which perception is translated into action. His work, along with the investigations of the theorists who follow him, provides a theoretical context through which to imagine what forms of action might emerge out of the interval of grief.

#### Generative Grief, Active Hesitation

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Henri Bergson turns to the functions of the human brain in order to provide a corporeal basis for the ethical value of hesitating between perception and action. His work thus offers a model for the possibility of negotiating the ambivalence between the need to destroy habits of perception and action on one hand and the equal necessity to reject paralysis or valuation of inaction on the other. In his introduction to *Matter and*

*Memory*, he establishes a dual psychological/metaphysical methodology to his analysis whereby two principles emerge:

The first is that in psychological analysis we must never forget the utilitarian character of our mental functions, which are essentially turned towards action. The second is that the habits formed in action find their way up to the sphere of speculation, where they create fictitious problems, and that metaphysics must begin by dispersing this artificial obscurity. (xxi)

While using a metaphysical methodology to struggle against habits built through practical engagement with the world of means and ends, movement and action, Bergson also insists upon the necessity of remaining at all times aware that thought is always essentially action-oriented. The psychological/metaphysical method thus relies upon the maintenance of a productive tension between the distrust of cause and effect narratives and the necessity to remain committed to material requirements for action in the world. This dual method corresponds to a similar negotiation in *The Body Artist*. Grief is understood to produce a difficult and often dangerous tension between the awareness of the constructed quality of the continuity of experience and the need to engage actively with the world which, to some extent, depends upon those artificial constructions (subjectivity, narrative, and linear time).

This need to find a way to conceptualize a process of generating action while also destroying conventional ways of thinking manifests itself in Bergson's neurological theory. For Bergson, the fundamental role of the brain is simple: it exists only to orient perception towards action. For that reason, thought can never remain indefinitely paused – it must push forward into action, and time and space only have significance in so far as perception is oriented toward a future deed. Nevertheless, Bergson does place temporal hesitation at the center of his theory of time, the brain, and action. For him, the brain is

best understood as a screen or sieve, a “zone of indetermination” that consciously perceives insofar as it splits matter into that which can pertain to possible action and that which does not. These zones of indetermination, “add nothing to what is there; they effect merely this: that the real action passes through, the virtual action remains” (32).

Consciousness, for Bergson, is a matter of choice directed towards action, a constant bifurcation of actual and virtual. But this movement from perception to action is never immediate or simultaneous except in cases of physical stimulus/response scenarios. In Bergson’s understanding, the more sophisticated the organism, the more choices it has to sort through, and as a result, the more time it takes for the brain to decide upon the act. Thus, “however brief we suppose any perception to be, it always occupies a certain duration, and involves consequently an effort of memory which prolongs one into another a plurality of moments” (25). This duration, the time that necessarily passes in the process of thought, makes some degree of hesitation central to concepts of activity and creativity.

This leads to a connection between time and indetermination, change, and potential in Bergson’s work. Elizabeth Grosz, who inherits Bergson’s interest in temporality and the construction of futures, explains, “what duration, memory, consciousness bring to the world is the possibility of an unfolding – a narrative – a hesitation” (106). Grosz does not see narrative here as synonymous with the restrictions of linear time – to the contrary, she sees the possibility of narrative as the possibility of a new political future. Hesitation, for Grosz, is oriented towards action and thus it does conform to a narrative action-oriented impulse, but it is not subjugated to a spatial register of past events pushing towards a stable future. Grosz thus suggests that Bergson

may be useful to feminist politics because of the potential that emerges out of the hesitation at the core of the production of narratives. She argues,

in light of this Bergsonian disordering of linear or predictable temporality, perhaps the open-endedness of the concept of the virtual may prove central in reinvigorating the concept of an open future by refusing to tie it to the realization of possibilities (the following of a plan) an linking it to the unpredictable, uncertain actualization of virtualities. (110)

In this sense, Bergson may offer a new way of understanding the fraught consequences of the indeterminacy of narrative in the case of *The Body Artist*. Grosz's expansion of Bergson's work offers a way of reading the strange pieces of psychological information at the end of the novella that at first appear to construct an ultimate capitulation to the narrative norms of prose fiction. In suggesting that a durational hesitation allows for a realignment between various actuals and virtuals in a narrative situation, Grosz suggests that forms of narrative that emerge after a hesitation might allow for the possibility of new constructions of the future even if those narrative aspects were understood to be present in the situation already. The lingering possibility that what was once not extended into action, remaining virtual and unextended, could, in the moment of hesitation, be expressed, offers a way of understanding the resumption of narrative as resisting capitulation to past structures. Thus Grosz's expansion of Bergson's concept of hesitation widens the possibilities for narrative to reject static commitment to inactivity while remaining open and undetermined by habitual structures of thought.

A close look at Deleuze's response to Bergson's model of the brain and time suggests, however, that this synthesis between the opening of the future and virtual possibilities inherent in the past might be too easy. In *Cinema 2*, Deleuze takes up Bergson's focus on the relationship between indetermination and action, and suggests

that extending the time delay between perception and action through cinematic images can offer ways of breaking habit and allowing new thought to emerge. He argues that while Bergson's theory "introduced a profound element of transformation: the brain was now only an interval, a void, nothing but a void, between a stimulation and a response," Deleuze suggests that "whatever the importance of this theory, this interval remained subject to an integrating whole... and to associations which traversed it" (211). To break this system of associations cinematically, montage, which formally constructs a mental process of associations, gives way to "a reversal where the image is unlinked and the cut begins to have an importance in itself... this time-image puts thought into contact with an unthought, the unsummonable, the inexplicable, the undecidable, the incommensurable" (213-4). Thus, Bergson's brain as "zone of indetermination" begins, for Deleuze, to take on value not just as a means of association, but also as the void that has value in and of itself. In this way, Deleuze argues that Bergson does not do enough to disengage time from narrative, to render the zone of indetermination free from pressures to conform to the habitual requirements of action. Insofar as the indetermination occurs only in the process of a movement from past to future, virtual to actual, it is still subject to the associations that appear to render the illegible legible. Deleuze thus suggests that unless the zone of indetermination is delinked from the eventually determinable actions, its indetermination can only weakly emerge.

The question, then, is whether it is possible to break the associations that traverse the zone of indetermination, to expose indeterminacy itself as possessing value and potential, not simply a means to an ends, and yet not remain committed to that indeterminacy to the point of stasis. In other words, we must ask whether grief can take

on value for itself without becoming suicidal and attaching itself permanently to loss and death. While Deleuze emphasizes the importance of rendering visible the process of breaking habits for its own sake, he also articulates explicitly what it is that is always endured in this process of breaking. The cinematic images that, he suggests, produce this state of indeterminacy point to the context of the endurance of the unknown, which is always a matter of something “too powerful, or too unjust, but sometimes also too beautiful, and which henceforth outstrips our sensory-motor capacities” (214). For Deleuze, everyday actions, stories, and images are not enough to detach means from ends, to point to the necessity of chaos in the center of creativity. The rupturing of experience and exposure to the excess of life, that Deleuze suggests a direct confrontation with time constructs, and which corresponds to the recognition of a shattering emptiness of stability and rationality, is within the conceptual category of grief: both dangerous and full of potential.

Deleuze does argue that once habitual connections are destroyed, a relinking process must occur, but not through the old circuits of perception, analysis, and action. The goal for contemporary cinema becomes, according to Deleuze, an attempt to restore dynamic life to thought, the body, and the world. Images that can serve to reconnect people to the world must “give words back to the body, to the flesh” in order to restore the belief in the body itself “as in the germ of life, the seed which splits open the paving-stones, which as been preserved and lives on in the holy shroud or the mummy’s bandages, and which bears witness to life, in this world as it is” (173). The very visibility of the body through the image creates the possibility of the cultivation of a belief in life, one that ultimately opens up a radical new form of commitment to the world. For



Deleuze, however, this form of commitment has nothing to do with action. In the films that Deleuze points to as providing these radical life-images, characters do not find ways of acting in the world. Instead, they find ways of not-acting by becoming visionaries and seers. He explains that while critics might argue that this posture is politically passive, “it is precisely the weakness of the motor-linkages, the weak connections, that are capable of releasing huge forces of disintegration... it is not the cinema that turns away from politics, it becomes completely political, but in another way” (19). If this politics has nothing to do with a representation of the capacity to act it is because ethics in this sense begins not with particular deeds, but with regaining the capacity to think and feel.

The politics of *Cinema 2* is a politics of seeing and thought rather than a politics of goal-oriented action. Yet Deleuze explicitly insists that this is not a matter of stagnancy or complacency. Just as the link between perception and action, means and ends, must be destroyed, the link between man and world must be broken so that we can see that it does not automatically exist. If life is impossible, unbearable, and unthinkable, cultural works must break the clichéd circuits by which we see the world as possible, bearable, and thinkable. In other words, they must construct grief. But this grief cannot be understood to be merely at the service of elaborating itself or as a nihilistic turn towards death as a value. The hesitation that grief constructs, and even the awareness of mortality that undercuts the assumption of the predictability of life narratives should constitute an invigorated commitment to an active orientation toward the world. Deleuze suggests that this reconnection best occurs through an engagement with the body, since “the body is no longer the obstacle that separates thought from itself.... It is on the contrary that which it plunges into or must plunge into in order to reach the unthought, that is life” (189). The

ambivalence of the body, its capacity for pleasure and pain, its essential unpredictability, allows for the attachment to both suffering and joy, and thus grief can become a catalyst for an engagement with life. In this view, the body is necessary to thought because “obstinate and stubborn, it forces us to think and forces us to think what is concealed from thought, life” (189). While experience is often subordinated to an adaptive mental apparatus that comfortably codifies, compartmentalizes, and neutralizes life, the body often disrupts these easy mechanisms by showing again and again how they fail in the corporeal context. For this reason, the body alone can ultimately answer to the need for “an ethic or a faith, which makes fools laugh; it is not a need to believe in something else, but a need to believe in this world, of which fools are a part” (173).

*The Body Artist* shows how narrative can offer its own emptiness of content as a formal gesture – how the breaking of narrative structures of prose fiction can expose the habitual assumptions we make about the relationship between the past and the future every day. The novella also shows thematically how essential it is in this context to definitively reject both types of temporal capitulation: to habitual perception-action assumptions and to total stasis in the name of meaninglessness. Deleuze argues that ultimately this project can only succeed through the construction of engagement that is not necessarily a subject-object oriented act, or a gathering of new forms of knowledge, but only through corporeal connection to the world. *The Body Artist* falls short of this goal on the level of large narrative structures because, as the final paragraph of the novella shows, the need to move perception in to action is collapsed into the assumption that action can only be accomplished by a subject defined by linear time and psychological history. In a sense, the novella fails to maintain a productive tension

between the unknown and action because of a misdiagnosis. In her state of grief, Lauren does not suffer from lack of linear time, but from lack of decisive action upon that essential lack. Grief, as force that emerges out of a rupturing of experience, destroys subject/object distinctions, disrupts linear time, and is always essentially ambivalent, is not itself paralyzing. Deleuze's work shows that the vacillation between acceptance (and consequential re-entering into linear time) and despair (detaching from the desire to find meaning entirely) can resolve into a form of bodily commitment that is neither rational-habitual nor chaotic-suicidal. His work with cinema thus has a larger ethical implication – one that is deeply connected with the potential inherent in grief. It suggests that this irrational will to construct links with a painful and essentially meaningless world can emerge only from the corporeal insistence that one go on despite so much evidence to the contrary.

It does not seem coincidental that Spinoza, whose work resonates with so many theorists today, partly because of its insistence upon bringing the body into such close contact with thought, sees desire as the fundamental “good” quality of being. His famous *conatus* states exactly this: “each thing, in so far as it is in itself, endeavors to persist in its own being” (108). This desire is not rational, because it does not necessarily conform to any prior categories of whether that being is good or bad. Instead, he argues, “we judge a thing to be good because we endeavor, will, seek after and desire it” (109). An affective connection to the world, which, emerging out of grief, insists upon life when that life is indeterminate, meaningless, and painful, suggests that we might judge life to be “good” despite all evidence. This irrational commitment can only be conveyed through the body, as the material of life that often exceeds discursive categories of thought and speech at

the same time as it persistently anchors life in the world. For that reason, only the body can sustain the grief that emerges out of the destruction of the categories that we often understand as allowing us to exist while still insuring that we continue to live by its own corporeal insistence upon existing.

*The Body Artist II: The Word and the Body*

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At the end of *The Body Artist*, Lauren begins to undergo a change in the way she perceives her world. The young man vanishes from her home, and with him, the embodiment of her grief-state. Without the young man to encapsulate and objectify the ways in which past and future collide in the face of her loss, time itself begins to overlap uncannily in the final pages of the novella. Yet at the precise time in which this temporal confusion begins to take hold, Lauren also begins to narrate her own story consciously. When the novella ends, abruptly, with Lauren turning once more to the world and away from the paralysis of timelessness, it seems that the convergence of this narrativizing impulse, temporal confusion, and Lauren's persistent anchoring in her own sensuous perception creates a decision to resume a life and to commit to an active form of existence. In short, with no rational narrative of transformation that suggests how Lauren reaches this decisive moment, some force of a-rational commitment must be understood to have occurred in these final pages. Yet if the end of the novella illustrates the cultivation of a new form of connection to the world, it does so only in the context of a great deal of skepticism toward narrative itself. The end of *The Body Artist* thus develops significant tension between the construction of corporeal sensation on one hand and the

impulse to narrate on the other. The reconciliation of this tension produces a critique of the narrative impulse itself, even while pointing to the possibility for narrative to enact the body and its potential through the ambivalence of grief.

The end of the novella epitomizes the fraught relationship between narrative and bodily sensation that exists throughout the work. As Lauren attempts to shed her subjectivity entirely, she paradoxically begins to narrate her own experience: “She thought in words sometimes, outright and fully formed” (113). She even begins to give herself instructions, directly attempting to shape her experience through narrative. Yet the narrative to which she attempts to shape herself is precisely the lack of narrative that the presence of the young man suggests might be possible: “Sink lower, she thought. Let it bring you down. Go where it takes you” (116), and the presence of her conscious narration undermines her position as a stable subject: “Sometimes she thought in these motive forms, addressing someone who wasn’t quite her. . . . I am Lauren. But less and less” (117). The narrative Lauren invokes thus demands almost the precise opposite of what the traditional narrative structure of prose fiction tends to value. Whereas prose fiction usually relies upon a stable plot and a stable subject, Lauren begins to narrate her own experience as resisting the forward-push of a plot and dissolving any remaining center of her identity. Ultimately, when the moment comes for Lauren to choose between the infinite stopping-in-the-void of despair and the acceptance of life (which is figured as a return to traditional forms of subjectivity and time), this dissociative discourse breaks free almost entirely and shapes the last episode of the book.

In the novella’s final pages, Lauren resolves her flirtation with different forms of temporal experience into an absolute certainty that the past can coexist with the present.

Having vacillated between experiencing temporal simultaneity that would allow for Rey's continued presence and the resignation that the loss of him is permanent, she suddenly Lauren suddenly decides forcefully that Rey is alive in the house. She climbs the steps to their bedroom, knowing that "Rey was intact, in his real body, smoke in his hair and his clothes" (121). In the movement from this ambivalence to the certainty that Rey is present, her narrativizing impulse goes beyond what her body can sense and perceive. She is already aware of this abstractly before the scene plays out: "She knew how it would happen, past the point of playing it through, because she refused to yield to the limits of belief" (122). It is at this point that the language of the novella switches from a description of physical sensation to a series of dissociative directives, which emphasize the shaping power of narrative. This transition from corporeal perception to narrative knowledge performs the transformation of a sensation into a knowable certainty. This produces tension immediately between the body and narrative: "Once she steps into the room, she will already have been there, now, at night, getting undressed. It is a question of fitting herself to the moment" (122). Struggling to fit herself to the moment, and stubbornly refusing the limits of belief, Lauren's narrative consciousness violently confronts her corporeal experience. At this point, the novella begins to produce two Laurens, one who is physically present with Rey in the room, who "will already have been there, now," and the other who narrates the scene without looking, who tells herself what she will see if she looks into the bedroom.

This splitting becomes increasingly apparent as Lauren refuses to look into the room, "aware of the look on her face" (123). Again and again, this awareness of her own face stops her from physically turning to watch the story unfold that she creates of Rey

and Lauren alive and together in the bedroom just beyond the doorway where she stands.

But even without looking, her sensations overwhelm her power to construct the story:

But before she stepped into the room, she could feel the look on her face. She knew this look, a frieze of false anticipation. . . . She stood a while, thinking into this. She stopped at room's edge, facing back into the hall, and felt the emptiness around her. That's when she rocked down to the floor, backed against the doorpost. She went twisting down, slowly, almost thoughtfully, and opened her mouth, *oh*, in a moan that remained unsounded. She sat on the floor outside her room. Her face still wore a decorative band, a trace across the eyes of the prospect of wonders. It was a look that nearly floated free of her so she could puff her cheeks, childlike, and blow it away. (123)

In this passage, the sensations of Lauren's body exceed the constraints of the narrative she attempts to impose and catalyzes a visceral reaction, an unsounded moan, a corporeal awareness of the emptiness that narrative cannot contain. The look on her face, of which she is persistently aware because she is narrating her own presence in the story, becomes merely an aesthetic accoutrement that signifies nothing more than her own capacity to shape the world in words, to make things bend to her will. Her sensing, perceiving, feeling, intuition insists, however, upon the decision to look into the room and find it empty. Her body twists, she moves slowly but instinctively as she falls, and then, "thinking into the blankness of her decision, . . . she worked herself up along the doorpost, slowly, breathing completely, her back to the fluted wood, squat-rising, drawing the act over an extended length of time" (124). This movement, which echoes her body-art in its conscious gesturality, arises out of "blankness," a total corporeal commitment to the action in and of itself. This decision that emerges out of her body leads her to the empty bedroom that has no trace of Rey. Here, Lauren's sensations are in some sense ahead of the narrative shaping of the world in words. This physical engagement with the room leads her to see that "[s]he'd known it was empty all along but was only catching up"

(124). Again, the limit that corporeality interposes resists narrative withdrawal into description and insists upon an engagement with the world and with loss. Thus, the tendency for narrative to detach itself from the body through the process of signification is undermined through the confrontation with the demands of corporeal life.

*The Body Artist* complicates the relationship between narrative, grief, and corporeal sensation considerably in its final pages. The novella departs from a traditional subject-centered plot through the cultivation of a narrative grief-state, freeing bodily sensation from the structures that traditionally limit corporeal experience to linear time and individualization. Yet as Lauren begins to stage her own narrative in the name of temporal disruption and the unhinging of subjective limitations, her bodily perceptions resist the shaping force of this attempt to rewrite the world according to her will. Ultimately, Lauren is tied to the world through the sensations and commitments she experiences on the level of her body, which will neither conform to simple assumptions about past, present, and future nor will it loose itself from these ways of perceiving altogether. Sensation thus contributes to the in-between quality of grief, leaving Lauren at once dangerously unhinged from any narrative form, but also deeply connected with the world of sensory and perceptual matter. In this sense, there is, at the core of the novella, an immutable connection between Lauren and the world that exists on the level of her body regardless of the structural breaking that occurs on the level of language, subjectivity, and time. This connection, which constructs a form of active engagement with the world in the face of loss, ultimately pushes Lauren back into an active relationship between her own life and the life outside, accomplished in the final sentences of the work as she opens a window from the nearly-hermetically sealed house she has



inhabited throughout the novella and feels the air from the outside for the first time: “She walked into the room and went to the window. She opened it. She threw the window open. She didn’t know why she did this. Then she knew. She wanted to feel the sea tang on her face and the flow of time in her body, to tell her who she was” (124). In this final negotiation between sensation and language, consciousness follows perception, and both time and subjectivity follow only from sensation. The feeling of the presence of the world outside demands a form of identity and temporal engagement that neither forcibly flees from nor passively conforms to linear structures of cause and effect, and Lauren’s body, at last, complies.

Loss, and the grief that follows, is thus part of a process by which bodily sensation and corporeal affects can inform a conscious commitment to the possibility of change. Yet grief is assailed from two sides – from the expectations of the status quo that demand acceptance and from the possibility of single-minded devotion to the process of loss itself that threatens to become despair. Yet if grief can be powerful, it is only because it strips away forms of signification, subjectivity, and temporality that limit the potential of the body to connect and commit to the world as it is. The state of grief, as an interval between loss and change, opens the vulnerable body that undergoes the sadness and instability of grief to a world that is unknowable, unpredictable, and volatile at its core. If that body can sustain a relationship with this dangerous state of affairs, new potential opens up in that radical form of commitment.

Pain can thus be understood as potentially generative of the new even as it forces a withdrawal from forms of activity that are coded as productive in everyday life.

Attention to grief as a necessary and dangerous interval between one way of being and another offers a more complex understanding of what it means to be active, committed, and generative – understanding that is essential to deepening concepts of political engagement. Complicating these concepts of activity and passivity, commitment and withdrawal, is particularly necessary in the context of neoliberalism, where language of productivity, even in its most challenging forms, is often put to work for the advancement of neoliberal values of competition and success. The language of grief, the attention to the potential imbedded in the sadness and desperation it brings, thus points to forms of activity that are invoked in cultural works like *The Body Artist*, but often not assumed to be useful to capitalist ethics of production. Seizing upon the strange affective states of transformation in these works can thus contribute to new ways of thinking about political engagement that themselves contradict certain neoliberal values. The political content of grief is thus necessarily unsteady, embedded in the affective complexity of loss, pain, and sadness.

### III. PERSEVERANCE

“...to learn to live and to die, and, in order to be a man, to refuse to be a god.”  
-Albert Camus

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The deterioration of the structures that keep things the way they are cannot occur without consequence; those structures tend to retain their privilege precisely because they are familiar, safe, and normalized. Change always entails loss, and the grief that emerges out of the loss of that support can be paralyzing. As William Connolly argues, “Suffering resides on the underside of agency, mastery, wholeness, joy, and comfort” (*Why I am Not a Secularist* 47). Nevertheless, the ambivalence of the position of suffering is conspicuous in this motley list of what it is not. Comfort, in a sense, sums up the mixed promise of suffering’s imagined opposite: the capacity to act and experience joy, but only within a circumscribed territory of unity and mastery. Suffering undoes the powers of agency and joy, forces we tend to associate with the active pursuit of better ways of life, but it also undoes the constraining forces of mastery and wholeness.

