

# **In Pursuit of the Real**

**Postmodernism and Critical Realism**


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### **Signed Declaration**

I, Timothy Rutzou, confirm that the work presented in this thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

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## **Abstract**

Postmodernism is often used as the signifier for the fashionable drift into relativism and unseriousness within Western philosophy. Conference after conference, article after article, book after book have appeared describing, denouncing or celebrating the postmodern condition. Within in this context, critical realism has, by and large, positioned itself against the postmodern turn. This project re-evaluates this stance. Against the critiques which have been levelled at postmodernism I will argue that critical realism is theoretically best placed to mediate the various postmodern positions and concerns by developing a reading of critical realism which places critical realism firmly within the context of postmodernism as an alternate postmodernism. Yet if critical realism can be understood within postmodernism, postmodernism can equally be understood within a more encompassing, more mediated realism. The task then is to find a new language which brings together Apollo and Dionysus, moving towards perspectival realism and a scientific anarchism concerned with the possibility and limitations of representing a complex world characterised by intensity, difference and becoming.

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# Opening remarks I

What are we calling postmodernity? I am not up to date. (Foucault, 1983: 204)

This thesis is concerned with outlining the possibility of realism under the conditions of postmodernism<sup>1</sup>. On the one hand it represents an attempt to challenge the peculiar mixture of pessimism and playfulness which characterises postmodern theory. On the other hand, it is concerned with bringing in postmodern theory from the cold and attempting to do what might seem impossible – unite postmodernism and realism. While postmodernism has perhaps become for some a tired trope eliciting frustrated groans, exasperated sighs and gnashed teeth, the challenges it represents will not, and should not, be cast aside as so much nonsense. Whatever else it may be, the logic of postmodernism represents an important attempt to come to terms with the nature of the present under conditions in which we are no longer sure such a thing can be done.

When applied to theory, postmodernism generally refers to forms of thought suspicious of classical notions of truth, reason, emancipation and objectivity. Against such forms, postmodernism concerns itself with the fragmentary, contingent, diverse, unstable, heteronomous and incommensurable nature of ‘reality’. Reflecting this, postmodern writing embodies a particular stylistic approach which embraces depthless, decentred, ungrounded, self-reflexive, playful, eclectic and pluralistic forms (Eagleton, 1996: vii). Whether or not

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<sup>1</sup> Here we must acknowledge the important distinction between postmodernity as a historical epoch grounded in social developments and postmodernism as its (contingent but hegemonic) cultural logic (Jameson, 1984a; 1984b; Eagleton 1996).



postmodernism can be said to represent a coherent 'age' or movement, one of its defining currents is almost inevitably an incredulity, suspicion and ambivalence towards theory in general and representation in particular. For this reason it is often viewed as a radically sceptical position. Against the high ideals (abstraction and rationalism) of modernity thought is understood contextually, that is, historically situated and linguistically bound; in a word, perspectival. But while perspectivalism need not be in opposition to realism, the popular consensus certainly suggests, with the peculiar inverted millenarianism characteristic of postmodernism (Jameson, 1984a: 53), that postmodernism spells the end of realism and represents a turn towards radical cultural or linguistic relativism. As one observer suggests, our present context is very much a general weariness with regard to theory, and the miserable slackening that goes along with this characterised by an endless pursuit of the new and the radical; new-this, neo-that, post-this, after-that, end-of-this, death-of-that (Lyotard, 1988: xiii).

To the postmodern eye the present context is one in which presence, presentation and representation have become shot through with intensity, difference, heterogeneity and fluidity, all of which are taken to operate against the possibility of realism. Under the conditions of postmodernism the world becomes defined by the impermanence and fluidity of form without the possibility of unification or cohesion. Space becomes 'democratised'; a pluralistic chaos populated by competing perspectives. Time becomes fragmented into overlapping temporalities experienced as forgotten or suppressed pasts, impossible futures, pastiche, irony and a nostalgia for lost presences. During this time, softly whispered promises of release appear amidst claustrophobic anxieties and paranoia. 'Reality', if spoken, is either placed within quotation marks to mark a deep cynicism towards any claim to the real or becomes a banal predicate which marks everything and nothing. In such a context reality appears as *the* lost presence, an elusive desideratum perpetually slipping through our fingers and leaving us with

nothing but an ever unattainable ideal. Those who advocate for realism are at best naïve and at worst oppressive guardians of a nostalgic imaginary.

Within the context of such a hostile environment the general approach of the realist has been to decry the postmodern turn as so much fashionable nonsense (Sokal and Bricmont, 1999). It is regarded as unserious gibberish, irreverent, vacuous, incoherent, unfounded and childish. Charlatanry. Vandalism. Pretence. Obscurantism. Masturbation<sup>2</sup>. As David Hume would have it, sophistry and illusion fit only for the flames<sup>3</sup>. When pressed, the realist might qualify this condemnation by conceding that postmodernism has done some useful theoretical and political work in highlighting the importance of language, difference or power relations, perhaps even providing a positive reference to Foucault in the process, but nevertheless will bravely conjecture any useful work which may take place within (the now defunct) postmodernism occurs in spite of itself, and at any rate is injured by its own narcissistic obscurity and incoherence (c.f. Bhaskar 2012; Eagleton 1996, 2004; Hartwig 2007<sup>4</sup>; Lopez and Potter, 2001; Sayer 2000; Searle 1977). Accordingly, it is suggested, that to be a postmodernist one must cease to be a realist, or to be a realist one must eschew postmodernism. Against the theoretical pessimism and defeatism on the one hand and the nostalgic desire to reclaim an illusory ideal on the other, I want to pursue the peculiar and paradoxical combination of postmodernism and realism.

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<sup>2</sup> Masturbation perhaps captures best the realist disdain for postmodernism; unproductive, fantastical self-pleasuring.

<sup>3</sup> Hume, 2011b: 706.

<sup>4</sup> The entry by Roberts in Hartwig 2007 on 'postmodernism' suggests that while critical realists have unsurprisingly equated postmodernism with irrealism there are reasons why the gap between critical realism and postmodernism is not so clear-cut. In contrast, the entry on the 'philosophical discourse of modernity' largely drawing on Bhaskar 2012 is more condemnatory of postmodernism.

### **A question of taste?**

At least partly behind the lack, if not impossibility, of engagement between realism and postmodernism is an aesthetic and ethical conflict. It is held that ‘realism’, if it is to be worthy of the name, must be clear, reasonable, empirically grounded and avoid the intoxicated speculation of the continental variety. It must be analytic: rigorous, methodological and scientific, even austere in its approach. The representation of reality is a serious endeavour. The dynamics of this aesthetic is captured by the editors of the boldly named volume *After Postmodernism* who simply suggest, “[p]ostmodernist writing celebrates ambiguity and complexity while realism *struggles* for clarity and simplicity” (Lopez and Potter, 2001: 5). Beneath this aesthetic judgment is an explicit valuation; realism is concerned with the *serious* struggle for clarity and simplicity while postmodernism engages in the *frivolous* celebration of ambiguity and complexity (presumably for its own sake). Here we find an old opposition: restraint and form against ostentatiousness and excess - Apollo v Dionysus. Realism of course, places itself squarely on the side of noble Apollo, demanding reason, order and the cultivation of form against the excesses of chaos. Through the impact of image and concept the Apollonian spirit wrests man from his Dionysian self-destruction (Nietzsche, 1999: 129). As a soteriological deity Apollo promises redemption at the price of restraint and self-control. Postmodernism, of course, appears as the self-styled intoxicated embodiment of Dionysus: engaging in carnivalesque excess, reckless abandon and orgiastic anarchy. Operating against the law of Apollo the primitive drum of Dionysus beats down upon the illusion of order and returns us to the undifferentiated chaos of original being. Here the veil of maya, the comforting illusion cast by Apollo, is torn asunder, leaving only shreds floating before the vision of mystical Oneness in the community of Dionysian being.

Those who know the Nietzschean characterisation of these two Gods of Parnassus will be well aware of the false choice on offer; Apollo and Dionysus constitute two aspects of a divine fraternity. Apollo cannot live without Dionysus and Dionysus cannot live without Apollo. Whenever the Dionysian forces become too disruptive, we are safe to assume Apollo is not far off, calling us to attend to forms and rescuing us from the indeterminate mystical unity of Dionysus. Wherever the frozen forms of Apollo linger, the Dionysian flood swells, ready to surge and sweep away Apollonian fixity. But more than this, both forces require one another; both forces operate best in conjunction, developing alongside one another, often in fierce but familial opposition, forcing the other into more energetic production. The complete communication breakdown between the Apollonian and the Dionysian is for Nietzsche an unnatural state<sup>5</sup>. It is only when the two are held together that the proper tragedy which is thought is able to take flight. Like two moments of a dialectic the Apollonian task of creating form and limit is coupled with the perpetual Dionysian task of overcoming form and limit. Here, reality is both Apollonian and Dionysian, understood not as different *gestalts*, but as a metaphysical unity in which order is held together with chaos. The difficult task of this thesis is to uphold the fragile union of Dionysus and Apollo.

### **A question of metaphysics?**

Like any other metaphysical investigation this thesis concerns itself with the questions ‘what kind of entities exist?’ (ontology) and ‘under what conditions are we able to come to know them?’ (epistemology). As a realist project it is committed to the relative mind-independent existence of reality. The basic argument for this is simple enough; reality, in some form, is not reducible to the language we use to describe it, the experiences we may have of it, or the stories

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<sup>5</sup> This disruption is above all represented by Socrates and Euripides, who set Apollo against Dionysus.

we tell about it. This is not without qualification. Social entities are clearly not mind-independent in the same way as natural entities. Social entities, from families to nations to social roles, are dependent upon our conceptual schemes. Yet, even here, we find that we must assert a relative independence of social entities from our conceptions of them. These relations are not only linguistic or conceptual, they are material and structural with an existence of their own which is not wholly dependent on our conceptual (or conscious) understanding of them. All this is simply to suggest that for a realist metaphysics, reality, both natural and social, has a degree or element of relative independence from our conceptions of it. Things are not simply human constructions all the way down. Our classifications, theories and models may be wrong and may fail to do justice to the internal dynamics of such entities. In short, we do not have a privileged or immediate access to things. Realism on this account is not synonymous with a naïve objectivism which is able to read knowledge directly off the world. Rather, realism is based, perhaps ironically, on the impossibility of a privileged access to truth or foundations, instead moving to undermine any complacent or mechanical assumptions about the nature of knowledge. Despite the daunting complexity of the world and the fallible character of human knowledge, realism nevertheless suggests it is still possible to develop relatively reliable knowledge such that there can indeed be progress in our understanding of the world (Sayer, 2000: 30).

Even so, realism quickly finds itself in murky waters. There are hybrid phenomena which are neither natural or social, cases in which the models we use affect the behaviour of the entities being studied, concepts which create their own referents, entities which rapidly pass in and out of existence, realities which resist inscription into language, illusions which are real and ‘realities’ that are spectral. In relation to such cases, realism often appears naïve and overly optimistic, an ideal and perhaps even a consoling illusion we should discard. However, it does

not follow that the existence of such cases should compromise a realist approach. Instead, such cases should drive us towards a more sophisticated realism which is able to recognise the contested nature of reality and the difficulty, but not necessarily the impossibility, of ‘representation’. Here we require a realism able to acknowledge that reality is a *kampfplatz*<sup>6</sup> a site of competing forces, dynamics, powers, struggles, tragedies, conjectures and convictions supporting different, sometimes competing and sometimes incommensurable, accounts. Reality is not something which is easy to establish; indeed, reality is profoundly equivocal. In this context any sufficiently sophisticated realism must take account of the effects of language, the heteronomy and fluidity of forms, the fracturing of identities and the general contestation of truth, all of which are characteristically evoked within postmodern thought. What is required is a realism which is sufficiently critical and aware of its own possibilities and limitations. We must be realist about realism. This is to say, it is not simple to be a realist.

In holding the Dionysian with the Apollonian, this thesis is concerned with bending the stick. When a stick is bent in the wrong direction it is necessary, in order to put matters right, to grasp it and bend it durably in the opposite direction (Lenin cited in Althusser, 1990: 210). The risk is that in bending the stick one bends too quickly, too little or too much. Intervening too abruptly runs the risk of not finding the mark, intervening too little runs the risk of being pulled back into error and intervening too drastically risks falling into the opposite error or breaking the stick (ibid: 211). In the context of the present engagement with realism and postmodernism I have tried to maintain the fragile balance by placing emphasis upon the Dionysian as a corrective to the realist tendency towards the Apollonian, while nevertheless highlighting the

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<sup>6</sup> For Kant: “The battlefield of these endless controversies is called metaphysics” [A viii] (Kant, 1998a: 99). ‘Kampfplatz’ as such is the state of being for all *other* philosophies, but not for critical philosophy. His own philosophy is outside the ‘Kampfplatz’, somewhere else, with a privileged access to the real. This gesture has been repeated by philosophy *ad nauseam* (Althusser, 1971: 64; c.f Althusser 1990).

Apollonian moments within the postmodern Dionysian. This has meant placing emphasis upon the Dionysian as primary. It is the Dionysian which proves to have ontological priority as the primordial power to which Apollo must always testify rather than eclipse. Within realism this has meant highlighting the equivocal moments in which a consistent realism finds expression as anarchic, anti-methodological and anti-systematic. Within postmodernism, this has meant highlighting the way in which representation and determination takes shape and in which the world is accounted for and presented. Whether this is a reading against the grain or a theoretical short-circuit is perhaps less important than the manner in which it is able to resituate realism by accounting for the conditions of possibility and impossibility in which we are able to represent complex and dynamic phenomena in 'language'. Above all my intention to avoid the tired gesture of deploying the modern against the postmodern or the postmodern against the modern. Instead of patronisingly suggesting that realism should acknowledge that certain elements of postmodernism may in fact be valid, I want to suggest that realism must resituate itself within postmodernism if it wants to be sufficiently realist. This is to say, realism must be concerned with developing an alternative postmodernism and an alternate language of realism.

While recognising a certain need to distinguish between 'language' and 'discourse' (see Fairclough 2003; Fairclough, Jessop, Sayer 2004) this thesis uses the terms interchangeably. While language can be said to precede discourse, and while discourse both presupposes and moves beyond language and linguistic systems into non-linguistic dimensions and applications, this thesis will understand both language and discourse as the means by which we represent (and more than simply represent) the social and material world. The reason for treating the terms synonymously is primarily pragmatic and rests in the need to refer between the different traditions and usages of the terms including the Wittgensteinian and Lyotardian account of 'language games', the Foucauldian account of 'discourse' and the Derridean account of

‘language’. It should be noted in turn that each of these accounts is predicated on the irreducible interrelationship between our use of the systems and structures of language, texts, conceptuality, belief, communication and meaning on the one hand, and the forms of practical, material and social life on the other. In each account, language (and/or discourse) moves beyond the purely linguistic to simultaneously encompass referential, propositional, ideational, conceptual, practical, performative, socio-relational and expressive elements (c.f. Fairclough, Jessop, and Sayer 2004). This is to say, language (and/or discourse) should be understood as not necessarily or primarily linguistic but is instead always used in a broader, even metaphorical, sense; i.e. ‘language’ and/or discourse always already contains important non-linguistic elements, even if those elements must be articulated and interpreted through the use and structures of language (and/or discourse). Accordingly, both the relation between language and its other, and discourse and its other, remain, by and large, structurally synonymous, departing only in regard to their relative specificity or generality in which discourse operates as a more particular sequence or instantiation of social semiosis to be distinguished from language which functions as a more general structural practice of communicative and performative activity in which discourse operates. In this context, the concept of ‘language games’ functions as an important intermediary operating between the two terms and uniting the practices of discourse with the practices of language. Thus, to take an example, the term ‘science’ operates within particular discourses about the meaning, performativity and social understanding of a certain series and sequence of social practices which are at once constructed by discourses, and yet are relatively independent from those discourses insofar as they are material and practical activities which are not easily reduced to any one particular discursive form. Thus, we can speak about multiple, different and competing discourses of science encompassing modern, postmodern, realist or irrealist perspectives which differ about the precise social meaning and truth status of science, while still broadly referring to the same



social practices even while conceptualising and enacting them differently and even while drawing upon the same language. This is to suggest that ‘science’ operates as a language game which consists of the interweaving of language and actions, bringing together various and diverse activities and forms of life (including discourses) which provide ‘science’ with the characteristic of family resemblances across different linguistic contexts and across different discursive instantiations. As such, discourse and language operate as perspectival ways of seeing, knowing and articulating particular instantiations of a social semiotic practice which draws upon the structural relations of language, society and semiosis in order to describe, understand and explain a particular phenomenon and/or practice. Thus, to find an alternate language of realism is to attempt to find a new way of describing, interpreting, understanding and explaining our relation to the world and our relation to our own knowledge of the world. Moreover, to find an alternate language of realism means to articulate new terms, new concepts, new problematics and new discourses through which we are able to more effectively grasp, inform and develop our practical activities engaged in a pursuit of the real.

