

No Subject Experiences Twice

Steven Shaviro

A Virtual Interview by Chaoyang Liao and Chun-yen Chen

[Editor's Note] Professor Shaviro is an enviably versatile writer and scholar well versed in modern and contemporary philosophy, theory of film and new media, and cultural theory. The subjects of his publications range from canonical literary figures such as Emily Dickinson and Wallace Stevens to Hollywood movies, from aesthetics to cyberspace, from philosophy to science fiction, from the question of creativity to the issue of the dominance of financial capitalism. He has by far published six books: Passion and Excess: Blanchot, Bataille, and Literary Theory (1990), The Cinematic Body (1993), Doom Patrols: A Theoretical Fiction about Postmodernism (1997), Connected, or What It Means To Live in the Network Society (2003), Without Criteria: Kant, Whitehead, Deleuze, and Aesthetics (2009), and Post-Cinematic Affect (2010). He is also an avid blogger writing on a dazzling array of topics at The Pinocchio Theory <<http://www.shaviro.com/Blog>>.

Professor Shaviro is among the first critics in the English-speaking academic community to engage substantially with the writings of Georges Bataille, Maurice Blanchot, and Gilles Deleuze; Deleuze remains a vital theoretical source in his work. In his 2009 book, Professor Shaviro proposed a rethinking of "the new" in light of Deleuze in tandem with Whitehead and Kant. This is why Concentric decided that a conversation with him for an issue on newness would be most fitting.

To ensure productive exchange, Concentric invited Professor Liao, a prominent scholar of critical theory in Taiwan, to participate. The interview was conducted entirely in writing. Professor Shaviro responded to all the questions the interviewers sent him.

Chaoyang Liao and Chun-yen Chen: Adrian Johnston begins the preface to his recent book on political transformations by referring to Walter Benjamin's "angel of history" as a fitting sign for our late capitalist times, where there is "an oppressive, immobilizing pessimism hanging heavily in the air of the prevailing *Zeitgeist*" (xiii). In addition to historical setbacks such as the short-lived Paris commune or the degeneration of the Chinese cultural revolution, he mentions the "anemic" humanism of contemporary "moderate leftists" and their inability to "master the affect-laden aesthetics of mass-media politics" (xiv). It seems that most Deleuzians, being impossibly optimistic, would simply dismiss this as a position locked into "molar" practicalities. As someone who works comfortably and often with Deleuzian insights, can you comment on Johnston's "tragic" take on the current situation of leftist politics? Is there perhaps a Whiteheadian response to all this?

Steven Shaviro: I think that it is way too simplistic to characterize Gilles Deleuze (or Deleuze and Félix Guattari) as somehow being "optimistic," although this is a mistake that some self-professed "Deleuzians" have indeed made. If you look, for instance, at Deleuze's "Postscript on Control Societies," you can see that he is making a very sober assessment of the new technologies of domination and oppression that come to the fore in a cybernetic, or networked, society. There is no sense here that networks, or rhizomes, or flows, or "smooth spaces" are somehow automatically liberating. (Consider also the last sentence of the chapter "The Smooth and the Striated" in *A Thousand Plateaus*: "Never believe that a smooth space will suffice to save us" [500].) I think that Deleuze was trying to develop a philosophy that was up to the measure of all the changes in thought, in society, and in modes of life that were taking place in the second half of the twentieth century. He gives us tools to understand *how things work* today (in the late twentieth century, and much of this is still valid in the early twenty-first)—without such an understanding of our circumstances, we cannot hope to change them. Deleuze defined philosophy as the creation of concepts; and the concepts he himself created (those of the virtual, of the rhizomatic, and of schizophrenic flows) are absolutely essential, I think, if we are to get a handle on our current world of hyperbolic computation and communication, of globalized financial flows, of technologies of instantaneity and of mass destruction.

Given all this, I am in basic agreement with Johnston (and behind him, with Slavoj Žižek and Fredric Jameson) that the reign of neoliberal ideology—and worse, of neoliberal desires and impulses and subjective formations—weighs so

heavily upon us today that it has become difficult to imagine anything different, or indeed any alternatives other than complete, apocalyptic annihilation. We have all internalized Margaret Thatcher's dictum that "There Is No Alternative." The problem is, and remains, how to imagine anything different—or how to awaken the social and political imagination, which indeed seems to have shut down in the last few decades. Just take a look at radical thought from the 1960s and 1970s: I am thinking of people cited by Deleuze and Guattari, like R. D. Laing, David Cooper, and even Carlos Castaneda; and also of such bold thinkers as Herbert Marcuse, Franz Fanon, Norman O. Brown, Ivan Illich, Paulo Freire, and Shulamith Firestone. All of these thinkers are deeply flawed, in ways that are all too easy for us to see today, but they all also present us with stunning positive qualities: a freedom of imagination, an audacity of invention, and a fervent desire for liberation. All of these are wanting now, in a time when genetic determinism, together with market fundamentalism, constrain the limits not only of what we can do but even of what we can think about, and thirst after.