The position of this seemingly passive state of suffering and its relationship to values of agency is complicated further by the discursive practices associated with neoliberal economic structures. The appeal to traditional forms of agency offers little help in the neoliberal order, since its common expressions (freedom, productivity, and progress) are aggressively put to work by the market logic of neoliberalism. The belief in freedom of thought and expression slips into freedom to buy, to own, and to exploit. The

belief in the essential progressive movement of human potential so quickly becomes a pure faith in the progressive potential of the capitalist economy. Neoliberalism, therefore, entails the breaking down of distinctions between conservatism and liberalism, the right and the left in favor of a terrifying alliance that claims the center and yet clearly institutes an entirely new political logic altogether. As a result, the usefulness of appeals to agency becomes increasingly suspect and responses to the ethical abdications of neoliberalism must find new theoretical footholds on a terrain that seems to erase those anchoring opportunities as soon as they appear. It is true that neoliberalism breeds new and insidious forms of suffering, but it is equally true that, as Connolly argues, “sufferers are full of surprises” (47). While the language of agency becomes increasingly complicated in the context of neoliberal appeals to progress and freedom, suffering, as the complex “underside” of forces of agency and mastery, produces its own forms of commitment and engagement. Yet the way suffering engages with the world often does not conform to categories of activity. Rather than leading directly to progress, suffering involves perseverance – the affective quality of continuing to exist in the face of pain, loss, and deprivation.

Tony Kushner’s blockbuster play, *Angels in America* has generally been considered to be historically significant as a galvanizing force in the AIDS activism of the late 1980s and early 1990s. Yet it is less examined as a salient contemporary critique of late-Cold War politics and an anticipation of the advent of the neoliberal. The bulk of the work is set in 1985-1986, the early years of Gorbachev’s reform attempts, and by the first performance of the entire play in 1992 the Soviet Union had dissolved. The anticipation of this paradigm shift plays out in a satirical monologue by “The Oldest

Living Bolshevik.” Fearful of the unrestrained opening of markets and mournful at the loss of the structuring principles of doctrine and theory, he addresses the anxiety of the age. He demands, “What system of Thought have these Reformers to present to this mad, swirling planetary disorganization? ... Market incentives? American Cheeseburgers?” (*Perestroika* 14). The Oldest Living Bolshevik ends his speech with a call for stasis until the authority of ideology can be reestablished. With the hegemony of global capitalism for the first time in sight, the political choice appears to be between either ecstatic participation in the free and unregulated flows of finance on the one hand and a reactionary and most likely doomed attempt to stop those flows, institute limits, and restrict growth on the other. Indeed, as the play unfolds, this precise quandary emerges, and with it a choice between stasis and capitalist exuberance, between conservative morality and irresponsibility, security and freedom, the bunker and the apocalypse.

Nevertheless, while *Angels* is as much about the late Cold War era as it is about AIDS, the epidemic is also central to its political argument. In the play, AIDS and the collapse of the Soviet Union do not merely historically coincide. The dying bodies of young people provide a material ground for the development of an affective state of perseverance despite the hopelessness of the political situation. The cultivation of perseverance acts as an alternative basis for commonality as state-based communism disintegrates, while the ethical claims that these bodies make on others also derail the easy freedom of neoliberalism. *Angels* embeds this political claim in a particular historical context and in the performance of one singular body, desperately vulnerable to the sociopolitical context of his time. The play performs an opposition between the logic of capitalism and the materiality of the human body, which persistently challenges the

pure expansion of capitalist freedom by its inevitable tendency toward sickness and mortality. This performance of the vulnerability of the body in the dramatic work offers an affective basis for new ways of thinking through the difficult and often paradoxical relationship between neoliberalism and ethical engagement, crisis and change.

### Staging the Epidemic

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*Angels in America* begins with a corporeal crisis. Prior Walter, a thirty-year-old New Yorker, reveals that he has been diagnosed with AIDS by displaying a Kaposi's Sarcoma lesion to his lover, Louis, in an early scene. Beginning with this early display and continuing throughout the rest of the play, the presentation of Prior's body is employed for an explicitly social purpose: the exposure of a sick body understood to be a material expression of the epidemic as a whole. When this occurs, it often interrupts, derails, or satirizes theoretical debates in the play and refocuses ethical questions around the body.

Prior first breaks the news to Louis at his grandmother's funeral:

*(He removes his jacket, rolls up his sleeve, shows Louis a dark-purple spot on the underside of his arm near the shoulder)*

[Prior:] See.

[...]

Louis *(grabbing Prior, embracing him ferociously)*: No.

Prior: I can't find a way to spare you baby. No wall like the wall of hard scientific fact. K.S. Wham. Bang your head on that.

Louis: Fuck you. *(Letting go)* Fuck you fuck you fuck you.

Prior: Now that's what I like to hear. A mature reaction. *(Millennium Approaches 21-22)*.

The display of Prior's body in this instance invokes both medical and emotional proof.

Louis's attempts to deny Prior's sickness ultimately fail in the face of his body, leaving

no rational linguistic reaction but a string of profanity. K.S. means AIDS, and in 1985, AIDS is a definitive death sentence. This definition of Prior's body as a dying body positions it immediately in relation to the unknown, the immeasurable, and a future that is markedly other than the expectations of the past. The shock of the physical lesion is central to the production of this definition, by conferring material reality upon the concept of illness despite Prior's otherwise healthy exterior. This occurs through a transfer of meaning that Elaine Scarry describes as the capacity for "the *incontestable reality of the physical body to now become an attribute of an issue that at that moment has no independent reality of its own*" (124-5). In this case, the lesion stands in metonymically for not only Prior's sickness, but the entire social phenomenon of the AIDS epidemic; its uncovering and presentation then constitutes a social confrontation with the embodied fact of the disease, the precarious positions of the bodies that are defined by it, and the painful instability it connotes.

Louis, an old-fashioned de Toquevillian liberal, prone to long rants that sound suspiciously half-NPR, half-John Stuart Mill, believes first and foremost in the free evolution of progress, and Prior's impending death challenges that belief directly. Within minutes of hearing the news, Louis contemplates leaving Prior. As his grandmother's funeral winds down, he asks the Rabbi what the Scriptures say about those who abandon the people they love at a time of great need. When pressed further as to why anyone would do this, he answers:

Maybe because this person's sense of the world, that it will change for the better with struggle, maybe a person who has this neo-Hegelian positivist sense of constant historical progress towards happiness or perfection or something, who feels very powerful because he feels connected to these forces, moving uphill all the time... maybe that person can't, um, incorporate sickness into his sense of

how things are supposed to go. Maybe vomit... and sores and disease... really frighten him, maybe... he isn't so good with death. (25)

Early in the play, political, ethical, and visceral registers already appear to be impossibly scrambled. Louis's political commitment to struggle, his ethical belief in progress, and his instinctive fear in the face of bodily abjection all conflate and begin to propel him away from Prior, toward a decision that will reverberate throughout the rest of the work.

This blurring of distinctions between the political and the emotional is, as Charles McNulty points out, one of Kushner's greatest strengths as a playwright. He argues,

[Kushner's] most singular gift as a dramatist is... in making visible the normally invisible cords that tether personal conscience to public policy. The playwright does this not by ideological pronouncement, but by tracking the moral and spiritual upheavals of his characters' lives. AIDS is the central fact of *Angels*, but it is one that implicates other facts, equally catastrophic. Racism, sexism, homophobia, moral erosion, and drug addiction come with the Kushnerian territory, and, as in life, characters are often forced to grapple with several of these at the same time. (88)

The nightmare of *Angels* is, on one register, explicitly political. The right is in unprecedented control of the justice department (itself symbolic of the ethical dilemmas that proliferate throughout the work), and the play traces many conversations in which well-meaning characters accidentally prove either grossly insensitive to issues of race, sexuality, and democracy or just plain ineffective. At the same time, the collapse of the hopes of the political left is viscerally produced in relation to Prior's bodily state of deprivation as much as it is in direct political discourse. Louis's eventual abandonment of Prior is a crime that activates emotional, ethical, and political registers in the play, and this nexus around the issue of abandonment is the focal point of the pain that *Angels* exudes. Yet everyone, including Louis, has desperate wants and desires that are left in a position of unbearable neglect. The blending of political and affective registers in the



play thus gestures to the opacity of political questions that often appear temptingly transparent in the context of political discourse alone.

As Prior's illness progresses, Louis continues to be unable to engage directly with the sick body of his lover, not only because it gives definition to an abstract phenomenon (the epidemic), but also because of its paradoxical excess, the corporeal material that does not fit into any discursive category. While a wound anchors the disease in definition, the body does not obey the logic of signification and boils over. Kushner emphasizes this tension through a scene of extreme corporeal abjection. Waking up in the middle of the night, Prior is feverish and unable to stand up. Louis, unable to comfort or care for Prior directly, leaves to call an ambulance.

Prior: Louis?

NO! NO! Don't call, you'll send me there and I won't come back, please,  
Louis I'm begging, baby, please...

*(Screams) LOUIS!!*

Louis *(From off; hysterical)*: WILL YOU SHUT THE FUCK UP!

Prior *(Trying to stand)*: Aaaah. I have... to go to the bathroom. Wait. Wait, just...  
oh. Oh God. *(He shits himself)*.

Louis *(Entering)*: Prior? They'll be here in...

Oh my God.

Prior: I'm sorry, I'm sorry.

Louis: What did...? What?

Prior: I had an accident.

*(Louis goes to him.)*

Louis: This is blood.

Prior: Maybe you shouldn't touch it...me...I...*(He faints)*

Louis *(Quietly)*: Oh help. Oh help. Oh God oh God oh God help me I can't I can't  
I can't. (48)

It is not only the concept of the disease, but its material expressions that Louis cannot bear. As Julia Kristeva argues, corporeal excess is abject insofar as it "does not *signify* death," but displays what "I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of

death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being” (*Powers of Horror* 3). It attests physically to the pain of living while dying, a state of life that Giorgio Agamben argues is banished from a public concept of life insofar as it “disturbs identity, system, order... borders, positions, rules, and is “in-between, ambiguous, composite” (*Homo Sacer* 4). Ultimately, Louis’s incapacity to engage with this excess and ambiguity leads him to hand Prior over to the authority of the medical establishment in a desperate attempt to find a force of definition that can contain the dying body. In doing so, Louis performs the problem with the liberal belief in the power of the individual, freedom, and progress – its tendency to value activity to the point of developing an irresponsible intolerance of limits. In this case, the freedom-seeking ethic of liberalism confronts an extreme threat – mortality – which posits an absolute limit and a horrifying reminder of the constantly ambivalent state of the simultaneously living and decaying body. Of course, seeing himself as a good liberal humanist, Louis cannot forgive himself for abandoning Prior, and spends the rest of the play verbally self-flagellating, begging for forgiveness, and yet unwilling to come back to Prior and watch him die. This state of anxiety performs the ethical dilemma at the heart of post-war forms of liberalism, which seek to integrate both a belief in the freedom of the market and a commitment to the ethical treatment of others. To follow the liberal market ethic out to its culmination necessarily means loosening the moral limits that bind the freedom of the market, dismantling structures of support that acknowledge the needs of others. And yet, once the limits of morality are detached from free economic liberalism entirely, the result is what we see today: the wholesale abandonment of responsibility for those who do not thrive economically.

To suggest that neoliberalism extends to certain ethical assumptions and to the intimate spheres of bodily life seems to contradict definitions by social theorists such as David Harvey, who argues first and foremost that neoliberalism is of an exclusively economic order. And yet, since neoliberalism has taken hold of many supporting institutions (including those related to education and media), Harvey also maintains that its effects extend well beyond the market. He thus argues, “neoliberalism has, in short, become hegemonic as a mode of discourse” (3). Wendy Brown has also recently suggested that neoliberalism, in contrast to the classical economic liberalism on which it was modeled, “is not confined to an expressly economic sphere.” Instead, “neoliberalism casts the political and social spheres both as appropriately dominated by market concerns and themselves organized by market rationality” (694). For this reason, she maintains, neoliberalism should be understood as a logic that extends to the construction of forms of subjectivity. Values of civic engagement that were fundamental to earlier forms of liberal democracy have faded, and “citizenship, reduced to self-care, is divested of any orientation toward the common, thereby undermining an already weak investment in an *active citizenry* and an already thin concept of a *public good* from a liberal democratic table of values” (“American Nightmare” 695). Both Harvey and Brown acknowledge that earlier incarnations of liberalism articulated a twin (albeit often unbalanced) commitment to human dignity and economic freedom – the humanist liberalism of most twentieth-century social democracies. Yet both suggest that what makes neo-liberalism “neo” is its totalizing logic over the very institutions in older forms of liberalism that either intentionally embed that market logic in a system of social benefits and safety nets or that work independently from the market to produce forms of community and citizenship.

In *Angels*, the disintegration of the Soviet Union and the implication that the welfare state will follow provides a metaphor for the gross abandonment of those who suffer from AIDS in the name of prosperity. Yet turning this logic on its head shows that the needs of those who suffer from AIDS cast a shadow over the jubilation of the new global market, demanding some form of acknowledgement and care. That response, however, cannot be in the form of a simple institution of limits without threatening to take on a reactionary cast. In the play, an angel makes this exact plea for strict, rational law. Responding to precisely the global condition that Louis personifies, she demands that Prior bring a prophecy to humankind.<sup>20</sup> She argues,

Surely you see towards what We are Progressing:  
The fabric of the sky unravels:  
Angels hover, anxious fingers worry  
The tattered edge.  
Before the boiling of blood and the searing of skin  
Comes the secret catastrophe:

Before Life on Earth becomes finally merely impossible,  
It will for a long time before have become completely unbearable. (*Perestroika*  
44)

The AIDS metaphor extends into this passage and its anxiety over progress; the image of the world in disintegration holds the same pathos as the body in disintegration. The irony that bodies that explore, seek new forms of erotic life and attachment, and project forward into a creative future experience the worst of disintegration, decay, and agony is alive in the Angel's speech, but so is a deep suspicion toward the rhetoric of progress, which she sees as connected with justifications for abandonment. This connection

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<sup>20</sup> The exaggerated condition of this prophecy mirrors, in this sense, the massively popular phenomenon of the AIDS play and *Angels* in particular during the early 1990s. Analyses of the AIDS play and its ambivalent political effects, see David Román, *Acts of Intervention: Performance, Gay Culture, and AIDS*, Barnes-McLain, "Death and Desire: The Evolution of the AIDS Play," and D.S. Lawson, "Rage and Remembrance: The AIDS Plays."

between emotional abandonment and the slow fraying of the ozone layer occurs earlier in the play, as Harper, a Mormon Valium addict who is abandoned by her closeted husband, Joe, muses:

Thirty miles above our heads, a thin layer of three-atom oxygen molecules... It's a kind of gift, from God, the crowning touch to the creation of the world: guardian angels, hands linked, make a spherical net, a blue-green nesting orb, a shell of safety for life itself. But everywhere, things are collapsing, lies surfacing, systems of defense giving way... this is why, Joe, this is why I shouldn't be left alone.  
(*Millennium Approaches* 16)

Both the Angel and Harper offer powerful arguments that point to the necessity to stop the destructive abandonment of the sick, the vulnerable, and the earth itself, and connect these forces of abandonment with appeals to progress.

The answer the Angel offers is a radical invocation of stasis and conservation. She implores,

Forsake the Open Road:  
Neither Mix Nor Intermarry: Let Deep Roots Grow:  
If you do not MINGLE you will Cease to Progress:  
Seek Not to Fathom the World and its Delicate Particle Logic:  
You cannot Understand, You can only Destroy,  
You do not Advance, You only Trample.  
Poor blind Children, abandoned on the Earth,  
Groping terrified, misguided, over  
Fields of Slaughter, over bodies of the Slain:  
HOBBLE YOURSELVES! (45)

In this desperate appeal for a stop to the destructive forces of progress, the angel ultimately embodies the opposite danger – an essentializing turn away from forms of hybridity, multiplicity, and creativity that verges on the rhetoric of purity characteristic of nationalist endeavors. Ultimately, Prior cannot abide this “mixed-up reactionary angel” any more than he can tolerate being left by Louis. Torn between the fear and loneliness of abandonment in the name of freedom and the malignant conservatism of the angel, Prior,

too, is left anxious and paralyzed in the face of an impossible decision between a totalitarian affirmation of stasis, roots, and purity and succumbing to a market-logic of life, which leaves those who are sick alone to fend for themselves. For this reason, while Prior's friend Belize reacts politically, arguing "don't migrate, don't mingle, that's... malevolent, some of us didn't exactly *choose* to migrate, know what I'm saying..." (47), Prior, confronted by the peril and pain of progress and the impossibility of stasis, cannot ignore the angel on political grounds, nor can he embrace her message. Stuck in this impossible position, he declares, "I hate heaven. I've got no resistance left. Except to run" (48).

Prior is asked to decide on behalf of his body, the disintegrating body of the planet, and the chaos of the late-Cold War globe, between two options. Both take for granted that the excess of change, potential, and life leads to pain, chaos, and unpredictability. The first, exemplified by the Angel and the Oldest Living Bolshevik, is to codify that excess into stable categories of articulation in order to go back or at least stop moving until a new order can be established. The second, perhaps more pernicious in light of its political success, is performed by the liberal Louis and articulated by neoconservative icon Roy Cohn, who also connects the precariousness of the global situation with the painful instability of affective life:

Love; that's a trap. Responsibility; that's a trap too. Like a father to a son I tell you this: Life is full of horror; nobody escapes; nobody; save yourself. Whatever pulls on you, whatever needs from you, threatens you. Don't be afraid; people are so afraid; don't be afraid to live in the raw wind, naked, alone.... Learn at least this: What you are capable of. Let nothing stand in your way. (*Millennium Approaches* 58)

Roy's diagnosis rests upon the same apocalyptic vision of the late twentieth century as that of the Angel and the Oldest Living Bolshevik. And yet, rather than seeing this

disarray as a sign to stop moving, Roy believes that the lack of order offers the opportunity and the imperative to abandon restriction entirely in favor of self interest. The strange collision between the effects of the cynical pragmatism of neoconservatism and the market enthusiasm that marks neoliberalism is not lost on Kushner. The second time this position is articulated comes from Louis, whose rhetoric begins to slip from that of his usual social-democratic liberalism toward statements that increasingly employ a neoliberal logic. On the steps of the closed Hall of Justice with his Republican-Mormon-future lover, Joe, Louis declares: “Maybe the court won’t convene. Ever again. Maybe we are free. To do whatever. Children of the new morning, criminal minds. Selfish and greedy and loveless and blind. Reagan’s children. You’re scared. So am I. Everyone is in the land of the free. God help us all” (*Perestroika* 74). Louis’s belief in the inevitability of progress and freedom lead him to an unlikely political affinity with the neoconservative revolution in politics and to a coextensive emotional lawlessness that leads him to acts of extreme selfishness.

As the dying left fights with the seemingly iron alliance of neoconservatives and neoliberals, Prior’s life hangs in the balance, unable to decide between these two impossible positions. As his body breaks down, he runs from his prophetic duty, trying to understand his visions, slowly going blind, until he meets Hannah, Joe’s mother, at a Mormon Visitor’s Center. Seeing him weakening, she takes him to the hospital, where he exposes his lesions again as evidence of the abject quality of his own body:

Prior: Look at this...horror.

*(He lifts his shirt; his torso is spotted with three or four lesions)*

See? That’s not human. That’s why I run. Wouldn’t you? Wouldn’t anybody.

Hannah: It’s a cancer. Nothing more. Nothing more human than that. (*Perestroika* 103)

While earlier presentations of Prior's body emphasize the unbearable and unthinkable aspects of the disease and mortality, this display returns the body to a position of collective political relevance through Hannah's simple affirmation. Prior's body, and with it the epidemic, sickness, and death, is thus reinscribed into the common, and action on behalf of that common becomes possible.

At this, the sky rumbles, the Angel descends, and at Hannah's prompting, Prior obeys scriptural precedent, wrestles the Angel, and demands a blessing:

But still. Still.

Bless me anyway.

I want more life. I can't help myself. I do.

I've lived through such terrible times, and there are people who live through much much worse, but... You see them living anyway. When they're more spirit than body, more sores than skin, when they're burned and in agony, when flies lay eggs in the corners of the eyes of their children, they live... I don't know if it's not braver to die. But I recognize the habit. The addiction to being alive. We live past hope. If I can find hope anywhere, that's it, that's the best I can do. It's so much not enough, so inadequate but... Bless me anyway. I want more life. (133)

There are several important invocations in this passage that offer ways of thinking through how an affective state of perseverance might offer an ethical position within the war between stasis and chaos, authority and lawlessness:

- 1 *Perseverance is the affective commitment to life out of devastation.* ("I've lived through such terrible times"): Prior's commitment to life arises imminently out of devastation, loss, and pain. His insistence upon the blessing of "more life" emerges directly from, rather than in spite of, the difficulty of that life. The fact of suffering, its ubiquity and severity, are here what construct the capacity for hope. A similar position is articulated by a diorama dummy of a Mormon Mother in one



of Harper's visions. When asked how people change, the Mother explains, "God splits the skin with a jagged thumbnail from throat to belly and then plunges a huge filthy hand in... he pulls and pulls till all your innards are yanked out and the pain! We can't even talk about that. And then he stuffs them back, dirty, tangled, and torn. It's up to you to do the stitching" (78). Throughout the play, change and progress are always performed in the context of loss of health, stability, and love. In his call for more life, Prior embraces that process despite its horror.

- 2 *Perseverance is a decision.* ("I want more life"): While the process of committing to life in this way involves coming to terms with ambiguity, Prior acts decisively. He definitively commits to life, even if it is a sick life – even to the point of asking for "more." In this way, Prior's demand exact opposition to the ethical standpoint personified in Louis, who cannot tolerate ambivalent feelings, but who also cannot commit to any single action. Prior tolerates, even embraces and holds ambivalence, but out of that ambivalence makes a commitment to life that is not ambivalent. His declaration shows how paradoxically the capacity to tolerate chaos and confusion is essential to any form of life that is constant and resolute.
  
- 3 *Perseverance is inadequate.* ("It's so much not enough"): To value resolute decision is dangerous, lest that decision transform into a totalizing worldview. Here, Prior avoids that danger by being aware of the inadequacy of his decision; it

is understood merely as a singular way of life in a particular historical, political, and emotional moment. This leaves room for future decisions and commitments that might emerge out of different experiences or demands. The decision on behalf of perseverance is thus understood to be contingent, fallible, and linked to the materiality of the life to which it commits.

- 4 *Perseverance involves a commonality of commitment.* (“We live past hope”): The presence of others is absolutely essential to this decision. It is through his empathy with others, the experience of their suffering as more vast and inexplicable than his own, that Prior arrives at a capacity to embrace his own painful existence. In this way, Prior’s commitment is not only to the continuance of his own life, but to the profusion and multiplication of life as such, and the lives of others. Harper has a similar vision in her meditation on the ozone layer. She sees,

souls of the dead, of people who had perished, from famine, from war, from the plague, and they floated up, like skydivers in reverse, limbs all akimbo, wheeling and spinning. And the souls of these departed joined hands, clasped ankles, and formed a web, a great net of souls, and the souls were three-atom oxygen molecules, of the stuff of ozone, and the outer rim absorbed them, and was repaired. (142)

What Harper calls “a kind of painful progress” (142) is here imagined as a vast network of common sufferers, linked together through the project of constructing a better future.