### **For a new realism**

In arguing for an alternative postmodernism the philosophy of Roy Bhaskar becomes an important point of contact between realism and postmodernism. While often presented as a means of escaping postmodernism Bhaskar’s philosophy shares a number of more than superficial similarities with the problematics of postmodernism. In fact it requires little imagination to view Bhaskar’s transcendental realism as a vast deconstructive endeavour operating upon the edifice of Western philosophy<sup>7</sup>. Much like Derrida, Bhaskar is concerned with the way in which the Western philosophical tradition has been continually structured in

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<sup>7</sup> Keeping in mind Bhaskar’s cherished metaphor of ‘underlabouring’ (Bhaskar, 1998: 167) and the relation of the word de-construction to the word ‘analysis’ which etymologically means ‘to undo’ (Johnson, 2004: xv).

terms of dichotomies or polarities which present us with false choices: real/ideal<sup>8</sup>, epistemology/ontology<sup>9</sup>, subject/object<sup>10</sup>, presence/absence<sup>11</sup>, difference/identity<sup>12</sup>, growth/change<sup>13</sup>, naturalism/anti-naturalism<sup>14</sup>, structure/agency<sup>15</sup>, fact/value<sup>16</sup>, reason/cause<sup>17</sup> and individual/collective<sup>18</sup> to name a few. These oppositions, of course, are not generally relations of an independent and equal nature. Usually one is elevated and a hierarchy established between the two, or the dichotomy is preserved as an insurmountable *aporia* in which we are forced to align with one side against the other. While some of these dualisms are resolved in a relatively consistent manner across the field, such as absence being viewed as the lack of presence<sup>19</sup>, others are fractured along the lines of a *gestalt* or parallax<sup>20</sup> in which one decides, or rather is forced to declare an allegiance to, how the dualism is to be resolved. In general, what these oppositions do is privilege forms of identity, unity, immediacy and presence over distance, difference, change and depth. In contrast to the ‘either/or’ nature of these binaries, Bhaskar consistently follows a logic which is simultaneously ‘both/and’ and ‘neither/nor’ preserving both the relation and the non-identity of the two terms.

At the core of Bhaskar’s critique of the Western philosophical tradition is a rejection of the elevation of epistemology over ontology (what Bhaskar calls the epistemic fallacy). The epistemic fallacy operates to reduce or translate all ontological statements into epistemological

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<sup>8</sup> i.e. empirical realism, transcendental idealism (Bhaskar 2008).

<sup>9</sup> Bhaskar 2008: 16f

<sup>10</sup> Bhaskar 1994: 187f

<sup>11</sup> Bhaskar 1995

<sup>12</sup> i.e. non-identity, Bhaskar 1995

<sup>13</sup> Bhaskar 2009: 1

<sup>14</sup> Bhaskar 1998

<sup>15</sup> Bhaskar 1998: 29f

<sup>16</sup> Bhaskar 2009: 169f

<sup>17</sup> Bhaskar 1998: 92f

<sup>18</sup> Bhaskar 1998: 29f

<sup>19</sup> Ontological monovalence c.f. Bhaskar 1995.

<sup>20</sup> see Žižek (2006) c.f. Bhaskar (1995:115f)

statements such that any statement about being is always translatable or reducible into statements about our knowledge of being (Bhaskar, 2008: 16). In so doing, the possibility of realism is undercut in favour of the inextricable correlation of subject and object entailing the self-presence of all meaning and the basis of an irredeemably anthropological account of the world. In such a position we have lost the great outdoors - an outside which is not relative or dependent upon us; there is no longer a place which thought can explore with the legitimate feeling of being on foreign territory (Meillassoux, 2008: 7). However, regaining this great outdoors is no easy task. In navigating this problematic, critical realism has relied upon three core commitments:

- i. Ontological Realism
- ii. Epistemic Relativism
- iii. Judgmental Rationality.

Ontological realism is the assertion that objects of discourse exist relatively independently of our discourse about them (see Bhaskar 2008: 21). This is the spontaneous view we have of the world in which we think something is real when it exists, even if there is no-one there to verify that it exists i.e. it exists unwitnessed<sup>21</sup>. However, ontological realism cannot and does not exclude an epistemic relativism which holds that all beliefs are socially, historically and linguistically constructed, so that all knowledge must be considered transient, and in which no truth-values or criteria of rationality can be said to exist outside of historical time (Bhaskar, 1998: 83). This entails that “there is no way of knowing the world except under particular more or less historically transient descriptions” (Bhaskar, 2009: 99). This is to say no ‘reality’ is self-interpreting and perhaps even that referent does not exist without reference<sup>22</sup>. Finally, the third

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<sup>21</sup> c.f. Lyotard (1988: 32)

<sup>22</sup> Which would perhaps be to take a stronger explicit position than Bhaskar does. Bhaskar is generally concerned to keep signified, signifier and referent separate, allowing for the possibility of referential detachment (Bhaskar 1995: 223).

term of the trio, judgemental rationality, occupies the place between ontological realism and epistemic relativism, suggesting that epistemic relativism does not, and cannot, mean that ‘anything goes’ i.e. there is a basis for holding one belief to another, based in systems of rules implicitly or explicitly grounded in practical activity (Bhaskar, 1998: 58). In theory, in so far as these three terms hold together there is an “absence of strain” or perhaps better a delicate balance which exists “between ... realism and relativism, relativity and rationality” (Bhaskar, 2009: 98). The attempt of this thesis to draw together realism and postmodernism is broadly in line with these commitments. In particular the desire is to develop and deepen the conceptions of ontological realism, epistemic relativism and judgmental rationality. It will argue that currents within postmodernism provide important reflections on these terms and allows us to come to a more complex, differentiated, fragmented and heterogeneous conception of what it means to be a realist. In particular it will place emphasis upon the nature of epistemic relativism and the necessity of perspectival realism. While things are not human constructs all the way down and there is an objective ordered reality, it is only knowable through particular and determinate formulations. Accordingly, three qualifications are required to clarify the perhaps idiosyncratic use of the term ‘realism’ throughout this thesis. In arguing for realism, I am arguing for both a metaphysical realism or entity realism based in the relative independence and endurance of objects from our experience, knowledge or discourse, and a scientific realism which asserts the contingent or speculative reality of the objects of scientific practice and understanding i.e. the sciences do in fact come to some form of knowledge about the world, but do so without guarantee, certainty or necessity and in a manner which is always necessarily enmeshed within language and discourse while also being irreducible to language and discourse. This realism is, as such, cautious and critical about claims to ‘reality’. Secondly, following classical definitions of realism, the realism on view argues for a form of reference which tends towards a correspondence theory of truth (c.f. Putnam 1978, 1981) but with equally

strong tendencies towards coherence theories of truth (notably following Wittgenstein (1953) and Kuhn (1962)). As such, it attempts to move out from under the forced dichotomy of correspondence versus coherence theories of truth by recognising the necessity of holding onto both moments, or equally, by rejecting both moments as unhelpful abstractions. Finally, while largely focused on the transcendental realism of Roy Bhaskar, I consider Bhaskar's position to be, by and large, situated within and responding to the broader analytic traditions of realism and empiricism, notably those of Whitehead (1920, 1929), Sellars (1963, 1968), Harré and Madden (1975), and Hilary Putnam (1978, 1981), with interesting connections and resonances to the work of John Searle (1995), Richard Boyd (1984, 1989), Nancy Cartwright (1983, 1999), and Stathis Psillos (1999). In particular, following Bhaskar (2009), Boyd (1989) and Cartwright (1999) realism is understood as implying the strong rejection of foundationalism, the rejection of a 'Humean' conception of causation and explanation and the deployment of transcendental or abductive argumentation to establish the conditions of the world we encounter in experience, practice and instrumental application. On this account realism does not imply theoretical bivalence or the existence of one true theory, one preferred vocabulary or distinctly privileged science, nor does it imply the absence of conventional, semantic or even arbitrary aspects to scientific theorising, nor does it suggest that scientists routinely and necessarily get the right answers or do good experimental metaphysics (Boyd, 1989).

### **What follows**

This thesis is structured as a series of engagements between the concerns of transcendental realism and certain currents within the 'postmodern tradition', namely, what has been called poststructuralism. The argument builds from a focus on language (chapters 1-4) to ontology (chapters 4-6). Within this general structure the thesis is concerned with outlining a realism which moves beyond the 'metaphysics of closure' (Lyotard), the 'metaphysics of presence'

(Derrida), the ‘metaphysics of identity’ (Deleuze) and the ‘metaphysics of irrealism’ (Bhaskar). Chapter 6 provides as the unifying and culminating theoretic, reconstructing transcendental realism as an anarchic enterprise based in an anti-essentialist, anti-systematic and anti-methodological realism.

In chapter 1, the context is set by means of an exploration of the problematics of modernism and postmodernism. It will present modernism and postmodernism through a reflection on the spatiality and temporality of the present. Notably, under the conditions of postmodernity the present becomes characterised by an increasing intensity, fragmentation and mobility. Drawing upon Frederic Jameson, Zygmunt Bauman, Jean-François Lyotard and Michel Foucault the chapter will argue for the need to take up the postmodern problematic of representing and accounting for fluidity, heteronomy and difference, rather than casting moralising judgements or attempting to occupying an external space<sup>23</sup>. This requires coming to terms with the temporality and historicity of thought, the nature of language and the intensity of its object. The work of Lyotard is particularly important here and much of the chapter is an engagement with his much maligned treatise on the postmodern condition (Lyotard, 1984). It intends to show that far from being nonsensical or incoherent, the postmodern stance towards metanarratives helpfully serves to turn our attention towards local rationalities by reject closing and totalising gestures. However, it argues that this turn should not simply retreat into historicism or linguistic analysis but must concern itself with doing ontology.

Chapter 2 introduces the key theoretical perspectives of Jacques Derrida and deconstruction. This proceeds from the postmodern condition to an analysis of the nature of language, focusing

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<sup>23</sup> This allows us to avoid such nonsense as post-post-modernism.

on the decentring effect of *différance* and the real as the other. Drawing on the work of Christopher Norris this chapter situates Derrida in the context of a transcendental realism concerned with providing the conditions of possibility (and impossibility) for language and meaning. Language as constituted by *différance* is presented as an equivocal instrument while deconstruction a necessary endeavour to prevent the collapse of *différance*.

Chapter 3 turns towards the positive (de)constructive use of metaphor. Despite the historical situatedness of meaning and the equivocality of language and conceptuality, the analysis of metaphor provided by Derrida inevitably and inextricably raises the problem of representation and ontology. Here, the focus is placed on the possibility and impossibility of representation in language through the concept of mimesis. Within this context deconstruction plays a positive and productive role moving us from epistemic relativism towards an ontological realism based in the possibility and deconstruction of 'white mythology'. Here it is argued that epistemic relativism and language need not lead us to a Rortian-like blancmange in which philosophy is presented as just another form of writing in the grand cultural dialogue. Instead, it is argued that philosophy must be resituated alongside writing without collapse of one into the other.

Chapter 4 opens up the ontological and metaphysical elements of deconstruction. While metaphor situates the necessity of ontology, the concept of *différance* opens up a properly ontological account of the real predicated on the rejection of the metaphysics of presence. This is to say, *différance* is not simply a linguistic structural phenomenon but bridges the nature of linguistic structure with the nature of ontological structure. This allows Derrida to resituate ontology as spectral (ontology as hauntology) and the deconstructive project as offering a peculiarly decentred realism in which reality is characterised by dislocation.

Chapter 5 moves from Derrida to Deleuze and from language to metaphysics. Deleuze represents an important moment within postmodernism as an explicit turn towards metaphysics. Where Derrida is concerned with the decentring of presence in *différance*, Deleuze is concerned with the intensity of presence as difference. Moving against the clear and distinct structures of Platonic representation, Deleuze provides a properly Dionysian embrace of becoming and difference based in an overturning of Platonism coupled with an Apollonian emphasis upon the construction of form and individuation. The restitution of difference allows for a realist but historical restitution of representation, conceptuality, structure and explanation by focusing on processes and dynamic mechanisms of differentiation.

Chapter 6 introduces the transcendental realism of Roy Bhaskar as an explicit attempt to account for the possibility of realism amidst the flux of phenomena in which knowledge ignobly develops in contingency, within language and often remains in a highly contested mode. The focus here is on Bhaskar's gritty conception of realism characterised by the difficult task of breaking with the epistemic fallacy made possible by wresting transcendental argumentation from its Kantian idealist foundations. Transcendental argumentation then serves as a basis for the examination of real experience in general, and scientific experimentation in particular, grounded in a complex stratification and differentiation of ontology.

Finally, chapter 7 will draw these threads together by returning to the themes of ontological realism, epistemic relativism and judgmental rationality to argue for a properly postmodern realism based in the idea and practice of doing justice.



While other readings of the relationship between (critical) realism and postmodernism are possible (and beneficial) it is hoped this thesis is able to resituate the nature of the engagement by turning towards the nature of ontology and structure. Rather than taking the form of a dialogue and pursuing consensus<sup>24</sup> or a fusion of horizons<sup>25</sup> it is an attempt to find a new language with which to bring something new into being: a postmodern realism. Insofar as it is concerned with pursuing the real under the conditions of postmodernism it is concerned with the possibility of representing an open, fragmented, differentiated, dynamic and contested reality without nostalgia, without terror and without guarantee.

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<sup>24</sup> Habermas 1984

<sup>25</sup> Gadamer 1975

# **Chapter 1: The Metaphysics of Temporality: The Modern and the Postmodern**

Context ... the weariness with regard to “theory”, and the miserable slackening that goes along with it (new this, new that, post-this, post-that, etc.). The time has come to philosophize. (Lyotard, 1988: xiii)

The first chapter of this project aims to historically and intellectually contextualise the realist project within the problematics of the modern and the postmodern. It will do this by (i) providing a definition of postmodernism developed through reflection upon its temporal and spatial aspects in relation to the logic of ‘the present’ and (ii) arguing for a realism situated within the problematic of postmodernism and the crisis of representation. In particular, drawing on the work of Fredric Jameson and Jean-François Lyotard, it will begin to outline the necessity for an anti-systematic account of realism which rejects metanarratives and affirms local rationalities without falling into relativism and without returning to universalising and typically modern forms of thought.

## **1.1 The temporality of the modern life**

In beginning to address the questions of the postmodern, one must inevitably ask what is the modern<sup>26</sup> and what, if anything, is the significance of the prefix post-? None of the questions

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<sup>26</sup> While there is always an inherent vacuity in attempting to define broad cultural movements or logics, insofar as cultural life is mediated conceptually this is a necessary endeavour.

are particularly easy to answer and have been the subject of much debate (see Jameson, 1984b: 55ff). Whether these terms are of any use, or are, on the contrary, mystifications which attempt to provide cohesion where there is none, is part of the very problematic of the modern and the postmodern. Certainly any attempt to articulate the characteristics of an epoch or encapsulate the spirit of an age (*zeitgeist*) is bound to glide over numerous ambivalences and equivocalities for the sake of providing an economical and cohesive account. With this in mind the conjectural working hypothesis of this chapter is that the modern and the postmodern represent particular problematics or problem-solution sets arising from and reflecting transformations taking place in the social world. Modern and postmodern will be used to denote an ensemble of certain social and cultural tendencies, attitudes, experiences, continuities, thematics and concerns, even if there are contradictions, different possible expressions in different spatio-temporal contexts and even if there is no proper referent<sup>27</sup>. Here the modern (modernity, modernism, modernisation) is broadly taken to represent the process of breaking with traditional social relations for processes of technological development and industrialisation and its (contingent but hegemonic) cultural and social reflections, while the postmodern (postmodernism, postmodernity<sup>28</sup>) represents the process of breaking with the modern in turn characterised largely by the developments of post-industrial capitalism<sup>29</sup>. As such, both signal moments of radical break with a dominant culture and aesthetic alongside a process of socioeconomic reorganisation and transformation, including technical and cultural innovation. As problematics, rather than being simple or true referents or objects, the discourses of modern and postmodern represent sites upon which particular, sometimes competing and

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<sup>27</sup> The definitions provided are accordingly Eurocentric insofar as the European context remains the historical basis in which these reflections have taken place and in which the reflections have continued.

<sup>28</sup> Can we add post-modernisation?

<sup>29</sup> Which began in post-war Europe, found a certain ascendancy in the 1980's and continues to hegemonically define life today. Although, while developed in 'Europe' these relations as cultural reflections upon particular socio-economic processes, they have since been exported such that it is possible to have discussions about postmodernism in developing countries.

incommensurable, narratives attempt to understand and come to terms with the conditions of the present including its tendencies and contradictions. Because of the contested nature of this site and the lack of proper referent<sup>30</sup>, the contours of the problem are liable to be defined by their solutions which have the effect of retroactively reconstructing the problem in particular terms (c.f. Althusser 1997: 14f). Here the reality of the problematic is not what is 'given' to this or that subject, but the state of the referent and reference which results from the effectuation of procedures defined by agreed-upon protocols, and the possibility of recommencing this effectuation as often as is necessary (Lyotard, 1988: 4). Accordingly, the modern and the postmodern will simply be treated as proper names which identify the general sites in which the problems of the spatiality and temporality of the present, and our relation to the present are resolved.

## **1.2 The experience of the modern - in pursuit of the eternal**

The figure of Baudelaire has come to be the poetic figurehead for describing the particular experiential quality of the modern life<sup>31</sup> (Benjamin 2006, Foucault 1997, Habermas 1987). In *The Painter of the Modern Life* Baudelaire characterises the modern man as one who “makes it his business to extract from fashion whatever element it may contain of poetry within history, to distil the eternal from the transitory” (Baudelaire, 1995: 12). For Baudelaire, whatever the modern may be, its defining experience is of an encounter which takes place in the present between the eternal (being) and the transitory (becoming). This experience is at once characterised by “the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent” and its other half, the “eternal and the immutable” (ibid: 13). Between these two poles, the modern state of mind is

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<sup>30</sup> i.e. the lack of presence.

<sup>31</sup> This should almost certainly be questioned, but for the purposes of exploring the philosophical questions of the philosophical discourse of postmodernism it is sufficient here to simply raise the question.

characterised by a peculiar attempt to escape from the confinements and limitations of the modern through a spirit of opposition and revolt which delights in illumination before the intoxicating multiplicitous splendour of life. The artist attempts to grasp hold of the harmonious and eternal beauty of the moment maintained amidst the interplay of human freedom and contingency. Baudelaire's description of the modern man captures a peculiar experiential reflection upon the modern as a continual attempt to both embrace and escape our finitude and our contingency; to dwell in history but to escape into perpetuity. Against forms of life which have grown old, the modern is a revitalising moment, a break with the grey on grey under which life loses its aesthetic value, for a perpetual attempt to embrace the new as it appears. In contemplating the nature of the modern Baudelaire presents us with a new definition and experience of the real or the true as the ephemeral (Habermas, 1987: 10).