My disagreement with Johnston and Žižek is that I do not think that the tools they provide—basically, a sort of radicalized social Lacanianism—do much to get a grip on this depressing situation. I do not think that their transference of a theory of ex-centric subjectivity really gets us anywhere; it doesn't adequately deal with today's radically transindividual, and indeed transindividuating (to use a concept from Gilbert Simondon that has been picked up and developed in more recent years by Bernard Stiegler) flows both of finance capital, and of any sort of resistance to finance capital. It is precisely here that I find Deleuze's concepts far more valuable, provided we take them in a soberly analytical sense, rather than in the celebratory manner that has become such a caricature.

As for Whitehead, I wouldn't claim that he gives us anything that is *directly* relevant to our current political and cultural impasse. His own creation of concepts simply works on a different level. Whitehead's deep understanding of the universal processes of creativity and novelty is crucial today, I think, precisely because the words "creativity" and "novelty" have become so normative and banalized—in the early twenty-first century, they have become the watchwords of every business school. We need to find a way to rescue these words, and concepts, from how they have been captured by the machinery of capital. Whitehead helps to give us a deeper, and more capacious, sense of creativity and aesthetics than our contemporary culture is otherwise able to provide; he also helps us to understand how values that are different from, and that transcend, the exchange-values of the marketplace, might still be relevant and powerful in a post-Enlightenment, secular

society.

CL/CC: You have some ties with the movement usually referred to as speculative realism. Can you explain what you see as the significance of this movement for non-philosophers? Can it become a potentially transformative development for the humanities in the way that (for better or for worse) poststructuralism, for example, was?

SS: “Speculative realism” is an umbrella term that in fact includes a lot of different philosophical positions that are sharply at odds with one another. The one thing that the various speculative realisms share is a rejection of the human-centered norms that have dominated philosophy and social theory during the past two hundred years. For instance, Bruno Latour argues that nonhuman entities are active parts of all our social arrangements, so that it makes no sense to conceive of a radical split between “culture” and “nature.” Jane Bennett similarly argues that nonhuman organisms, and even nonliving things, exhibit “a positive, productive power of their own.” Quentin Meillassoux seeks to recover for philosophy “the great outdoors” that Western thought gave up when, in the wake of Kant, it limited itself to speaking only of the “correlation” between human beings as subjects, and the object-world contemplated or worked upon by those subjects. Graham Harman and his fellow practitioners of “object-oriented ontology” articulate a metaphysics that is no longer focused upon the problem of “human access,” but instead puts all entities in the world upon an equal ontological footing, and pays attention to their intrinsic qualities.

All forms of speculative realism are directed against the basic assumptions of so-called poststructuralism. Speculative realists reject the idea that there can be no realm of being apart from the infinite play of language or textuality. They also reject philosophies, such as that of Lacan, which can only posit the Real negatively, as a realm that remains undifferentiated and insubstantial, to the extent that it cannot be incorporated into the Symbolic. To the contrary, the speculative realists describe ways in which we can indeed refer to things in the world, as they exist apart from our own impositions and conceptual schemes. For Meillassoux, such a reference to things outside of our own conceptions of them is accomplished in the mathematical abstractions of physical science; for Harman, it is made possible through such things as metaphor and allusion.

I think that speculative realism is important because it opens up questions that have been ignored for too long. It widens the scope of what we can think and ask; it

renews and reawakens that sense of wonder which is central to all philosophy, and to all art. It rescues us from the petty ironies, cynical platitudes, and narrow self-referential circles that have characterized so much of recent, “postmodern” culture. In a world rapidly heading towards ecological catastrophe, it leads us to be more aware of all the other entities, living and nonliving, with which we share this planet, and the cosmos. It reminds us that there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in our philosophies.

CL/CC: You follow Brian Massumi in conceiving affect as a subjective and impersonal or transpersonal. Emotion, on the other hand, is affect reduced, captured, and/or privatized by the constitution of the subject. We can see that this conception opens up a whole new vista in our understanding of affective politics. Isn't this, however, at least a partial return to the Lacanian psychoanalytic model where the inescapable entry into the symbolic captures and organizes the real, producing a distorted cipher of the latter but in principle excluding it as unrepresentable excess? It would help a great deal if one can have a more precise account of the mechanism or process that effects this capturing of affect, which is really extraordinary considering what it has to perform: converting intensity into extension, partitioning infinitude into finitude, and creating quantifiability and subjective closure, all the while maintaining an openness capable of leading straight back to some kind of an original state in affectivity. Why is it not the other way around: emotion combining, interacting, molecularizing, or (God forbid) dialecticizing, into transpersonal formations?

SS: I do not think that Massumi's model is very similar to the Lacanian model. For Lacan, the process is one of negation, castration, and alienation; the subject comes into existence as “barred,” or split from itself. Massumi's model, deriving from Deleuze and Simondon, operates in an entirely different manner. It's a positive and productive process, not a negative one; and it has nothing to do with any sort of alienation. The movement from affect to emotion, or from the virtual to the actual, is one of particularization, individuation, crystallization, or positive determination; or, better, it is a creative movement of self-organization and emergence. One particular configuration emerges out of a welter or cloud of potentialities.