- 5 *Perseverance is a-rational.* (“Bless me anyway”): This decision occurs outside any rational categories. *Angels in America* ceaselessly accumulates evidence in

favor of abandoning life entirely, so much so that Prior's decision seems to be a-rational. The issue simply is not whether or not it makes logical sense to go on living in the world of the play; the commitment seems to come out of a visceral need to go on living.

Outside of the seemingly fixed binary of the choice between stasis and unrestrained movement, Prior's demand performs a third option. In demanding "more life" despite the certainty of suffering, he clearly refuses the prophecy of the Angels and the cautions of the Oldest Living Bolshevik. At the same time, he turns the neoliberal/neoconservative ethic on its head, engaging with suffering rather than turning away from it. Most importantly, Prior makes a definitive commitment in the face of his own decaying body. Rather than being paralyzed by the ambivalence it causes, as Louis is, Prior decides to persevere on its behalf, and, by extension, on behalf of life as such. The many affective phases and states of Prior's body as he moves towards this state of perseverance emphasize the profound pain at its core. In this sense, the AIDS epidemic, by forcing a confrontation with mortality and yet demanding a commitment to action, paradoxically becomes a site of potential within the panic of late-Cold War politics that refuses both the attempt to go backward to an earlier state of authority and the sirens call of neoliberal freedom.

#### Toward an Ethic of Perseverance

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The recognition of "the habit... the addiction to being alive" is a source of hope rather than cynicism in Prior's analysis, and insofar as it drives affirmation, it catalyzes

his decision to demand “more life.” In a seemingly tautological move, the fact of others going on living motivates Prior to go on as well. In other words, the fact of “living anyway,” of perseverance in spite of hopelessness, becomes an ethos, a common way of life. But how is this ethos of perseverance ethical? And how does it constitute a trajectory away from the false choice between the chaos of capitalist freedom and the reactionary insistence upon limits and the status quo?

In his afterward to *Perestroika*, Kushner explains that Prior’s soliloquy draws directly from Harold Bloom’s translation of the Hebrew word for blessing as “more life.” Jewish sources abound throughout the play, and numerous critics have suggested that as much as it is commonly read as a queer play, *Angels in America* should also be understood as having strong Jewish concerns as well.<sup>21</sup> The Jewish inheritance of the concept of perseverance arises powerfully in the invocation of the blessing “more life,” and indicates a trajectory of thought that begins with the Old Testament and, mutating, mixing, and migrating, ends up in the context of contemporary neoliberal America in the work of Tony Kushner.<sup>22</sup> Drawing from similar sources, the work of Baruch Spinoza offers further illumination of how this call for “more life” might be understood to have both ethical power and contemporary relevance. Spinoza’s work, which has recently found new popularity by providing a groundwork for many works of contemporary theory that connect the biological, emotion, and power, offers a theoretical bridge

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<sup>21</sup> See Jonathan Freedman, “Angels, Monsters, and Jews: Intersections of Queer and Jewish Identity in Kushner’s *Angels in America*” and Ranen Omer-Sherman, “Jewish/Queer: Thresholds of Vulnerable Identities in Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America*” among others.

<sup>22</sup> In “Postmodern/Post-Secular: Contemporary Fiction and Spirituality,” John McClure suggests that this way of understanding “blessing” has resonances with Thomas Pynchon’s “creative exuberance” (153) and, by extension, to an entire class of contemporary fiction that has “post-secular” qualities, including *Angels in America*. McClure’s argument, in this sense, contributes to an exciting turn to the ethical potential embedded in contemporary works of literature, which produce excess as much as argument, but in doing so offer new inroads to thinking through the fraught circumstances of social engagement

between the Old Testament source texts of the blessing and the current reverberations of the state of perseverance that it invokes.<sup>23</sup>

The *Ethics* begins with a contradiction that anticipates the relationship between affect and action, habit and ethics that perseverance seems to invoke: Spinoza's "ethics" emerges out of a radical argument against free will that deprives God, as well as humankind, with autonomous volition. People lack free will because of the network of causes and effects of which Spinoza's universe primarily consists. Consequentially, "no single volition can exist or be determined to act unless it is determined by another cause, and this cause is again by another, and so ad infinitum... it cannot be said to be a free cause, but only a necessary or constrained cause" (53). The commonality of existence, the fact of the interconnection of every attribute of the universal substance, constrains every expression of those attributes by their constant collisions and interactions. God, consequentially, as that which comprises the whole of universal substance, "cannot... be said to act from freedom of will" because "will... stands in need of a cause by which it may be determined to exist and to act in a definite matter." For this reason, God is the origin of will, but is not affected by it. This by no means leads to a passive universe for Spinoza, however, because will as motivating force is replaced by power. He argues, "all things have been predetermined by God, not from his free will or absolute pleasure, but from the absolute nature of God, his infinite power" (53). Nevertheless, since God is understood to be the very substance of which everything that exists is a mere differentiated form, this predetermination does not constrain the actions of individuals

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<sup>23</sup> Fascinatingly, contemporary uses of Spinoza range from claims such as that of Antonio Negri that Spinoza provides a philosophical basis for revolutionary Marxism (see *Subversive Spinoza: (UN) Contemporary Variations*) to connections with the neurobiological in work such as Antonio Damasio's recent explorations of the role of feeling in thought, which I discuss in more detail later in this section.

except insofar as they are understood as mere modes or expressions of God. People's actions, then, are not determined in advance according to a willful plan, but they are not completely free or unconstrained either. As expressions of a single substance with infinite power, they engage in constant connections with other expressions of that power. These connections either augment or diminish the power invested in those expressions, depending on their content. It is toward the content of these connections that Spinoza's ethics is aimed.

And yet, since free will does not exist for Spinoza, the *Ethics* does not advocate certain forms of action. Instead, it exposes the ethical content of the power with which the universe is already invested, a power that is often misunderstood or misrecognized as emerging out of a will or plan rather than out of the fact of life itself. For this reason, while the binary between freedom and constraint is false, there is an important distinction between that which increases or decreases one's power to act. We experience these changes as emotions. Spinoza writes, "By emotion (affectus) I understand the affections of the body by which the body's power of activity is increased or diminished, assisted or checked, together with the ideas of these affections" (103). Emotions are the ideational experience of physical responses to interactions that give a body greater or lesser power. For this reason, while we imagine falsely that we have free will, we do seek connections with other bodies that give us greater power. Spinoza's *conatus*, his definition of the essence of all things, is simply this innate tendency to seek greater potential: "*Each thing, in so far as it is in itself, endeavors to persist in its own being*" (108). In short, this *conatus* articulates perseverance as the primary ethical mode of all beings.

Unlike other philosophies that posit an original state of human selfishness that leads to a permanent state of war without the limitations of social contracts, Spinoza sees this *conatus* as the cause of all ethical relations. This is a result of his model of the universe, whereby all bodies are modes of the same universal substance. This univocity of being means that if every expression of that being serves its own *conatus*, the whole of being is positively affected. For this reason, though it seems counterintuitive, Spinoza argues:

It is when every man is most devoted to seeking his own advantage that men are of most advantage to one another. For the more every man seeks his own advantage and endeavors to preserve himself, the more he is endowed with virtue... that is for living by the guidance of reason. But it is when men live by the guidance of reason that they agree most in nature. (172)

In direct opposition to the social contract philosophies of Hobbes, Machiavelli, and Freud, the State is necessary in Spinoza not because people are, by nature, dangerous to one another, but because we cannot always know what is truly in our own self-interest and for that reason are constantly plagued by “passive emotions” (103) that cause jealousy, hatred, and other “sad passions” (110) which, in turn, destroy commonalities and diminish our capacity to be positively affected. This differentiates the Spinozan *conatus* from selfish pragmatism as exemplified by Louis and Roy Cohn in *Angels*. The endeavor to persist in one’s own being, to persevere, has nothing to do with ignoring others. To the contrary, only recognizing the profound interconnectedness of all being allows one to more accurately understand what one can do to better persevere and to augment the power of univocal being. Spinoza’s argument, then, is that on the level of essence, the effort to persevere in one’s bodily existence is both personally and

communally productive. Moreover, it constitutes the most fundamental ethical capacity of any body.

That this *conatus* motivates us on the level of the body, that it exists in a pre-conscious state, and that it can be a basis for new understandings of ethical action, has been addressed directly by neuroscientist Antonio Damasio in his strange interdisciplinary work, *Looking for Spinoza: Joy, Sorrow, and the Feeling Brain*. Part meditation on philosophical discovery, part description of neuro-biological research, part autobiographical narrative, Damasio's book begins from an unconscious moment of discovery, as he gazes up at a quote on yellowed paper on his wall for which he has long ago forgotten the context and searches for the citation only to find a seemingly new text in an old volume. The quote he reads is the *conatus*, and when Damasio revisits the *Ethics* he is shocked to find an argument that resonates with his recent findings from neural imaging of emotional states. Furthermore, he finds himself expanding his neurobiological findings to ethical conclusions, just as Spinoza did. In reference to the *conatus*, Damasio asks, "Why should a concern for oneself be the basis for virtue, lest that virtue pertain to that self alone?" (171) His answer is biological, as is, he argues, Spinoza's:

The biological reality of self-preservation leads to virtue because in our inalienable need to maintain ourselves we must, of necessity, help preserve *other* selves. If we fail to do so we perish and are thus violating the foundational principle, and relinquishing the virtue that lies in self-preservation. The second foundation of virtue then is the reality of a social structure and the presence of other living organisms in a complex system of interdependence with our own organism. (171)

Damasio points out that this conclusion has been made by Aristotle and various religious figures, but argues that the radical nature of the *conatus* for the contemporary ethical



moment is that “it contains the foundation for a system of ethical behaviors and that foundation is neurobiological. The foundation is based on the observation of human nature rather than the revelation of a prophet” (171). As a result, it is descriptive as much as instructive, pointing to the immanence of virtue to itself. Indeed, “happiness is not a reward for virtue: it is virtue itself” (175). In expanding Spinoza’s work into the neurobiological, Damasio points to resonances between unconscious perseverance and biological constitution, and yet gestures to the radical potential inherent in the ethical decision to persevere, which in turn consists of an affirmation of the pre-conscious brain.

The brain, according to Damasio, produces feelings, not knowledge, as “byproducts of the brain’s involvement in the management of life” (176). Thus, decisions that appear to be made on hunches or “gut feelings” turn out to be decisions made unconsciously by the brain in efforts to preserve the organism. The feelings come after the fact, and provide a context for the retroactive narrativizing of the act. William Connolly seizes upon this same neurological fact in light of the discovery that there is a half-second delay between certain reflexes, such as physical reactions to pleasure and pain, and conscious awareness of the action. He argues,

If the unconscious dimension of thought is at once *immanent* in subsisting below the direct reach of consciousness, *effective* in influencing conduct on its own and also affecting conscious judgment, *material* in being embodied in neurological processes, and *cultural* in being given part of its shape by previous inscriptions of experience and new experimental interventions, then several theories of morality... may deserve active contestation. (*Neuropolitics* 85)

Those theories of morality that need to be reconsidered are, in Connolly’s view, both those that “underplay the role of technique and artistry in thinking and ethics” and those that “overestimate the degree to which the cultivation of an ethical sensibility is linked to an intrinsic purpose susceptible to general attunement or recognition” (85). In other

words, the possibility of an ethics informed by the biological requires recognition of the absolute singularity of the ethical act (since the brain and body that produce it are specifically situated culturally, historically, spatially, temporally, and emotionally) and the univocity of ethical being (as it serves the organism to socially persist in its own being).

The habit of living, “the addiction to being alive,” is, as Prior describes it, reason to commit to life. The question is how this commitment goes beyond tautology and constitutes an ethical act. The *conatus* is instinctual, biological, and occurs on an unconscious level of being. And yet for Spinoza and his followers, it paradoxically provides a ground for ethics. In his analysis of the *Ethics*, Gilles Deleuze explains how this “typology of immanent modes of existence” (23) goes beyond a simple categorizing of states of being and constitutes something less than a program but more than a passive description: “There is... a philosophy of ‘life’ in Spinoza; it consists precisely in denouncing all that separates us from life, all these transcendent values that are turned against life, these values that are tied to the condition and illusions of consciousness” (26). Spinoza’s work performs the necessary speculative component to his ethical philosophy. It is not enough to simply go on, to persevere in life despite difficulty. The awareness of the priority of that going-on, of that perseverance, is what thought can do to augment the bodily *conatus*, as long as it does not codify that body, that perseverance, by ascribing rules of behavior to support that *conatus*. Prior’s acknowledgement of “the habit” is a Spinozan move in this meta-sense. He recognizes this condition in other bodies and that recognition fuels his capacity to engage in life and to decide upon its

behalf. His decision to call for “more life,” in this way, is not only a demand on behalf of his own limited life but on behalf of life as such.

But what does it mean to commit, on the level of the organism or on the level of the mind, to a force that exists habitually? How can life, if it is unconsciously pursued by every being, be the object of a decision? What does it mean to affirm life? In *Angels*, there is an ethical difference between simply persevering in life habitually and affirming that habit, giving it voice, and demanding qualitatively more on its behalf – to decide once and for all on behalf of life. Ethical perseverance is decisive in as much as it is active, difficult, and demands struggle. As Belize argues, “it isn’t easy, it doesn’t count if it’s easy, it’s the hardest thing” (*Perestroika* 122). What, then, is the force that motivates this perseverance, that exposes the radical affirmation behind “the addiction to being alive”, that allows for a call for “more life” to be more than a simple decision, more than just habit?

### The Common Bind

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Bodies that persevere demand life both affectively and decisively. Since decisions of this sort emerge out of the habits of those bodies, they often do not conform to traditional categories of reason. Thus, as Antonio Negri points out, the decision, a concept that stands in for any ethical moment of action that constitutes new forms of life, has often been relegated to a position outside of the discourse of material politics, in order to insulate the political against that which does not conform to reason. If the decision is mystical and ineffable, the argument goes, then it can be put in the category of

that which cannot be explained. It can therefore be compartmentalized, leaving the political terrain unscathed by its complications. Negri, however, suggests another option:

The only way to remove the impasses... of the decision is by subtracting it from the rational/irrational dichotomy, and considering instead the ‘choice’ as a decisive element for the articulation and the movement of bodies, in as much as it is the product of the brain in a body in movement. The decision becomes an element of bodies, and is thus implicated in the ontological conditions of action. If bodies are a free productivity on the edge of time, then the autonomy (rational or irrational) of the decision is pure illusion. (239)

The affective nature of the ethical decision grounds it in the flesh of the corpus, in the concrete movement of bodies. Therefore, it cannot be dismissed as a transcendent force or a mysterious power, but must instead be understood as evidence of the potent and indefinable quality of bodies, of the relentless creativity of material life. This embeddedness of the decision in the sensing, feeling, acting body does not automatically give it free clearance into the sanctioned discourses of politics, however. Despite the materiality of its expression, the decision still eludes description in rational terms and remains outside of the political conversation *as if* it were as mystical as the protectors of those discourses would have it.<sup>24</sup>

In a sense, the decision that emerges from perseverance must remain elusive to these sanctioned discourses. This decision by definition falls outside of what is called “rationality” because it is not entirely based on the conventions of the past.<sup>25</sup> For this reason, The Oldest Living Bolshevik’s plea in *Angels* is impossible; to have a theory

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<sup>24</sup> For this reason, several theorists have contributed essential works that call for more inclusion of visceral registers of experience and sensory life into the “rationalist” discourses of politics and ethical philosophy. William Connolly’s *Why I am Not a Secularist* is particularly noteworthy in this discussion.

<sup>25</sup> In this claim, I draw on Carl Schmidt’s argument in *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty* in relation to the legal decision. Schmidt points out the exceptional and founding nature in the decision. This paradox is subsequently addressed by Giorgio Agamben in *Homo Sacer* and *State of Exception* as well as Jacques Derrida in “The Force of Law: The Mystical Foundation of Authority,” in *Deconstruction and the Possibility of Justice*.

before a decision or commitment limits that decision to the constraints of what has been previously imaginable, thinkable, and computable. Hannah's paradoxical claim, "You can't wait for a theory, but you have to have a theory" (144) is closer to grasping the tension at the heart of the decision, particularly in its implied temporal argument. Yet this does not mean that this decision is free. It is absolutely essential that it be limited, lest the act become authoritarian.<sup>26</sup> For Spinoza, it is other bodies that limit the actions of our own as well as augment our capacity to act. There is a pronounced difficulty in preserving the tension within the call for "more life" between the futurity of its force and its essential constrained embeddedness in the social body.

In *Angels*, this dynamic is expressed through events that appear a-rational, even magical, but come up against the constraints of human relationships. Visions consistently fuel a relentless mixing and churning that places unlikely characters in touch with one another. This is more than a simple dramatic vehicle; it is an ethical model that defies the logic of stasis and atomism as well as any notion of utopian freedom. In this sense Kushner, too, writes under the belief that being is more common than we may think. Commonality does not necessarily lead to a consensus or shared revolutionary goals – far from it.<sup>27</sup> Nevertheless, this insistence upon commonality in the areas of life that are

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<sup>26</sup> It is here that I part ways with Schmidt, as far as sovereignty is concerned. It is of great importance, however, to recognize what a fine line separates the dogma of secular rationalism and the dogma of mystical authoritarianism.

<sup>27</sup> Negri's analysis also fails to take into account the limitations of social constraints upon the decision. His teleological belief in the growing commonness of being leads him to argue that the decision, too, will be increasingly univocal. He suggests, "With the events of 1968, the City of Man, in an irreversible decision, loosed the arrow of the revolutionary temporality of the common" (261). Through its assumed inevitability, the City of Man replaces the City of God only to reinstate its transcendence and utopianism. Dangerous in its totalizing potential, Negri's argument ultimately opens the door for decisive claims on behalf of a common that does not yet exist.

usually most private does allow for alliances and networks to emerge between people in pain that otherwise would be impossible.

Prior and Harper, for instance, meet in a vision before they ever actually meet. This is inexplicable, even in the stage directions: “*Harper is having a pill-induced hallucination. She has these from time to time. For some reason, Prior has appeared in this one. Or Harper has appeared in Prior’s dream. It is bewildering*” (*Millennium Approaches* 30). Likewise, it is bewildering for Prior and Harper.

Prior: What are you doing in my hallucination?

Prior: I’m not in your hallucination. You’re in my dream. (31)

As Harper points out, the their meeting defies the rational logic of hallucinations. She argues, “The mind, which is where hallucinations come from, shouldn’t be able to make up anything that wasn’t there to start with, that didn’t enter it from experience, from the real world” (32). However, visions in *Angels* exceed this logic, constructing novelty not only out of imagination, but also out of mutual recognition. In this vision, Harper knows that Prior is sick, just as he knows that her husband is gay. They both see each other in ineffable clarity, truths about one another careening in without explanation, and those truths explode the serenity of the default.

Prior: I just looked at you, and there was...

Harper: A sort of blue streak of recognition.

Prior: Yes.

Harper: Like you knew me incredibly well.

Prior: Yes.

Harper: Yes.

I have to go now, get back, something just... fell apart. (34)

Through an inexplicable confrontation with a man she doesn’t know in a hallucination that may or may not be someone else’s dream, Harper learns definitively that her marriage is disintegrating and thus she too must decide upon a new life – either one of

impossible complacency or one of desperate instability. The a-rational in *Angels* thus has a destabilizing function, throwing characters into situations that demand that they decide, not from choice but from desperation, having no choice but to choose, no possibilities for life outside of a decision to persevere in it.

When Prior is forced into a position where he must decide either on behalf of stasis or on behalf of life, he, too, has utopian hopes. Taking the presence of Angels and Heaven as a sign that rationality no longer holds sway, he first asks for the impossible:

Prior: I want to be healthy again. And this plague, it should stop. In me and everywhere. Make it go away.

Australia:

Oh We have tried.

We suffer with You but

We do not know. We

Do not know how. (*Perestroika* 131)

The decision to make a claim for perseverance emerges out of necessity and compromise.

The “anyway” in the demand, “Bless me anyway,” is thus absolutely necessary to insure that whatever hope is implied in the decision to go on living is understood to be provisional, limited, and constrained by the social and historical context. As he leaps into the future, Prior takes with him his sickness, his suffering, his mortality, the constraints of his historical situation, and the sickness, suffering, and mortality of others.

Deleuze refers to Nietzsche’s eternal recurrence as “a belief in the future,” (*Difference and Repetition* 90) since it constitutes a decision whereby life is affirmed regardless of what it might bring, and indeed because it might bring the end to all forms of safety, identity, and predictability. Deleuze explains, “it is repetition by excess which leaves intact nothing of the default or the becoming-equal... it is by itself ... the future as such” (91). Belief in the future, in other words, requires a commitment to the unknown,

to instability, to fear, and to loss, because the new is understood to always be all of these things. This leaving-behind of “the default,” is shown in *Angels* to be necessarily ensconced in grief, so much that the affirmation that this grief allows only peeks through for a moment, radical as it might be, before once again disappearing into the everyday struggle of American life. And yet, Kushner’s work is vital in suggesting that these moments of radical affirmation are ubiquitous, but only provisionally, specifically, and in very limited ways, and that the recognition of the existence of these moments is central to any hope for the future of American democracy. In his afterward to *Perestroika*, he acknowledges this as, at least in part, both his aesthetic and political goal in the play:

Together we organize the world for ourselves, or at least we organize our understanding of it; we reflect it, refract it, criticize it, grieve over its savagery and help each other to discern, amidst the gathering dark, paths of resistance, pockets of peace and places from whence hope may be plausibly expected.... From such nets of souls societies, the social world, human life springs. And also plays. (155)

Kushner explicitly points to the necessarily collaborative nature of this process, and for this reason, theater is an ideal genre for the construction of such “nets of souls.” Through the profusion of perspectives, positions and postures that occurs in *Angels*, a properly multivocal ethics can emerge, resisting Theory and its monolithic inscription.

Furthermore, the presence of others is what allows the affective morass of the process of belief in the future to emerge. In the world of the individual, loss of the default challenges nothing but the individual’s self-identity. In a social landscape, however, loss of the default entails the loss of insulation against an environment of scarcity, responsibility, and the demands of others.