Whether or not this is universally representative, this attitude is distinctly modern. Whether in the modernism of Baudelaire or the modernism of the Enlightenment, life was no longer to be governed by repetitive cycles or monotonous continuations of stale forms. In pursuit of the new, traditions, cultural practices, old aesthetics and superstitions, must be swept away by the embrace of change. This process of nihilistic *aggiornamento* creates the peculiar vertiginous quality of the modern as an ensemble of interconnected movements and attitudes standing aloft from everything which has come before (Callinicos, 1989: 29f). For the exuberant and ambitious spirit of the modern the society it inherits is always too resistant to change, and much too frozen in its habitual ways (Bauman, 2000: 3). The ground must be cleared and reality must be emancipated from the dead hand of its own history (ibid: 3). To this end, the past must be liquefied so that it can be reconstructed into 'new' and 'improved' forms. For the denizens of the Enlightenment this new world must be built upon a lasting solidity based upon the recognition of universal patterns, codes and rules; a world predictable and manageable for free

and rational individuals (ibid: 3ff). The new order of this new world would be more solid than the orders it replaced, subject only to the universality of reason and not the caprices of imagination and ignorance. Against this solidity, for Baudelaire, the modern entailed a much more romantic embrace of the ephemeral, the imaginary and the aesthetic of the new against any austere or utilitarian visions of progress. Indeed, perpetually growing alongside the modern consciousness is a romantic reaction defined by a nostalgia for lost or eclipsed unities expressed in terms of an aesthetic affirmation of the natural, the organic, the unconditioned and the sublime (Kant, 1952; Rousseau, 1984, 1991; Schiller, 2004). These forms were considered to be unconstrained by the systems of universal reason, and allowed for a mythic or poetic identification with the non-I or the immediate as the realm of freedom proper. In such expressions, the experience of the modern is less characterised by optimistic hope than by a new tyranny which fetters humanity and is injurious to life insofar as it breaks the natural and organic unity of the world through the introduction of its cold and calculating logics. With industrialisation, the colourful landscapes of the world change and become dominated by an unnatural skylines; a grey world of empty streets, dim lamps, bellowing chimneys, isolated wanderers and tired workers. Far from univocally instilling hope in the appearance of the new, the modern becomes a contested site defined by excitement, anxiety, frustration and *ennui* in equal measure. On one side, the experience of the modern is defined by the optimistic unyielding belief that there is no form of being which reason could not penetrate and no element which could not be eventually brought under its control. On the other, discontent with civilisation returns to subjectivity and myth; anxiety coupled with a nostalgia for lost innocence amidst this new and foreign landscape (Adorno, 1972). The complex air of the modern is well captured by Marshall Berman:

There is a mode of vital experience – experience of space and time, of the self and others, of life’s possibilities and perils – that is shared by men and women, all over the

world today. I will call this experience ‘modernity’. To be modern is to find ourselves in an environment that promises us adventure, power, joy, growth, transformation of ourselves and the world – and, at the same time, that threatens to destroy everything we have, everything we know, everything we are. Modern environments and experiences cut across all boundaries of geography and ethnicity, of class and nationality, or religion and ideology: in this sense, modernity can be said to unite all mankind. But it is a paradoxical unity, a unity of disunity: it pours us into a maelstrom of perpetual disintegration and renewal, of struggle and contradiction, of ambiguity and anguish. To be modern is to be part of a universe in which, as Marx said, ‘all that is sold melts into air’. (Berman, 1983: 15)

The modern, as a rupture with the past and a complex ensemble of relations of the new represents the experience of hope, terror and loss before a grand odyssey which promises to recast the world.

### **1.3 The sociology of the modern – towards rationalisation**

Sociologically, the modern, modernity, modernism or modernisation is connected with the theory of disenchantment and rationalisation (Adorno, 1972; Weber, 1992). For Weber modernity represents a particular occidental process of disenchantment heralding a disintegration of religious worldviews, and ushering in a new secular culture based on rationality. In breaking with the metaphysics of religion, the new rationality was able to give rise to modern empirical sciences, politics economics, art and culture each of which were considered autonomous and each of which took shape and progressed in accord with their own inner logics and rationalities (Habermas, 1987: 1). Modernity was concerned with an increasing state and institutionalisation of instrumental rational activity (*zweckrational*) based on an

increasing comprehension of local rationalities. Notably however, while instrumental rationality is able to guide action, it is unable to offer objective criteria for selecting the goals of action, only the means of pursuing them according to the dictates of reason. Reason pursues knowledge, such as causality, solely in order to achieve objectives, leaving free the question of values. Alone, as instrumental and practical, reason is in a perpetual state of inertia, unable to provide goals or impulses of its own<sup>32</sup>. In the context of an increasingly rationalised society, the individual finds themselves within the infamous “iron cage” (Weber, 1992: 123); like a cog, trapped within a vast mechanical system based on bureaucratic efficiency, rational calculation and control, plunging the individual into “a polar night of icy darkness and hardness”<sup>33</sup> (Weber, 1994: 368). Modernity properly refers to an ensemble of social relations and processes which are cumulative, mutually reinforcing and concerned with the mobilisation of technology and resources towards the development of efficiency, production and productivity<sup>34</sup> (Bauman, 2000: 2). For Michel Foucault this tendency towards increasing rational management is represented in the culmination and arch-metaphor of modern power itself: Jeremy Bentham’s Panopticon (Foucault, 1977; Bauman, 2000). In the Panopticon, prisoners are disciplined by the threat of omniscient surveillance (knowledge) in which mastery of the prisoner’s body and mind is achieved through the efficient management of time and space made possible by the mobility and vision of its guardians. Modernity crystallises into a vast machine concerned with the efficient maximisation of input and output.

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<sup>32</sup> As Hume suggests, reason can never be motive to the will, produce any action or give rise to any volition: “reason is, and ought only to be, the slave of the passions” (Hume, 2011a: II.3.3).

<sup>33</sup> A theme developed by Herbert Marcuse uniting Marx, Weber and romanticism into a critique of one dimensionality and repression entailed by modern capitalist society (Marcuse, 1964; 1972).

<sup>34</sup> C.f. Heidegger 1997.



#### 1.4 The philosophy of the modern – in search of new foundations

Philosophically, modernity has a much longer history. The emergence of a philosophical discourse of modernity is traceable back to Descartes if not earlier, and the properly modern attempt to find a new foundation for philosophy (Descartes 1996, 1999; c.f. Habermas 1987). This pursuit conceived the absolute and indubitable possibility of knowledge as grounded in the cognitive subject. In Descartes this is represented by the famous declaration ‘*cogito ergo sum*’, I think therefore I am. Whatever I may question, I cannot doubt that when I doubt, it is I who thinks. From this Archimedean point, one could proceed to rationally rebuild the universal foundations of thought. If modernism begins here, it is characterised by an attitude which desires certainty against the challenges of radical scepticism. Knowledge requires a sure foundation on which to build; indeed, in Descartes we are concerned primarily with the structures of a self-relating self-knowing subject (Habermas, 1987: 18). However, while we might begin with Descartes it is the philosophical legacy of Kant which provides the framework for all subsequent debates concerning the status of knowledge and the place of the human subject in the modern era. Building on Descartes, for Kant the modern can be characterised, not only by reference to questions of certainty amidst uncertainty, but as an attempt to define the conditions, powers and limitations of the finite human subject in the world - “What can I know? What should I do? What may I hope?” [A805/B833] (Kant, 1998a: 677). This project takes place under one name: Enlightenment [*Aufklärung*]. Enlightenment and modernity are so inextricably linked that modernity could be understood as the time in which Enlightenment is realised, or rather, the time in which we are becoming enlightened. Famously, Kant defined enlightenment as the emergence (*ausgang*) from “self-incurred immaturity” governed by the motto “have courage to use your *own* understanding!” (Kant, 1991: 54). Here, the present is put forward as the moment of transition. But the possibility of this transition is defined almost entirely negatively. Enlightenment is an *exit* rather than an entrance. Specifically,

Enlightenment is an exit from our subjection to authority. Insofar as we are immature we are subject to sacred authors who take the place of our understanding, pastors who take the place of our conscience, and doctors who take the place of our judgment (ibid: 54). As the exit from immaturity, but not yet the entrance into maturity, Enlightenment is the moment in which humanity begins to put reason to use for its own benefit, without subjecting itself to the necessity of any authority but that of reason.<sup>35</sup>

In Kant, the concept of enlightenment is above all a relation to the present. It is a reflection on ‘today’ as the appearance of the new in history. Here modernism appears a radical consciousness of the discontinuity of a time that breaks with the past, and experiences the passing moment of the present with vertiginous detachment. When Kant expresses enlightenment as an *ausgang*, or equally when the artist of Baudelaire experiences the modern as the ephemeral, the fleeting, and the contingent, the present is recognised as an eternal conjunction of a future that need not resemble the past. However, the modern does not simply lie in recognizing and accepting this moment alone. Rather, it adopts an attitude toward the present as the site of movement (fluidity), and attempts to capture the eternity of being from within the fleeting possibilities of becoming itself. This new world is to be distinguished from the old by the fact that it opens itself to the future rather than expresses continuity with the past (Habermas, 1987: 6). This new beginning is rendered constant and reborn within each moment that gives birth to the new (Habermas, 1987: 6). In Kant this is achieved in reason and represented by Enlightenment. For Baudelaire this moment is aesthetic and represented by, among others, the dandy who pursues the eternal through fashion. Yet in both this eternity is

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<sup>35</sup> Although, as Foucault rightly suggests, the subjection to authority is ambiguous insofar as Kant proposes a “contract of rational despotism with free reason: the public and free use of autonomous reason will be the best guarantee of obedience, on condition, however, that the political principle that must be obeyed itself be in conformity with universal reason” (Foucault, 1997: 308).

presented as neither beyond the present instant as a transcendent reality<sup>36</sup>, nor behind it as a ground of being, but somehow contained within it as an immanent possibility. Indeed, as Foucault in his analysis of Kant suggests, rather than seeking to distinguish the ‘modern era’ as a historical period or epoch after the ‘pre-modern’ and before the ‘post-modern’, modernity is properly understood as an *attitude* to the present (Foucault, 1997: 309). This is a decision, the embrace of a certain way of thinking, feeling, acting and behaving which marks a relation of critical distance to the present as an artefact of past immaturity, and the present as the eternal possibility of the new. This comes with a task, or better an *ethos*, which ‘dares to be wise’ by heroically grasping the present moment as sublime; pregnant with a multiplicity of possibility. Accordingly, “modernity is not a phenomenon of sensitivity to the fleeting present; it is the will to ‘heroize’ the present” (ibid: 310).

This temporal attitude of modernism, and the promise of the present in Kant and Baudelaire, is expressed by Walter Benjamin in the *Theses on History* (1968) as the messianic promise of now-time<sup>37</sup>. Here the past is presented as the ephemeral and mechanical succession of images which flash up in an instant and threaten to disappear irretrievably unless they receive recognition (ibid: 255). However, the succession of history is not simply an irresistible and blind movement towards an “unknown future paradise” driven by the “winds of progress” (ibid: 257). Neither is it the mechanistic play of a puppet and a dwarf (ibid: 253). Rather, history is a site shot through with “time filled by the presence of the now [*Jetztzeit*]” (ibid: 261) with each moment lived becoming a veritable judgment day (ibid: 254). This concept of now-time breaks with the sequentialist determinism of historicism, which can only portray the events of history

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<sup>36</sup> Characteristically, the ‘new world’ no longer means the Christian paradise to come but a new and secular happening (Habermas, 1987: 7).

<sup>37</sup> Notably, Benjamin also challenges the traditional image of Baudelaire as Romantic dreamer, and instead evokes the modern poet as one who caught in a life-or-death struggle in an inhospitable present with the urban forces of commodity fetishism under capitalism (Benjamin, 1968; 2006).

like so many beads of a rosary (ibid: 263), for a moment of contingency and openness. This open time is not empty but full with meaning and promise, carrying a fragile faint hope in the fact that the future is still unfolding. In Benjamin, and in modernism, the closure of the past and the threat of a repetition of the same is counterpoised to the openness of the present as the conjuncture of the future (which never properly arrives). As such, the modern is characterised by a permanent reflection and restlessness of our present situation rooted in the constitution of the self as a finite subject in a historical juncture, confronted by openness who must forcefully seize upon the passing moment lest it irretrievably disappear<sup>38</sup>. The modern is inseparable from the recognition of our historicity and an attitude towards our historicity<sup>39</sup>. In this finite space we are promised the possibility of transcendence and emancipation from the contingencies of history if we are able to seize upon the eternal and immutable, not in the past, but in the passing moment on the way to the future. The modern conviction is that we ourselves can be something new, that a new age is beginning, that nothing need be the same again and that anything is possible; above all, whatever it may be, we desperately desire it all to be new (Jameson, 1984b: 310). We must make ourselves and the world modern. As Rimbaud cries “*Il faut être absolument modern*”, we must be absolutely modern (ibid: 310).

### **1.5 The postmodern condition – modernity unbound**

What comes after the new? What does it mean to be modern today under the so-called conditions of postmodernity? If modernity is in fact characterised by the appearance of the new, how do we begin to define or understand what comes after it? Fredric Jameson notably attempts to define postmodernism by reference to an historical period. While this inherently presents a risk of spatialising a historical period as a “homogeneity (bounded on either side by

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<sup>38</sup> Or, to use the Sartrean term, nothingness (Sartre 2003).

<sup>39</sup> i.e. our thrownness (Heidegger 1962).

inexplicable chronological metamorphoses and punctuation marks)” (Jameson, *ibid*: 2-3) this historical periodising allows Jameson to position postmodernism as a ‘cultural dominant’ allowing for a range and coexistence of different features and contradictions in the present. As such, postmodernism is presented as the cultural logic of late Capitalism, the self-reflections and practices of a comprehensively commodified organ of production and consumption (Jameson, 1984b; Mandel 1978). As a cultural phenomenon postmodernism is the air we began to breathe sometime during the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> century when finance capitalism gave way to multinational capitalism<sup>40</sup>. These years are marked by an “inverted millenarianism” in which premonitions of the future are replaced by a sense of ending notably encompassing the end of ideology, the end of art, the death of philosophy, the death of the subject etc. (Jameson, 1984a: 53). The modern, exhausted, flowers and the new culture that arises is one in which time and space is viewed in increasingly fluidic, instantaneous, immediate, chaotic and heteronomous terms<sup>41</sup>. Indeed, Jameson suggests postmodernism can be characterised as a crisis in historicity (Jameson, 1984b: 25). A breakdown of the structures of modern temporality suddenly releases the present from all focusing and constructive activity or intentionality. As a heteronomous and different, even schizophrenic, reality the present engulfs the subject with an indescribable vividness, a perception which is properly overwhelming, and functions to isolate the subject in a web of intertextuality, hyperactivity and immediacy. Encountering such a heightened intensity could be described in the negative terms of anxiety and the loss of reality, but is equally describable in the positive terms of euphoria, or the high of intoxicating or hallucinogenic intensity (Jameson, 1984a: 73). The effect is at once of an immediacy, flattening, fragmentation and intensification of reality<sup>42</sup>. Time is no longer spatialised

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<sup>40</sup> The periodising nature of this definition is not lost on Jameson: “I have rather meant to offer a periodising hypothesis, and that at a moment in which the very conception of historical periodisation has come to seem most problematical indeed” (Jameson, 1984b: 3).

<sup>41</sup> Coupled with this is what Margaret Archer (2012) has called an increasing meta-reflexivity based in the necessity of agentive criticality in light of the highly fluidic, chaotic and relational context of (post)modern life.

<sup>42</sup> What David Harvey has called “time-space compression” (Harvey 1990).

diachronically as progression towards either a historical hope or apocalypse, but instead inhabits a synchronic space<sup>43</sup> characterised by superficiality and multiple surfaces (ibid: 64). In this space, the subject loses the capacity to organise the temporal manifold, and relate past and future into a coherent experience or narrative. Time becomes “heaps of fragments” and is experienced as randomly heterogeneous, piecemeal, fragmentary and aleatory (ibid: 71). Proceeding from this flattening, fragmentation and intensification is a repudiation of depth in contemporary theory. This repudiation notably encompasses essence and appearance (along with a concept of ideology as false consciousness<sup>44</sup>); latent and manifest (particularly in terms of repression<sup>45</sup>); authenticity and inauthenticity (or alienation and disalienation)<sup>46</sup>; and finally, signifier and signified<sup>47</sup>. These relations are unravelled, deconstructed, and replaced with a conception of practices, performativities, discourses and textualities, whose structure is one of decentred intensity. Depth is replaced by perspectives and surfaces, or, rather, by multiple surfaces, and the hermeneutics of meaning or the abstract logic of modernity is replaced by intertextual play. Jameson sums up this new logic or aesthetics of theory with the phrase “difference relates” (ibid: 75).

For Jameson, because postmodernism must be taken as a historical phenomenon or cultural logic, it becomes insusceptible to conceptualisation in terms of moralizing judgements; indeed, such an approach would be at best a category-mistake (ibid: 85). Whether we accept it or not, this new culture affects our very life-style, from the architecture that structures our environment to the way we read, to the way we listen to music, how we go about our daily lives, from watching television to our work habits, to purchasing groceries from the supermarket, to how

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<sup>43</sup> This synchronic space could equally be characterised as non-synchronous synchronicity (Bloch 1977).