Think of a field of potential energy, where the energy is available to do work, or to be expressed, in any number of ways. The potential energy field does not itself specify the way, or ways, in which its reserve of energy might be used. Each time,

in every event or process, a concrete activity of “individuation” (Simondon) or “conrescence” (Whitehead) takes place which expends this energy in one particular manner (rather than another)—but the activity itself determines the form that it assumes, as this could not have been already-given in the energy field itself.

Each individuation or conrescence is a finite process of becoming. It happens, and then it is over; the entity has constituted itself, it has become something definite. Impersonal forces of affect have been concretized in the form of a particular, personal emotion. It is precisely because all entities are finite and determinate that they do not exhaust the reservoirs of potentiality out of which they emerge. The virtual, or the potential energy field, continues to offer new prospects of transformation. This need not be hypostasized as some sort of “unrepresentable excess.” There is indeed an excess, because no particular, finite act of determination ever exhausts all potentiality.

But all this has nothing to do with questions of representation, and the excess is not inaccessible. Rather, once a particular process of becoming or actualization has been concluded, the virtual, or potential energy field, is still available for yet *another* process of becoming. There is no end to these. Rather than thinking of the “subject” as fixed, therefore, we should say with Whitehead that “no thinker thinks twice; and, to put the matter more generally, no subject experiences twice” (*Process and Reality* 29). I am no longer the “same” subject now that I was a couple of seconds ago. In this way, the interchange between virtual and actual, or between affect and emotion, is always something that goes both ways. Whenever intensity is converted into extension, whenever finitude, quantifiability, and subjective closure are being produced, then *at the same time* the reverse is also taking place: emotion is indeed also “combining, interacting, molecularizing, or dialecticizing into transpersonal formations.”

CL/CC: A related question concerns the status of the body. There is a strain of posthumanist thought running from Donna Haraway to Mark Hansen that stresses the importance of a more or less closed or individualized body, even (or especially) in the age of digitalization, for the maintaining of a workable conception of agency. While impersonal affect can be fully located in materiality, can one point to ways in which it is still relevant for the ethical act as initiated by the (fully organed) individual, as opposed to simple resignation with which we simply wait for the invisible forces implicated in some greater body to play themselves out?

SS: The whole point of Whitehead’s discussion of process, and of Deleuze’s discussion of the virtual, is that *nothing is fully predetermined*. Potentiality is not unlimited; it is never the case that anything whatsoever can happen, for no reason at all. (In this sense, both Whitehead and Deleuze maintain—in contrast to Meillassoux—some version of Leibniz’s principle of sufficient reason.) But it is also never the case that the future is entirely predetermined, or that the effect is entirely contained in the cause; in this way, Whitehead and Deleuze depart from Leibniz. As Latour—following both Whitehead and Deleuze—puts it, there is always more to the effect than was present in the cause that provoked it: “consequences overwhelm their causes, and this overflow has to be respected everywhere, in every domain, in every discipline, and for every type of entity” (484).

Or, as Whitehead himself puts it, every entity needs to make a *decision*, in the process of constituting itself. Some of these decisions may be greater or more momentous than others; but even in the most insignificant or “negligible” cases, there is still at least *some degree of agency*. Nothing could be further removed from the idea of “simple resignation with which we simply wait for the invisible forces implicated in some greater body to play themselves out.”

I think that Whitehead’s notion of decision, and his sense of different degrees of agency, is far preferable to the all-or-nothing logic that we get in all too many contemporary discussions of agency, in which we must have either “the ethical act as initiated by the (fully organed) individual,” or else nothing besides a passive fatalism. These are caricatural extremes, neither of which ever obtains in actuality. Rather, there is a broad spectrum of in-between positions.

CL/CC: In the article “The ‘Bitter Necessity’ of Debt: Neoliberal Finance and the Society of Control,” you make a compelling argument about how both Michel Foucault and Deleuze have at some point located economism, rather than life politics, at the core of postmodernity. You note that in *The Birth of Biopolitics*, which is widely considered a landmark work in Foucault’s theorization of biopolitics, Foucault ends up shifting attention from biopolitics to neoliberalism: Foucault discovers that it is market logic rather than governmentality centered on life that can best explicate contemporary society. You also emphasize that Deleuze, similarly, characterizes the current social formation as the control society, in which the organized sites of confinement that constitute the disciplinary society give way to networks of free-floating control and in which money, now predominantly figured in flexible exchange rates, forcefully evinces the logic of the new regime of

control. We do not think you are suggesting that critical attention should simply bypass “life” from now on. Quite the contrary, we think your work on contemporary film and media is remarkable precisely because, among many things, it examines the *being* of these pop culture products as expressions of contemporary political economy. We do wonder, however, what you think of the theory of biopolitics today—for instance, that of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, and of Giorgio Agamben. In your comment on Hardt and Negri (*Post-Cinematic Affect*, 2010), you seem sympathetic to some of their propositions (e.g., their understanding of affect as being singular and common at once) but unsure about others (e.g., their claim that there is no longer an “outside” in the current capitalist system). Would you say that their critical model fails to give economism enough consideration? How would you respond to their contention in *Empire* that neither Foucault nor Deleuze has fully grasped the centrality of production in biopolitical power, especially the productivity of bodies and of affect? What are the limits and limitations of their biopolitical thesis? As for Agamben, he seems to take a radically different route. His theory pivots on the ubiquity of “the political” and on the modern and contemporary renderings of certain archaic figures of the political. At the same time he has written on capitalism (e.g., the spectacle society) and contemporary image culture (e.g., the theological legacy of nudity images). If these biopolitical approaches fall short, in which aspects does this occur? What can be gained in giving primacy to economism over the issue of life?