Even though perseverance convokes the powers of the common along new and more enabling lines, the common is also a burden and a constraint. But the inadequacy of perseverance is a necessary limit, a reminder that to decide on behalf of the common is always provisional, momentary, and profoundly linked to the past. This ethic must take the dangerous position of affirming pain along with life, and elements of the past along with the future. Paradoxical in content and endlessly fraught with ambivalence, *Angels in America* emerges in a pivotal time in the consolidation of global capitalism and posits an affective state of perseverance against the irresponsibility of neoliberalism and the authoritarianism of reactionary conservatism. Reinstating history and the specificity of others as variables that limit the future, the play ultimately calls into question any theory that claims a potential utopia on the constantly shifting ground of life. Yet it also suggests that perseverance is a vital political force within the neoliberal order, offering a terrain for commonality even as such theoretical claims to communal life appear to be fading. It is toward the need to establish forms of commonality within the alienating forces of neoliberalism that perseverance offers some, albeit limited, hope. Now more than ever, ways of imagining the common outside of the structures of the state that nevertheless stand against the logic of the market are essential. Thoroughly steeped in suffering, perseverance withdraws from the imagined freedom of neoliberalism. Where neoliberalism easily appropriates revolutionary calls for freedom into a nightmare of self-interest, it has much less use for pain. Yet perseverance also relentlessly calls for action within the recognition of loss and impossibility. It therefore offers one way of opening up the political potential in an active refusal of all that neoliberalism takes for granted – easy

forms of freedom, progress, and happiness – in favor of a much more difficult pursuit of joy and love in the face of human suffering.

#### IV. CURIOSITY

*“Is there no way out of the mind?”*

*-Sylvia Plath*

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Much ado has recently been made about the slow disintegration of the always-tenuous border between public and private. This appears to be just one symptom of the destruction of bourgeois liberalism and with it its insistence upon the distinction between the spaces of public freedom such as the democratic public sphere and the capitalist market, and the spaces of domestic privacy such as the preservation of the sanctity of the nuclear family, the keeping of sexual secrets, the right to remain mysterious to the state and its apparatuses of control.<sup>28</sup> The neoliberal “privatized” world tends to fuse public and private to benefit certain forms of publicity, particularly those that support financial freedom, and certain forms of privacy, insisting upon the sanctity of the nuclear family while abolishing other forms of privacy in the name of its preservation. Yet these forms of publicity and privacy that neoliberal privatization values are bolstered to the exclusion of others – democracy wanes as a form of publicity just as personal information becomes

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<sup>28</sup> This argument can be traced back to Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, but has expansive presence throughout theories of the public/private divide and its relationship to bourgeois liberalism.

the property of product testing and commodity analysis.<sup>29</sup> But this, sadly, is not news.

The question that remains is not whether or not forms of privatization are occurring along these lines, but what forms of communal life can populate its realm of influence. The drive to know others, to seek out strangers and forge connections between them, has not disappeared, but it does demand redirection. Nevertheless, every opportunity for alliance is also an opportunity for appropriating that alliance and putting it to work in the hungry market. Every opportunity to seek new knowledge is an opportunity for colonization of some imagined frontier. How, then, can we find each other? In the context of this radical simultaneity of exploitation and atomization, can curiosity provide a shared basis for relating and thinking in common?

The sheer abundance of approaches to questions of privacy attests to the currency of these concerns. Throughout the humanities and social sciences, not to mention in popular media, scholars, writers, and journalists are now in the process of debating what contemporary surveillance policies and information technologies might mean for the future of confidentiality. Largely, these discussions revolve around political interventions, such as the patriot act; corporate innovations in market research; and technological inventions and their social consequences, particularly those of Internet services such as MySpace, Flickr, and Facebook. Conversations around media, technology, politics, and the complexity of privacy and publicity are thus as much a contemporary phenomenon as the objects of these conversations. These inquiries tend to negotiate between the potential for the exposure of the individual to others to forge new social networks and the exploitation of that exposure by forces of power. In this sense,

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<sup>29</sup> On the destruction of the democratic public sphere in the context of neoliberalism, see Wendy Brown, "Neo-Liberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy."

what is at stake is the multivalent quality of the word “curiosity.” At once, curiosity describes, according to the OED, “the desire or inclination to know or learn about anything, *esp.* what is novel or strange” and “an object of interest; any object valued as curious, rare, or strange.” The difference, it seems, is between curiosity as an affective force that seeks out the new, and “a curiosity” as an object that has been endowed with a particular value based on its rarity.

At first this distinction appears to only describe the difference between an affect and a thing. Yet, as Barbara M. Benedict argues, the history of capitalist growth attests to a growing collision between curiosity as a force of desire and “curiosities” as increasingly commodified objects. In England during the early modern period, she argues, “the expansion of curiosity from a passion to a product reflects the revolutionary shift in English society as wealth flooded in from colonies and new inventions and as all aspects of culture became subject to reification” (3). Nevertheless, she argues, curiosity remains ambivalent throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, indicating at once forms of domination and subordination to norms and set values. During that time, curiosity subverts conservative forces by exploring forces of sexuality, aggressively pushing beyond stable social values, and disrupting class boundaries. Constructing spectacles of monstrous “curiosities” – often people with unusual physical traits – curiosity also indicated the control of the unknown, the exploitation of rarity for profit, and the domination of others. Curiosity thus already had the dangerous position in European early modernity that it now has in the contemporary United States.

Yet in the contemporary American cultural context, the stakes of curiosity are different. The danger it poses as a commodifying force remains, and has, in fact,

amplified as capitalism has advanced. Yet its most marked challenge to the status quo is no longer through the disruption of conservative values by bringing the strange into contemporary discourse, but through its affective power to seek out new forms of relation.<sup>30</sup> In this sense, there is a great cleavage in the United States today between the presentations of “curiosities,” or the unveiling of the strange to the public eye, and curiosity as a passion for new ways of engaging with others.<sup>31</sup> Now as always, however, the desire for novelty and knowledge is treacherous. Particularly when the body is the object of curiosity, as with exhibitions of human oddities during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in England and in the field of photographic, cinematic, and digital medical imaging in the nineteenth, twentieth, and twenty-first centuries, there is an enormous risk of the body to become reified and thus stripped of its capacity to engage curiously with others.

This danger is even more pronounced when the part of the body that is exposed is the center of thought itself – the brain. The exposure of the brain has been of scientific interest throughout history, but advances in neuroimaging over the past 35 years suggest that the visibility of the brain is a particularly pressing contemporary issue. Since the development of Positron Emission Tomography (PET) scanning in the mid 1970s, the stakes of exposing the body to ambivalent forces of curiosity have been raised to the level

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<sup>30</sup> Foucault’s repressive hypothesis suggests that the interval between disrupting the dominant values of the time by bringing taboos into popular discussion and the cultural reification of those taboos has closed to such a degree that pushing back against repression in this sense is no longer an appropriate radical strategy. See *History of Sexuality, Volume 1*, “The Repressive Hypothesis.”

<sup>31</sup> The importance of the cultivation of different forms of publicity in contemporary life has been emphasized by Nancy Fraser in her influential “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” in which she develops a concept of “subaltern counterpublics” for those who are marginalized by the dominant conception of “the public” and in Michael Warner’s *The Trouble with Normal* and *Publics and Counterpublics* in which he emphasizes the importance of stranger-relation in developing active and engaged multiple publics.

of the spatial analysis of neural operations. While Computed Tomography (CT) and Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) technology offer the photographic image slices of the brain, PET and now functional MRI (fMRI) allow for neural changes to be traced over time, producing images that are often read as moving images of thought processes. FMRI in particular, invented in 1992, has revolutionized neuroimaging because it allows blood flow to certain regions of the brain be traced without the exposure to radiation that PET requires. Over the past decade, fMRI has become increasingly accessible and affordable and with it, images of brain functions have become ubiquitous in research environments and popular culture alike.<sup>32</sup>

Consistent with the mutual implication of danger and promise in curiosity, however, this increased visibility of structural neural function has led to interdisciplinary work in the sciences and social sciences that aims to understand the relationship between neural states and affective, ethical, and relational behavior. This work often has the explicit aim of challenging assumptions about “normal” states of rationality, sociability, and decision-making. Interest in relationships between the biological and the social has become significant enough to produce an emerging field of neuroscience that focuses exclusively on modes of social relation that rely upon biological instinct and forms of affect and feeling.<sup>33</sup> These theories expand ideas of commonality beyond the

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<sup>32</sup> The best information about neuroscanning and its history tends to be through Internet sources due to the quickly changing nature of the field. Jamie Shorey’s Duke-based website, *Foundations of MRI* <<http://www.ee.duke.edu/~jshorey/MRIHomepage/MRImain.html>> has some particularly excellent timelines and information, from which most of this history was drawn. Also see Keith Johnson’s excellent site covering technical descriptions of various neuroimaging techniques at <<http://www.med.harvard.edu/AANLIB/hms1.html>>.

<sup>33</sup> Social neuroscience and affective neuroscience each constitute separate fields, but have significant overlaps. These intersections have led to the founding of several new journals that address this relationship, most notably Oxford University Press’s *Social Cognitive and Affective Neuroscience* in 2006. Among the most prominent researchers in the fields of affective and social neuroscience are Antonio Damasio, Uta and

public/private dichotomy in fascinating ways, suggesting that social orientation might be a fundamental aspect of human life on a corporeal level. Thus, while they are often not explicitly driven at political analysis, strides in neuroscience can have profound political implications for the way we understand structures of social relation. But neurobiological research is also potentially political in a different, and perhaps opposite, direction: cognitive science is deeply connected to the capitalist market both directly through institutional funding and through the use of its findings in market research. The very practice of making the brain visible is also ultimately implicated in diffuse structures of power through the very putting-into-discourse of the “last frontier” of human thought and feeling.

Neuroscanning technologies in general and fMRI in particular thus have the complex consequences of allowing for the functions of the brain to be increasingly monitored, analyzed, and shared among various publics, from the scientific community to the readership of popular non-fiction, from market executives to political radicals. Does making the mysterious functions of the body visible instantly inscribe them into categories of mastery, or can we instead posit an interval in which affective forces of curiosity might take hold, expanding and connecting the visible beyond categories of description, before those categories begin to delimit the possible? What does it mean to understand thought as an image, a series of images, or a moving image? What are the political consequences of the very process of opening the brain up to examination and forms of connection with others, and the visual media used to accomplish that opening?

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Chris Frith, Joseph Ledoux, and V.S. Ramachandran. While the content of their research varies considerably, all are interested in the ways in which biologically constituted emotional states construct and emerge out of social relation.



Reading medical imaging as itself cultural, how does neuroimaging relate to other forms of moving-image media?

The uses of images in the disciplines of science and medicine throughout modernity have long and well-documented histories.<sup>34</sup> As many of these histories suggest, imaging technologies, from hand-drawn illustrations to X-Ray to fMRI have extensive and varied cultural implications that extend beyond the research programs and diagnostic applications for which these technologies are explicitly intended. As Jose van Dijck suggests, medical imaging evolves in a complex and mutually constitutive relationship with popular media. Arguing that “the media’s insatiable appetite for visuals has undoubtedly propelled the high visibility of the interior body in modern-day culture” (5), she focuses on the cultural tendency to believe that medial imaging makes bodies more transparent. This concept of transparency, however, has normative political and social implications:

Mediated bodies are intricately interlinked with the ideal of transparency. Historically, this ideal reflected notions of rationality and scientific progress; more recently, transparency has come to connote perfectibility, modifiability, and control over human physiology... The transparent body is a complex product of our culture – a culture that capitalizes on perfectibility and malleability. (5)

Van Dijck’s analysis epitomizes one prominent view of the cultural significance of medical imaging in general – that hegemonic ways of viewing the internal functions of

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<sup>34</sup> Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison’s recent work, *Objectivity* (New York: Zone Books, 2007) is particularly noteworthy in this archive. Daston and Galison chronicle the use of images in scientific atlases, arguing that concepts of objectivity as realized in scientific illustrations change dramatically throughout the modern period. Bettyann Holtzmann Kevles offers a similarly ambitious history of the development of medical images of the body during the twentieth century in *Naked to the Bone* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1997), which offers insight into intersections between developments in medical imaging technology and modern visual art movements.

the body are essentially normalizing.<sup>35</sup> In developing the conceptual nexus of transparency, malleability, and perfectibility she offers a critique of a dominant narrative of the way medical images are often employed in contemporary American popular culture. New technology is understood to offer greater transparency (a commonplace that van Dijck takes great pains to deconstruct), which then leads immanently to new possibilities for malleability and thus, also immanently, to perfectibility. Van Dijck suggests that cultural constructions of this narrative through images of medical diagnosis, treatment, and improvement in sources ranging from popular journalism to the Internet have dangerous political implications that support the cultural status quo in many respects.

The transparency-malleability-perfectibility narrative of medical imaging has great purchase in contemporary American popular culture, from reality television explorations into plastic surgery to genetic “mapping” and alteration. But should the dominance of this narrative and its many unhappy social consequences lead to the conclusion that technologies scientific and medical imaging are essentially culturally normalizing? Do they only produce bodies as curiosities to be normalized, or can they also contribute to a more expansive sense of curiosity? Leaving aside questions of medical and scientific efficacy of these technologies, which are themselves highly debated, and instead focusing on the ethical, political, and cultural vibrations of contemporary corporeal imaging practices, does the cultural presence of these practices exclusively reinforce the status quo?

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<sup>35</sup> See also Joseph Dumit’s “Objective Brains, Prejudicial Images,” *Science in Context* 12:1 (1999), 173-201 in which he explores the legal implications of PET scanning and warns of the dangers of developing popular images of “normal” and “abnormal” brains.

Arguing that the cultural implications of these practices can best be understood as part of a greater visual culture, Lisa Cartwright offers another analysis of contemporary medical imaging, but one that suggests that these forms of imaging might be key to developing concepts of “life” that are both normative and innovative. Rather than examining medical imaging as one isolated instance of visual culture, Cartwright argues that medical imaging and cinema have a privileged relationship, suggesting that they are intrinsically linked at the level of their history and technological function. Unlike many traditional narratives of early cinema that suggest that the development of the popular cinema instantiates a break with the early uses of the cinematic apparatus for medical purposes, she claims that cinema continues to function as a primary force in the social construction of normative concepts of life and the body. She explains,

One of my primary claims here is that the cinematic apparatus can be considered as a cultural technology for the discipline and management of the human body, and that the long history of bodily analysis and surveillance in medicine and science is critically tied to the history of the development of the cinema as a popular cultural institution and a technological apparatus. (3)

While Cartwright primarily defines the relationship between cinema, the body, and the medical and scientific disciplines as one of surveillance and control, her analysis is specifically oriented toward the argument that the cinematic construction leads to vivification – both the development of the concept of “life” and the definition of the human body as primarily dynamic. She suggests that the use of film in practices of science and medicine “contributed to the generation of a broad cultural definition of the body as a *characteristically dynamic entity* – one uniquely suited to motion recording technologies like the cinema, but also one peculiarly unsuited to static photographic observation because of its changeability and interiority” (4, emphasis mine). The moving

image thus contributes to a particular concept of life as consisting primarily of movement, change, and potential. This sense of the “vivifying” force of cinema and medical imaging thus begins to push toward a possible affinity with curiosity as a force of change and relation, even as its primary social force is still one of control and authority.

Cartwright’s analysis focuses primarily on intersections between popular visual culture and scientific uses of film in the early twentieth-century – neurological studies in asylums and cinescopic images of blood circulation, for instance. In these senses, she is correct in identifying the “vivifying” gaze of the cinema as primarily medically normalizing and regulating. Yet coextensively with the uses of cinema to present a concept of life through the surveillance and *representation of* bodies, twentieth century cinema theorists were interrogating the relationship between cinematic images and the bodies *confronted by* those images. The question for these theorists was not so much how cinema could develop a concept of biological life as how cinema could directly construct thought. The moving image was seen as having an unprecedented connection to the brain itself as accessible through the dynamic and mutable body. In this sense, the relationship between images and the body in both instances can be defined as one of curiosity, but curiosity understood as a multivalent force with complex political implications.

Cartwright suggests that the mode of early motion studies of the body in forms such as those Tom Gunning refers to as instances of “cinema of attractions” “invites the spectator to participate in the ‘scientific’ fascination with the execution of ‘life’” (16).<sup>36</sup> This “scientific” fascination, which Cartwright sees as more removed and quasi-scientific

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<sup>36</sup> See Tom Gunning, “Primitive Cinema – A Frame Up? Or, The Trick’s on Us,” *Cinema Journal* 28:2 (Winter 1989).

than Gunning's concept of "primal fascination" otherwise would suggest, picks up on the classic double valence of the concept of curiosity. In the context of cinema these two senses of curiosity, as passion and product, affect and performance, transgression and codification seem to exist simultaneously. Theorists and practitioners of early cinema such as Sergei Eisenstein often hoped that cinema could harness the force of the transgressive aspects of curiosity in favor of revolutionary change, only to find that the commoditization of the curious spectacle often overwhelmed the dynamic potential of cinematic images. Contemporary film theorists, unable to simply turn to cinema as a direct shaper of thought after the disaster of cinema's implication in fascist movements of the mid-century, thus provide a valuable context for complex ways of thinking through the relationship between contemporary forms of power, the brain, and thought, and the most apt theoretical starting place to look into the ambivalent effects of visual curiosity upon the brain and thinking – both the curious drive for codification, stabilization, and authority and the expansive, exploratory function of curiosity, which forges connections only to imagine what further links might emerge in the future. Beginning with Gilles Deleuze's suggestion that a political cinema must produce not new thought, but "the awareness that one is not yet thinking," I will ask what two contemporary films that take the brain as representational material might tell us about the cultural function of the contemporary popularization of medical imaging of the brain. Throughout this chapter, I will suggest that in each instance, from cinema theory to cinematic practice to medical imaging, versions of the affective state of curiosity are posited and complicated, produced and undermined. Ultimately, I hope to offer a conceptual analysis of the emotional and

political complexity of curiosity as it is constructed in contemporary American visual culture.

### The Cinematic Brain: Theory

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From its earliest theorists and practitioners, film has been the site of the imagination that art might be formally linked with the processes of thought. Sergei Eisenstein in particular shows an interest in many of his written works that montage techniques might shape the nervous system from within in dramatic ways – enough to trigger an awareness of a organic social whole that could be translated directly to mass political utopianism. Eisenstein imagines a world where normal brains can be broken into better brains, taken beyond habitual circuits of perception, and led to a political awareness that everyday thought is too encumbered by context to reach. This relationship between cinema, the body, and the brain is, he suggests forged by various techniques of montage. He suggests that just as watching a work that employs a rhythmic form of cinematic montage causes “one’s hands and knees [to] rhythmically tremble, in [intellectual montage], such a trembling, under the influence of a different degree of intellectual appeal, occurs in identically the same way through the tissues of the higher nerve systems of the thought apparatus” (*Film Form* 82). The brain itself is thus, for Eisenstein, the target of the highest level of cinematic montage technique, which takes as its aim the literal vibration of its very flesh. Bodily affects are just stepping-stones to the true aim of cinema – the affectation of the brain itself.

For Eisenstein, this process has potentially revolutionary possibilities, aimed toward a hope that intellectual cinema could lead to “the realization of revolution in the

general history of culture; building a synthesis of science, art, and class militancy” (83). The failure of this project, of course, came from a variety of sides – from the growing dominance of plot-based film based on rational and habitual linking of images, from the increasing restrictions upon Socialist Realist art, and from the terrifying use of cinema as fascist propaganda by practitioners across Europe, including the aesthetically stunning and politically horrifying films of Leni Riefenstahl. As Gregg Lambert points out, the failure of Eisenstein’s revolutionary project was not that the project itself failed, but that it succeeded in all the wrong ways: “the optimism with which Eisenstein originally held the muscular syntax of inner speech and the forms of ‘sensual, pre-logical thinking’ as primary sources for montage... also harbored the possibility of fascism, manipulation, and the infinite alienation of the masses” (267). Eisenstein’s political goals, based upon the hope that a shock to thought could lead to a transformed neural basis for relation, led to a situation that Deleuze describes as a dual crisis. At once, “cinema is dying... from its quantitative mediocrity” while “the mass-art... has degenerated into state propaganda and manipulation, into a kind of fascism which brought together Hitler and Hollywood, Hollywood and Hitler” (164).

Consequently, by the time Deleuze takes up the possibility that cinema and thought might have some privileged relationship, the very concept is deeply suspicious. But Deleuze suggests that it was Artaud, not Riefenstahl, who provides the next step from Eisenstein’s theory. Rather than believing in a shock to thought which opens it up to a dazzlingly complete political whole, Deleuze summarizes Artaud’s intervention as suggesting, “if it is true that thought depends on a shock which gives birth to it (the nerve, brain matter), it can think only one thing, *the fact that we are not yet thinking*, the

powerlessness to think the whole and to think oneself, thought which is always fossilized, dislocated, collapsed” (167). Opening up the interval between the interruption of habitual thought and transubstantiation to the point where the latter is never understood to occur, this turn from the ideological to the nihilistic avoids the problem of propaganda, but lacks a turn to new modes of thought. Curiosity is cut off before it can engage with an unknown world – stopped at the point where room for discovery might be acknowledged – and left with nothing to pursue. Artaud’s theory opens up the necessary interval after shock, but leaves the curiosity that might emerge disempowered.

Deleuze thus begins his extension of Artaud’s theory from the premise that this paralysis of thought and action are necessary to any ethical engagement with the world. He argues that once “the sensory-motor break makes man a seer who finds himself struck by something intolerable in the world, and confronted by something unthinkable in thought... thought undergoes a strange fossilization, which is as it were its powerlessness to function, to be, its dispossession of itself and the world” (169). This process echoes Artaud’s valuation of the awareness of non-sense. Yet Deleuze explains that this “fossilization” can lead to something else – a form of belief. This belief is “believe, not in a different world, but in a link between man and the world, in love or life, to believe in this as in the impossible, the unthinkable, which none the less cannot but be thought” (170). Bad cinema, Deleuze explains, is the consequence of thinking and living clichés. Bad cinema films the world, which is banal, habituated, and detached. Yet if cinema can destroy the very links that allow this thought/world dynamic to persist, a cinema that constructs an engaged relationship with the world can evolve and bring with it thought that thinks the excess of habitual thought. Deleuze calls this kind of “un-thought” “belief-



in-the-world” to indicate its immanent materiality and its notably irrational character, but we might also call this “un-thought” curiosity, a force that desires connection with the world outside of habitual modes of knowing.