<sup>44</sup> Here the work of Althusser (1997, 2008) in presenting ideology as unconscious marks a critical turning point.

<sup>45</sup> Here the work of Foucault 1988 is particularly important.

<sup>46</sup> Baudrillard 1983, 1994

<sup>47</sup> Derrida 1976, 1978 etc.

we respond to advertising, to how we think (Norris, 2000: 9). Under such conditions life objectively and subjectively becomes constituted by immediacy, interconnection, fluidity and fragmentation. One can, under the right material and cultural circumstances, listen to reggae in the morning, watch a western in the evening, eat McDonald's food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, wear a Parisian perfume in Tokyo and "retro" clothes in Hong Kong, or read Baudrillard in Sydney or view a Sidney Nolan exhibit in Buenos Aires (c.f. Lyotard, 1984: 76). Indeed, the proliferation of forms coupled with the collapse of distance and speed of travel in a characteristically open world defines the cultural and social backdrop of postmodern theory and the bringing into crisis conceptions of identity, space and time. The hyper-fluidity of postmodernism entails that we no longer feel ourselves as living among the 'relics' of 'the past' and the crippling inheritance of an *ancien regime* from which we must break. Instead we find ourselves within an increasingly accessible cosmopolitan world filled with a plurality of possibilities, curiosities and quaint interests. However, within the context the new no longer carries with itself the exciting and iconoclastic epochal resonances of modernism. The word 'new' is itself no longer experienced as new or pristine (Jameson, 1984b: 310). Indeed, everything is new, but, because of this, the category of the new loses its weight. Under the weight of the modern, the new was always accompanied by a millennial expectation and a utopian sense of impending transformation of the self and the world; indeed, the present was characterised in terms of pregnancy with the possibility of a new future age, a new adventure, filled with now time. Under the postmodern this new age of promise has 'arrived' and the weight of the past and the future is collapsed into an infinite weightlessness. Instead, postmodernism operates as a cynicism of historicity, which perpetually holds and withdraws from any direct gaze on reality, instead relying on short-circuitry, nostalgia and pastiche to diffuse the real (Jameson, 1984a). Any sense of 'realism' here can only appear in the spaces created by the shock of escaping confinement and defying expectations, through a highly self-

reflexive, intertextual awareness of the sublime complexity of historical situations. We are condemned to seek history (either a past or a future) through a web of images and simulacra which can only attempt to represent or subvert our ideas and stereotypes (ibid: 71).

Against the seriousness of the modern, the postmodern is characterised by a renewal of production, vitality or intensity after what it perceives as a long period of ossification (ibid: 313). Time loses any fixed narrative or immanent promise the future might supply; indeed, time ceases to hold any metaphysical authority whatsoever (ibid: 336). Rather, we are presented with a contemporaneous decentred, discontinuous and overlapping set of temporalities in flux. If the modern was characterised by a liquidity of past traditions in favour of a lasting solidity, postmodernism is characterised by liquidity and infinite speed *tout court*. The melting of the fetters and manacles of the modern is radicalised to encompass all projects which claim lasting value. Accordingly, the patterns of dependency and interaction under the modern are themselves liquefied leaving an unprecedented malleability and flexibility of form. As Bauman suggests, in this post-panoptical situation, “[s]olids are cast out once and for all” (Bauman, 2000: 8). Under this new regime, things themselves have changed almost beyond recognition and are experienced as amorphous and even intangible objects. Power becomes nomadic, based on mobility rather than fixity, and is characterised by escape, elision and avoidance rather than order-building and order-maintaining (ibid: 11). Instead of stability and reliability, form becomes defined by travelling light, moving quickly, being heteronomous, continually renovating and transforming. Deleuze, in particular, evokes this quality of the postmodern condition in his accounts of schizophrenia (Deleuze, 1983) and the rhizome (Deleuze, 1988). In both, the experience of space and time is presented as rapid interconnection, fluidity and



fragmentation<sup>48</sup>, obscuring any possibility of a pure experience, pure presence, centres, beginnings or ends. Indeed, the crude temporality of modernity and change (progress), including the cumbersome machinery of the dialectic and the possibility of transcending finitude, is discarded for a concept of overdetermination, interconnectivity and immanence (Jameson, 1984b: 218). Insofar as time is valued, postmodernism substitutes the hierarchical valuations of the modern for a vertical and 'democratic' space (ibid: 307). This valuation is particularly realised in relation to the past. Under postmodernism the engagement with past is no longer nihilistic or revolutionary, but is characterised by a suitably light, irreverent and playful tone. The free play which develops in postmodern literature avoids the sense of priority, commitment and responsibility of the modern in relation to the past, and is instead committed to a libidinal investment in the emergence of multiplicity in new and unexpected ways by drawing on, dis-integrating and re-integrating, rather than annihilating, the past. If the modern is characterised by a logic of cohesive universality (solid-arity), the postmodern operates as so many logics of dis-integration (Dews, 1987). The engagement however is no longer concerned with simply critiquing an older organic totality in preparation of the new, but to realise the imminent emergence of the new through its fragmentation, multiplication and dispersal. Accordingly, the past is viewed as so many different, unrelated, fuzzy sets of overlapping and overdetermined subsystems that perceptually it appears like an indistinguishable or hallucinogenic<sup>49</sup> depth of places and spaces and dimensions which are then piecemeally incorporated into the present<sup>50</sup> (Jameson, 1984b: 372). This anarchy of postmodern schizo-fragmentation and chaotic pluralism is perhaps the arch-reference of postmodernism itself

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<sup>48</sup> Although Jameson rightly suggests the term fragmentation is too weak, too primitive and too totalising to define this movement.

<sup>49</sup> See *Theatrum philosophicum* (Foucault, 1998: 343ff).

<sup>50</sup> To evoke Benjamin, even the mechanical past is not safe from this new radical open-time (Benjamin, 1968: 255).

(ibid: 372). As Habermas suggests, postmodernism marches under the sign of a primordial anarchism (1987: 4). Postmodernism is “the anarchist farewell to modernity” (ibid: 4).

## **1.6 After metanarratives**

The crisis of historicity under postmodernism is best laid out by Jean-François Lyotard (1984), perhaps the singularly most famous and widely read<sup>51</sup> text which lays bare the logic of postmodernism. This text represents a complex crossroads in which a number of different intersecting themes, including aesthetics, linguistics, epistemology and sociology, are brought together in analysis of the postmodern condition (Jameson, 1984c: vii). While postmodernism is often presented as a radical break with the dominant culture and aesthetic of the modern, Lyotard presents postmodernism within the ongoing context of modernism and modernisation. Indeed, postmodernism becomes a cultural reflection of the movements in socioeconomic organisation taking place in the most highly developed societies as a result of the transformations in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century (Lyotard, 1984: xxiii). These transformations have altered the game rules for science, literature and the arts, provoking a crisis of representation and legitimacy in our cultural narratives (ibid: xxiii). Characteristic of this ‘new’ culture is a crisis in the status of knowledge resulting from the retreating narratives of the modern and the intensity of the present. This is not an extrinsic or contingent happening, but occurs as a result of an intrinsic culmination of the logic of modernity itself coming to terms with its own status. As science has always been in conflict with narratives (ibid: xxiii), postmodernism simply signals a stage in reflexivity in which modernity’s own narrative structure is made apparent and brought into question. Under these conditions the dominant discourse of the modern, defined largely by the advance of ‘scientific’

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<sup>51</sup> And perhaps most unjustly disparaged and misunderstood.

understanding, is overtaken by so many social, political and cultural developments that it becomes historically redundant to speak of 'modernity' any longer as a single and unified experience or phenomenon.

The use of the term metanarrative is notoriously infamous in this text. Lyotard defines metanarrative with regard to modernity such that the term 'modern' designates any knowledge which legitimates itself by reference to a "metadiscourse", that is, a discourse which "makes an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth" (Lyotard, 1984: xxiii). In contrast, postmodernism is defined as "incredulity towards metanarratives" although it is important to note this definition is prefaced by the qualification "simplifying to the extreme" (ibid: xxiv). As a cultural state, this incredulity is a product of the progress that has taken place in the sciences. Indeed, any notion of progress properly presupposes a degree of incredulity which loosens up the past and allows development to take place (ibid: xxiv). Under the conditions of modernity, incredulity is directed towards the apparent solidity of tradition. Under postmodernism, this incredulity is directed to the future and the particular millennial promises of solidity entertained by modernity. The enlightenment hope of escaping from finitude and irrationality by means of reason, represented by the liberation of humanity on the one hand and the speculative unity of all knowledge on the other, is simply no longer credible; this is to say, the metanarrative has lost its meaning for the finite subject (Jameson, 1984c: ix). The metanarrative is no longer able to sustain its cohesion and we are no longer able to withstand its function, its foundations, its hopes, its heroes, its dangers, its voyage and its goals (Lyotard, 1984: xxiv). Instead, embracing finitude, these metanarratives are in the process of being dispersed into clouds of narratives, each of which

has its own logics, pragmatics and legitimacies specific to its kind<sup>52</sup> (ibid: xxiv). There is no longer one but many ‘language games’<sup>53</sup>, and we live our lives at the intersection of not one but many of them (ibid: xxiv). Characteristically, these language games are not necessarily stable or communicable, and express themselves as a decentred heteronomy of elements rather than a coherent unity. As a result, there is no stable or universal language or form of judgment with which to articulate, mediate or assess a situation. The particularity and heteronomy of language games can only entail local determination, a patchwork of regional dialects some of which are able to communicate with each other, others of which are incommensurable. Any attempt to pursue a metalanguage or universal consensus able to articulate and mediate between such diversity can only find expression as a violent act which suppresses difference. There is only a plurality of irreducibly different language games, paradigms, research programmes and traditions – an intense heterogeneity of elements – competing and striving for local legitimacy without the possibility of attaining universality. This new cultural ontology of postmodernism is a centre-less web of dynamic and heteronomous relationships. In response, the postmodern condition, and postmodern knowledge, is a refinement of sensitivity to such differences and reinforces tolerance towards the incommensurable, rather than the attempting to establish unity or consensus (ibid: xxv).

The critical problem faced under this new cultural regime is not simply one of legitimation (Habermas, 1978) but of representation in general. If modernity can be characterised by the

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<sup>52</sup> We should note the parallel with Weber and the turn towards local rationalities (Weber 1992).

<sup>53</sup> The term is Wittgenstein’s (see Wittgenstein 1953). The definition of language-game in Wittgenstein is not simple, but encompasses connection with certain practices which as a result carry particular rules, logics, etc. entailing many possible potential applications which are not fixed but come in and out of existence, and have different meanings in difference contexts which must be learnt but may be connected by family resemblances. Above all, “... the term ‘language-game’ is meant to bring into prominence the fact that the speaking of language is part of an activity, or of a form of life (Wittgenstein, 1953: 23)”. Lyotard’s use is broadly in line with Wittgenstein’s concept.

finite subject attempting to overcome finitude through, on the one hand, the embrace of a unified, abstract, logical and cognitive form of thought associated with 'science' and, on the other, the liquefaction of narratives and, in particular, local mythic and traditional structures, the postmodern condition represents the return of the repressed narrative structure of modernity itself and with this a crisis in the cohesive account of knowledge and science. To a large part this crisis arises as the narrative of scientific neutrality is brought into question. Particularly under the contemporaneous conditions of post-industrial capitalism the processes of science appear more completely subordinated to external powers than ever before (Lyotard, 1984: 8). In an age in which scientific research requires exorbitant expenditure for technical research equipment, an equation between wealth and knowledge is inevitable (ibid: 45). Not only is the practice of science rolled into the circulation and narrative of capital, the games of scientific language become intertwined with the games of the rich, such that whoever is wealthiest has the best chance of being 'right' as a simple result of technological capital (ibid: 45). More importantly, and related to this, are the questions concerning the status of knowledge and the progressive nature of scientific advancement given this relationship between capital, technology and science and the loss of scientific neutrality. Under the conditions of modernity, the cumulative nature of scientific and technological knowledge was taken for granted, and the debates concerning the development of science extending into the twentieth century were largely confined to the form that accumulation takes (ibid: 7). While some people pictured it as regular, continuous and unanimous, others emphasised scientific discovery as periodic, discontinuous and conflictual (see Bhaskar 2008; Kuhn 1962; Popper 2002). Such truisms, Lyotard holds, need to be challenged. In the first place, scientific knowledge does not represent the totality of knowledge (Lyotard, 1984: 7). Scientific knowledge has always existed alongside, in addition to, and often in competition or conflict with, other forms of narrative knowledge, i.e. other language games. While this includes certain local or indigenous

knowledges (Feyerabend 1975), it also concerns the narrative structures which define what science is, what science is doing and how science is doing it. The narrative of scientific progression was predicated on the ideas of internal equilibrium and conviviality about the unity of scientific practice (Lyotard, 1984: 7). Prompted by discoveries which challenged this consensus<sup>54</sup>, science is opened up to a reevaluation of its own legislation and legitimation. What constitutes *legitimate* scientific practice? And, on what authority is this question resolved? Indeed, such questions invariably raise the question of power, to the point at which knowledge and power can be understood as two sides of the same question of legitimation i.e. who decides what knowledge is, and who knows what needs to be decided? (ibid: 9).

To answer such questions a division between knowledge (*savoir*) and science must be erected such that knowledge is not made equivalent to science or even ‘learning’ (*connaissance*). Lyotard defines science as a specific subset of learning in which learning is defined as “the set of statements which, to the exclusion of all other statements, denote or describe objects and may be declared true or false” (ibid: 18). This is to say, ‘science’ is not the form of knowledge itself, but only ever a particular (historical) instantiation and practice of learning which is turn a particular instantiation of knowledge<sup>55</sup>. Much like Foucault (1989b), Lyotard views science as a form of *connaissance*, an historical *a priori* generating a particular discursive horizon as a form and language of learned subjectivity and practice (i.e. a performative language game). Within this context, ‘science’ is confronted by its own narrative legitimacy, which is at once socio-political and epistemological (Lyotard, 1984: 18). This crisis represents an internal erosion of the legitimacy of metanarrative forms of ‘knowledge’ (*connaissance* parading as

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<sup>54</sup> In particular, the discoveries of Einstein and Gödel in natural science and mathematics, but equally applicable to the historical and sociological investigations of Canguilhem (1969, 1989), Foucault (1967, 1973), Koyré (1957), and Kuhn (1962), among others.

<sup>55</sup> Lyotard’s formulation could be expressed as knowledge (*savoir*) > learning (*connaissance*) > science (*science*).

*savoir*) as such forms are recognised as historical determinations and subject to questioning<sup>56</sup> (ibid: 39). The critical delegitimation of narrative practices undertaken in modernity is thereby applied to the (meta)narratives of science itself. Indeed, postmodernism represents the erosion of the unity, cohesion, neutrality and progressive quality entailed by the speculative and emancipatory narratives of modernity within which an account of science (/knowledge) was always central.

In particular, Lyotard singles out the linguistic relation of scientific discourse to the referent. For Lyotard reference and the rules of adequation which govern science are arranged in terms of a language game governed by proof and consensus. Here, the referent is presented in terms of susceptibility to proof which can be used as evidence in debates (ibid: 24). This quality of reference is such that questions of reality are resolved by questions of proof, tantamount to suggesting not that “I can prove something because reality is the way I say it is”, but only “as long as I can produce proof, it is permissible to think that reality is the way I say it is” (ibid: 24). Behind the cohesive logic of reference in modern science is an implicit metaphysical principle that the same ‘referent’ cannot supply a plurality of contradictory or inconsistent proofs (ibid: 24)<sup>57</sup>. Moreover, the logic of the language game establishes that the objects referred to by science are not only unitary, but always available for repeated access and testing to establish either their verification or falsification. In other words, reality is readily accessible in certain and explicit conditions of observation, through which it must be possible to decide whether or not a given reference or statement is legitimate. But this legitimacy is only ever according to the language (game) judged relevant by the scientific community or, more

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<sup>56</sup> This is properly the problem of nihilism in Nietzsche.

<sup>57</sup> This is developed in *The Différend* (1988) to encompass a linguistic paradigm which places sense alongside signifier, signified and referent in the context of addressor - addressee.

correctly, their legislators<sup>58</sup> (ibid: 18). Accordingly, scientific knowledge is nearly always a reduction of plurality to the dominance of one particular language game and its logic (denotation) which excludes all other possibilities, and in which a statement's truth value is regarded as acceptable only according to the appropriate criteria devised by the scientific community<sup>59</sup>.

Given the recognition of the heteronomous relations of differing language games it becomes apparent that science and scientific knowledge, as a particular instantiation of a particular language game, cease to be able to judge the existence or validity of other narrative knowledges and vice versa. In separating out knowledge, learning and science, there ceases to be a universal language of judgment which can be applied to all contexts<sup>60</sup> (ibid: 26). Rather, at this level, Lyotard suggests, "all we can do is gaze in wonderment at the diversity of discursive species, just as we do at the diversity of plant and animal species" (ibid: 26). Lamenting the "loss of meaning" or "the loss of grand narratives" under postmodernism simply boils down to nostalgically mourning the fact that knowledge can no longer be held to be principally unified or unifiable in general, and answerable to science in particular (ibid: 26). While we may form a pessimistic impression of this fragmentation (remorse that: nobody can speak all of the languages; the project of the system is a failure; emancipation is not intrinsically linked to knowledge or science; the tasks before researchers have become compartmentalised and no one can master them all etc.), this loosening up is in fact a realistic recognition of, and surrender before, the limitations of the nature of language games and the forms of life (ibid: 41).

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<sup>58</sup> This is to linguistically suggest referent must be somewhat detached from reality i.e. referent is a social construction.

<sup>59</sup> We might note that while Lyotard is perhaps primarily concerned with language, this seamlessly leads to questions of metaphysics and the ontological condition of possibility for such language games.