SS: I will leave Agamben aside here, because I have very little to say about him. I have never come across anything in his writings that was the least bit useful or thought-provoking for me. This may well be my own limitation, rather than his. I can make no sense, for instance, of his notion of “bare life,” since I can see in this nothing other than the condition that Marx ironically calls that of the “free laborer,” separated from the land and from any form of control over his/her own sustenance at the very dawn of capitalism (and as one of the conditions for capitalism to get underway in the first place). I do not claim to offer any critique of Agamben, because I have not had the sort of engagement with his work that such a critique would require. I just find him opaque and puzzling.

Hardt and Negri are for me a much more interesting case. I both agree and disagree with them in profound ways. I find their account of the predominance of “affective labor” in the current globalized economy to be incredibly useful. It’s not that such labor didn’t exist before, or that older forms of labor (like industrial labor) have somehow disappeared, but rather that our current social and economic

formation is characterized by the hegemony of affective labor processes (together with the hegemony of finance capital over industrial capital, and the importance of continued “primitive accumulation,” or expropriation of formerly public resources, alongside the appropriation and accumulation of surplus value). I think that Hardt and Negri are correct in their observations about “empire” replacing the older forms of imperialism, now that capitalism has truly become global; under this regime, nation-states do not cease to exist, but they play a different role (*vis-à-vis* an international “market” that they cannot control) than they did formerly. And Hardt and Negri are also right to assert that the extraction of a surplus—which is to say, ultimately, of profit—has now extended well beyond the factory, to encompass all areas of social life, and that this means an increasing appropriation, not only of surplus labor-power, but also of what Marx called “general intellect,” or the accumulated knowledges and capacities of human life as a whole—including things like habits, everyday practices, forms of know-how, and other potentialities of human (and not just human) “life” in general.

So in this sense I appreciate many aspects of what Hardt and Negri mean by biopolitical power, or the appropriation of the laboring activity of bodies and affects, not just in places of work, but in the overall compass of “life” as a whole. Yet this is also the point at which Hardt and Negri become disturbingly unsatisfactory to me. For what they are describing, under the rubric of biopolitics, affective labor, and the “real subsumption” of all aspects of social existence—and indeed of “life itself”—under capital, is a living nightmare, or a situation of unmitigated horror. For what it means is that we (meaning, by this “we,” everybody who works, whether in an office, a school, a factory, or some other institution, as well as everybody who is unemployed or underemployed, i.e., who does not even get the opportunity to work)—that we, so described, are not just being exploited nine-to-five, but rather all the time, 24/7: in our leisure as well as our work, when we are not being paid as well as when we are being paid, indeed even when we are asleep. This is what it means for capital to appropriate general intellect, and to capture, commodify, and sell not only quantifiable goods and services, but also such impalpable things as atmospheres, feelings, ways of being, or forms of life.

What I find inexplicable in Hardt and Negri is that they describe this situation of hyper-oppression and hyper-exploitation as one in which we are closer than ever to liberation, so that the self-determination of the multitude, as an active, affirmative, constitutive power, is somehow just around the corner—or is even, somehow, already in effect. This sounds suspiciously to me like the old-fashioned Marxist belief (never held, as far as I can tell, by Marx and Engels themselves) that

“objective” economic conditions will somehow produce a transition from capitalism to socialism all by themselves, without the need for any sort of political action.

The view that economic processes will lead to revolutionary change all by themselves is precisely what used to be criticized, in many Marxist circles, as “economism.” And yet, I think that the problem with Hardt and Negri’s position is actually the result of their taking “biopolitics” too seriously, instead of subordinating it to economics. The reason for their unearned optimism is because they think that what capital is today exploiting can be designated, all too simply and holistically, as “life.” Where Marx saw labor being expropriated in the commodified form of labor-power, they see “life” as being expropriated directly. But I think this is wrong. There has been no shift from labor to life as a whole. Rather, leisure activities, and even mere sleeping, have been themselves transformed into new particular forms of labor. This allows them to be purchased in the form of labor-power, so that a surplus may be extracted from them. To appeal to “life” beyond such specific forms of labor is an empty gesture. Indeed, the very idea of “life” in Western thought and culture is an exceedingly problematic one, as Eugene Thacker demonstrates in his brilliant recent book *After Life*. I am inclined to suggest that “life,” as posited in various discourses (not only those of Hardt and Negri) on biopolitics and biopower, does not exist. It is just an empty hypostatization, a transformation of forces and processes into a supposed essence. If we posit that such an essence has been alienated by practices of governmentality embodied in biopolitics, then it becomes all too easy to fantasize a disalienation that will return “life” to its essence. But this obscures the various forms of production and expropriation that are actually taking place, and puts the focus on tactics of “governmentality,” instead of examining the more basic processes of surplus value extraction and capital accumulation.