“Belief-in-the-world” emerges out of cinematic production that aims not to represent the world, but to “film, not the world, but belief in this world, our only link” (172). This takes the aesthetic focus of cinema away from representation and the dream of the organic whole. If the cinema does not need to represent, reflect, or reproduce the world, readings of the politics of cinema based on thematics of representation are also deeply suspect. The turn to cinema as filming belief is simultaneously a critical move toward a focus on production. Cinema does not represent a world to an audience. Instead, cinema produces an initiation of a commitment to a world that cannot be accessed through representation or knowledge but instead must simply be felt and believed in. Cinema, then, becomes productive of states of feeling and states of belief rather than remaining merely representational.

This decentering of knowledge as both the primary mode of aesthetic value (representation) and the primary factor in the thought/world dynamic allows for production, belief, and materiality to become central. Cinematic thought does not aim to master or know, but should instead remain committed to a confrontation with the unknowable. Deleuze argues that the unknowable and unthinkable necessitate a confrontation with the body. Belief can only occur by a cinematic apparatus that can “give words back to the body, to the flesh” (173). The body, however, does not replace thought, but simply acts as the immanent connection between the world as it is and thought: “the seed which splits open the paving stones, which has been preserved and

lives on in the holy shroud or the mummy's bandages, and which bears witness to life, in this world as it is" (173). The body, then, breaks the organic composition of narration by its particular material connection to the world for which narration no longer fits. And while Deleuze points to the danger of privileging knowledge over life in cinema and in the world, in no way does he simply reverse a mind/body dualism to privilege the body over thought. To the contrary the body and thought are immanently connected: "not that the body thinks, but, obstinate and stubborn, it forces us to think and forces us to think what is concealed from thought, life" (189). Knowledge can no longer colonize the affects of the body. Instead, "thought will be thrown into the categories of life. The categories of life are precisely the attitudes of the body" (189). The cinema produces an image of thought through an image of the body because the body is precisely what forces thought to become immanent and material rather than a transcendent operation of a discrete knowledge apparatus. The body thus propels curiosity even though it becomes an intellectual state of connection. Curiosity, in the Deleuzian cinema schema, would therefore be placed best between affect and thought. It is the feeling that motivates the brain, the thinking that is activated through the body.

When Deleuze turns to the brain itself as it appears in contemporary cinema, he shies away from representations of discrete brain organs. Instead, he turns to Kubrick who, he argues, constructs the entire world of a film as a brain, that "every journey in the world is an exploration of the brain" (206). And yet neither world nor brain is predictable, seamless, or whole. Instead, "the identity of world and brain, the automaton, does not form a whole, but rather a limit, a membrane which puts an outside and an inside in contact, makes them present to each other, confronts them or makes them clash"

(206). The brain-world is thus posed as and against ultimate exteriority and ultimate interiority – both the brain and the imagined “outside” exist as limits that are broken and splintered again and again, proving once and for all that there is no organic whole to be found. The brain-world in these films, however, is not merely nihilistic. It contains people, sensations, and emotions. Thus it is “a cinema which is cerebral or intellectual but not abstract, because it is clear to what extent feeling, affect, or passion are the principal characters of the brain-world” (209-10). Cinema of the brain thus reflects an understanding of thought as produced by a brain populated with others, shot through with emotion and sensation, and anything but aloft and abstract.

Deleuze argues that this is no coincidence – that the brains he sees in filmmakers from Kubrick to Resnais correspond, at least loosely, to new ways of relating to the brain in the post-war period, to “a simultaneous change in our conception of the brain and our relationship with the brain” (210). While he suggests that this might have as much to do with our lived experience of the brain as to any scientific innovations (in fact, he suggests, those innovations might follow the lived experience rather than the other way around), Deleuze does suggest that both science and life begin to move away from concepts of organic function and towards fragmentation, dislocation, and disruption as primary mechanisms of thought. Thus “we no longer believe in a whole as interiority of thought – even an open one; we believe in a force from the outside which hollows itself out, grabs us, and attracts the inside” (212). Ultimately, Deleuze sees potential where many theorists of medical and scientific imaging see danger – in understanding the brain itself as broken rather than a symbol of unity. While this can, as some suggest, lead to a disciplinary pathologization of “abnormal” brains, when universalized, as Deleuze

suggests, “the brain becomes our problem or our illness, our passion rather than our mastery, our solution or decision” (212). This problematic nature of the brain leaves it open to cinema that tears it open, exposes its weakness and its limits, and offers new possibilities for the body to construct new forms of thought through new encounters with an always-permeating outside.

For Deleuze, the brain that cinema constructs offers a site of collision between thought and bodily sensation, the internal and the external, the self and others. In this sense, we can say that Deleuze’s brain-images are spaces of curiosity. Yet the double-valence of this term holds, even for cinema. While Deleuze takes great pains to differentiate his theory from both Eisenstein and Artaud, both linger at the margins, threatening to either reinstate an intellectual whole, whereby the active creative forces of curiosity become codified and potentially commodified “curiosities” or verging on the potential of nihilism, nonsense, and the loss of curiosity in the face of the impossibility of knowledge. But how does this tension work out in films that thematize the brain as well as spatializing it in images? The following section examines two contemporary films that construct brain-spaces and explicitly offer the tenuous place of the brain as a site of active contestation.

#### The Cinematic Brain: Practice

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##### *Being John Malkovich*

The parallel structures of cinema of the body and cinema of thought become almost indistinguishable in Spike Jonze’s *Being John Malkovich*, which emerges out of a highly experimental script by Charlie Kaufman. The central conceit of the film is that

there is a secret portal into the brain of the actor John Malkovich (played brilliantly by himself). The portal can be accessed from an opening behind some filing cabinets in an office in which one of the film's main characters, Craig Schwartz (John Cusack), comes to work. Once "inside" Malkovich, whoever accesses the portal sees what Malkovich sees and feels what he feels, as they navigate the world through goggle-shaped vision. This lasts for about fifteen minutes before they fall into a ditch along the New Jersey Turnpike. When Craig finds the portal by accident, he uses it as an opportunity to get closer to Maxine (Catherine Keener), an attractive coworker, who convinces him to turn the portal into a business venture. Meanwhile, a love triangle develops between Craig, Maxine, and Craig's wife, Lottie (Cameron Diaz). Both Craig and Lottie fall in love with Maxine, who is only attracted to either of them when they are inside Malkovich. Soon, everyone is using Malkovich – Charlie to get closer to Maxine, finally taking over Malkovich completely in efforts to get her to stay with him, Maxine to both make money and find erotic satisfaction in being with Malkovich when he is possessed by Craig or Lottie, and Lottie in order to experience the pleasure of a new body and express her desire for Maxine – but precisely how Malkovich is used by whom turns out to form the ethical core of the film.

Clearly a film about expressions corporeal life in many forms (Craig and Lottie's apartment is filled with various wild animals from reptiles to chimpanzees), *Malkovich* flirts with categories of identity as performance (Craig is a puppeteer, Lottie at times believes herself to be a transsexual) and psychoanalytic theories of trauma (Lottie's pet chimpanzee, Elijah, experiences an anxiety disorder brought on by a secret trauma surrounding his capture). But the film will not ultimately resolve into any of these

categories, partly because the bodies that construct the categories will not be reduced to them and partly because the relentlessly complex dismantling of traditional forms of subjectivity escapes even the categories of performance that the film posits. The film accomplishes the construction of these dense and complex images of human life through the space of the radically open brain – the brain with a portal – which at once retains the imprint of the individual who “possesses” the brain while becoming a mutable space for the blending and fragmenting of the link between body and thought, identity and relation.

*Malkovich* begins with a puppet show. The scene is clearly meant to be an explicit performance (we hear applause, see the parting of a curtain), and the show is highly expressionistic, constructing uncannily human gestures from the blank expressionless wooden puppet that almost seems to scream and rant as he dances around the stage. As the curtain closes to applause, the camera pans upward to reveal Craig Schwartz, an undeniable likeness to the dancing puppet below, alone in his workshop. The puppet, here, is simply the affection-image of Craig Schwartz – the embodied space of emotion and thought that erupts in mad gestures in contrast to Craig’s stooped posture and quiet, passive speech. The close up on the Craig-puppet is thus a close-up on Craig. While Craig Schwartz, the man, perceives and acts, the Craig-puppet feels and evaluates. Strangely, the role of the body in general is transposed to the puppet and Craig-as-puppeteer has no body without his marionettes. Craig’s other puppets – his wife, and later Maxine, the object of his infatuation – seem to be only vehicles for Craig to play out his fantasies through the Craig-puppet. This makes his clearly contrived statement to Maxine, “Have you ever wanted to see the world through someone else’s eyes, to feel what they feel, see what they see,” in explanation for his puppeteering particularly

dishonest: Craig uses puppetry as a means of getting inside *his own* skin, and to feel what *he* feels. The Craig-puppet/Craig circuit is entirely self-reflexive, narcissistic, and, consequentially, static.

Of course, the wooden Craig-puppet is only a foreshadowing of the real puppet figure of the film: John Malkovich himself. Notably, when Craig first discovers and experiences the portal into Malkovich's brain, while he is thrilled with the concept of the portal and its ethical/social/psychological implications, he has no immediate desire to go back into the brain of Malkovich. His relationship to the portal becomes one of opportunism, pure and simple, as Maxine convinces him to rent out the portal and he uses the business to get closer to Maxine. He uses the cliché of "being someone else" for his advertisement – a concept in which he clearly does not really believe. Just as Deleuze sees the link between man and the world as fundamentally broken, the link between Craig and the particularities and surprises of the outside world is severed entirely. Craig's outside (Maxine, puppetry, even his strange workplace which forces his body to conform to a stooped, passive posture, are all direct reflections of his inside. Craig colonizes everything outside of him with his own relentlessly violent, static, and selfish subjectivity. His drive to possess and express, to territorialize through expression of a unified subjectivity, excludes any possibility of *being* John Malkovich. Instead, when he finally does go back inside Malkovich in order to conquer Maxine, he only wants to stay once he realizes that he can take over Malkovich entirely. Thus, during the eight-month period that Craig is in Malkovich, John Malkovich is being Craig; Craig is not being John Malkovich.

Lottie, on the other hand, seems to experience her body for the first time through the experience of being someone else in Malkovich. Her first journey into Malkovich, as he showers and dries off, is built entirely of physical sensations and culminates in admiring herself/him in the mirror. While she misreads this fulfillment as transsexual, seeing her alienation from her own everyday body as a result of gender, it seems that on the contrary Lottie is able to reconstitute a sensuous link to the world through the experience of inhabiting a body that is strange, unfamiliar, not yet clichéd and taken away. Thus, she experiences pleasure from a body that is not already incorporated into a subject or an individual - *a* body, not *my* body.<sup>37</sup> When Lottie is being John Malkovich, she really is Being John Malkovich. Lottie takes advantage of the incredible potential of Malkovich's open brain: she inhabits it like a space to explore, to defamiliarize, to *be* someone else, not to colonize or give oneself up to someone else.

Craig and Lottie perform two possibilities for the relationship between curiosity and the brain. Either the access to the brain through the cinematic image allows for the brain to be just one more site for biopolitical control, and should thus be resisted by keeping the brain "private", or the opening of the brain can allow for a radical new cohabitation, and "privacy" is understood as a kind of atomistic loneliness (Lottie takes no pleasure in the privacy of her thoughts). This second option renders the brain open and sharable and entails fragmenting selfhood and all of the negative Craig-traits it involves: selfishness, territorializing instincts, the violence that necessarily results. The brain provides the ideal space for both possibilities – the difference is in the mode of use. While Craig literally uses Malkovich as a puppet, turning his body into a vehicle for

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<sup>37</sup> On the use of the indefinite article in the place of the possessive in relation to the process of becoming and forming alliances, see Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 263-4.



Craig's desires, Lottie cohabitates with Malkovich, exercising subtle influences on his desires, but also taking his desires on as her own.

*Malkovich* therefore presents many valences of the potential within affective forces of curiosity. John Malkovich's brain is used as "a curiosity" through its commodification by the Maxine/Craig business venture. Perhaps more insidiously, Craig's attempt to reside permanently in Malkovich suggests an even darker role that curiosity can play in domination – lacking even the playful possibilities of the commodification of "curiosities," Craig shuts down possibilities for relation, discovery, and play by taking advantage of the openness of Malkovich's brain to permanently control it. This possibility exemplifies the dystopian view of opening up sites of thought and relation to visual knowledge. Finally, the film suggests that a third type of curiosity is possible, despite its many dangers. While Malkovich's brain leaves him vulnerable to forms of exploitation and control, it also opens his neural space up for exciting new modes of life, creativity, and commonality. The erotic pleasure that Lottie finds in temporarily being John Malkovich has nothing to do with subordinating his brain to her desires. Rather, Lottie's access to Malkovich's brain produces greater possibilities for curiosity as affect – the desire to think that which cannot yet be thought, and the desire to feel beyond the confines of the individual body.

The alternatives that *Malkovich* presents do not simply serve as crude representations of different possibilities for neurobiological research; clearly the brain portal stands in for modes of association that are not necessarily based on the literal opening of the neural space. Nevertheless, the performance peculiar collision of thought and body in the space of the brain makes the neural imaginary of *Malkovich* particularly

salient to questions of power and the brain today. As neurobiological research persists in making the brain at once more legible and more open to forces of interaction, control, and exploration, the ambivalence performed in *Malkovich* between the potential for control and the potential for curiosity, the potential for narcissism and the potential for radical relationality, offers one place of departure for examining the ethical conundrums of other brain-images: those created in efforts to understand the brain scientifically.

*Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*

What are the conditions under which the openness of the brain might produce possibilities for relation rather than close them down? To ask this is to ask when the tension between the sense-making function of reason and the non-sense of the open and mutable brain-space might prove particularly generative. In a later script, this time actualized through the playful direction of Michel Gondry, Charlie Kaufman explores these questions by once again producing two versions of one brain in a film. But this time, the difference cannot, as it can in *Malkovich*, be reduced to the particularities of personalities and use. Instead, the difference that emerges is between the brain as imagined by corporate-scientific attempts to dominate it and the brain as a lived space produced by the bodies that inhabit and relate within it. Unlike the fantastic explanation of the presence of the portal into John Malkovich's brain in *Being John Malkovich*, *Eternal Sunshine* draws on the rhetoric, at the very least, of contemporary neuroscience in developing the scientific fiction at the heart of the film – that a company, Lacuna, Inc., has developed the technology to erase memories associated with an event or person by making a virtual “map” of the emotional registers of that cluster of memories.

The film proceeds from the premise that a serious relationship between two Long Island residents, Joel Barish (Jim Carrey) and Clementine Kruczynski (Kate Winslet), has recently dissolved, and that Clementine has used the services of Lacuna to erase Joel from her memory. When Joel finds out, he seeks out the procedure as well, and the bulk of the film takes place both within Joel's memories, through images understood to be literally in his brain, and in his apartment, as his memory is being erased. The narrative moves in a vaguely backwards-order. It begins on the day after Joel's memory erasure (though the viewer does not find that out until later in the film) as he wanders on the beach at Montauk in the winter and meets Clementine there, seemingly for the first time. They talk on the train, at her apartment, on the phone, and, seemingly fascinated by one another as strangers, spend the night lying on the frozen Charles River together. The narrative then jumps back to the day Joel discovers that Clementine has erased him from her memory and proceeds forward until Joel embarks upon the erasure, at which point the narrative again begins working backward through the relationship in Joel's memories themselves. Finally, after the erasure is complete, the narrative once again jumps forward to the day following Joel and Clementine's night on the Charles, as they discover that their memories have been erased and that they are, in fact, in the process of embarking upon a relationship that they have already had.

The repetitive structure makes it clear that there is a problem with the memory erasing procedure from the beginning of the film. In the opening scenes, which take place on the day after the procedure is done, Joel wakes up, gets ready to go to work, spontaneously runs to the Montauk-bound side of the platform as he waits for his train, and meets Clementine on the beach. It isn't clear until much later what they are doing on

the beach in February, but as soon as the narrative returns to the night of the erasure it becomes clear that some aspect of the procedure will not work since Joel will unconsciously seek out Clementine the very next morning. A parody of this repetition simultaneously plays out as one of the Lacuna technicians, Patrick (Elijah Wood), uses lines from Joel's journals and Clementine's letters to reproduce the emotional context of the early days of Joel and Clementine's relationship, quoting Joel's lines and anticipating Clementine's desires. Consequently, some of the most emotionally significant scenes (the night-trip to the frozen Charles river, for instance) occur three times, once in Joel's memory of Clementine, once, unknowingly, after the memory erasure has taken place, and once between Clementine and Patrick. But unlike the forced role-playing of the Patrick/Clementine scenes where the words are identical but the feeling is uncomfortably forced, the repetition of the Joel/Clementine dialogue is never perfect, but the emotional quality is the same. Emotions, in the film, are thus understood as the primary substance of memory and relation – both the material that allows memories to be linked together and the residue that remains when those memories have dissolved.

Throughout the bulk of the film, which takes place as Joel is undergoing the memory-erasing procedure, two different types of images of Joel's brain coexist. On one hand, his brain is mapped onto a computer that Patrick and Lacuna's head technician, Stan (Mark Ruffalo), bring into Joel's apartment. This image of the brain is modeled off of the images that result from various processes of contemporary neuroimaging. The scanner shows slices of the brain and lighted regions that represent memories, which move as the memories change and are erased. The erasure is represented as the disappearance of those lighted regions. But as this process occurs, the film constructs a

second set of brain-images – the images of memories that Joel is understood to experience as he is undergoing the procedure and ostensibly asleep. These memories are not, however, presented as simple flashbacks. They vacillate between being lived memories, where Joel participates in the events he remembers just as he did in his original memory, and detached representations of memories, which Joel observes from a third-person perspective, even as his body plays through the event as it occurred - at times, Joel appears in his own memories as a double, a conscious observer of himself and at others, his third-person involvement is registered as a voice over. Throughout the first half of the procedure, everything goes as planned. Joel vacillates between unhappily reliving the end of the relationship and watching it occur with a detached calm, narrating the events from a new position of power and remove.

As the memories go farther back into happier moments of their relationship, however, Joel has second thoughts. He becomes less certain that he wants to go through with the procedure, and the difference between lived memory and observed memory begins to break down. The Joel that is theoretically repeating the memory as it occurred becomes increasingly conscious of his performance and tries to break out of it, communicate with Clementine, and change the course of the procedure by fleeing the memory that he knows the technicians are trying to erase. Joel and Clementine begin running through his memories, trying to hide from the erasure by inhabiting unpredictable places – memories from childhood and adolescence – places where the two as a couple never existed, where they take on strange roles and share impossible experiences, like bathing in the sink together as infants and cavorting in the yard outside Joel’s childhood home. There is an eerie, playful tone to these fugitive “memories” as a

result of the dissonant pairing of the inevitability that they will always be re-routed into the predictable emotional memory-maps of their relationship and yet the strange freedom that the momentary escape of reason and determination within the oddly pliable images that the brain offers up for exploration.

The disjunction between the two brain-images in the film – those of the scanner and those that represent Joel’s experience of the procedure suggests that Lacuna is clearly guilty of a gross oversimplification of the affective registers of memory. The weakness of the Lacuna image is nowhere more satirized, for instance, than when immediately after a scene in which Joel and Clementine “hide” in a richly textured memory of Joel’s childhood, and a hilariously undersized “Baby Joel” is watched by Clementine-as-childhood-babysitter in a gorgeous mod dress, Dr. Howard Mierzwiak (Tom Wilkinson), inventor and founder of Lacuna, points to a small glowing light on a cross-section of a brain and says, “There he is.” While the affective quality of the brain-images of the memories themselves exposes the falsely clinical nature of the brain-images generated by the neural scanner, this difference is exposed most dramatically through the juxtaposition of the experience of memory erasure itself. Figured as a simple disappearing series of lights on the scanner, the other brain-images of memory erasure are visually and emotionally violent. Walls crumble, faces become washed out and distorted, voices change pitch and waver before fading altogether, and entire structures waste away to dust in seconds. While Dr. Mierzwiak describes the brain damage that occurs during the procedure as “on par with a night of heavy drinking,” the destruction of the brain figured through its emotional materiality is extreme.

The violence of the memory-erasure procedure paired with the authority at work in the medicalization of memory and the extreme traceability of the brain's functions produces the tragedy of the film – that no matter how hard Joel and Clementine try, they will eventually be found somewhere in Joel's brain, manifest as a glowing light, and erased. The end of the film thus enacts a coming to terms with an extreme version of loss – not only the loss of the relationship, but also the loss of any trace of it in the brain. As the last remaining memory crumbles, Clementine whispers, “Meet me in Montauk,” and then disappears, as everything does, into the dust and rubble of the destroyed memory. The grief that erupts in the face of this loss, which only barely registers on Joel's paralyzed face as he undergoes the procedure, points definitively to the danger of offering up access to the brain to medical and scientific invasion. At the same time, the procedure itself is represented as an offering to those managing inconsolable grief brought on by memory – which turns out to be almost everyone. Dr. Mierzwiak's office is populated with people in terrible pain, people who have lost pets, children, and lovers. The assumption behind the procedure is that the pain of memory haunts everyone; the public inscribed by the procedure is a public locked in devastating loss.

Not only does this complicate the problematic ethical position of the procedure itself, but the film also complicates its own grim assessment of the dangers of brain-alteration through the continual presence of the excess that the procedure cannot manage – the emotional traces that it leaves behind. These unconscious traces motivate Joel and Clementine to go to Montauk the next day and find each other again, offering not only a small way out of the totalizing gaze of the neural scanner, but pointing to a strange gift that the procedure produces as an unintentional by-product. It is clear from the narrative

that prior to the end of the relationship and the procedure, Joel and Clementine had become stuck in habitual ways of interacting and the subsequent hostility and contempt of a stagnant relationship. Even after the fact that the procedure has occurred is revealed, and both Joel and Clementine hear the disgust with which they talked about each other prior to the memory erasures, their commitment to pursue adventure through and with one another is augmented, not diminished, by the knowledge that they have, in fact, done it all already. The repetition that the film anticipates is understood to be a repetition of the scariest and most vulnerable aspects of love – not the verbatim script that Patrick offers – but the uncanny openness produced by the very science that seeks to close it down, clean it up, and offer the opportunity for an impossible *tabula rasa* to a public understood to be perpetually in pain. Ultimately, the film seems to value the potential within the watchful eye of the MRI to create new experiences, challenge the passivity of medicalization and rationalization, and resist through residual feelings. In the oddly contradictory space of the gaze of cinema, the gaze of science looks thin. And yet, it is science that opens up the brain to the kind of curiosity and exploration that the film envisions at its most expansive moments.