<sup>60</sup> Although, as language games contain metaphysical postulates this opens up important possibilities for analysis and even judgment.



Importantly, the absence of a unifying ground or judgmental criteria, the multiplication of language games and the increasing complexity of denotive utterances under postmodernism do not suggest a complete abandonment of criteria altogether. Languages, in being deployed locally, are not thereby employed haphazardly (ibid: 42). Their use is conditioned upon the proper formulation and articulation of their own rules, and the enumerations of the operations and limitations that may be performed. Here, axiomatics are defined which encompass: the use of a proposed language; the logic of what constitutes well-formed expressions; what constitutes a legitimate operation of language; and what activities may be performed on the basis of these logics (ibid: 42-43). Notably, the performative self-definition of language games is governed by a metalanguage which provides the formal logical conditions and limitations under which axiomatics in general do or do not hold (ibid: 42). This metalanguage operates as the syntax for all language games on the basis of at least four logical properties: consistency (whether a system can admit both a proposition and its negation), completeness (a system would lose consistency if an axiom was added to it), decidability (whether a given proposition belongs in a system or not) and the independence of the axioms from one another (securing the heteronomy of language games and their rules). These principles, derived from post-Cantorian set theory and famously elaborated by Kurt Gödel (1940, 1962), frame Lyotard's entire engagement<sup>61</sup>. Most importantly for Lyotard, the logic of Gödel suggests that all formal systems have internal limitations such that there is no system able to satisfy the conditions of completeness and/or consistency (Lyotard, 1984: 43). This signals an important shift in the notion of reason itself, moving it from modernity and the vision of a linear and unified discourse towards postmodernity and a decentred, heteronomous but nevertheless rigorous

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<sup>61</sup> Incredulity towards metanarratives could be easily rephrased into terms drawn from post-Cantorian set theory – the set of all sets cannot be presented (c.f. Badiou 2005) and equally applies to Lacan's proclamation that there is no big Other i.e. the big Other is always barred, incomplete, lacking or castrated (Lacan, 1977b: 146f).

conception of reason. The principle of a metadiscourse or metanarrative is replaced by a principle entailing a plurality of formal and axiomatic systems governed only by the universal (but inconsistent) metasyntax of logic and sets (ibid: 43). This entails some important considerations. Any systematic or universal attempt to establish consensus or consistency is always, at best, a limited horizon. This is to say, such an attempt can only ever appear as a particular state or moment in the discussion (the establishment of an axiom) and not an end in itself (ibid: 66). Indeed, consensus must be recognised as a horizon that is never reached, and is, properly speaking, unreachable without introducing or recognising a degree of heteronomy (discarding universality) or, alternatively, by doing violence and establishing a particular determination which must necessarily glide over differences to establish its own unity and consistency (at the cost of completeness). With regard to science, research that takes place under the aegis of a system (or to use the Kuhnian term – paradigm) can only be understood as directed to stabilisation and performance, rather than truth. Consensus appears as an *integrating* component which operates in order to maintain and improve the performance of a system through the increase of efficiency (ibid: 55). When a paradigm is in operation, the stability of normality is maintained in part by the lack of interest in, even hostility towards, change and difference. To attain a high level of efficiency, a system must function by necessarily reducing complexity and generating and suppressing incompleteness and heteronomy (ibid: 61). This requires the renunciation of all other narratives or possibilities, and demands cold and clear minds and wills committed to productivity, and resolving the questions of the paradigm on its own terms (ibid: 62). Accordingly, work under the paradigm always entails a strong degree of stabilisation in which replication and accumulative growth is pursued, and in which alternatives must be rejected in favour of more limited problem solving (Kuhn, 1996: 35ff). Here Lyotard saves a particular coherence of research and experimentation by recasting it in terms of linguistics and the theory of performativity (Jameson, 1984c: ix). As such, the purpose of

scientific work under a paradigm is less to produce an adequate model of a reality than it is to produce more work, i.e. to generate new and fresh scientific statements and ideas (ibid: ix)

However, for Lyotard, in pursuing performativity and growth in the context of stability and efficiency, the system must operate on violence and terror (Lyotard, 1984: 63). By terror, Lyotard is concerned with the generation of efficiency gained by eliminating, or threatening to eliminate, a player who has refused to operate according to the established consensus (ibid: 64). In the name of these goals, the heterodox elements must be either silenced or forced to consent, through the exercise of (a thoroughly political) terror which consists in the threat: “[a]dapt your aspirations to our ends – or else” (ibid: 64). The system becomes a structural machine of efficiency, devoid of humanity, dehumanising in order to rehumanise a different level of normative capacity geared towards increasing productivity and performativity within the paradigm and thus ironically blocking the possibility of imaginative developments of knowledge or alternative futures<sup>62</sup> (ibid: 63). This peculiar attempt at solidification is a return to an instantiation of the metanarrative of *modernity* and the Reign of Terror it characteristically represents. Accordingly, for Lyotard, consensus is always a suspect value (ibid: 66). Yet, to the extent that science can be differential in practice, it can provide the antimodel of a stable system while still being concerned with productivity and performativity. Such a science is in fact a model of an “open system” concerned with pragmatics based on movements which mark a difference from what is already known (ibid: 64). Here, scientific discovery entails breaking with past consensus and throwing the system into crisis by showing it to be heteronomous, inconsistent and incomplete and allowing for transition to the new. Moreover, the necessary internal limitations of any system make this ‘paralogical’ moment inevitable. Something must

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<sup>62</sup> There is more than a little resonance with Weber (1992, 1994) and Marcuse (1964, 1972) here.

always come along which disturbs the order and the operations of consensus and in which a moment of escape from the terror of the system becomes possible.

The crisis of scientific knowledge under the conditions of postmodernism is in fact what Lyotard, tongue in cheek, calls a crisis of 'determinism' (ibid: 54). Here, determinism is understood as a particular corollary to performativity; indeed, it is "the hypothesis upon which legitimation by performativity is based" (ibid: 54). Since performativity, and with performativity, efficiency, is based on a format defined by an input/output formula, there is always a presupposition build into the system entailing the environment into which the input/output formula is entered is stable, that is, it follows a regular 'path'. The very idea of performativity and efficiency must imply a highly stable system based on the principle of a relation and an equilibrium which should be, in theory, calculable, entailing a closure under the conditions of which regularity is possible and measurable (ibid: 55). The ideal possibility of this fulfilment is expressed in Laplace's fiction of the 'demon' who, knowing all of the variables, is able to determine the state of the universe at a moment  $t_1$ , and can thus predict its state at a moment  $t_2$  (ibid: 55). This fiction presupposes that systems, including above all the system of systems called the universe, follow regular patterns and obey universal laws such that they are traceable along regular paths, enabling the possibility of perfect precision in prediction (ibid: 55). Quantum theory has put the brakes on such a desire in showing that uncertainty does not necessarily decrease as accuracy or control goes up. Even closed systems can be indeterminate and uncertain. Rather, we continually encounter a complex local morphology which prevents the production of stable forms and regularities, usually because of conflict intrinsic to local circumstances based in the imbalance of forces (ibid: 59). Here we should note the manner in which performativity gives rise to ontological presuppositions which are explicitly addressed by Lyotard.

Against the logic of the system, and the metanarratives of modernity, Lyotard advocates the stance of postmodernism as being one of dissent<sup>63</sup>. The governing principle of this is not the expert's homology but the inventor's paralogy which breaks with the established order in pursuit of the new (ibid: xxv). The lack of grand narrative in no way presupposes that we are reduced to barbarism or ignorance, and the nostalgia for lost narratives is revealed to be pathological in not only desiring consensus (and thus violence and terror) but equally in assuming that under the conditions of postmodernism the incredulity towards metanarratives entails the death of thought and emancipatory practice. Heteronomy and fragmentation are always and necessarily the suppressed other of metanarratives which could only ever establish dominance predicated on the colonising metaphor of bringing order to chaos. In contrast, the turn toward little narratives means that legitimation can spring from local linguistic practices and communicational interactions which cannot be coerced, controlled or bullied by the elevation of one supreme universal language and its rules. The recognition of the heteromorphous nature of language games entails the renunciation of terror, as the critical first step in the postmodern direction (ibid: 66). The second not unrelated step is the principle that any consensus about the rules defining a game and the 'moves' playable within this language *must* be local, in other words, agreed on by its present players and subject to eventual cancellation. Such an orientation favours a multiplicity of finite meta-arguments and metaprescriptives which are always limited in space and time (ibid: 66). The harsh austerity and terror of 'realism' is done away with for a plurality and heteronomous conception of realisms (ibid: 41).

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<sup>63</sup> Here, Lyotard is making a not so veiled attack upon Habermas and the notion of discursive rationality (Habermas 1972). Indeed, the dispute between Habermas and Lyotard can be viewed as dissent over the inherence of modernity and modernism.

Here, as Bauman (1991) suggests, postmodernism represents the modern coming to terms with its limitations. But more than this, postmodernism is a coming to terms with the nature of the modern itself by shining a light into its dark recesses in order to look at its unacknowledged conditions. It forces modernity to face the truths it refused or was unable to recognise about itself. Accordingly, postmodernism represents a period of slackening, a release from the binding solidities of modernity for the fluidity of postmodernism (Lyotard, 1984: 71). In this new context, thought is, above all, concerned with the pursuit of justice and the unknown as *critical* values (ibid: 66). This conception of justice is not linked to consensus or contract but the preservation of the syntax and separation of language games (ibid: 66). Justice recognises the heteromorphous nature of language games and acknowledges the multiplicity of finite and local arguments, which is to say, that all forms of rationality has limits.

What room does this leave for any project of realism? Certainly the demand for the real, which is for Lyotard the demand for unity, simplicity and communicability in art or in knowledge, becomes deeply problematic (ibid: 75). Above all, the cultural conditions of postmodernism and post-industrial capitalism inherently possess “the power to derealise familiar objects, social roles, and institutions to such a degree that the so-called realistic representations can no longer evoke reality except as nostalgia or mockery, [or] as an occasion for suffering rather than for

satisfaction”<sup>64</sup> (ibid: 74). The real ceases to be characterised by reality<sup>65</sup>. Accordingly, any classical definitions of realism or representation become deeply problematic, and even pathological, in a world in which reality is profoundly destabilised and fluid (ibid: 74). Moreover, the desire for a unified, cohesive account of the world - the desire for the real as in any sense finally present and before us - has resulted in terror, for which we have paid a high price. There is no whole or one to which we can return, no easy reconciliation between the concept and the sensible, and no possibility of transparent and easily communicable experience (ibid: 81-82). Instead, postmodernism is the demand for slackening and for the pacification of continued bouts of nostalgia. Against the ever-present mutterings of the desire for a return of terror, or for the realisation of a new grand narrative to seize and dominate reality once again, Lyotard suggests one simple solution: “[l]et us wage a war on totality; let us be witness to the unrepresentable; let us activate the difference and save the honour of the name” (ibid: 81-82). Far from being a *new* aesthetic, this moment represents a subversive return to the birth of the modern itself. Against the linear and unified time modernity expressed, postmodernism announces a heteronomous and cyclical time condensed and intensified within the modern (present) moment. The modern, in whatever age and form it appears, exists through a shattering of beliefs, a liquidation of the past, and a discovery of the “lack of reality” of reality itself,

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<sup>64</sup> The loss of reality under late capitalism is well captured by Jean Baudrillard. For Baudrillard there is no longer a mirror of being or appearance which can unite the real and its concept, as there is no longer any question of substituting the sign of the real for the real itself (1983, 1994). In the place of reality we have hyper-reality, the generation of models of a real without origin or reality (Baudrillard, 1983: 2). At best, the real persists here and there as vestiges in the deserts (ibid: 2). Yet this is to say too much. It is not simply that the real is masked behind the model or appears only as traces, but rather that the difference between the ‘true’ and the ‘false’, the ‘real’ and the ‘imaginary’, is itself threatened (ibid: 5). In the *Society of the Spectacle* Debord expressed a similar reflection; under the conditions of mass production life has receded into representation in which ideology can no longer simply be unmasked (Debord, 1989: 7). Against such a pervasive system, there is only the possibility of shock, acts of terror which destabilise the totality. Hence, Baudrillard’s hugely important critical intervention in highlighting the nature of the virtual in *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* (1995) and its complete misreception amongst realists (for example, Benton and Craib 2010: 172; Norris 1990, 1992 c.f. Patton 1995).

<sup>65</sup> In *The Différend* Lyotard also critiques the realist assumption that referent is equivalent to reality: “Either the différend has an established reality for its object and it is not a différend but a litigation, of, if the object has no established reality, the différend has no object, and there is simply no différend. – So speaks positivism. It confuses reality and referent.” (Lyotard, 1988: 28). Instead Lyotard inverts the relation of reality and referent such that nothing can be said about reality that does not already presuppose it (ibid: 32).

alongside the invention of other realities in the pursuit of the new and eternal (ibid: 77). In this context, the postmodern is undoubtedly a part of the modern in which “all that has been received, if only yesterday ... must be suspected” (ibid: 79). This doubt of course encompasses modernity itself<sup>66</sup>. In returning to the moment of the modern Lyotard effects a temporal reversal; a work can only truly become modern if it is first postmodern (ibid: 79). Indeed, the postmodern is understood not as the modern at its end, but as the nascent state of all modernisms (ibid: 79). Under postmodernism this state is radicalised, and Lyotard effects an eternal return to the site of the modern itself to birth ever new possibilities and promises in the present (ibid: 79). In so doing, postmodernism gives witness to the suppressed differences, contingencies and possibilities housed within each moment, not as an attempt to provide a new solidity, but as the preservation of liquidity and heteronomy itself. Here, the postmodern moment consists in a permanent horizontal revolution, a bending back time upon itself to bring forth the infinite possibility and contingency in every fleeting moment. The purpose of this is less to supply reality than to shatter reality, that is, any fixed or universal forms of the real. Such a moment consists in testifying to the limit of the present, presentation and representation by perpetually bearing witness “to that which cannot be presented” (ibid: 81).

### **1.7 The sublime real**

The postmodern sublime as the form of ‘that which cannot be presented’ supplies the closest definition of the real in postmodernism. The sublime is concerned with the presentation and representation of what is properly the unrepresentable in presentation itself. In so doing it attempts to deny to itself “the solace of good forms” and “the consensus of a taste” which would make possible a collective nostalgia for a revived unity of the whole (ibid: 81). Instead,

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<sup>66</sup> And, to be properly reflexive, postmodernism, or at least what passes as postmodernism.



searching for ever new presentations, it participates in a perpetually disruptive exercise of continual recasting. As with the paralogical moment in science, this is less concerned with the generation or possibility of a new consensus than with breaking with the old consensus. The new is not something to be enjoyed, but something to be mobilised in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable itself and the limitation of all systems. This moment is a spasm in which presentation is both affirmed and denied in a properly unrepresentable moment. The sublime represents the manifold of difference and openness itself as it confronts the closed circle of representation. This stuttering exposes the ‘state’ of thought when it encounters its extreme limit (Lyotard, 1994: 56) and uncovers the inability of the system to synthesise and integrate these differential aspects within a single present (ibid: 143). Indeed, in the sublime moment, thinking is faced with quantities or qualities exceeding its own power of presentation and thus confronts the possibility (or better, the impossibility) of what is presentable within the system itself<sup>67</sup>. Thought undergoes a crisis of spatiality and temporality represented by the absolute failure of synthesis to present its object such that nature ceases to speak to thought through the “coded writing” of forms (ibid: 52). Indeed, what is encountered in this moment is the loss of finality within a heteronomous and heterogeneous infinite (ibid: 53).

In its form, the sublime can be understood as a profoundly negative or denatured aesthetic, or, rather, an ‘aesthetic of denaturing’, a moment which breaks and suspends the unifying and harmonious operation of reason (ibid: 56). Here the products of formation and ordering conducted by the system are encountered by a ‘presence’ in the form of a pluralist heteronomy which exceeds what thought itself can synthesise and represent (ibid: 53). This aesthetic denies to the imagination the unifying power of forms, while denying to nature the power to

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<sup>67</sup> The parallel to Gödel should not be missed as for Gödel what is properly unrepresentable is the system itself, the set of all sets.

immediately affect thinking with unified forms (ibid: 54). However, it would be incorrect to suggest the sublime is simply the presentation of an unrepresentable object or ‘presence’. Rather, it is the relation of limitation itself encountering its other as Other and in this violent moment, exceeding itself. As limitation is only conceivable by erecting an inside, and therefore an outside, the sublime is an encounter which appears outside of the construction of limitation, and is therefore encountered as in-determinate, un-conditioned and un-limited. In the sublime the subject faces and experiences the *aporia* of a presentation for which there is (yet) no possible representation (ibid: 65).

In this regard, the *feeling* of the sublime is the irruption in and of thought in an encounter with the Real<sup>68</sup> as a violent trauma (ibid: 55). This encounter “is like lightning”, a moment which short-circuits thinking with nature providing only the bad contact that creates the spark (ibid: 54). Beyond the structures of finitude, the sublime is properly nonsensical, the de-mensuration of all sensibility. Here the sublime feeling is neither a moral universality nor aesthetic universalisation, but is, rather, the destruction of the one by the other in the violence of a *différend*<sup>69</sup> which cannot be communicated to thought but operates as a site of return (ibid: 239). For Lyotard “[t]he *différend* is the unstable state and instant of language wherein something which must be able to be put into phrases cannot yet be” (Lyotard, 1988: 13). It is a site of discord and dispute, a *kampfplatz* which properly characterises the multiplicitous and heteronomous nature of reality as a problematic and contested site beyond the possibility of full comprehension or representation, but a site to which we continually return. To do justice to the *différend* requires new addressees, new addressors, new significations, new referents,

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<sup>68</sup> The Real in Lacan is the site of undifferentiation outside of language and representation. More than this, however, the real is the site at which the imaginary and the symbol stumble. It is refractory and resistant; hence the formula “the real is the impossible” (Lacan, 1977a: 280).