I do not want to sound too harsh here. In fact, Hardt and Negri pay considerably more attention to economic expropriation and exploitation than most other contemporary theorists do. (It is important to note that they do focus on these processes, whereas other radical thinkers—Alain Badiou is the most notable example—programmatically bracket and ignore them.) But I still think that there is a certain imbalance that comes from their overvaluation of what they call biopolitics.

I’m aware that what has today come to be called “neo-vitalism,” in various configurations, is concerned precisely to emphasize force and affect, rather than essence, in its understanding of how the world works. Evidently, I am largely in accord with this impulse. But I still think that it is dangerously confusing to

hypostasize “life” *per se* in any way. The nineteenth-century vitalists wrongly claimed that there was some sort of basic distinction between life and nonlife. They imagined some special process that drove living things, in contrast to the merely mechanistic forces that were supposedly all there was to the inanimate world. Today, this dualism is inadmissible. We should rather say, following Whitehead—and also Latour, Bennett, and the speculative realist philosopher Iain Hamilton Grant—that all materiality, or all of existence, nonliving as well as living, is intrinsically active and agential. It might be better to say, not that everything is alive, but that everything *thinks* in one way or another. This is the thesis, not of vitalism, but of panpsychism.

CL/CC: You are arguably among the first scholars in the contemporary English-speaking academic world to pay attention to a subjective or presubjective affect, long before the emergence of what has now come to be called the “affective turn” in theory. In your first book, *Passion and Excess: Blanchot, Bataille, and Literary Theory* (1990), you engage particularly with the nonconscious affectivity that Georges Bataille’s and Maurice Blanchot’s writings evoke. Although Deleuze’s philosophy is not the focus of the book, Deleuzian terms and concepts, to be sure, figure prominently there: affect, expression, affective intensity, singularity, and so on. At times it almost seems that you are reading Bataille and Blanchot (especially the latter) from a Deleuzian perspective. In any case, you find all these philosophers sharing in a thinking of affirmation. In your subsequent books, *The Cinematic Body* (1993) and *Connected, or What It Means to Live in the Network Society* (2003), where Deleuze’s influence is increasingly conspicuous, you reiterate the same ethos of affirmation and read contemporary images, including cinematic and digital ones, in light of Deleuze’s concept of virtuality alongside Bataille’s “unproductive expenditure” and Blanchot’s non-essentialist take on images. With all the similarities among these thinkers, would you say that Deleuze’s notion of the virtual, in particular, has made a pathbreaking contribution to the way we think of affirmation? Given that Bataille’s and Blanchot’s writings are to a significant extent responses to the crisis of modernity, in what ways are their responses still relevant today?

SS: Although Blanchot and Bataille remain among my favorite writers, I am not sure how much of a resource they provide for critical thinking and imaginative creation in the twenty-first century. They are both deeply involved with the problematics of twentieth-century modernism. Important as these problematics

were, I think that today we need to get beyond them—to move on to other, more pressing problems—instead of reiterating their impasses.

For instance, Bataille is focused above all upon the crucial modernist issue of transgression—the rupturing of all boundaries and constraints, both social and metaphysical. For Bataille, the most important thing was the event of transgressive rupture: a rupturing, all at once, both of the ego, and of the external constraints that had restrained that ego. Transgression overturned the world, but at the same time, it refused to impose any new sort of order, any new structuring of the world, because if it had done so, it would merely have set up a new set of conditions that needed to be transgressed in their own turn.

This dialectic goes to the heart of so much that happened in the terrible course of the twentieth century: I am thinking, not only of radical artistic movements, but also of the massive, devastating wars and the totalitarian governments. In such contexts, the movement towards a radically self-expiating transgression was an important one.

But transgression cannot be meaningful for us today in the same way that it was for Bataille in the early and mid-twentieth century. This is largely because transgression, today, has become entirely commodified. There isn't a transgression, a "perversion," or an extremity of any sort that isn't already data-mined and monetized and niche-marketed; such a process is precisely what the internet is *for*. To continue to hold onto Bataille's supposed scandalousness today is to be the dupe of a marketing scheme.

All this is not a criticism of Bataille, so much as it is a plea to read him *historically*: to understand him in the context of the problems he was confronted with in his own time, without automatically thinking that these problems are also—or still—ours.

Looking at Bataille in this way, I am not convinced that he has much to say to us about extreme, exasperated sexuality, or about the relations between sex and death. From the perspective of the twenty-first century, Bataille is a much better political economist than he is a sexologist or pornographer. His "notion of expenditure" is still important, I think, when we contemplate how the globalized capitalist economy at once produces more superfluous goods and services and entertainments than any human being could ever want, much less need, while at the same time relegating the great mass of the world population to deprivation and misery. Today, two billion human beings live in global slums; even the relatively pampered and privileged citizens of the most affluent countries are being subjected to endless rounds of austerity. All this in order to service and perpetuate a financial

system that seems increasingly unmoored from any sort of physical production and consumption whatsoever. The potlatches of the Pacific Northwest that so obsessed Bataille have nothing on the derivative markets that dominate economic activity today. Bataille is still important, insofar as he initiates the study of an economics that has nothing to do with scarcity, and that is driven by affective elements that cannot be comprehended in cognitive terms, or in the neoclassical language of preferences and rational calculations. Doubtless, however, we need to find a new vocabulary for expenditure, since Bataille's own recourse to a language of dialectical negativity is inadequate.