#### Curious Image / Control Image

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Gilles Deleuze articulates the complex interrelationship between systems of control and creative potential as part of a schematic historical argument in his late work, “Postscript on Control Societies.” Departing from Michel Foucault’s analysis of disciplinary societies, which systematically produce docile subjects through multiple institutional sites of power, Deleuze argues that in the post-war period these disciplinary



sites begin to undergo crises in their claim to sovereignty. But the dissolution of discipline does not lead to relative freedom. Instead, “what it means to talk of institutions breaking down [is] the widespread progressive introduction of a new system of domination” (182). In this new system,

It’s a capitalism no longer directed toward production but toward products, that is, toward sales or markets. Thus it’s essentially dispersive, with factories giving way to businesses. Family, school, army, and factory are no longer so many analogous but different sites converging in an owner, whether the state or some private power, but transmutable or transformable coded configurations of a single business where the only people left are administrators. (181)

What Deleuze calls a “control society” is therefore related in a strong sense to what contemporary cultural critics are beginning to suggest should be considered the social ontology of the economic system of neoliberalism. In arguing that neoliberalism cannot be understood to be merely an economic development, Wendy Brown takes up

the shift neo-liberalism heralds from relatively *differentiated* moral, economic, and political rationalities and venues in liberal democratic orders to their discursive and practical integration. Neo-liberal governmentality undermines the relative autonomy of certain institutions from one another and from the market. (“Neoliberalism and the End of Democracy” 21)

Neoliberalism and the control society therefore indicate two different approaches to the same contemporary problem – the relationship between the fading of distinctions between institutions and the new forms of power that erupt out of that transition. Both Deleuze and Brown see this new power formation as one that relies upon fluidity and movement as opposed to boundaries and limits, but Brown emphasizes the economic basis for these transitions while Deleuze sees the forms of power that emerge from this increasingly undifferentiated control society as being radically diffuse, marked only partially by the logic of the corporation. Deleuze’s analysis, therefore, offers a critical way in to the discussion of contemporary neoliberalism through openings in the cultural

terrain that are not explicitly concerned with the development of economic forms of domination.

For Deleuze, contemporary expressions of control rely upon unveiling fields of visibility and power rather than concealing them. The implicit visual metaphor for control societies in “Postscript” is therefore expressed as the opening of all that was, in disciplinary societies, enclosed. The “confinements” of the disciplines slowly dissolve, and what remains is a nightmare of transparency, epitomized in the transformation from the mass/individual binary to the “dividual,” the subject who is always understood as an aspect of a whole. This social valuation of transparency is also manifest, as Jose Van Dijck suggests, in medical imaging, where discourses of transparency often proceed to the assumption that the body can be seen, altered, and perfected. The popularization of neuroimaging and its findings, occasioned by the proliferation of neurobiological research in self-help publications and facile explanations of brain function in the news media, thus offers another site of opening – the opening of the brain to the visual gaze and, consequently, to forces of control. The fear of this controlling gaze is part of what is exposed in the representation of neuroscience in *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind*.<sup>38</sup> And yet, as the complex relationship in the film between curiosity and the exposure of the brain suggests, the difference between scientific brain imaging and cinematic brain imaging cannot be reduced to the difference between control and resistance or transparency and complexity. Rather, as Deleuze shows, cinematic images of the brain can be employed towards a rhetoric of transparency, malleability, and perfectibility just as scientific images of the brain can provide new possibilities for curious relation in an interval between opening and understanding, imaging, and interpreting. *Sunshine* makes

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<sup>38</sup> See Jose Van Dijck, “Memory Matters in the Digital Age.”

this clear in the hope generated by the very attempt and failure of the memory erasing procedure – new creative potential for modes of engagement are produced by the very desire to master the brain and its impossibility. The traces left by the attempt to control are, in themselves, catalysts for new modes of life.

As a result of the fluidity between sites and forms of power, Deleuze argues that engagement with control can emerge out of any expression of that power – one need not look for the most powerful manifestation of the control apparatus. He explains that within the control society,

It's not a question of asking whether the old or new system is harsher or more bearable, because there's a conflict in each between the ways they free and enslave us. With the breakdown of the hospital as a site of confinement, for instance, community psychiatry, day hospitals, and home care initially presented new freedoms, while at the same time contributing to mechanisms of control as rigorous as the harshest confinement. (178)

Inquiries into the ways in which images of the brain function to produce forms of control therefore offer ways of understanding contemporary manifestations of social power in general. Cinema, in its formal particularity, thus offers one way of seeing the impact of the visual upon the brain even while neuroimaging produces images that have their own attendant hermeneutic demands and cultural practices. As these practices are in the process of rapidly shifting and changing, the relationship between the moving image and the brain in general is a vital field of inquiry. While there is much to fear in the potential expansion of control to the brain, there is also great potential for new and radical forms of social relation. Visual images of the brain expose the material basis of thought both to the curiosity of the market and to the curiosity of others. The permeability of the brain, like the advent of the “dividual” as the dominant form of subjectivity in the control society, destroys the enclosure of the self... for better and for worse.

Eisenstein's utopian dream that cinema could produce a revolution along specified ideological lines by constructing a shock to habitual thought emerges contemporaneously with similar impulses in early twentieth century neurology. The potential to see and alter the structures of the brain, either through formal innovations in cinematic images or through the increasing visual access to structures of the brain itself seemed to offer the promise of perfection – in both politics and medicine. But what emerges from this turn to the brain as image and as related to the practice of image-making is, rather than perfection, the possibility for new ways of visualizing selfhood and relation. The desire to understand the self and open the seemingly hermetic subject up to the gaze of others reflects a promising and dangerous form of curiosity, which always threatens to turn over into mastery or commoditization, but which at best offers innovative modes of relation. This is Deleuze's hope for the cinema – that in relinking the body to the world through thought, the cinema might produce “a people,” the people who are otherwise “missing” in both post-war cinema and post-war society.

It is to the relationship between the brain and commonality, visuality and relation that *Being John Malkovich* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* are directed, and with which they playfully experiment using images of the brain itself. While both films suggest that the curiosity that the open brain produces is highly ambivalent, leading to authoritarianism as well as liberation, control as well as experimentation, *Malkovich* seems to produce a scenario that emphasizes modes of use as the distinguishing factors between these forms of curiosity. In the world of *Malkovich*, it seems that the brain-with-a-portal exposes two different kinds of people – those whose curiosity fuels sensory and affective play and those whose curiosity fuels the desire to market and dominate. *Eternal*

*Sunshine*, however, complicates this reading considerably. More akin to Deleuze's suggestion in "Postscript," that control societies are still fundamentally oriented toward domination, the film shows the social prevalence of a controlling impulse in relation to brain images. In this sense, the film offers a more direct critique of the dangers of contemporary neuroimaging practices. Yet in *Eternal Sunshine* curiosity, catalyzed by the visibility of the brain, still offers some promise. At the margins of forces of control, in their residue and unintended mistakes, neural-affective material remains. It is in this emotional terrain that curiosity can function as innovation, relation, and the search for commonality in new and exciting ways.

The potential that curiosity offers, to link people together and offer new modes of engagement with the world, cannot be delinked from its emergence out of an exposure of the body to control, codification, commoditization. *Being John Malkovich* and *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* expose the multivalence of exposing the brain in this sense. The difference between the creative forces of curiosity and the dangerous control of the body as "a curiosity" is often in the specific way that the visibility of the brain is used – that is what *Malkovich* shows us. But this difference – between the instinct to dominate and the instinct to explore and change – cannot be reduced to the difference between science and not science, or medicine and not medicine. Rather, as we see in *Sunshine*, the very modes of control that produce the brain as a commodified "curiosity" also offer opportunities to engage in curious ways with one another. The awareness of this fundamental ambivalence at the heart of curiosity is what cultural works can offer. In this way, they can and do construct modes of engagement with fields of visibility and bodily states that draw from the opportunities opened up by forces of control. In order to

take advantage of this position, however, it is necessary to give up on the hope that we can somehow both seek to open up possibilities and implement an ideological program at the same time. The creative forces of curiosity depend upon a commitment to the interval between a habitual past and a certain future, and an affirmation of the new possibilities for relation that exist in that space of possibility and danger.

## V. LOVE

*“We must conceive discourse as a violence that we do to things.”*  
*-Michel Foucault*

*“Critical theory in dark times is a singular practice of amor fati.”*  
*-Wendy Brown*

How can critique affirm, even love, the messiness of the affects? The precariousness of emotion – the danger in allowing emotion to even tacitly function politically, let alone to let it speak, encourage it to so, affirm its messiness despite its danger – places it in a decidedly vulnerable position in relation to practices of theorizing. Critique binds and forms continuities through chaos and disorder. How can the critic still affirm the cut that she sutures? What does it mean to practice critique lovingly?

A significant continuity that emerges among the genealogy of philosophy that has populated this inquiry is a commitment to philosophy not only as a pursuit of knowledge, but as a form of affirmation. Beginning with Spinoza, for whom the highest form of thought takes the form of a love of God (and thus love of the world as it is), these thinkers see the work of philosophy as a rigorously trained practice of saying yes to the world. This “yes” does not consist of a willed ignorance, nor does it emerge out of a simple optimism. To the contrary, it is absolutely essential that the “yes” that philosophy speaks be in the face of darkness, of pain, and of the temptation to give up. The power of the philosophical “yes” resides in its seriousness, the height of its stakes, its deeply felt

difficulty. Perhaps for this reason, for Spinoza, Nietzsche, and Deleuze and Guattari, the pursuit of this “yes” in writing necessitates some untraditional work with the form of theoretical discourse – experimental practices that move theoretical writing away from communication and toward creation. The language of philosophy itself bends with the force of the pursuit of the “yes” – it is as if the very grammar of inquiry will not push far enough into the world for the affirmation to take place. The practices produce a radically affective form of philosophy. It is in this affirmative sense that the philosophical genealogy I trace can be understood as a tradition of loving thought, of thought *as* love.<sup>39</sup>

## Philosophy and Love

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### *Spinoza*

Spinoza’s *Ethics* is at once an ethics, a cosmology, and a meditation on the aims of thought itself. These elements express themselves in indistinguishable ways; the goals of an ethical life are also the goals of a life of thought and can only be attained through a more complete understanding of the substance of which the world is composed. It is precisely this – the loving understanding of God, which is nothing more than the univocal substance that comprises all things– that both defines an ethical life *and* a life of the mind. The *Ethics* thus begins with a careful exposition of the relationship between God,

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<sup>39</sup> This is one of many ways of understanding the continuity among these thinkers. My choice to focus on the relationship between these philosophies and affirmation is informed by my interest in the difficulty of bringing an affirmative theory of life to bear on difficult states of change – an interest that has motivated my use of these theories throughout this project. This genealogy takes a very different form if it is considered to be, as Elizabeth Grosz suggests in her various works on time, primarily directed toward thinking futurity. Likewise, Peter Hallward’s suggestion in *Out of this World: Deleuze and the Philosophy of Creation* that Deleuze’s primary focus is the “logic of creation” (7) that leads him to privilege the virtual over the actual puts his antecedents in a vastly different context. My understanding of the Deleuzian project and inheritance lies closest to John Rajchman’s in *The Deleuze Connections*, where he argues that the logic of the work of Deleuze, Spinoza, and Nietzsche shares a primary orientation toward affirmation and connection. Despite their fundamental differences, these various modes of thinking through this philosophical lineage nevertheless tend to coalesce around questions of change and creativity – questions that are at the core of this project.



the attributes of God (all universal matter), and the various modes of interaction between those attributes. These forms of interaction differ qualitatively based on their results. All forms of relation in the world lead either to the relative augmentation or the relative diminishment of the potential for a body to act. We experience those that lead to more power of activity as *pleasure*, while those that lead to decreased potential lead to *pain*. The emotions are thus central to Spinoza's *Ethics*, by offering important information as to the quality of our interactions. A better life will produce greater pleasure, while pain is evidence of a life constrained by forms of relation that limit potential. For this reason, Spinoza's analysis focuses on the cultivation of emotions that are both active, "something which can be clearly and distinctly understood through our nature alone" (103), and pleasurable.

In addition to valuing pleasure over pain, Spinoza argues that *active* emotions are better than *passive* ones, since anything pleasurable that emerges from within the body itself has greater strength and is less likely to suddenly become painful. This, Spinoza suggests, is the danger with most forms of love, which he defines as the experience of pleasure paired with the idea of an outside cause. The object of that love can cease to exist or to respond, which quickly turns pleasure into pain, power into paralysis. The danger of pain and passivity leads Spinoza to advocate a radical suppression of some emotions when those emotions are ultimately understood to be destructive. Yet the role of the intellect in relation to the emotions is not only one of domination. Since the difference between activity and passivity where the emotions are concerned lies with our capacity to comprehend or understand the causes of those affects, Spinoza suggests that the mind is necessary to augment some of the highest emotional states. Access to active emotions and

mental activity are thus linked, since “*the active states (actiones) of the mind arise only from adequate ideas*” (107). The potential for activity, and with it, an ethical life, is thus bound up in a complex reciprocal relationship between mind and body, with emotions at the nexus between them.

The *Ethics* is therefore primarily aimed at the role of thought, even though the bulk of the text addresses the emotions. For Spinoza, the use of the mind alone can lead to a more active, pleasurable, and ethical life. For this reason, “it is of the first importance in life to perfect the intellect, or reason, as far as we can, and the highest happiness or blessedness for mankind consists in this alone” (196). A rigorous practice of thought can allow people to “arrange and associate affections of the body according to the order of the intellect” (207). This process of sorting and arranging the affects should lead to a redirection of feeling, rather than an obliteration of emotion, toward the love of God which is understood as the love of the whole of universal being. This love, since it is directed at the univocal nature of life as such, is the conscious affirmation of being, of life, and of the universe. The love of God, which is simply the love of life, is thus the goal of thinking and the highest form of human activity.

From a formal perspective, it is important to note that the *Ethics* emerges out of a rigid geometrical method that seems to perform a kind of intellectual dominance upon the affective subject matter of the argument itself. The structure of proofs that constrains the argument to logical chains of deduction seems to subordinate the affective processes of writing to a rigorously cerebral process of limiting, codifying, and classifying. On this level, there appears to be an implicit argument at work in the book concerning the role of the mind and its relative independence from the emotions. Philosophy seems to best be

performed in a discourse that is as insulated as possible from the distractions of affect, even on the level of representational or associational language. Yet, as Deleuze has suggested, there is a second level beneath this strict form, a “second subterranean *Ethics*” (Chapter 2, footnote 21). He argues,

The *Ethics* is a book written twice simultaneously: once in the continuous stream of definitions, propositions, demonstrations, and corollaries, which develop the great speculative themes with all the rigors of the mind; another time in the broken chain of scholia, a discontinuous volcanic line, a second version underneath the first, expressing all the angers of the heart and setting forth the practical theses of denunciation and liberation. (28-9)

The *Ethics* therefore enacts a parallelism regarding the workings of the mind and the body, the intellect and the affects on a formal level as well as on the level of argument. While the scholia are integrated throughout the work, performing an emotional subtext to the intellectual restraint of the proof structure, they function, as Deleuze suggests, to some extent as an independent narrative that can be pulled away from the rest of the work and still be readable in and of themselves.<sup>40</sup> This philosophy, which advocates as the highest good not only the careful intellectual practice of thought but the deeply felt affective state of the love of all things, performs the very practice of thinking that leads to this capacity on the level of discourse. The highest form of love, affirmation of all that is eternal and all that forms the universe of being, can only occur through a practice of intellectual life. Thus, the logical structure of the *Ethics* is not only a cover for a more

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<sup>40</sup> Badiou’s reading of Spinoza’s geometrical method differs markedly from Deleuze’s. While Deleuze seems to privilege the freedom of form in the scholia, Badiou sees the Spinoza’s use of the geometrical method as more generative than free-form philosophical discourse and at the core of his concept of being. He argues that in Spinoza’s *Ethics*, “being can only be thought *more geometrico*... God has to be understood as mathematicity itself” (“Spinoza’s Closed Ontology,” 96). It is possible to see this dispute over the meaning of form in the *Ethics* as corresponding to a split between two uneasy inheritors of Deleuze’s legacy – Badiou and Antonio Negri. As I will suggest, while Badiou suggests that a turn to mathematics is necessary for philosophy to think the unthinkable, Negri argues in favor of an immanently political “common name” that enacts new forms of life in common as it issues forth from a visceral confrontation with indeterminacy.

honest and complex “subterranean” version of the argument – it reinforces the difficult practice of mental activity that is required to attain the most enduring forms of affective pleasure. Philosophy, for Spinoza, thus does limit and lessen the force of certain emotions, particularly those that arise out of passivity and confusion, but it ultimately is understood, even on the level of writing itself, to cultivate and make room for affect at its most expansive and influential: the love of life.

### *Nietzsche*

For Nietzsche, the knot where affect, writing, and love meet cannot be disentangled into clear practices of critique that leave pain, cruelty, and violence aside. Drawing heavily from Spinoza’s assertion that activity and the pleasure that it entails is central to an ethical life, Nietzsche insists upon the simultaneous acts of force that accompany that activity and the ensuing inseparability of loving affirmation and violence. He insists upon the immanent connection between these forces of life directly in *On the Genealogy of Morals*. Here, Spinoza’s emphasis in the *Ethics* upon the necessity for serious formal intellectual work in order to attain the emotional state of affirmative love is echoed in Nietzsche’s work in regards to the practice of philosophical life. Though he points to orgiastic forms of pleasure and cruelty as the expressions of affective freedom and creative force, he maintains, “cheerfulness – or in my own language *gay science* – is a reward: the reward of a lone, brave, industrious, and subterranean seriousness” (21). Nevertheless, this seriousness is distinct from bad consciousness of *ressentiment*, which turns the violence inherent in all acts of creativity inward, forming morality based on shame, guilt, and debt and forms of life that Spinoza would call passive and those who

Nietzsche defines as subject to “slave morality,” whose “action is fundamentally reaction” (37). In this sense, Nietzsche, like Spinoza, insists upon an intellectual seriousness built upon joy and activity rather than deprivation and passivity.

The cheerfulness to which this seriousness should lead is neither simple nor innocent. The valuation of freedom of activity that is at the core of Nietzsche’s ethics implies a direct freedom of the affects – defined as forces of life and pleasure. Loosing these affects upon the world leads inevitably to creation, but also destruction - love, but also violence. Those who possess the freedom to act in this way are marked by “their indifference to and contempt for security, body, life, comfort, their hair-raising cheerfulness and profound joy in all destruction, in all the voluptuousness of victory and cruelty” (42). Yet the freedom of these forces is understood to be necessary for all creation, all action, and all love. This indistinction within forces of activity between destruction and creation and the analogous nature of thought, art, and bodies in relation to these forces emerges as central to Nietzsche’s creation myth, which foregrounds “artistic violence” in the building of states and societies. Those who form the state out of the raw material of human bodies,

do not know what guilt, responsibility, or consideration are, these born organizers; they exemplify that terrible artists’ egoism that has the look of bronze and knows itself justified to all eternity in its ‘work,’ like a mother in her child. It is not in *them* that the ‘bad conscious’ developed, that goes without saying—but it would not have developed *without them*, this ugly growth, it would be lacking if a tremendous quantity of freedom had not been expelled from the world, or at least from the visible world, and made as it were *latent* under their hammer blows and artists’ violence. (87)

Artistic violence is, therefore, an active force of life and will. The original state, formed by sheer power and force, is an expression of the potential in life to produce and reproduce images, structures, and artifacts. This particular expression of this power,

however, has the result of depleting the bulk of humanity of its freedom, and hence its capacity to enact its own aesthetic violence. The peacefulness of the state is consequentially a result of the depletion of the artistic capacity for creation in its subjects, who turn this instinct inward. This, in turn, produces not only bad consciousness, but also aesthetics. The violence of bad consciousness is masochistic-artistic, seizing upon “this delight in imposing a form upon oneself as a hard, recalcitrant, suffering material and in burning a will, a critique, a contradiction, a contempt, a No into it,” (87). It then leads to “an abundance of strange new beauty an affirmation, and perhaps beauty itself. – After all, what would be “beautiful” if the contradiction had not first become conscious of itself, if the ugly hand not first said to itself: “I am ugly?” (88).

The distinction between violence directed outward and violence directed inward, which first seems to form a kind of good/bad distinction, becomes endlessly tangled in the example of artistic violence. At once the generator of the lack of freedom that produces the internalization of violence and the expression of a creative life force that even looks beautiful when it is sublimated into self-loathing and aesthetics, artistic violence becomes internally regulating, rather than externally transformative when it is turned inward. Aesthetic categories of beauty and ugliness must be understood to be part of this regulation rather than some safe realm of artistic expression. Thus, violence exacted by physical means, for Nietzsche, is simply the external, active version of the violence of custom and norms (which it produces), and the violence of aesthetics (in which the drive for physical violence exists as a kind of shadow). This tangled situation leaves behind the compartmentalized logic of Spinoza’s *Ethics* and instead posits a problem for art and critique: if any act of creative force also entails either a spectral or

physical potential act of physical violence, how can the impulse to construct artifacts or theories proceed affirmatively?

The key in Nietzsche, as it is in Spinoza, is the commitment to be affirmative even when that affirmation entails force. Bloodshed, for Nietzsche, is only the second-worst thing that can happen to a society. His critique of his contemporaries is that they err too much toward inactivity. He argues, “together with the fear of man we have also lost our love of him, our reverence for him, our hopes for him, even the will to him. The sight of man now makes us weary – what is nihilism today if it is not *that*? – we are weary of *man*” (44). In addition, as with the example of aesthetics, all structures of life and consciousness that appear non-violent also, he argues, emerge from an original violence to the freedom of will, the echoes of which continue to perpetuate forms of moral, intellectual, and emotional servitude: “Ah, reason, seriousness mastery over the affects, the whole somber thing called reflection, all these prerogatives and showpieces of man: how dearly they have been bought! How much blood and cruelty lie at the bottom of all ‘good things’!” (62). Just as aesthetics emerges from an internalization of the violence of artistic formation, “reflection” and other forms of seemingly innocuous intellectual practices emerges from the internalized restrictions upon thought that are built into our very language. Force, freedom, and affect, for Nietzsche, are difficult to theorize because they do not rely upon a subject, a structure that is imposed upon us through grammar itself. Force is “nothing more than... driving, willing, effecting, and only owing to the seduction of language (and of the fundamental errors that are petrified in it) which conceives and misconceives all effects as conditioned by something that causes effects, by a ‘subject’ can it appear otherwise” (45). Language is thus the guarantor of the success

of passive morality; the grammatical necessity of a subject chains the affects to a responsible party and individualizes the violence or creation that they wreak.