<sup>69</sup> As Lyotard’s term of choice, *différend* encompasses dispute, disagreement, strife, discord and difference or variation of opinion.

new rules, new languages and new phrases in order to find an expression and context in which it becomes possible to speak. Within the *différend* difference always acts as a disruptive force operating at the limits of discourse and in the gaps of the system to prevent closure and effect openness while driving us forward to in pursuit of a new language with which to articulate the real, a real in some respects beyond all presentations and representations<sup>70</sup>.

In the *différend*, Lyotard undermines and abandons the conventional possibility of meaning as determined by a fixed reference point (reality is not a given). Instead Lyotard introduces a complex interplay of meaning and sense, making space for competing and even incommensurable interpretations and perspectives (Figure 1.1). Indeed, for Lyotard, the project of representation is itself a nihilistic endeavour which can only end in violence as it can never close the divide between the determinations of representation and the overdetermination of reality and language. Reference is, properly speaking, impossible, not because of the movement of signifiers, but because reference itself is always spoken into an open, decentred and overdetermined web of relations and senses (ibid: 28). Against every realism, Lyotard answers that no one can see “reality” proper, but rather reference must always presuppose and retroactively posit its own reality amidst contestation (Lyotard, 1988: 33). Indeed, reality is the arch *différend*. Yet, in spite of this, justice (and not truth) demands the attempt to present the unrepresentable while keeping it from violence.

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<sup>70</sup> Importantly, in *The Différend* this is concerned with finding a language to articulate the violence done to victims who are left unable to speak and divested of the means to argue because of this i.e. to establish their reality according to the current rules of the game. The main case in point is Auschwitz.

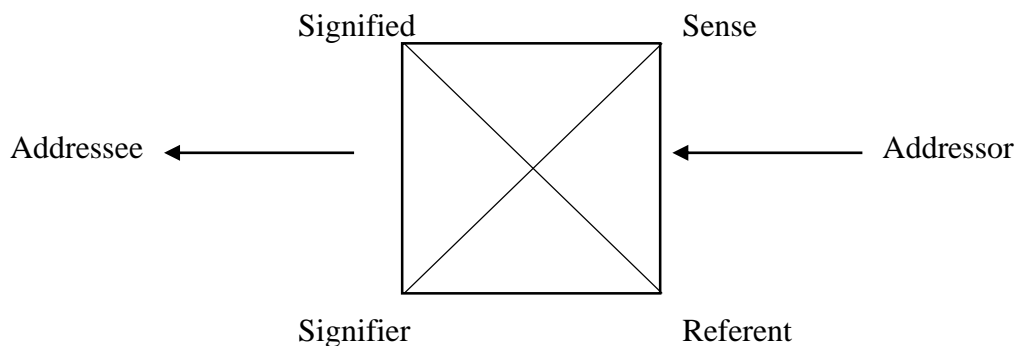


Figure 1.1 The semiotic square

Lyotard's anti-systematic approach approaches reality, its temporalisations, spatialisations and inscriptions within language, as a profoundly open-system. In such a context meaning is found in particularity rather than universality, and heteronomy rather than unity. Epistemologically, this works out as a deep-laid scepticism about the possibility of finality to truth and realism, and with this the necessity of maintaining a plurality of perspectives and approaches. Aesthetically, this works out as an embrace of the sublime as a moment which highlights limits, breaks horizons and presents the unrepresentable, finding beauty, not in the straight lines and clarity of modernity, but in moments of complexity and even inelegance – the spasms of the sublime. Ethically, this works out as an affirmation of difference and pluralism, which attempts to preserve the other from violent impositions and terror. As we can never escape finitude, and are therefore never in a position to adjudicate between competing positions, we can only prevent the suppression of the *différend*. On this account, the sole remaining virtue of justice consists in maximising the possibility of openness by critiquing closure, and preparing the way of the new in the present. Postmodernism as such is the promise of the return and the reinvention, indeed the triumphant reappearance, of the modern moment (Jameson, 1984: 60).

As modernism itself signals an incessant *aggiornamento* by disembedding static traditions and melting all that is solid, so postmodernism becomes a process and experience of a hyperactive modern without recourse to the comforts of modernity.

### **1.8 Contesting closure and unblocking logjams**

Pursuing this line, the problem faced under both the modern and the postmodern is the possibility of confronting our historical understanding and the conditions and limitations our finitude imposes. While the modern seeks escape from finitude, the postmodern radically embraces finitude and under postmodernism the promise of deliverance from finitude is abandoned. Instead we are presented with a cyclical temporality which returns ever new to the present, dislocating and fragmenting space and time, and through the cracks which emerge, embracing the new and different as so many possible (finite) worlds. Indeed, postmodernism becomes a celebration of the modern itself, the modern without modernity and modernisation. This is the modern moment as “anarchy triumphant”<sup>71</sup> (c.f. Deleuze, 2004: 137).

While any complacent or delirious celebration or rejection of the present is surely unacceptable, if postmodernism is, as Jameson suggests, a historical and cultural phenomenon, conceptualising it purely in terms of moral or moralising (or aesthetic) judgments is certainly the wrong approach (Jameson, 1984b: 46). Jameson suggests in this context we must proceed dialectically through a process of immanent critique which attempts to identify both moments of truth and perhaps the more evident moments of falsehood (ibid: 47)<sup>72</sup>. But maybe even this

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<sup>71</sup> It is perhaps this element above all else for which postmodernism has been attacked. Postmodern ‘anarchy’ is taken to entail a strong commitment to relativism, perspectivalism and epistemic pessimism before the unsurpassable barrier erected between representation and reality (Bhaskar, 1995; Danermark et. al. 1997; Sayer, 2000; Lopez and Potter, 2001). However anarchism does not and need not mean ‘anything goes’.

<sup>72</sup> Andrew Sayer *initially* pursues a similar line to Jameson in his *Realism and Social Science* (2000).

is not enough. Instead, modifying Jameson's reflection on Marx and Capitalism we must do the impossible, namely to think postmodern positively and negatively all at once; we must achieve, in other words, a type of thinking capable of grasping the regressive features of postmodernism along with its extraordinarily liberating dynamism simultaneously, within a single thought, and without attenuating any of the force of either judgement (Jameson, 1984a: 86). Following this, we might even view postmodernism as offering a degree of release in which realism is ironically able to take flight by coming to terms with its transcendental conditions and limitations. Here realism becomes defined by permanent revolution - a continual return to the site of the real.

The model for this particular conception of realism is located within Sartre's *What is Literature?* and provides us with a grammar which unites the new and the real:

The writer takes up the world as it is, totally raw, stinking, and quotidian, and presents it to free people on a foundation of freedom ... It is not enough to grant the writer the freedom to say whatever he please! He must address a public that has the freedom to change everything, which implies, beyond the suppression of social classes, the abolition of all dictatorship, the perpetual renewal of categories, and the continual reversal of every order, as soon as it starts to ossify. In a word, literature is essentially the subjectivity of a society in permanent revolution. (cited in Deleuze, 2004: 79)

Here a certain postmodern spirit emerges from late modernism (existentialism) as a mode of contestation against any closing in of the orders of representation. As paradoxical as it may seem postmodernism ceases to be simply a new scepticism, but may even be seen to offer a new form of realism<sup>73</sup> operating as a ground-clearing exercise arousing our vigilance against

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<sup>73</sup> c.f. Jameson, 1984a: 88

static forms and forcing us to reconsider the role of intensity, heteronomy, difference and change in the real. Certainly, in shallower forms, this ground clearing exercise has a very limited life<sup>74</sup>. What is characteristically missing in such cases is the difficult project of *reconceptualising* the possibility, and not simply the impossibility, of representing totalities (c.f. Deleuze, 2004: 79). Without this, the perpetual renewal of categories and the continual reversal of every order leaves us to “live on like so many scattered limbs” (ibid: 79). The attempt to reconceptualise totalities in light of the intensity and fragmentation of the postmodern, prevents the release of productivity and performance from becoming a perpetual cycle of uninteresting and meaningless change for the sake of change and the new from simply becoming kitsch. In short, this task prevents the culture of postmodernism from descending into triviality.<sup>75</sup>

Such an approach has particular resonances with the ‘unfinished project of modernity’ (Habermas, 1987). This pursuit represents a continuation of testing the limits of modernity, highlighting its prejudice and thereby resolutely insisting the project lives up to the highest standard of critical thought by taking nothing on trust, most of all its own more doctrinaire values and assumptions (Norris, 2000: 69). Within this pursuit the unfinished project of modernity rests on a revaluation of the temporality and spatialisation of the present and the possibility of realism in a context which resolutely breaks with the forms of modernity. However, in many respects we are less concerned with the unfinished project of modernity than the unfinished project of postmodernity i.e. the critique and surpassing of the modern. The temporal and spatial peculiarity of postmodernism represents a radical and anarchic expression

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<sup>74</sup> Much like the conceptual art of Marcel Duchamp the lesson is quickly learned, becomes tedious in its repetition and intolerable in its proliferation.

<sup>75</sup> Notably, this was also the problem for Baudelaire and the modern.

of the original dilemma of modernity while rejecting its solutions. Whereas modernity involved a recognition of our insertion as individual subjects into a temporality full of promise and governed by metadiscursive and metanarrative prescriptions, postmodernism experiences the weight of a decentred subject before a multidimensional set of radically discontinuous and heteronomous realities in the present (Jameson, 1984: 413). Under such conditions, this tends to result in an exposure to a perpetual barrage of immediacy from which all distance, sheltering layers or intervening mediations are removed (ibid: 413). Such a situation is expressed in the form of a radical suppression of distance<sup>76</sup>. Within this space the new is always immediately proximate and equally meaningful and meaningless. Within such a context the unfinished project of postmodernity is concerned to reclaim a conception of reality and realism without nostalgically invoking or returning to project of modernity but also without collapsing everything into condensed immediacy.

Here the persistent decision to choose between the modern and the postmodern, or between ‘enlightenment’ and ‘irrationality’, is, and always was, a false choice which blackmails us into two polarised and equally unappealing alternatives<sup>77</sup>. The unfinished project of postmodernity consists in finding a language which moves beyond the coercive logic of modernity and any equally uncritical conception (or rejection) of postmodernity. This manoeuvre is echoed, albeit perhaps not practiced, in Foucault who suggests in proceeding ‘against’ modernity:

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<sup>76</sup> Paralleling the technical transformation of the social world by technology, namely, cheaper and quicker travel on the one hand and the ‘world wide web’ on the other.

<sup>77</sup> One problem here is certainly that the main parties, proceeding from an apprehension of the stakes, have often been pressured by their situation to adopt an adversarial stance. In so doing, the real points at issue and the extent of their shared interests, values and concerns is displaced for polemics. Derrida (1988), Habermas (1987), and Searle (1977) have all shared in this in relation to deconstruction, as have too often proponents of critical realism.



... one has to refuse everything that might present itself in the form of a simplistic and authoritarian alternative: you either accept the Enlightenment and remain within the tradition of its rationalism (this is considered a positive term by some and used by others, on the contrary, as a reproach); or else you criticize the Enlightenment and then try to escape from its principles of rationality (which may be seen once again as good or bad). And we do not break free of this blackmail by introducing "dialectical" nuances while seeking to determine what good and bad elements there may have been in the Enlightenment. (Foucault, 1997: 313)

For Foucault this means developing an historical ontology which turns away from all projects that claim to be inherently global or radical in nature (ibid: 316). Indeed, Foucault's ongoing historical and theoretical engagements represent a critical attempt to come to terms with the temporality of knowledge without abandoning rationality *tout court*. His immediate concern is with the investigation of the events that have led us to constitute ourselves and recognise ourselves (and with ourselves the world) in particular ways. It is characteristically archaeological and genealogical and not metaphysical or transcendental in its approach. Indeed, Foucault is concerned only with the way in which certain orders have been created in certain historical moments, founded on certain contentions and presuppositions, many of which are social or linguistic in nature (Foucault, 1989a; Foucault, 1989b). This foregrounds an epistemological and sociological inquiry in which order is understood and treated as particular and contingent. Order is an historical creation which structures the space in which phenomena appear and in which certain forms of knowledge become possible. These historical rationalities have no necessary lasting purchase on reality and are formed only, perhaps, to dissolve and vanish in the ephemera of history (Foucault, 1989a: xxiii).

In proceeding historically Foucault is above all concerned to bring to light the ‘epistemological field’, the various *epistemes* in which knowledge is understood apart from all criteria to reference or rational value or objective forms. The question of reality is bracketed to analyse the multiplicitous ways in which the condition of possibility for ‘science’ is historically constructed (ibid: xxiv). Yet, this gesture of bracketing reality in order to understand the manner in which knowledge is created requires an important supplement. It is not enough simply to delineate the various historical *epistemes* which have structured the order of things while bracketing the question of its objective weight and ontological status, one must also be able to bracket the historical *episteme* and attempt to consider the order of things transcendentally and ontologically. This is only possible if the *episteme* itself is not all-encompassing and the world is not made into a bottomless undifferentiated abyss (c.f. Deleuze, 2006: 13)<sup>78</sup>. The danger of the epistemic project is that in focusing on the historical and social, we are prone to fall into sceptical despair or cynical detachment in which the structures of the world are lost amongst the structures of language or become all but reduced to the structures of our minds, and the sociological and epistemological conditions in which those minds are formed, take shape, are cultivated and expressed. If there is an ‘epochal’ error which might characterise the postmodern condition, it is that the imaginary and the symbolic (namely the linguistic) become so determining that the only meaningful act becomes one of dissent or terrorism. But by bracketing metaphysics, or by aiming for metaphysical neutrality, one is only left with an implicit metaphysics. Indeed, unless one explicitly moves to address bad metaphysics with good metaphysics, we are left with an ontology of objects (including events and processes) which are infinitely plastic to our conceptual schemas. Insofar as it refuses and eliminates the possibility of providing an alternate metaphysics, the postmodern simply becomes a crisis

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<sup>78</sup> This would be to present the structure of the *episteme* as a simple origin grounded in a Cartesian self-relating self-knowing subject albeit now made historical.

operating within the problematic of the modern. This has often had the consequence that representation and realism are conceived of as impossible under postmodern conditions. Reality is simply too heteronomous, too fluidic, too complex or too determined by language to be properly represented. Yet such a position is simply a reflection of the bad consciousness and bad conscience of a failed and guilty modernity which remains implicitly wedded to the equation of representation, solidity and universality. Rejecting the false choices of modernity entails finding a language of representation, metaphysics and ontology which is properly postmodern. We must wrest the real from history without departing from history (or detemporalising reality). Here Lyotard's analysis provides an important gesture insofar as the problems of language inherently raise metaphysical questions while delineating the context in which those questions are pursued. In pursuing a metaphysically realist project we must avoid turning once again to nostalgic and imaginary unities, metanarratives, and hegemonic language games and instead comprehend reality as *différend* i.e. heteronomous, multiplicitous and capable of sustaining different perspectives. However, the difficult task faced by realism under such conditions is to at once affirm local knowledges, historical *epistemes*, languages, dynamic systems, intensive presences, heteronomy and difference without sacrificing rationality, rigour and realism, but without returning to universalising or modern forms of thought. This amounts to refusing to play the game of modernism, while being continually forced to play it, while attempting to find a way out. The task of the unfinished project of postmodernity is the difficult deconstruction of the project of realism itself without withdrawing into a council of despair or a euphoria of hope. This entails, as Sartre suggests, the rejection of every order as soon as it starts to ossify but more importantly the attempt to take up the world as it is "totally raw, stinking, and quotidian" (cited in Deleuze, 2004: 79). Such a philosophy is a permanent revolution, a continual bending back to the real - without guarantee and without assurance. The crisis in realism under postmodernism consists precisely in the fact that "the old is dying and

the new cannot be born” and that “in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appears” (Gramsci, 1971: 276). In such a context, to do justice to the real requires new addressees, new addressors, new significations, new referents, new rules, new languages and new phrases in order to find an expression and context in which it becomes possible to speak of the real. The unfinished project of postmodernity consists in finding a properly post-modern realism and a language of realism which is not merely reacting against the long shadows cast by modernity. If nothing else, the union of postmodernism and realism entails that there can only ever be a difficult engagement in the present which must continue to come to terms with the finitude of its thought as it spasms in attempting to grasp a complex and contested reality<sup>79</sup>.

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<sup>79</sup> As a brief postscript it is important to note that since the early reflections of Lyotard and Jameson, the postmodern age has taken a turn towards the serious. The recalcitrant solidity of the past has re-emerged in religious fundamentalism; the anxiety of the future has re-emerged in climate change; and the liquidity of the present is threatened by the recognition of inequality under late capitalism (movement is only for some).

## Chapter 2: Language on the Margins of Ontology

If the unfinished project of postmodernity requires new languages, deconstruction offers an important reflection on the relation between the structures of language, the structures of the world and the possibility of realism. This chapter will introduce and situate the work of Jacques Derrida within the context of a Nietzschean interpretation of language and the critique of identity and structure. More substantively it aims to show that the linguistic framework developed by Derrida in the notion of *différance* offers a realist account of language and linguistic structure which based on the rejection of immediacy and presence. Such an account establishes the equivocal role of language and clears the ground for a proper delineation of the relationship between language and its other (the real).