CL/CC: The Deleuzian-inspired affect theory emphatically rejects the structuralist, constructivist, and psychoanalytic approaches to the subject: in brief, it rejects the supremacy of the signifier, of constituting ideology, and of lack in cultural theory. Affect theory in its own right posits the unconceptualizable materiality of affect and attends to the potential for change taking place at “the edge of virtual, where it leaks into actual” (Massumi 43). Some practitioners of affect theory, however, tend to understand the unqualified affective intensity as “unmediated” experience. While affect from Deleuze's perspective is indeed some sort of “matter” and the encounter with it is some kind of “event,” are we to understand affect as something unmediated? In your book on Bataille and Blanchot, you say clearly that affect is not spontaneity or immediacy, but rather something “which affects us *before* being ‘given’ to us in phenomenological intuition” (*Passion and Excess* 29). You tackle this issue even more brilliantly by returning to the question of aesthetics. In *Without Criteria: Kant, Whitehead, Deleuze, and Aesthetics* (2009), for instance, you are not just trying to articulate the affinity among Kant, Whitehead, and Deleuze in terms of their aesthetic agendas. An important purpose of your project there is to bring the question of affectivity to bear on the potentiality of singularities. By bringing aesthetics to the forefront of contemporary thought, you put “judgment” back into the equation. This reengagement with the question of aesthetic judgment, as we understand it, can facilitate our understanding of those experiences of affectivity that are at once singular and common. Elsewhere you also argue that aesthetic judgment can help to transform the Kantian *sensus communis* into a “cultivation and sharing of the highest possible degree of singularity” (“Beauty Lies in the Eye”). It seems fair to say that this type of aesthetics can thereby prevent affect theory from falling back on the “anything goes” pathos of earlier postmodernist thinking, which often just ends with effectless (and affectless?) concession to the double-edgedness of pretty

much everything. In brief, your Kant-Whitehead-Deleuzian aesthetic judgment can help actualize the raw matter of affect and implicate the subject in the process, thus rendering change possible. How do you situate your approach vis-à-vis the field of affect theory today?

SS: I don't think that affect can be equated with some sort of unmediated experience. Nothing is unmediated, because every process involves a sort of transference or translation—actually, many transfereces and translations—and these always involve the activities of what both Deleuze and Latour, in related but slightly different ways, call *mediators*. Expression and creation cannot take place without mediators, who can be defined as agents that do not just passively transmit some previously existing bit of information, but actively shape and reshape what they are transmitting, thus helping it to come to form, or come to expression, in the first place. Whitehead has a similar idea when he says that every “actual occasion” can only take place through the “prehension” of previous occasions, which the new occasion both takes up and alters—leaving behind a legacy which can then be taken up and transformed in its own turn.

The main problem with my early book *The Cinematic Body*, and the reason why today I mostly reject that book and think that it is a failure, is that in writing it I didn't take Whiteheadian, Deleuzian, and Latourian notions of mediation into account, and instead wrote as if affective experience were somehow direct and unmediated. (I was trying to critique the Hegelian notion of mediation as a dialectical negation, but I totally failed to grasp the possibility of nondialectical mediation).

I could put this into different terms by saying that, in *The Cinematic Body*, I failed to give any account of aesthetics, whereas today I would argue that affectivity and aesthetics go together, and that you cannot give any account of affect without adopting an aesthetic stance. In this sense, I agree with Harman's claim that aesthetics must become first philosophy, although my reasons for saying this are slightly different from his.

“Aesthetics” in modern Western philosophy suffers from a primordial split, as Deleuze remarks on several occasions. On the one hand, aesthetics has to do with sensibility, that is to say, with reception and response to sensation (think of Kant's “Transcendental Aesthetic,” the first section of the first Critique). On the other hand, aesthetics has to do with judgments of beauty and sublimity (think of Kant's “Critique of Aesthetic Judgment,” the first half of the third Critique). In the first sense, aesthetics is purely passive; in the second sense, it is active; a full theory of

aesthetics needs to be both at the same time, which means that it needs to break down the very opposition between passivity and activity, or between sensibility and spontaneity.

This role of being both passive and active—and therefore in a sense neither—is taken on by affect, which is necessarily a matter of (passive) sensibility and of (active) spontaneous transmission at one and the same time. Since affect is impersonal or prepersonal, it isn't something you have, but something that invests and invades you, that forces itself on you (i.e., affect is passion). At the same time, affect cannot just be received, it needs to be enacted: to feel it is to act it out, to mediate it, to transmit it. As Whitehead says, feeling always has a “vector quality.” It doesn't stand still, but rather it always comes from somewhere, and it is always pointed towards somewhere else. Affective experience is aesthetic, and it involves a process of (nondialectical) mediation.