Discourse is thus in a precarious position in Nietzschean terms. Potentially a force of violent formation and also subject to the grammatical institution of subjectification, discourse is dangerous on two counts. Either it can produce “reflection,” another tame, passive, and ultimately dangerously self-reflexive practice steeped in bad consciousness and *ressentiment* or it can push outward, forging new connections and forming new structures, which then produce their own violence upon the world. Nietzsche, for his part, is decisively committed to the latter. His own rhetoric, which seeks to “replace the improbable with the more probable, possibly one error with another” (18) often pushes forward into prophetic tones, promising and exhorting, as he does at the end of the first essay of the *Genealogy*,

The *redeeming* man of great love and contempt, the creative spirit whose compelling strength will not let him rest in any aloofness or any beyond, whose isolation is misunderstood by the people as if it were flight *from* reality – while it is only his absorption, immersion, penetration *into* reality...*he must come one day.* (96)

Nietzsche’s language, at its most active, creative, and suggestive takes leave of the structures of critique that impose forms of subjectification and reflection. In the *Genealogy*, this takes the form of prophecy and invocation; elsewhere it manifests as aphorism, fragment, and, in the case of *Zarathustra*, parable. While Spinoza’s work in the *Ethics* maintains a rigid structure on the surface, allowing the affective journey of his speculation to percolate in nodes and points along the work, Nietzsche ultimately abandons the formal properties of logical language entirely in favor of forms that cut through the regimes of reason and polemic to which most thought is subject.



In these renegade forms, Nietzsche offers his most direct affirmations. In *Ecce Homo*, a posthumous work that weaves together philosophical fragments, a rigorous auto-critique, memoir, essay, and self-eulogizing, he offers a meditation on not the grand themes of ethics, politics, or religion, but “the basic concerns of life itself” (256). This turn to life as the object of speculation leads him to summarize his work in terms of a love of that life. He explains, “My formula for greatness in a human being is *amor fati*: that one wants nothing to be different, not forward, not backward, not in all eternity. Not merely bear what is necessary, still less conceal it – all idealism is mendaciousness in the face of what is necessary – but *love* it” (258). This statement is issued almost as a slogan, a recipe, a didactic order. Yet its demand exceeds its form. This “formula,” in short, is impossible to follow without the direct practices of life and thought that are understood to precede it. In this sense, the *demand* to love fate, to affirm the world, cannot be answered, but it must be asserted nonetheless. Love, for Nietzsche, is inseparable from the act of this call – from the act of writing as invocation of feeling.

### *Deleuze and Guattari*

Spinoza and Nietzsche offer two crucial nodes along a historical trajectory of theorists who posit affects as the forces that motivate creativity and life. For both thinkers, the affective states of affirmation, pleasure, and love present the highest potential for creativity and thought. There are, of course, myriad others who have experimented with formal innovations in critique and theorized the centrality of the emotions in ethical, intellectual, and political life.<sup>41</sup> Nevertheless, the major inheritors of

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<sup>41</sup> The most notable omission here is Henri Bergson, who is commonly considered to be one of the most central influences on Deleuze’s thought, but who does not shape his philosophy on questions of affirmation

the Spinozan and Nietzschean philosophies do not emerge until the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Deleuze, perhaps, was the most central in resuscitating what he saw as an alternative philosophical tradition that runs through Spinoza and Nietzsche (as opposed to the traditional Continental line that runs through Kant and Hegel). In marking out this tradition, Deleuze offers a history of philosophies that he sees as concerned with developing a radically empirical connection with immanent life. Throughout his work, he emphasizes that this connection with life is anything but automatic. For that reason, he privileges modes of being that he sees as forging these connections. His works on art (*The Logic of Sense*, *Kafka*, *Cinema 1*, and *Cinema 2*) go beyond criticism and offer ways of thinking art as producing certain connections to forces of life. Likewise, many of his works on philosophy (among them, books on Spinoza, Nietzsche, Bergson, and Foucault) tease out the practices of thought that develop and engage immanently with life and the world. In this sense, Deleuze's philosophical trajectory is largely concerned with practices of artistic and intellectual connection to life, gesturing to the possibility that these aesthetic and critical practices might have the potential to open up the world to new forms of thought and action.

His works with Felix Guattari take this implication and proliferate it into critical practices that are untraditional, even at times even nearly unreadable. While the works that Deleuze authors on his own at times radically depart from a traditional logical structure, the concepts that he develops often follow a fairly schematic taxonomic logic (the *Cinema* books offer a clear example of this practice). In *Anti-Oedipus* and *A*

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as directly as Spinoza and Nietzsche do. Also absent is a consideration of major interventions in the mid-twentieth century toward phenomenological and existential projects. These projects, often aimed at questions of commitment to the world as it is, nevertheless tend to rely upon humanist foundations that run counter to this genealogy, particularly in its Nietzschean vein.

*Thousand Plateaus*, however, this impulse toward taxonomy multiplies wildly into a mad dance of concepts. Logical ordering disappears almost entirely (the preface of *Plateaus* insists that the book can be read beginning from any page), and metaphors extend beyond their vehicles, pointing to the uncontainability of their tenors. This philosophical practice seems to pick up where Nietzsche's left off, participating in a grammatical break from the limitations of the discourses of critique.

While these critical experiments occur throughout the collaborative career of Deleuze and Guattari, it is not until their last publication together, *What is Philosophy?*, that they take up a direct consideration of the practice of philosophy itself. In the opening lines of the work they speculate:

The question of *what is philosophy?* can perhaps be posed only late in life, with the arrival of old age and the time for speaking concretely. In fact, the bibliography on the nature of philosophy is very limited. It is a question posed in a moment of quiet restlessness, at midnight, when there is no longer anything to ask. It was asked before; it was always being asked, but too indirectly or obliquely; the question was too artificial, too abstract. Instead of being seized by it, those who asked the question set it out and controlled it in passing. They were not sober enough. There was too much desire to *do* philosophy to wonder what it was, except as a stylistic exercise. That point of nonstyle where one can finally say, "What is it I have been doing all my life?" had not been reached. (1-2)

This passage introduces a book that is, as it suggests, unique in taking on the question of philosophy concretely. While the affective postures and intellectual practices that create a philosophical approach are implicit in Spinoza and Nietzsche, and often need to be extrapolated from formal decisions in much of the history of philosophy, Deleuze and Guattari do seize upon what appears to be an emotional moment of taking-stock, a commonplace of old age, that one at last is compelled to ask "What is it I have been doing all my life?". Yet this moment is, as thought is described in Spinoza and Nietzsche, both a powerful result of a particular affective state of affirmation, love, and creativity

and a state of great intellectual seriousness or sobriety that emerges out of the capacity to control impulses of desire.

The compulsion to ask the question is also, they suggest, historical. The question of the role of philosophy emerges at the same time as “the only events are exhibitions, and the only concepts are products that can be sold. Philosophy has not remained unaffected by the general movement that replaced Critique with sales promotion” (10). The appropriation of the language of philosophy (“the event”, “the concept”) into the language of capital necessitates a careful delineation of the practices of philosophy from the practices of commerce. Thus the reassertion of the specific practice of philosophy is posed against this historical moment, with the potential to create for the first time total indistinction between thought and the market, “an absolute disaster in thought” (12). In this sense, while the practice of philosophy is understood to span the history of thought, the intervention that Deleuze and Guattari make is explicitly political and historically specific insofar as it responds to the contemporary age, in which “we do not lack communication. On the contrary, we have too much of it. We lack creation.” (108). In the context of informatization and late capitalism, the distinction that must be made is not, as it was for Nietzsche, between morality and ethics nor is it, as it was for Spinoza, between religious orthodoxy and rigorous thought. The breach for Deleuze and Guattari is precisely between communication and creation, the latter of which is understood to be philosophy’s contribution to a project of “resistance to the present” (108).

Creation, for Deleuze and Guattari, is the central activity of philosophy, which is defined as “not a simple act of forming, inventing, or fabricating concepts, because concepts are not necessarily forms, discoveries, or products. More rigorously, philosophy

is the discipline that involves *creating* concepts” (5). In this sense, philosophy does elide the problem of violence as it is invoked in Nietzsche. The process of forming, which is associated with artistic violence, is not a process that philosophy is understood to undertake. Instead, the creation of concepts is understood to occur specifically, provisionally, and in a particular context. The codification of life is not its project.

Rather,

every creation is singular and the concept as a specifically philosophical creation is always a singularity. The first principle of philosophy is that Universals explain nothing but must themselves be explained... to create concepts is, at the very least, to make something. This alters the question of philosophy’s use or usefulness, or even its harmfulness (to whom is it harmful?). (7)

Since philosophy does not form, describe, or communicate, it does not limit possibilities, but expands them. It multiplies approaches rather than narrowing them down, and exposes universals as limiting rather than instituting them further. The practice of philosophy thus is, for Deleuze and Guattari as it is for Spinoza and Nietzsche, a practice of loving affirmation.

The creation of concepts is understood as an intervention on the level of language and on the level of being. In language, the concept “proceeds with violence or by insinuation and constitutes a philosophical language within a language – not just a vocabulary but a syntax that attains the sublime or great beauty” (8). There is a linguistic, aesthetic violence to philosophy on the level of grammar, as it disrupts the functioning of communication in favor of creation. On the level of being, the concept intervenes in an otherwise undifferentiated chaos: “A concept is... a chaoid state par excellence; it refers back to a chaos rendered consistent, become Thought, mental chaosmos” (208).

Therefore, the concept does not banish chaos, but slices it and presents “*a finite number*

*of heterogeneous components traversed by a point of absolute survey at infinite speed*' (21). To say that the action of creation is simply affirmative, then, is too simple. Yet philosophical creation does not, as do communication, reflection, and representation, codify and normalize the chaos of life. Instead, the concept offers a singular point of orientation, of alliance, of consistency within the chaos of living matter.

This "reterritorialization" of the chaos of life that the concept enacts seeks to "*give consistency without losing anything of the infinite*" (42), thus affirming the univocity of being while providing a provisional and contextual field of possibilities that are cohesive. In this sense, the method of Deleuze and Guattari is a direct inheritance of Spinoza – a response to the question of how the human mind can think on, affirm, and love the infinite. At the same time, Deleuze and Guattari begin to move this practice toward questions of the present. In doing so, they suggest that there is a political role for philosophy to play both in its capacity to say "yes" to the infinite and in its capacity to say "no" to contemporary structures of exploitation. In the contemporary global situation, where "the creation of concepts in itself calls for a future form, for a new earth and people that do not yet exist.... Art and philosophy converge at this point: the constitution of an earth and a people that are lacking as the correlate of creation" (108). Philosophy is thus understood as a response to the needs of the present, to the demands of a crisis in the world as much as it is an affirmation of the infinite possibilities of existence.

It is essential in Deleuze and Guattari that the creation of a people is both invoked with passion and commitment by philosophers and artists and at the same time beyond the scope of conceptual or affective invention alone. They maintain that

a people can only be created in abominable sufferings, and it cannot be concerned any more with art or philosophy. But books of philosophy and works of art also

contain their sum of unimaginable sufferings that forewarn of the advent of a people. They have resistance in common – their resistance to death, to servitude, to the intolerable, to shame, and to the present. (110)

Philosophy and art are thus prophetic forms that can only be fulfilled by the action of a people who “cannot be concerned” with philosophy – who must only be concerned with the production of a people and modes of life that resist the domination of the status quo. Deleuze and Guattari thus push the question of love, affirmation, and theory into the realm of contemporary *critique* – with all of the complexities and dangers involved in the pairing of philosophy with the world, theory with practice. While ontological philosophy can take as its object the affirmation of the substance of being, and with it the goal of withdrawing from aspects of life that are distracting from that project, critique emerges out of a crisis in the contemporary – and as such cannot avoid being implicated in the tangle of politics, aesthetics, and the corporeal stakes of change.

### The Critical Turn

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In defining critique as a specific form of mediation, I draw from Wendy Brown’s genealogy of critical practice in *Edgework*. Posing an etymology of the term “critique” beginning with the Greek concept of *krisis* from which it emerged against “contemporary characterizations of critique as disinterested, distanced, negating, or academic,” (7) Brown argues that the practice of critique should be understood as immanently linked to the crisis that invokes it. While “etymologically, after antiquity, *criticism* and *critique* move apart from *crisis*” (6), she suggests that discursive practices of critique still retain aspects of that link, which is still at work in medical and political uses of the term “critical” – as in “critical condition”:

What is interesting in this contemporary trace of the old usage is the sustained linking of the objective and subjective dimensions of critique, the ways in which a worldly event or a phenomenon... connects a specific condition with an immediate need to comprehend by sifting, sorting, or separating its elements, to judge, and to respond to it. (7)

Far from being disinterested, critique exists only as a respond to “an urgent call for knowledge, deliberation, judgment, and action to stave off catastrophe” (7). It is noteworthy that this definition does separate the practice of critique from traditional understandings of the practice of philosophy. Yet Brown’s critique shares a root belief in affirmation with Spinoza, Nietzsche, Deleuze and Guattari. The difference in the affirmation lies in the specificity of the event that gives rise to theorization. While for these philosophers, the ontological substance of the world is both the object of contemplation and the object of affirmation, critique takes root in particular contexts. Drawing from Foucault’s discussion of scriptural analysis in “What is Critique?” Brown argues that critique should be understood first and foremost as a form of *reading*. She suggests that the practice, “is always a rereading and as such a reaffirmation of that which it engages... critique takes over the object for a different project that that to which it is currently tethered” (16). The practice is, therefore, one that both affirms and seeks to change the object of critique. While this understanding of critique takes a practice of thought and gives it great potential power, this dual mandate to both say “yes” to the world and to change it is precisely what makes it so dangerous.<sup>42</sup>

Critique is understood to not only comprehend, or even create, but to burrow into objects in the world. In so doing, its potential violence is great and the risk inherent in its

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<sup>42</sup> Brown’s indebtedness (and mine) to Marx’s definition of critique as a revolutionary practice is clear in this sense. The history of the appropriation of Marxist notions of praxis and critical discourse toward both state sponsored violence and some of the most fertile resistance movements in the twentieth century provides perhaps the clearest historical example of this potential and danger in revolutionary concepts of critique.



practices of love is immediate. Yet for all of its danger, critique rarely undergoes a confrontation with its own formal properties. A notable contemporary exception occurs, perhaps strangely, perhaps appropriately, in a recent work of American poetry. It should not be surprising that the poem performs the difficult position of critique perhaps better than any one work of theory might, by drawing attention to the issue of form. Ben Lerner's "Didactic Elegy," a long poem in his highly acclaimed recent book, *Angle of Yaw*, enacts a work of critique as it calls that act into question. In this self-reflexivity, however, it neither insulates the work of poetic-criticism from the practice of further critique nor does it make claims to a loftier position than that of the critic. Instead, it contextualizes the medium of critique with a world of other media, and implicates the discourse of critique in the need for self-awareness that art continually takes for granted as part of its own practice.

"Didactic Elegy" exists formally on the borders of poetry and critique. While lineated, it draws from the rhetoric of criticism with a profusion of conceptual definitions, italicized terms and rhetorical questions. The poem's formal difference from the rest of Lerner's work in the book is emphasized by its position in the center of a split section of short elliptical prose pieces (both titled "Angle of Yaw"). Sandwiched between these two eponymous sections, the poem performs a departure from the brevity and imagery of the rest of the book, emphasizing its marginal status. The poem also departs from the rest of the book by directly addressing a single event that haunts, in many ways, the rest of the book but only indirectly: the attacks of September 11, 2001. In thus positioning the rhetoric of critique as imminently tied to the direct representation of the event, Lerner emphasizes the difficulty that this collision creates. Poetry, in the rest of *Angle of Yaw*,

has many ways of addressing the concerns that the collapse of the World Trade Center elicits – problems of language and spatial verticality, mass engagement in politics, and the mapping of conquest and defeat. Yet something drives the speaker of “Didactic Elegy” to directly address the event, and that aspect of the speaker is drawn out, separated, and given a name: the critic.

The critic is, from the beginning of the poem, suspect, even before the complexity of the historical event comes into play. The poem begins seemingly far from the horrors of September 11 with a simple example of modern aesthetic experimentation, a white canvas with a black line across it, which occurs simultaneously with the emergence of the critic-as-character. From this example, the rest of the poem moves in and out like spokes, performing discursive departures and returns to the project of criticism.

Intention draws a bold, black line across an otherwise white field.  
 Speculation establishes gradations of darkness  
 where there are none, allowing the critic to posit narrative time.  
 I posit the critic to distance myself from intention, a despicable affect. (61)

Here, the speaker gives rhetorical birth to the critic in order to perform distance between the poetic project and the critical project. This distance allows the speaker to judge and admonish the critic’s violence upon the work of art, as she<sup>43</sup> “establishes gradations of darkness where there are none.” In reflexively positing the critic from the first person, however, the poem points to the discursive force in splitting the interpretive act and shedding “intention, a despicable affect.” By emphasizing the critic as a character of his immanent creation, the speaker posits his own complicity with the critical project. This complicity is further established by the profusion of terminological definitions that emerge from the first few stanzas:

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<sup>43</sup> Pronouns in the work gender the critic female. Since the speaker is not gendered, I use masculine pronouns when referring to the “I” of the poem in interest of clarity.

Yet intention is necessary if the field is to be understood as an economy.

By *economy* I mean that the field is apprehension in its idle form.  
 The eye constitutes any disturbance in the field as an object.  
 This is the grammatical function of the eye. To distinguish between objects,  
 the eye assigns value where there is none. (61)

The definition of *economy* as a visual practice associated with an eye that synecdochically stands in for the critic as it “assigns value where there is none,” points to the complicity between the speaker and the critic as the speaker employs a classically critical rhetoric. Nevertheless, this definition also performs a split between the two positions by anchoring the definition to a particular critical and physical practice, that of the “critical eye,” a term Lerner is clearly playing with by anthropomorphizing the eye while forming syntactical parallels with the critic. The language of capital in defining the practices of the eye as it reifies disturbance, turning it into an object with value, also suggests a parallel logic between that of capital and that of critique, both seeking forms of profit (one financial, one cultural) through the process of valorization.

This indictment of the critical process as intimately tied on a formal level to the process of commodity fetishism echoes a common criticism of modern enlightenment discourse as producing a logical structure that supports state-based forms of dominance. For Foucault, for instance, Enlightenment humanism and the liberal ideology that accompanies it, ultimately privileges certain forms of knowledge and excludes others by suggesting that the epistemological method and forces of reason should be the bases for philosophical and political discourse. This constitution-by-exclusion, he argues, is also, not coincidentally, the logic of the modern state. Lerner’s work suggests a similar parallel between contemporary practices of aesthetic critique and a market-based logic that approximates the mechanisms of neoliberalism – an inclusionary practice that aims to

draw economic value from practices that are traditionally understood to exist outside of the direct intervention of the market, such as art and education. In this sense, both liberalism and neoliberalism can be considered to be formal problems inasmuch as they are problems of content. The neoliberal logic of cultural inclusion, in this case, seems inexorably tied to the practices of critique.

While the speaker in Lerner's poem criticizes the critic as the neoliberal commodity fetishist, this very act of distancing and displacing that logic indicts the speaker as part of that very project. Even the gesture of this paradox, the poem suggests, does not offer a way out:

Just as the violation of the line amplifies the whiteness of the field,  
so a poem can seek out a figure of its own impossibility.  
But when the meaning of such a figure becomes fixed, it is a mere positivity. (61)

The beginning of the "Elegy" therefore constructs the classic critical double-bind: to attribute meaning to a work of art is to do violence to it by asserting a culturally dominant logic, in this case, economic, that inevitably informs that attribution of meaning. Establishing non-meaning or impossibility is equally problematic, however, as it simply fixes the meaning of a work of art to itself, leaving it "a mere positivity," self-immanent and atomistic.

The stakes of this apparent dead-end are raised considerably when the work of art and the act of criticism are confronted by the historical event:

Events extraneous to the work, however, can unfix the meaning of its figures thereby recharging it negatively. For example,  
if airplanes crash into towers and those towers collapse,  
there is an ensuing reassignment of value.  
Those works of art enduringly susceptible to radical revaluations are masterpieces.  
The phrase *unfinished masterpiece* is redundant. (62)

“Events” can thus begin the cycle of interpretation anew, leading to the practice of criticism that constructs masterpieces, or they can simply evacuate the meaning from a work, reducing it back to its pure aesthetic surface, thus, in the face of the event, “to the critic, the black line has become simply a black line” (62). As the poem shows, this process either perpetuates its own infinite cycle or dead-ends at nihilism. The intervention that does shift the categories of critique constructed in the poem is thus not “the event,” but the rupturing force of the particular example of recent historical tragedy, as it tears through the critical logic of the work with its contingent affective power. After its invocation, the problem of critical definition becomes immanently anchored to power, when, having defined heroism as the willingness to accept death, the speaker suggests,

Rescue workers who died attempting to save them men and women trapped in the towers are, in fact, heroes,  
but the meaning of their deaths is susceptible to radical reevaluation.  
The hero makes a masterpiece of dying  
and even if the hero is a known quantity  
there is an open struggle over the meaning of her death. According to the president,

any American who continues her life as if the towers had not collapsed  
is a hero. (63)

This is the problem with masterpieces: if they can be continuously reevaluated, that reevaluation will occur by whoever is in a position of discursive power. The logic of the critic in freely attributing meaning to the masterpiece is thus also the logic of the president. Despite the “open struggle” over the meaning of the hero’s death, this struggle is immediately closed down on the level of the line; the interval between struggle and definition collapses within the very line in which the struggle is initiated by the citation of the president. Power thus wins in the game of infinite interpretability.

There is, however, something to be gained by the consciousness of this trap. The poem continues:

Formalism is the belief that the eye does violence to the object it apprehends.  
 All formalisms are therefore sad.  
 A negative formalism acknowledges the violence intrinsic to its method.  
 Formalism is therefore a practice, not an essence.  
 ...  
 Negative formalisms catalyze an experience of a structure.  
 The experience of a structure is sad,  
 but, by revealing the contingency of content,  
 it authorizes hope. (65)

Hence, an awareness of the practice of formalism, sad though it might be, can at least point to the distance between critical method and content. But once the content and “use value” are stripped from the work, the critic becomes empowered further:

The critic’s gaze is a polemic without object  
 and only seeks a surface  
 upon which to unfold its own internal contradictions. (65)

The poem, however, does perform its own worth here, suggesting that while the artistic work might simply be a vehicle for the performance of a certain critical logic,

It is not that the significance is mere appearance.  
 The significance is real but impermanent.  
 Indeed, the mere appearance of significance is significant.  
 We call it *politics*. (65)

This may be the beginning of a suggestion of why the events of September 11 are central to a poem that seems to be so much about the logic of critique. The “example” of the event effectively politicizes the text, even as it points to the impermanence and danger inherent in that politicization, and even as it becomes clear that, as it is inevitably in my reading, the poem will be instrumentalized by a variety of different critical positions that will perform their respective logics regardless of the content of the poem.