### 2.1 Deconstruction ... irrealist?

No term more than deconstruction has become synonymous with the postmodern embrace of interconnectivity, fluidity, fragmentation and heteronomy. As it is typically presented, understood and often practiced, deconstruction rails against the discourses of ontology. Lining up on both sides, there is no shortage of anti-realist readings of deconstruction in general and of Derrida in particular (Bhaskar 1995; Collins, Mayblin, and Appignanesi 1996; Culler 1981; Eagleton 1983, 1999; Habermas 1987; Hartman 1981; Searle 1977; Wolfreys 1998). The infamous claim that ‘there is nothing outside the (con)text’ [*il n’y’a pas de hors texte*] ironically often abstracted from its context (c.f. Derrida: 1988: 136), is quickly taken to mean there is no

reality to speak about or act on, only the mediations of language<sup>80</sup>. Deconstruction becomes part of a vacuous drift away from all references to the real. Yet, however much the manoeuvres of deconstruction appear to lend themselves towards such an interpretation, Derrida is adamant that he will not be read as a linguistic idealist. Instead, on Derrida's own account, deconstruction is concerned with reference, truth and pursuit of the other of language:

It is totally false to suggest that deconstruction is a suspension of reference. Deconstruction is always deeply concerned with the *other* of language. I never cease to be surprised by my critics who see my work as a declaration that there is nothing beyond language, that we are imprisoned in language; it is in fact, saying the exact opposite. The critique of logocentrism is above all else the search for the *other* and the *other of language*. (Derrida in Kearney, 2004: 154)

Or again,

Since the deconstructionist (which is to say, isn't it, the sceptic- relativist-nihilist!) is supposed not to believe in truth, stability, or the unity of meaning, in intention or "meaning-to-say," how can he demand of us that we read him with pertinence, precision, rigour? How can he demand that his own text be interpreted correctly? How can he accuse anyone else of having misunderstood, simplified, deformed it, etc.? In other words, how can he discuss, and discuss the reading of what he writes? The answer is simple enough: this definition of the deconstructionist is false (that's right: false, not true) and feeble; it supposes a bad (that's right: bad, not good) and feeble reading of numerous texts, first of all mine, which therefore must finally be read or reread. Then

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<sup>80</sup> Richard Rorty famously follows this to suggest that interpretation goes all the way down:

There is nothing deep down inside us except what we have put there ourselves, no criterion that we have not created in the course of creating a practice, no standard of rationality that is not an appeal to such a criterion, no rigorous argumentation that is not obedience to our own conventions. (Rorty, 1982: xlii)

perhaps it will be understood that the value of truth (and all those values associated with it) is never contested or destroyed in my writings, but only reinscribed in more powerful, larger, more stratified contexts. (Derrida, 1988: 146)

And again,

[F]rom the point of view of semantics, but also of ethics and politics, "deconstruction" should never lead either to relativism or to any sort of indeterminism. (Derrida, 1988: 148).

In spite of these proclamations, the argument made in support of a realist reading of deconstruction largely, if not solely<sup>81</sup>, comes from the work of Christopher Norris (Norris, 1982; 1985; 1987; 1990; 1993; 1997; 2000; 2004) who has consistently suggested that deconstruction is not part of the relativist drift within postmodernism but is best understood as offering a rigorous account of the strength and weakness of language<sup>82</sup> (Norris 1982). In fact, Norris suggests deconstruction can even be understood a form of critical realism<sup>83</sup> (Norris 1997). Yet, if deconstruction is a form of realism<sup>84</sup>, critical or otherwise, it is concerned with

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<sup>81</sup> For a recent articulation and defence of Derridean (post-deconstructive) realism see Marder 2009.

<sup>82</sup> While not describing Derrida as a realist Caputo (1997) provides an important defence of Derrida. Where Norris tends to emphasise the earlier work leading to a more structuralist reading, Caputo tends to emphasise the later, leading to both a more Levinasian reading and a more ambiguous relationship with the possibility of realism:

For deconstructive thinking is acutely sensitive to the contingency of our constructions, to the deeply historical, social, and linguistic "constructedness" of our beliefs and practices. But that is not because it has appointed itself the supreme arbiter of what is true and false. On the contrary, it is because it confesses that it does not "know" the "secret" that sits in the middle and smiles at our ignorance. In other words, deconstructive thinking is a way of affirming the irreducible alterity of the world we are trying to construe - as opposed to the stupefying nonsense that deconstruction reduces the world to words without reference. (Caputo, 1997: 52)

<sup>83</sup> Following Norris's lead Wight (2004), Joseph (2004) and Norrie (2004) have all argued, to various degrees, for the 'limited incorporation' of aspects of Derrida and deconstruction within a broad critical realist framework while critiquing, with differing degrees of hostility, what they perceive to be his theoretical and ontological shortcomings.

<sup>84</sup> On this, Norris expresses doubt about Derrida's conception of the real. In particular, Norris suggests that Derrida's real differs fundamentally from the real of critical realism (Norris 2004: 262f). This is almost certainly true, for reasons which will be explored below.

avoiding presenting the real as in any sense immediately given, present, self-present, self-interpreting or grounded by a transcendental signified.

## 2.2 Escaping the presence of reality

In pursuit of the real Derrida is concerned with providing a critique of the history of Western metaphysics and the way in which the world is constituted through the elevation of presence<sup>85</sup>. Western metaphysics for Derrida is understood as structured in terms of binaries flowing from the elevation of presence over absence and encompassing such relations as truth/error, identity/difference and speech/writing. In each pair the second term is considered the negative, corrupt and undesirable version of the first, as the first represents the privileged relation of presence. As absence is understood as the lack of presence, so evil is understood as the lack of the good, error is a lack of truth, etc. Western thought has been concerned with a process of giving 'reality' a structural centre by referring to reality through a point of presence or a fixed origin (without absence, difference, etc.) which provides orientation, balance and organisation (Derrida, 1978: 352):

The history of metaphysics like the history of the West, is the history of these metaphors and metonymies. Its matrix – if you will pardon me for demonstrating so little and for being so elliptical in order to bring me more quickly to my principal theme – is the determination of being as presence in all the senses of the word. It would be possible to show that all the names related to fundamentals, to principles, or to the centre have always designated the constant of a presence – *eidos*, *arche*, *telos*, *energeia*, *ousia* (essence, existence, substance, subject) *aletheia*, transcendentality, consciousness, or conscience, God, man, and so forth. (Derrida, 1978: 353)

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<sup>85</sup> It should be noted that this is very different from a critique of metaphysics *tout court*.



The nature of our historical context means that we are caught within the closure of this particular metaphysics, and must recognise our position within this logic, even as we attempt to overturn it (Spivak, 1976: xx). In drawing our attention to this predicament, Derrida pursues a playful yet laborious strategy of attempting to rewrite an old language in order to escape from its closed circle. Here there can be no possibility of avoiding doing metaphysics, even and especially when we are concerned to rattle metaphysics (Derrida, 1978: 354). We have in our resources no language which is not always already enmeshed in this history such that we cannot pronounce a single destructive utterance which has not already slipped into the form and the implicit postulations of what we seek to contest (ibid: 354). To place into question the system we must be aware of our own critical relation to language, the heritage we are drawing upon and the way in which the terms of the problematic have already been defined and laid down for us in advance. Because of this there is a necessity for proceeding immanently. To this end, deconstruction draws upon the relative efficacy of language on the one hand, and the indeterminacy, under-determination and over-abundance of meaning within language on the other, in order to call our attention to, destabilise and subvert our inherited metaphysics. Coupled with this project of immanent critique is the necessity of attempting to move beyond the metaphysics of presence and think the unthinkable; a notion of structure without centre, origin or end (ibid: 352). If the goal of deconstruction is to effect a rupture in metaphysics, the former manoeuvre represents a transcendental refutation, while the latter transcendental argumentation.

### **2.3 Contextualising Derrida**

To situate the work of Derrida and deconstruction it is useful to identify precursors. While Derrida draws on a rich history of structural linguistics and phenomenology including Saussure, Husserl and Heidegger, it is perhaps Nietzsche who most resembles the complex

interrelated dimensions of Derrida's analysis of language, tone and general approach<sup>86</sup>. Central to Nietzsche is the proper recognition of the role of language in coming to terms with the interrelated questions of metaphysics, reference and truth<sup>87</sup>. Within this context metaphor is understood as the ordinary basis of what the intellect presents as truth. Simply put, metaphor is the means by which the intellect establishes an identity between two non-identical or dissimilar things. As Spivak highlights, the German term *Gleich Machen* (to make equal) resembles *Gleichnis* – image, simile, similitude, comparison, allegory, parable (Spivak, 1976: xxii). For Nietzsche, language is conceptualised as giving power over the world through an Apollonian act of creating order and form through the establishment of identity. This act allows the construction of a stable order which engenders temporary peace in the form of fixed, regularly valid forms which in turn become the obligatory designations of things. By creating fixed conventions the will to power manifests as the will to truth, a deception which is indifferent to pure knowledge or truth itself. 'Truth' on this account is attained by the forgetting of being, in favour of the affirmation of convention<sup>88</sup>. Language as a product reflects

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<sup>86</sup> Indeed, in numerous places Derrida has outlined what we should look for in Nietzsche in terms that read much like a manifesto for deconstruction itself:

... the systematic mistrust of metaphysics as a whole, the formal approach to philosophic discourse, the concept of the philosopher-artist, the rhetorical and philosophic discourse, the concept of the philosopher-artist, the rhetorical and philological question asked of the history of philosophy, the suspicion of the values of truth ('well applied convention'), of meaning and of being, of 'meaning of being', the attention to the economic phenomena of force and of difference of forces, and so forth. (1982: 362-363)

And again:

Radicalising the concept of interpretation, perspective, evaluation, difference ... Nietzsche, far from remaining simply (with Hegel and as Heidegger wished) within metaphysics, contributed a great deal to the liberation of the signifier from its dependence or derivation with respect to the logos and the related concept of truth or the primary signified ... (1976: 31-32, 19)

<sup>87</sup> And it is on the question of metaphor and metaphysics that Derrida parts company with Nietzsche (Derrida, 1982: 262f).

<sup>88</sup> For Nietzsche, forgetting serves a very practical social function:

Forgetfulness is not just a *vis inertiae*, as superficial people believe, but is rather an active ability to suppress, positive in the strongest sense of the word, to which we owe the fact that what we simply live through, experience, take in, no more enters our consciousness during digestion (one could call it spiritual ingestion) than does the thousand-fold process which takes place with our physical consumption of food, our so-called ingestion. To shut the doors and windows of consciousness for a while; not to be bothered by the noise and battle with which our underworld of serviceable organs work with and against each other; a little peace, a little tabula rasa of consciousness to make room for something new, above all for the nobler functions and functionaries, for ruling, predicting, pre-determining (our organism runs along oligarchic lines, you see) – that, as I said, is the benefit of active

a rather arbitrary designation of one-sided preferences and inadequate expressions concerned with the relations of things to perception, which are in turn transposed back onto the world in the form of an image or metaphor. Language and the formation of concepts do not proceed according to logical or cognitive necessity and least of all according to adequation with the essence of things beneath appearance. There are no *necessary* connections, only contingent distinctions. The metaphor or the idea originates through equating the unequal by gliding over differences, actualisations and individualisations to unite under form and concept what has no such form or concept in nature (ibid: xxii). In his infamous and often quoted crescendo Nietzsche suggests:

What, then, is truth? A movable host of metaphors, metonyms, and anthropomorphisms: in short, a sum of human relations which have been poetically and rhetorically intensified, transferred, and embellished, and which, after long usage, seem to a people to be fixed, canonical, and binding. Truths are illusions which we have forgotten are illusions: they are metaphors that have become worn out and have been drained of sensuous force, coins which have lost their embossing and are now considered as metal and no longer as coins. (Nietzsche, 1979: 84)

Truth consists in customary representations, the obligation to lie and distort according to a fixed convention (Nietzsche, 1979: 84). However, this genetic act of social construction and obligation is forgotten in order that the world and indeed oneself can be placed under the guiding control of these abstractions. Everything is subjected to the egalitarian universality of the idea which knows nothing but clearly marked boundaries, laws, privileges and subordinations (ibid: 84). Likewise, the human being is transposed as a rational being with the consequence that

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forgetfulness, like a doorkeeper or guardian of mental order, rest and etiquette: from which we can immediately see how there could be no happiness, cheerfulness, hope, pride, immediacy, without forgetfulness. (Nietzsche, 2006: 35)

Here Nietzsche recognises forgetfulness as a valid, necessary and practical feature. One cannot continuously remain in the mode of criticism.

impressions, intuitions, and individualisation are spirited away in favour of generalisations, abstractions and identities (ibid: 84).

In order to carry out its function, the construction itself must necessarily incorporate a degree of fluidity which prevents structure from solidifying into a maddeningly rigid bureaucracy which could only call attention to the inadequacy of its own illusion:

Here one may certainly admire man as a mighty genius of construction, who succeeds in piling up an infinitely complicated dome of concepts upon an unstable foundation, and, as it were, on running water. Of course, in order to be supported by such a foundation, his construction must be like one, constructed of spiders' webs: delicate enough to be carried along by the waves, strong enough not to be blown apart by every wind. (Nietzsche, 1979: 85)

As the world itself is characterised by change, the stable superstructure erected upon the changing base must itself be rigid enough to provide order, but flexible enough to withstand and respond to change. Instead of being constructed from nature or intuition directly, the structure is built with conceptual material which must first be manufactured (ibid: 85). Here Nietzsche resumes and departs from a Kantian premise, namely that knowledge must be actively produced by the subject i.e. we know only what we create<sup>89</sup>. However, on the Kantian account, truth is always already thoroughly anthropomorphic and does not or cannot contain anything which can remotely be construed as true 'in itself' but is only ever truth 'for us'. Accordingly:

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<sup>89</sup> Properly speaking, for Kant knowledge it is not actively created by the subject, but by the mind of the subject which synthesises concept and intuition behind the subject's back.

He [the seeker of truth] strives to understand the world as something analogous to man, and at best he achieves by his struggles the feeling of assimilation ... His method is to treat man as the measure of all things, but in doing so he again proceeds from the error of believing that he has these things [which he intends to measure] immediately before him as mere objects. He forgets that the original perceptual metaphors are metaphors and takes them to be the things themselves. (Nietzsche, 1979: 86)

Importantly, it is only in the act of forgetting the metaphoric nature of language and truth that one can live with repose, security and consistency. The petrification and coagulation of these metaphors provides comfort only insofar as an adequate unity holds, and the illusory and simulated nature of the metaphor and the distinction between the ‘for itself’ and the ‘in itself’ is placed out of mind. The world of perception must become adequated and identical to the world of concepts. Without this there would be no (illusion of) order to the world; indeed the creation of a web of concepts reflects an inability to tolerate the unmediated chaos of the world by providing a thin veneer of orderliness. As Nietzsche suggests in *The Gay Science* “the collective character of the world ... is in all eternity chaos – in the sense *not of a lack of necessity but of a lack of order*<sup>90</sup>, arrangement, form, beauty, wisdom, and whatever other names there are for our aesthetic anthropomorphisms [italics mine]” (Nietzsche, 1974: 146). This chaos compels humanity to create an unending proliferation of interpretations and conceptual schemas whose origin resides in, but is not reducible to, a psychological and therapeutic need for the presentations of identifiable objects situated within a discernible order.

If stability is to be achieved subject and object must be united. Only in the fetishism of forms (the petrification and coagulation of a mass of images) is this possible. As Nietzsche suggests

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<sup>90</sup> Here Nietzsche draws an important distinction between necessity and order. This is an important corrective to the view that flux entails unintelligibility.

“only in the invincible faith that *this* sun, *this* window, *this* table is a truth in itself, in short, only by forgetting that he himself is an *artistically creating* subject, does man live with any repose, security, and consistency” (1979b: 86). Nature must not be bifurcated. The relationship between perception and conception requires the establishment of an adequation. However, there is and can be no adequate conjunction between subject and object. The conceptual creative schema of the artistic subject “which originally streamed from the primal faculty of human imagination like a fiery liquid” (ibid: 86) is continually frustrated by its own dissolution. Instead, confronted by the possibility and actuality of different perceptions and perspectives the possibility of the *correct perception* or the *correct interpretation* breaks down as there are no criterion *available* to judge between competing perspectives which, if in existence, could provide the correct and definitive one. The possibility of an adequate expression or representation is regarded as a contradictory impossibility as there is no necessary relation governing subject and object in language or in sense (ibid: 86). Language and metaphor does not proceed logically, causally or necessarily to the essence of things. Indeed, “all the material within and with which the man of truth, the scientist, and the philosopher later work and build, if not derived from never-never land<sup>91</sup> is at least not derived from the essence of things” (ibid: 83). A concept is not formed by virtue of the imagination preserving a “reminder of the unique and entirely individual original experience to which it owes its origin” (ibid: 83), but because it must join countless other more or less similar cases together, cases which are strictly speaking never equivalent, but which must be made equivalent (ibid: 83). This what Nietzsche calls an “aesthetic<sup>92</sup> relation” (ibid: 86) which, operating between two absolutely different spheres (subject and object), operates as a mediating force which Nietzsche describes as “a suggestive transference, a stammering translation into a completely foreign tongue” (ibid: 86). The

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<sup>91</sup> *Wolkenkuckuksheim*, literally Cloud Cuckoo land

<sup>92</sup> Here we should remember the dual meaning of aesthetic as concerned with the creation and appreciation of beauty and as concerned with perception.

hardening and congealing of a metaphor (or equally a conventional representation) is no guarantee of truth, adequation, or justification. No representation can be considered necessary. Language always strains to represent the world.

The culmination of this mediation is a reflection on causal law. Science, proceeding from the collapse of the in-itself and the for-itself in language, draws the conclusion that there is an eternal consistency, and infallibility of the laws of nature. The laws of nature are as harmonious as the laws of logic and reason. But if the laws of nature are understood within the above problematic of language and structure, we are only ever acquainted with what the laws of nature are for us, and never what they are in themselves. Nature is known only through acquaintance with its effects and affects, that is as a sum of relations accounted by the subject. However, these relations are nothing but the comprehensions of forms overlaid upon nature and the conceptual, temporal, spatial, in a word, metaphorical edifice which we bring to things.