The paradox of aesthetic judgment in Kant is that it is at one and the same time singular and universal. An aesthetic judgment has to do with one individual instance, something that cannot be identified with anything else, that is not covered by any already-existing rule, and that cannot be subsumed into any larger category. Yet an aesthetic judgment is also universal, in that it is never private, but always requires some sort of perpetuation beyond itself, beyond the immediate moment of reception—it needs to be communicated, addressed to others, perpetuated beyond its singular occurrence. Kant differentiates the problematic of aesthetic judgment from the understanding of empirical facts, on the one hand, and the categorical commands of morality, on the other. But Whitehead and Deleuze both insist that all judgments are aesthetic ones—even questions of fact on the one hand, or of obligation on the other, involve an irreducible aesthetic (singular-universal) dimension.

This irreducibility of the aesthetic does not imply that everything is arbitrary, meaningless, or merely subjective—it is not a skeptical relativism. Rather, the irreducibility of aesthetics means that cognition can never be entirely separated from feeling. It's not that truth doesn't exist, but that truth requires a certain will-to-truth; without affectivity there would be no reason to strive for truth, and therefore truth would never be established or be known. Truth is not dependent upon us, as it might be in the Kantian and Hegelian traditions; it is precisely the independence of things in the world from us—their reality outside the correlation, as the speculative realists would put it—that requires us to approach the things of the world aesthetically or affectively. We must allude to things in response to their allure, as Harman suggests; or we must encounter them non-cognitively and aesthetically,

through the faculties of “feeling, desire, drive, emotion, will, imagination and memory” (to quote Michael Austin on the speculative realist recuperation of the romantic tradition stemming from Schelling).

CL/CC: A related issue pertains to exactly how judgment takes place. You suggest that because there is always some margin of indeterminacy in the subject’s prehension of the objective datum, this very margin is where change can happen. Change, as you argue, is a function of *manner* rather than of essence. This manner indicates the way in which we let ourselves be affected by the objective datum in the world. Yet, what about the *form* of this objective datum—isn’t it equally important in our process of formulating aesthetic judgment? Doesn’t it bear on the manner in which the objective datum affects us? (And, is Deleuze’s distinction between the form of content and the form of expression relevant here?) In your writings on contemporary images, you do seem to suggest that this form matters a great deal—and perhaps that is why, say, Kathryn Bigelow’s *Blue Steel* and Ridley Scott’s *Blade Runner* end up effecting divergent affective intensities.

SS: I’m not sure that “judgment” is the best term for what happens. Whitehead speaks of “feelings” and “propositions,” and the “decisions” that every entity makes with regard to them; but very few of these decisions involve what could, strictly speaking, be called a judgment. Feelings both precede and exceed the conscious deliberative process that we know as judgment. Kant’s great advance is to see that aesthetic decisions or judgments are non-cognitive; Whitehead extends this by saying that most aesthetic decisions are not conscious either. Feelings, and decisions of “adversion” or “aversion” can be conscious, but they need not be, and usually are not.

As for the question of “form,” I think there is some ambiguity in the use of the word. Yes, every entity, according to Whitehead, chooses its own manner, or way, to be affected by the objective data that it encounters. But these “data” are not just particular, atomistic sense-impressions, as they were considered to be by the British empiricists. Whitehead says that, beyond these impressions, there is a vast wealth of what he calls “non-sensuous perception.” This latter category includes our feelings of our own body, of our antecedent histories, and of the vague influences of what Whitehead calls “causal efficacy.” Moreover, the relations among various received data are themselves felt as data; as William James argued, we have experience of relations as well as of things. Among these relations, one must certainly include what the question refers to as the *forms* of the prehended objective data.

Whitehead's theory of prehensions, like James' radical empiricism, includes as data, or as factors of experience, much that was excluded by Locke, Hume, and the old British empiricist tradition.

CL/CC: You have astutely shown that Deleuze and Whitehead are two principal thinkers of the new. "Newness" can be a misleading term as it projects an impetus for the ever-changing. The new in Whitehead and Deleuze, however, actually calls for a serious reconsideration of time. As you point out, Deleuze describes novelty as the actualization of the virtual, whereas Whitehead depicts this as the becoming-actual of reality in the present. And this actualization, in your words, "is the hinge, or the interstice, not only between past and future, but also between the two forms of causality [the efficient cause, or the naturalistic cause-effect relation; and the final cause, or the decision by which an actual entity becomes what it is]" (*Without Criteria* 98). Can you elaborate on the "hinge between past and future" part? Since newness can also be incorporated by capital, can we say that this attentiveness to the relationship between past, present, and future can be a key to our distinguishing good novelty from bad novelty?

SS: For Whitehead, as for James and Bergson before him and Deleuze after him, the "present" is never a sheer instant. It always includes a certain temporal thickness, or involves a certain duration. Whitehead adopts a term from James, and calls this the "specious present." The instantaneity measured by scientific instruments is only a secondary or derivative abstraction from the specious present of consciousness. In addition, Whitehead says, the thick or specious present always refers intrinsically to a before and to an after. "The past has an objective existence in the present which lies in the future beyond itself" (*Adventures of Ideas* 191). On the one hand, every present refers back to, and inherits from, the past moments that it prehends. On the other hand, "the present bears in its own realized constitution relationships to a future beyond itself. . . . Immediate existence requires the insertion of the future in the crannies of the present" (191). There are definite similarities between Whitehead's conception of time here, and Husserl's assertion that every present moment necessarily involves retentions (of the past) and protentions (towards the future).