At the end of “Elegy,” the speaker turns for a moment to the question of the example itself in order to reflexively engage with some possibilities for form and critique.

Asking if the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> should be memorialized, the speaker argues,

I think we should draw a bold, black line across an otherwise white field  
and keep discussion of its meaning to a minimum.  
If we can close the event to further interpretation  
we can keep the collapse from becoming a masterpiece. (67)

This becoming-formal of violence through an act of abstract representation thus suggests that acts of violence have something to learn from a practice that has become, in contemporary art, often second nature.

Violence is not yet modern; it fails to acknowledge the limitations of its medium.  
When violence becomes aware of its mediacy and loses its object  
it will begin to resemble love.  
Love is negative because it dissolves  
all particulars into an experience of form.  
Refusing to assign meaning to an event is to interpret it lovingly. (67)

The poem constructs the violent act as that which has yet to be reached by the commonplaces of contemporary aesthetic theory. Rather than fetishizing this seemingly exceptional quality of violence, however, the speaker insists that it must be brought *inside* the realm of critique and the aesthetic in order to detach violence-as-content from violence-as-form. Just as painting becomes increasingly formal as its mediality is highlighted, violence, in this view, becomes increasingly formal as it becomes “aware of its mediacy.” This bringing-inside of violence, however, does not disempower the violence of the event. Rather, it radically unleashes the *form* of violence. As long as violence is understood to have an object, it will be taken up as a problem of representation, and the critical hamster-wheel will be inevitable. Only the acceptance of the formal properties of that violence in all of its multiple forms (as image, as language,

as affect), allows it to become common, takes it away from the violence of the critic, and opens the even to a negatively-constituted act of love. Thus, as the final line of the poem posits, “Ignorance that sees itself is elegy,” (67), and the best tribute to a tragic event is literally willed ignorance – the turning away from a project of knowledge, interpretation, and power that allows a violent event to approach pure form.

Yet the non-equivalence of the speaker and the critic, established through the structure of the poem as it both defines terms and defines the critic, suggests that the poem is itself performing a kind of critique that is not that of “the critic.” In this sense, the form critique offered by “Didactic Elegy” seems to be one of radical splitting, detaching the art work as it is conceived or the event as it occurs (which are to be lovingly left alone) from critical activity, which can function best itself as pure form, in the abstract construction of concepts and definitions – a critical form that has substantial resonance with that of Deleuze and Guattari. But unlike Deleuze and Guattari, Lerner insists upon a rigorous formal self-reckoning – a reckoning that perhaps relies upon an alliance with the form of poetry to take place. The poem thus opens the medium of critique to a series of serious questions about form, violence, and the difficulty of engaging in a politically, historically, or aesthetically anchored practice lovingly. How do contemporary critics, those who understand their projects as immanently anchored to the call of crisis, reconcile the practice of critique with the dangers of representational thinking? Can and does contemporary critique approach “pure form,” and is this even possible? How does love express itself in critical practice today?



## Critique and Love

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*Negri*

In *A Time for Revolution*, Antonio Negri proposes a radical simultaneity of crisis and critique, of event and concept. His concern is with the genesis of what he calls “the common name” – “defined as the expression of the common quality of things and, at the same time, as the constructive projection of being into the *to-come*” (156-7). He argues that the common name takes on enormous productive power when it is constructed at the same time as a radical confrontation with the openness and restlessness of time – *kairos*. The potential simultaneity of the experience of *kairos*, of “the quality of the time of the instant, the moment of rupture and opening of temporality (152) and the invocation of the common name suggest the possibility that “the event of real knowledge is produced... precisely at the point where the restlessness of time reveals itself as power” (152). If *kairos* entails the recognition of the restlessness of time, the awareness of the potential at the heart of the present, then the common name is the decision on behalf of that restlessness. In other words, *kairos* can be considered, in this sense, to be the awareness of the crisis of the present to which the common name responds. Negri’s analysis offers a potent model for the constructive connections between crisis and critique to be part of an ontological mode of being that exceeds a notion of critique as a form of discourse among many. The common name is thus the extreme limit of how extensive we might imagine the power of critique to be. Generative on the level of being, the common name

is not only the sign of the singular existent in the instant that links the act of naming to the thing named, nor is it solely the seeking of multiplicity in *surveying* over the edge of time. Situated within the power of production of being, it is also

the construction of the *telos* of generation. It is this production, that is to say this generation, which we call *praxis*. (158)

In imagining an act of naming that emerges immanently out of a confrontation with the possibility for the new, Negri invokes the possibility that Marx's categories of revolutionary critique might be fulfilled on the level of being. The construction of a common experience of instability is thus understood as a revolutionary moment – a moment predicated upon an act of critique that affirms the immeasurability of time.

But where does this experience of *kairos* come from, who experiences it, and how do they respond? Negri suggests that the impetus to name and to affirm must first come out of a direct experience of the openness of the instant, of the void at the center of what we assume to be a safe, scripted, linear progression of history into the present. This rupture, he argues, is felt most profoundly by those who are most at the mercy of chance and indeterminacy – the poor. He argues, “when he appears before us, the poor person is naked on the edge of being, without any alternative... he is the naked eternity of the power of being” (194). The body of the poor person is, for Negri, a corporeal expression of the instability to which *kairos* attests on the level of temporality. And as *kairos* demands the common name to produce a *telos* out of the chaos of time itself, poverty demands a simultaneous response to give shape and a common direction to the vulnerability of the poor body. Just as *kairos* needs the common name to become political, the poor need love to constitute a political force: “the experience of poverty introduces one to the constitution of the common; the experience of love is an activity of construction of the common” (210). Poverty provides a phenomenology of immeasurability – an ontological crisis. Love provides affirmation, generation, and action upon that crisis. Politics becomes a linguistic act of construction at the interval between

crisis and action – “the activity of production of the common name between poverty and love” (223).

Negri’s argument is seductive to the critic. It gives the act of naming and, by extension, the activity of critique, enormous political power. In this sense, it epitomizes the potential inherent in the genealogy of philosophers sketched in the first half of this inquiry – those who argue that thought is a practice of loving affirmation – but extends that power of love to the political realm. In fact, Negri often invokes Spinoza to precisely these ends. But his use of the economic state of poverty betrays the danger lurking in this tempting call for praxis. In the push to develop a theory by which “it is possible to transform the world at the same time as it is interpreted” (158), Negri privileges that interpretation over the historical and affective specificity of that world to the point where the multiplicity of forms of poverty in the contemporary geopolitical scene become “the poor” – “biopolitical subjects” that suddenly appear as if they already comprise a revolutionary mass. In the rhetorical turn from the “constitutive” pain of poverty to the claim for radical love that they must engender, poor people, in Negri’s work, seem to suddenly emerge from the experience of poverty all the better for it. While Negri offers a scenario that would give the loving power of critical language the sway that critics often desire, his work performs the precise reason for this desire to remain unfulfilled. It is true – the common name is transformative – but in Negri’s work of criticism, it succeeds only in transforming the condition of suffering people into a condition that no longer looks like suffering, as if by magic. The critical craving for a perfect simultaneity of event and critique and the dream of praxis is thus exposed as a violent tendency to inscription and ideology.

*Badiou*

In differentiating between the conceptual models of philosophy and critique, it may seem strange to fuel a consideration of the latter with a thinker who so firmly self-identifies as a philosopher. Alain Badiou, however, sits firmly on the margins of these two practices, at once insisting that philosophy must remain separate from the practices it conceptualizes - politics, science, art, and love - while calling upon philosophy to offer a critical context for political change. His work also sits on the margins of several philosophical trajectories, pointing as much away from the genealogy that includes Spinoza, Nietzsche, and Deleuze as he draws from it. While he praises Deleuze for his courage in setting out “an altogether original genealogy” (“One, Multiple, Multiplicities” 68) of philosophy and being “the first to properly grasp that a contemporary metaphysics must consist in a theory of multiplicities and an embrace of singularities” (68), he suggests that his point of disagreement with Deleuze can best be seen “*at the point of greatest proximity*: the requirements for a metaphysics of the multiple” (69). He argues that the “vitalist” trajectory of Deleuzian philosophy reinstates categorical oppositions at exactly the point where they claim to turn to the multiple – by instating a concept of univocal “life” that subordinates the singular without offering access to a concept of the infinite. In this turn away from the attempt to understand the multiple “*in order to adequately think Substance, or the One*” (71), Badiou’s work offers one of the most promising directions for contemporary critique, one that inherits from Deleuze a commitment to the pursuit of ways of thinking that challenge the hegemony of the present by affirming the aspects of situations that do not conform to expectations even as

it pushes back against the aspects of the Spinozan trajectory that have become the most dogmatically entrenched and the most politically irresponsible.<sup>44</sup>

Badiou argues that there are four fundamental desires of philosophy: revolt, logic, universality, and risks. These four desires are today met with four parallel obstacles: the reign of merchandise, the reign of communication, the need for technical specialization, and the necessity for realistic calculations of security (“Philosophy and Desire” 29-31). Nevertheless, like Brown’s call upon critique as response to crisis, Badiou suggests that the contemporary geopolitical situation demands a rebirth of philosophy in opposition to what is often perceived as its growing irrelevance. He argues that the recent global profusion of crises necessitates “a philosophy open to the irreducible singularity of what happens, a philosophy that can be fed and nourished by the surprise of the unexpected” (41). Philosophy must thus shed its hermeneutic, postmodern, and analytic forms, all of which he argues disempower the practice of thought as a result of their various preoccupations with the difficulties of linguistic representation. Rather than seeing philosophy as fundamentally a practice of language, he argues for “a philosophy of the event” (41). For Badiou, philosophy invokes a practice of critique, as it is understood to respond to the particularities of a cultural context, to read events and singularities within that context, and revolt against the accepted habits of contemporary life. Most of all, Badiou’s aims for philosophy share with Brown’s project of critique the belief that the

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<sup>44</sup> I am particularly interested in Badiou’s suggestion his that Deleuzian contemporaries often misjudge the norm that they should be reacting against. This tendency to assume that “movement is superior to immobility, life superior to the concept, time to space, affirmation to negation, difference to identity, and so on” (70) draws, it seems, from a lack of historical specificity in much of this work. As I have suggested, the neoliberal paradigm that so violently marks the present often tends to value precisely movement, change, productivity, and difference. In this sense, my interest in probing the tensions between this affirmative genealogy of philosophy and contemporary cultural constructions of affective states of vulnerability is an attempt to depart from this tendency, looking to the specific cultural sites that invoke, call into question, and reconsider the possibility of various forms of affirmation.

practice of thinking the contemporary must exist in response to a particular call, a demand that arises out of crisis. Badiou, like Brown, sees this call as already resounding, but as yet unanswered. He argues, “Philosophy is ill, it might be dying, but I am sure that the world (the world, neither a God nor a prophet, but the world) is saying to philosophy: ‘Get up and walk!’” (42). Paradoxically, however, he argues that this demand must be met with a philosophical practice that is “at the same time, more modest, more remote from the world and more descriptive” (42), leaving political action, artistic creation, scientific invention, and amorous encounters (all categories of the event) to politicians, artists, scientists, and lovers. In this sense, Badiou’s philosophy sits somewhere between Brown’s demand for a directly engaged practice of critique and Lerner’s argument in favor of a critical practice that leaves its object lovingly alone. Most importantly, however, Badiou’s work stands in opposition to any notion of critique-as-praxis. It thus withdraws from the event precisely at the moment that Negri’s work seizes upon it, leaving action on behalf of the event to those who are immanently connected with it.

Importantly, for Badiou the negotiation of the paradox of critical engagement is only possible through a radical invention on the level of form. As it verges away from communication and representation, philosophy, he argues, must turn away from language itself – and toward mathematics. Mathematics allows philosophy two tools in the pursuit of thought. The first is the capacity to think the seemingly unthinkable. Language produces a persistent limit to thought at the point of representation. Only if it becomes poetic, producing an “objectless presence” (“Language, Thought, Poetry” 246) does it escape this bind, but in becoming poetry it loses its connection to the construction of general truths. But language as it is commonly used on behalf of philosophy leads to

walls on the edge of the thinkable, and “humanity languishes in the night of superstition, which can be summarized by the maxim: there is something we cannot think” (“Mathematics and Philosophy” 9). Unlike language, mathematics not only provides access to the seemingly unthinkable – allowing us to conceive, for instance, of a curve whose function cannot be determined at any point – but it shows, as it does with the example of the underivable function, that these unthinkable situations are, in fact, more common than those that are thinkable. Thus, “everywhere where mathematics is close to experience but follows its own movement, it discovers a ‘pathological’ case that absolutely challenges the initial intuition. Mathematics then establishes that this pathology is the rule, and that what can be intuited is only an exception” (“One, Multiple, Multiplicities,” 75). In this sense, mathematics gives philosophy access to the possibility of the event – that which cannot be determined to arise necessarily out of a given situation. It allows for thought to gather “not just what its time imagines itself to be, but what its time is – albeit unknowingly – capable of” (“Mathematics and Philosophy,” 15). Unbound from representational thinking, the critic can seize upon the potential in a given situation and demonstrate its ubiquity, its possibility, and its volatility. In this sense, Badiou argues, “mathematics is always more or less equivalent to the bulldozer with which we remove the rubble that prevents us from constructing new edifices in the open air” (17). Mathematics performs a crisis in thought – a crisis that is understood as necessary for thought to address the crises of the world.

Mathematics, for Badiou, is thus a tool for the obliteration of habitual ways of thinking, and offers a way of clearing away tired assumptions about the world in favor of new conceptual constructions. But while it offers unprecedented access to possibilities in

the world, mathematics also elides the seemingly inevitable ascription of oneness to the infinite that thought encounters which is at the core of Badiou's critique of Deleuze, his antecedents and his followers. Like Deleuze, Badiou sees thinking multiplicity as key to thinking commonality – he agrees that concepts are singular collections of elements rather than self-same identities – but for Badiou that multiplicity is constituted on the basis of a void, not a univocity of being. Mathematics, and set theory in particular, he argues, is necessary to avoid the assumption of oneness behind multiplicity. Badiou's use of mathematics in this way leads to a radically different understanding of the relationship between thought and potential, one that is “critical” in the sense of being tied, always, to the productive possibility inherent in crisis.

Badiou's use of set theory is a complex and difficult terrain to navigate with its own founding figures and conceptual history, but its goal is to offer a model of the relationship between *situations* (ways of thinking about the world that include a variety of elements), *events* (critical transformations of situations that emerge out of an element of the situation itself), and *truths* (the active commitment to an event). Situations consist of a set of elements, each of which itself consists of elements. An event becomes possible when an element of a situation has no elements of itself that belong to that situation. This gives birth to the event: if it is affirmed that that element does in fact belong to the situation, the situation undergoes a crisis. Badiou often uses the example of Galileo in this regard. While Galileo's theories appeared in a situation of accepted science at the time, none of the elements of his theories belonged to the accepted definition of that situation. A choice thus appeared – whether or not to commit to the trajectory of science that would follow from the inventions of Galileo. Galileo constituted an event in the



situation of science because it was affirmed that his work should be considered part of that situation, leaving no option but for the situation to be reconsidered – perpetually so, as it still is by scientists today. The need for set theory in order to properly engage with this possibility comes in at the level of the unknown. If, in order for an event to occur, there must be an element that itself has elements that are unknown to the situation, in describing that element a paradox occurs in language. In order for those unknowns to play a critical role in overturning the status quo of the situation they must not be describable in the language of the situation itself. Set theory, however, offers ways of describing the presence of unknowability within an element of a set.<sup>45</sup>

Crisis is, for Badiou, the genesis of every possible truth. Truth begins, “with a groundless decision – the decision to say that the event has taken place” (“Philosophy and Truth,” 46). The decision must be groundless – if an event can be determined to occur, it is commonplace knowledge and ceases to be an event. The commitment to pursue the event is thus always a wager in the name of chance. This commitment is taken on by the *subject* of the event. In Badiou’s theory, subjects exist only at this moment of decision and commitment – they are constituted through *fidelity* to an event. A lover, for instance, is constituted as a subject of that love when she takes a chance and commits to the possibility of the event of love, despite its inherent indiscernability.

In order for the pursuit of this truth to have revolutionary implications, it must continually posit the possibility of its completion. The hypothesis that the proposed truth might be complete is what demands a total reconsideration of the initial situation. Badiou explains, again using Galileo as an example, “Galileo was able to make the hypothesis that all nature can be written in mathematical language, which is the hypothesis of a

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<sup>45</sup> See *Being and Event*, meditations 34 and 35 on the work of Paul Cohen.

*complete* physics. On the basis of this anticipation, he *forces* his Aristotelian adversary to abandon his position” (49). But this hypothesis is always ultimately unfulfilled since “there is *always*, in any situation, a real point that *resists* this prophecy. I call this point the *unnamable* of that situation” (49). The preservation of this unnamable is absolutely essential – if it is named, it constitutes a disaster for the situation. And yet, there is always a desire for everything to be named. Badiou names this desire *evil* – “evil is the will to name *at any price*” (50). Truth thus proceeds by a fidelity that at once affirms a hypothesis of completion while maintaining an unnamable at the heart of the truth. This fidelity is ethical insofar as it demands a relation with the event that resists the temptations of evil *and* the temptations of withdrawal from the project of truth. Badiou explains, “the ethic of truths... is that by which we take the measure of what our times are capable of, as well as what our times are worth. Such is, in a word, the very task of philosophy” (51). Philosophy thus emerges from the possibility of an infinite crisis, but one that demands affirmation rather than retreat, love rather than fear.

Badiou’s formal innovations, particularly his use of mathematics, allows for a radically crisis-driven philosophy of affirmation. Yet even in the linguistic translation of the mathematical deduction that drives this philosophy, the affective content of the process of critique disappears. The term “fidelity,” for instance, invokes the hard-won faith of the lover in the face of the unknown other, but what does it mean to have “fidelity” to a concept? To a political event? To a scientific discovery? How does fidelity express itself on the level of the physical body? Badiou invokes Beckett as an artist who invokes a rigorously subtractive logic on the unnamable of the human body as an

example – and perhaps the literary nature of this example is no coincidence.<sup>46</sup> For Badiou, poetry is at once the inverse of philosophy and its dark twin. He argues that there are “two extremes of language: the poem, which aims at objectless presence, and mathematics, which produces the cipher of the Idea” (“Language, Thought, Poetry,” 246). Sense and presence are not the domain of philosophy, even though poetry has the same subtractive logic as philosophy, and challenges notions of representation and communication just as philosophy should. This closeness, Badiou argues, unnerves philosophy because “the poem is a thought which is nothing aside from its act, and which therefore has no need to be the thought of thought. Now philosophy establishes itself in the desire of thinking thought. But is always unsure if thought, *in actu*, the thought that can be sensed, is not more real than the thought of thought” (247). Despite this anxiety, Badiou maintains that the domains of poetry and philosophy must remain separate, since “to abandon the rational mathematical paradigm is fatal for philosophy, which then turns into a failed poem. And to return to objectivity is fatal for the poem, which then turns into a didactic poetry, a poetry lost in philosophy” (247). This problem is visible in a poem such as Lerner’s, which, as a self-declared didactic elegy, embraces this didacticism in order to speak on the problem of critique, but becomes in that project something closer to an act of critique in and of itself. For this reason, the relationship between poetry and philosophy should, Badiou argues, remain in perpetual conflict, but a conflict that recognizes “the *common task*, which is to think what is unthinkable, to say what is impossible to say” (248). Poetry and philosophy are thus both ways of approaching

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<sup>46</sup> Badiou invokes Beckett in several essays – to illustrate the process of subtraction and the ethical commitment to the unnamable in truth.

fidelity to events, of pursuing their truths with careful persistence and measured affirmation.

### Critique and Literature

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The parallelism of philosophy and poetry that Badiou invokes should lead us not only to engage hybrid forms of poetry and philosophy such as Lerner's, but also to ask what the encounters between philosophy and literature can tell us about the project of critique. It is noteworthy that the contemporary practice of critique in various forms of political theory, continental philosophy, and cultural theory has taken root in English departments for the past several decades. Is it this shared terrain of the impossible attempt to think the unthinkable in the face of crisis that leads to the strange disciplinary collision of literature and critique today? At best, perhaps. There are, undoubtedly, myriad reasons for the presence of not-explicitly-literary theory in English departments, most emerging from disciplinary disputes within Philosophy departments that are entirely unrelated to the study of English. This situation has become even more complicated in recent years, where a growing suspicion toward the role of theory in literary studies has called into question not only the usefulness of the European canonical texts that, for a time, dominated literary study, but the continued pursuit of the theoretical enterprise itself. But if we are to ask what a continued role for the shared disciplinary ground of literature and theory might be, or to what work we might be able to best put this uncomfortable alliance, the commitment to creating new fidelities to crisis might be a fruitful place to begin.

What is the usefulness of an alliance between literature and critique in engaging lovingly with crisis and affect? Literature shares with philosophy an uneasiness regarding language. Prose fiction, with its narrative demands, also shares with philosophy a tendency to subject thought, experience, and feeling to a shape that fulfills expected norms of cause and effect, beginning, middle, and end. Yet literature often produces a range of singular possibilities within a given context. Lerner's poem, for instance, "critical" as it might be, exists in a book that gives voice to a multitude of positions, some embodied as subjects, others emerging only out of the formal qualities of language, and still others posited as absences, all within the context of post-September 11<sup>th</sup> America. This is one of many examples of how literature can enact a profusion of affects, a multitude of feelings, and explicitly or implicitly demonstrate a connection between those feelings and a historical context without reducing history to a group of affects or reducing affects to historical determination. The capacity to translate those possible alliances and connections to the realm of the critical will remain, as Badiou suggests every fidelity to truth must, incomplete, and yet the gesture toward the hypothesis that art is speaking to the present is a necessary task for cultural criticism to undertake.

Literature puts sense and feeling into language. Critique pursues the possibilities embedded within crisis in language. Insofar as those possibilities are often expressed on the level of corporeal experience and affect, critique needs literature. Insofar as sense and feeling can easily be ignored in a general pursuit of engaging with the present, literature needs critique. The more difficult this alliance is, the more potentially generative it might be. Only when critique begins to radically take stock of its own formal properties, to understand itself as one of many expressions of loving fidelity to the present, can it

become a militant force of change. Literature, in relentlessly foregrounding the stakes of form, can provide as useful an interrogation of critique as critique can provide literature. This messy, conflictual, and fraught relationship between two modes of linguistic creation has so much more to teach the present than traditional uses of “literary theory” and “cultural studies” would suggest. Beyond reading representation, beyond the exercise of application of theoretical models, the messy affinities of literature and critique might be surprising in their potential to open up the possibilities of crisis even as they affirm the practice of creation. But only if they do so cautiously, modestly, and lovingly.

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