As for novelty, this comes in different degrees. A stone is less creative than a living organism; it doesn't produce as much novelty. But in principle, novelty is never reduced to zero, just as, on the other hand, it can never be infinite. Even when a new event (like the subsistence of a stone) consists in nothing but the sheer

repetition of a previous event, there is a minimal degree of novelty, since even here the many “are increased by one.” The stone’s reiteration is a novel fact, added on to its many previous reiterations. The novelty is “negligible” in its extent, Whitehead says, but it is not for all that inexistent.

At the other extreme, novelty cannot be infinite, because no aesthetic decision, no matter how radical, can entirely abolish all of the “data” that came before it, and upon which it was based. Whitehead upholds what he calls the *ontological principle*, which states that “there is nothing which floats into the world from nowhere” (*Process and Reality* 244); rather, “actual entities are the only reasons; so that to search for a reason is to search for one or more actual entities” (24). The ontological principle is Whitehead’s revised version of Leibniz’s principle of sufficient reason; everything that happens is grounded in something prior, though it is not automatically determined by what is prior. (When an actual entity makes a decision, this decision is always on the basis of inherited data; but the deciding entity may be its own reason, when it determines to alter or innovate upon those data.) In maintaining some version of sufficient reason, Whitehead is clearly at odds with any position such as that of Meillassoux, who maintains that anything can happen at any time for no reason whatsoever. Whitehead’s view is neither as deterministic as Newtonian physics was, nor as radically contingent and indeterminate as Meillassoux’s speculative materialism is. For Whitehead, as for Latour (as I have already quoted), “consequences overwhelm their causes,” so novelty is never zero; but causes can never simply vanish altogether, so novelty is never infinite.

All that said, we should remember that, for Whitehead, novelty and creativity are *generic* notions: they apply, more and less, to all entities and to all processes. The “more and less” is important, but it cannot be turned into an absolute distinction, or a firm criterion. In this sense, Whitehead does not give us any absolute principle to distinguish good novelty from bad, capitalistic novelty. There are differences, to be sure, but we need to *decide* on the import of these differences, rather than appealing to some pre-given rule. This is part of what I mean when I argue that Whitehead asks us to operate “without criteria.” Whitehead is never cynical; he never says that everything all comes down to the same, or that there are no meaningful distinctions. But every entity, or every process, must *decide* for itself which differences and distinctions *matter*, which ones are *important*. And this is always a question of extent, of “more and less.”

I utterly deplore the way that “innovation” and “novelty” and “creativity” have today become the buzzwords of business schools; it’s ludicrous for Apple to

claim, every single year, that its new product is so utterly radical and unforeseen that it “changes everything.” But I take upon myself the responsibility for making this political judgment. There is no master key that gives me a firm basis for distinguishing good novelty from bad novelty.

CL/CC: In *Post-Cinematic Affect*, you examine a number of contemporary media products and reflect on the ways in which they each respond to the neoliberal economic system. In your conclusion you say you are hesitant to claim that these works have achieved some sort of “resistance”; you do not believe that aesthetics can translate easily into politics. You argue that at a time when our imagination “threatens to fail us,” these works—if they have achieved anything—have succeeded in exposing and delineating this threat. Is this always going to be the conclusion we come to when we look at modern-day media output? At some point you try to set yourself apart from Hardt and Negri on the topological question of “the outside.” While they argue that the current capitalist system leaves us no outside, you believe that the “real subsumption” of today’s capitalism should be taken less as a finality than as an ongoing tendency, and that there is always something that has not been incorporated by capital. Where, then, do you locate this outside? Would you entertain the thought that perhaps we should turn to an aesthetic agenda other than postmodernism so as to attain this outside? After all, come to think of it, Deleuze is particularly fond of modernists: Proust, Beckett, Pierre Boulez, etc. Perhaps potential resistance lies elsewhere than the very media productions that are engrossing us a little too much?

SS: I do not know where potential resistance lies. But I believe that it is our duty to “keep hope alive.” And often radical change, and a movement towards justice, arises in the least expected places: consider the recent revolutions in the Middle East, for one impressive example.

That said, I do not think that the aesthetic in itself can be a form of “resistance.” There is no direct passage from the ontological to the particular social, economic, and political changes that we would like to make. At most, I’d say that the basically aesthetic nature of existence means that change is always possible, and that this change need not always be for the worse. And particular aesthetic constructions, or works of imagination, can inspire us in concrete and particular ways—they can help us to open up new perspectives, and to see and feel things differently. *How* they do this, and for whom, remains open: it will differ from work to work, and from person to person. I do not think, however, that these differences

have anything to do with the old twentieth-century modernist opposition between “high” and “popular” culture, or between avant-garde art and mass media. These particular oppositions have some historical importance, but they simply do not apply in any way to the promiscuous cultural situation of the twenty-first century.

CL/CC: What is left of literary studies in this age of images?

SS: I have no answer to this. My own work involves the study of both.

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