Just as the bee simultaneously constructs cells and fills them with honey, so science works unceasingly at that great columbarium of concepts, the graveyard of perceptions. It is always building new, higher stories, and shoring up, cleaning and renovating the old cells; above all, it takes pains to fill up this monstrously towering framework and to arrange therein the entire empirical world, which is to say the anthropomorphic world. (Nietzsche, 1979: 88).

The will to metaphor is an inextricable and indispensable aspect of the human being, yet the desire to erect a rigid new world is one that is continually frustrated. Confusion is sown among the conceptual categories as new transferences, metaphors, and metonymies emerge as the artistic desire to refashion the world moves away from the lifeless concepts it has created, now desiring that the world may be more colourful, less coherent, and eternally new (ibid: 84). The

regularity of the web of concepts has the effect of convincing us that we are aware and in the real world. But the intellect has an invincible inclination to escape from this bondage of the 'real world', or at least represent to itself that such an escape is possible. In this Bacchanalian moment, the immense framework of concepts which preserves life from the anomie of chaos is wilfully thrown into confusion, and the old conceptual barriers are themselves thrown into chaos by the use of forbidden metaphors and unheard of combinations which now turn to embrace the individuality and particularity of human life. In this reflection we find a certain play between the forces of Apollo and Dionysus transfigured as the forces of rationality and romanticism. However, as with Apollo and Dionysus, lest we consider Nietzsche simply and unproblematically on the side of Dionysus and romanticism, we are reminded of their mutual constitution. Rational man and intuitive man "stand side by side" (ibid: 90). One is the reflection of the other. In one is the fear of intuition and with intuition difference, individuality and perspective. In the other, scorn for abstraction which departs from life. One carefully inartistic, the other wildly irrational, but both equally concerned with a desire to rule over life. One achieves this through foresight, prudence and regularity, the other by the affirmation of life in all its multiplicitous forms, including, and especially, suffering. Each represents the limit condition and reflection of the other. Abstraction succeeds in staving off chaos by gaining the stoic illumination of rationality at the cost of happiness. The other, in embracing intuition, suffers more intensely and more frequently, unable to learn from experience, but achieves mastery by embracing the liberation of mythic deception, seizing hold of life in all its forms.

In contrast to the usual postmodern interpretation of Nietzsche, such an analysis of language is primarily concerned to reject the false choices on offer and recover a difficult middle in which both rationality and intuition (romanticism) are critiqued as accomplices to a false metaphysical choice (modernity). Instead the rational-intuition dyad is shown to be a self-constituting unity.



Rather than siding with one to the deprecation of the other, Nietzsche places himself in a complex relation to the dyad in order to pursue its implications and limitations. This is a logic of both/and which is simultaneously a neither/nor. In so doing, the subject-object relation is problematized and the one-sided resolutions on offer are both rejected. Nietzsche opposes the entire system of metaphysical grammar with its moral undertones on the basis that it displays an active indifference and suppression of difference for the establishment of identity (cf. Derrida 1982: 17f). To this end, the very unity or conjunction of ‘language’ and ‘reason’, ‘mind’ and ‘body’ and ‘subject’ and ‘object’ are placed into question.

Drawing on and developing Nietzsche, Derrida presents a similarly complex manoeuvre in relation to presence. If we understand Nietzsche’s account of language in the above manner deconstruction should be understood as concerned with identifying and attempting to move out from under the false metaphysical choices forced upon us and encased within language through a logic operating on a simultaneous both/and neither/nor. This position rejects any attempt or desire to represent ‘the real’ unambiguously in language and/or equally to escape from the contingencies of language into another plane<sup>93</sup>. Such an approach can only result in a closure of being and a reduction of the real to the present in some form. Enmeshed in this fallacy of presence, our gaze becomes redirected from the difference and openness of being towards a specific and particular mode of being which is granted a privileged status. Against this, Derrida repeatedly asserts the alterity of the real cannot be made equivalent to what is represented or made present (re-presented). Here deconstruction need not be understood as a sceptical collapse of the real, but a pursuit of the real as the other of language and the preservation of this distinction. On this account, deconstruction is concerned with a critique of irrealism, exposing

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<sup>93</sup> i.e. most notably, conceptuality c.f. Derrida 1973.

that what we take as 'reality' as all too often an anthropomorphic or idealist collapse of the real. In critical realist parlance we might suggest Derrida is concerned with preserving the encroachment or identification of the transitive dimension with the intransitive dimension understood as the illegitimate closure effected in language. Far from leading towards a certain *jouissance* of irrationalism or relativism, deconstruction seizes upon the way in which language operates to articulate the world through the use of an equivocal instrument while seeking to avoid metaphysical closures i.e. deconstruction operates to prevent the collapse of the real into language and into the present (Norris, 1987: 18).

In particular Derrida is concerned with the implications of the paradoxical status of language as both an instituter and underminer of truth and meaning<sup>94</sup> (Dews, 1987: 9). For Derrida the failing of the Western philosophical tradition rests in the illusion that meaning in language can be, in particular privileged contexts, contained within a closed circle of immanent relations which binds object to thought and makes meaning immanent, immediate or self-present. In Derrida's view, all language is based upon an inexorable dislocated externality entailing the necessity of interpretative acts and carrying with it the intrinsic dangers of loss, incoherency, ambiguity, contradiction, dispersal and endless delays of meaning including its possible non-recuperation. Language represents the condition of possibility and impossibility of meaning in which there is no possibility of recovering an original or privileged sense. Rather than being

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<sup>94</sup> This is particularly evident in Derrida's critique of Husserl's attempts at objectivity (Derrida 1973, 1989). In Derrida's analysis of Husserl, the embodiment and dependence of truth or objectivity in language creates an aporia for Husserl precisely at the point he wishes to 'go transcendental' and escape relativism. Rather than securing objectivity, its inscription into language ironically sets it free:

Speech is no longer simply the expression of what, without it, would already be an object, caught again in its primordial purity: speech constitutes the object and is a concrete juridical condition of truth. The paradox is that, without the apparent fall back into language and thereby into history, a fall which would alienate the ideal purity of sense, sense would remain an empirical formation imprisoned as fact in a psychological subjectivity – in the inventor's head. Historical incarnation sets free the transcendental, instead of binding it. This last notion, the transcendental, must then be rethought. (Derrida, 1989: 77)

concerned with capturing truth or meaning, deconstruction is concerned with uncovering and revealing systematic incoherencies which resist the effort of establishing closure and through this act, preventing the other of language from being collapsed into language. Accordingly, deconstruction represents a vigilant and necessary reaction against the tendency of thought to reduce being to present, fixed, immediate and static representations. Indeed, all of Derrida's key theoretical moves can be understood as concerned with the attempt to preserve the real as other without reducing it to what has been represented in consciousness, experience, language, or reason (i.e. what it is for us). As Norris suggests, deconstruction is concerned with a "rigorous effort of conceptual desublimation", or put simply a "waking up" to the problem of language and realism (Norris, 1982: 28-9). In its most rigorous form, deconstruction operates as a constant reminder of the way in which language deflects or complicates the project of articulating the complexity of the world (ibid: 19) and the way in which dominance functions to mask that which is dominated behind language itself and the relations of presence and identity.

#### **2.4 Jam tomorrow and jam yesterday – but never jam to-day**

The lynchpin to Derrida's account is the notion of *différance*. *Différance* is used to capture the way in which meaning is never simply the re-presentation of something already present, but highlights the irreducibility of presence as constituted by non-presence. Here the language of ontology seems to fall short. Ontology names only what is present or absent, and struggles to conceive, and perhaps cannot even speak of something which is properly both and neither. In attempting to find a word to present the unrepresentable, Derrida uses the metaphor of a *sheaf* to 'represent' the particular relations of *différance*. Here sheaf is understood as an assemblage of different threads loosely bound and held together (Derrida, 1982: 3). As a sheaf, *différance* represents a loose grouping of different lines of meaning which can be held together in certain

ways, unbound and recombined (ibid: 3). The effect is a fluidity and heteronomy in language which is inherent to linguistic structure (*langue*) and practice (*parole*). The word *différance* itself embodies this relationship. Signalled by the notorious ‘a’ and playing on the indiscernible variance of pronunciation in French, *différance* represents an ambiguous and indiscernible assemblage of meaning ‘to differ’ and ‘to defer’<sup>95</sup>. In *différance* both moments are held together as an excess or reserve of meaning which resists both unity and division while inscribing opposition within itself. *Différance* is the inscription of the ‘both/and’ and the ‘neither/nor’ within language.

*Différance* unites the way in which language as a decentred structure is constructed about a fundamentally polyvalence that is the condition of possibility for meaning. In the dual constitution of *différance* as differing and deferring, *différance* is always the interplay of presence and absence. One aspect cannot be reduced to the other, made dependent upon or cast aside. Between these terms is an insurmountable gap which can only be expressed by abstracting the two moments of differing and differing. Here the inaudible ‘a’ of *différance* cannot be exposed but remains reserved and concealed as a surplus behind the presence of pronunciation, while simultaneously always revealing this relationship. In the notion of *différance* Derrida is offering a playful reflection on Saussurean linguistics. For Saussure the meaning of a sign is constituted by reference to other signs. Each sign has meaning only by virtue of its difference from other signs. Indeed, language relies on the preservation of difference, firstly, as concerning the phonic difference between signifiers such that ‘cat’ is comprehensible because it is not ‘cap’ or ‘bat’; but secondly, and more importantly, is the difference entailed by the web of signification. A sign is ultimately determined by its reference,

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<sup>95</sup> Defer also contains an ambiguity insofar as it concerns deferment (temporal postponement) and deference (yielding to something or someone).

difference and deference to and from other signs within a linguistic system providing it with a certain range and delimitation of meaning and use. Language is such a system of interdependent signs that an isolated sign, if such a thing could exist, would be meaningless. It is the reference, difference and deference of a sign within a web of signifiers which makes meaning possible (Eagleton, 1983; Saussure, 1983).

A critical signalling device used by deconstruction in highlighting this *différential* relationship and the inadequate and yet necessary nature of signs is the art of writing under erasure (*sous erature*). To write under erasure is to simultaneously present and obscure a word which is misleading or inaccurate, e.g. in the sentence ‘~~being~~ is multiple’ it is necessary to erase being (which is singular) in order to preserve the sensibility of being as *différance* and therefore multiplicitous without subjecting it once again to identity under the name ‘being’<sup>96</sup>. According to Spivak erasure and *différance* involve recognising “the absence of a presence, an always already absent present, of the lack of an origin that is the condition of thought and experience” (Spivak, 1976: xvii). *Différance* is the antagonist to presence. Like the word *différance*, presence is the indiscernible union of two aspects: spatial – what is here before me; and temporal – what is now. Presence is constituted by the unity of these two features (as the here-and-now). This mode of the present, is characterised by that which is before me (i.e. it is a mode of, what Bhaskar will call, empirical realism). Symptomatically, this relationship of presence becomes inscribed as that which is not only present but presented as an unchanging present. What is immediately present becomes reified, fetishized, naturalised and even

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<sup>96</sup> This art of erasure first appears in Heidegger concerning the relation of Being and Dasein: A thoughtful glance ahead into this realm of ‘Being’ can only write it as **Being**. The drawing of these crossed lines at first only repels [*abwert*], especially the almost ineradicable habit of conceiving ‘Being’ as something standing by itself and only coming at times face to face with man. (Heidegger, 1958: 81)

abstracted from temporality and presented as eternal<sup>97</sup>. In contrast, *différance* is concerned with dissolving this illicit universality by highlighting that what is present is dependent upon other conditions and relationships which are forgotten in the presentation or representation of presence. By inscribing a word under erasure the constitutive structure of language is acknowledged as remaining unrepresented, presupposed and necessary as a surplus and reserve which operates to create meaning highlighting the way in which presence is constituted by *différance*. As following the logic of writing under erasure would result in the erasure of all language, it is reserved for drawing attention to critical terms only.

The spatial aspect of *différance* is characterised by the dynamic structuralist relationship in which a sign is defined by its relationship with other signifiers. Likewise, the temporal aspect of *différance* is defined by its reference to both its past and future usage. As with *Dasein* in Heidegger, a sign is characterised by its historical context and trajectory, including (most importantly) the historical development of a language itself (diachronicity). The sign carries with it both the memory (etymology) and the forgetting (present usage) of its genealogical heritage. Moreover, as continually in motion, this present meaning and usage of the sign is itself subject to change in the future such that new contexts of meaning may always open up. As the sign is meaningful only within a web of reference, changing references or contexts will create new and unintended meanings and connections. The intensity of the present characterised by *différance* thus stands, here and now, as the history of the past in the present, and the future enfolded but inaccessible in the now. This presents language (and the present) as an open rather than closed system, an inseparable assemblage of being, nonbeing and

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<sup>97</sup> In critical realist terminology, the metaphysics of presence is part of the implicit ontology of irrealism and the unity of the epistemic-ontic fallacy, ontological actualism and ontological monovalence in language (Bhaskar 1995).

becoming<sup>98</sup>. A sign, as a complex spatio-temporal-causal nexus, is constituted by *différance* precisely because it is an open systemic ‘phenomena’ constantly differing and deferring to other signs, and differing and deferring to its temporal history and future possibilities. Accordingly, the sign is composed by that which exceeds it, the absent which lies behind and is masked by the presentation of the sign in the determinations of the present<sup>99</sup>.

This importance of *différance* becomes particularly evident in the contrast between speech and the writing. For the metaphysics of presence, the written sign is taken to replace or stand in for the ‘thing’ i.e. the sign represents (re-presents) the thing in its absence, signifying the absent thing for the purpose of presentation (or re-presentation). In this calculus the sign always defers to a lost presence such that the sign is only conceivable on the basis of the missing presence towards which it is moving and to which it aims to reappropriate. In contrast, the speech act is said to represent the immediate and privileged unity of meaning based on the articulation of sound and sense in the proximity of reference, thus combining presentation, representation and self-presentation<sup>100</sup>. In relation to speech, the written sign becomes a secondary phenomenon which lacks the immediate presence and certainty of speech instead presupposing a lost original unity or presence, a missing ‘thing’ for which the sign is now a substitute (Derrida, 1982: 9). Because it lacks the immediacy given in speech, the sign is considered a degenerate form; less desirable because less immediate and therefore prone to introduce ambiguity and confusion into the equation. Yet, if we take Plato’s or Rousseau’s discussion of the relation between speech and writing as representative of this position, we find that this position is unable to

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<sup>98</sup> This is what Bhaskar refers to as becoming-in-being (process-in-product, i.e. history) and being-in-becoming (product-in-process i.e. geo-temporal trajectory), although here the appropriate deconstructive move would be to place ~~being~~-in-becoming, and becoming-in-~~being~~ under erasure to signal that we are dealing with an inconsistent and *différential* being rather than with reified and static conceptions of being. (see Bhaskar, 1995)

<sup>99</sup> Here we might suggest is a similar manoeuvre to Bhaskar’s critique of actualism and of the fetishism of closed and mechanical systems.

<sup>100</sup> All the more so in the experience listening to oneself speak (*s’entendre parler*).

sustain itself. Plato must preserve the speech of Socrates in writing in order to testify to the dangers of writing, presenting his writing as a good form which preserves the self-presence of speech in dialogue (Derrida 2004), while Rousseau in his *Confessions* condemns writing for being only a representation of speech, and yet confesses that he expresses himself better in writing than in person (Derrida, 1976: 142). Both Plato and Rousseau disqualify writing as the destruction of presence and a disease of speech while simultaneously valorising it as the possibility and promise of reappropriation (ibid: 141-142). In such moments we encounter not presence itself, but a desire for presence, which already presupposes a lack of presence, or the inevitable displacement of presence i.e. *différance*. Indeed, ironically, presence even becomes an ambiguous and dangerous ideal with writing becoming necessary to capture “a presence whose lack has not been preceded by any fullness” (Johnson, 2004: xiii). The concerted attempt to maintain the primacy and logic of presence collapses without introducing *différance* as both its condition of possibility and impossibility. Presence is never simply self-presence but is always constituted by hidden premises and relations of *différance* entailing that there is always in need of interpretation:

... difference [*différance*] makes the opposition of presence and absence possible. Without the possibility of difference, the desire of presence as such would not find its breathing-space. That means by the same token that this desire carries in itself the destiny of its nonsatisfaction [*sic*]. Difference produces what it forbids, making possible the very thing that it makes impossible. (Derrida, 1976: 143)

It is *différance* understood as a particular incorporation of negativity (non-identity, temporality, distance, change, and absence) that provides language with its functionality, while also opening the space for its critique. That is to say, *différance* critiques an idea of language as a pure presence, fallen from the heavens, ready-made and fully formed (Derrida, 1982: 11). Instead, language faces the difficult task of coming to grips with its historical construction without



falling into immediacy. Languages are not natural. They are not inscribed into the cosmos or hard-wired into the human brain, nor do they universally and unequivocally express a particular cognitive structure (such as an *episteme*). *Différance* is language understood as decentred structure; without origin, without teleology, and without guarantee. *Différance* is the “non-full, non-simple, structured and differentiating ... [~~origin~~] of differences” (ibid: 11). In short, *différance* is the affirmation of the open-systemic and decentred nature of language that conditions the possibility of meaningful language, thought and critique by rejecting the privilege of ‘presence’ and the language of closure and certainty this entails.

*Différance* then can be said to erase the presence of presence. In so doing, it remains unexposed but presupposed by the construction of meaning. That is to say, *différance* cannot be contained or articulated within language but operates as the hidden domain of the real which constitutes the reserve of all presence, and makes possible the presence of presentation:

One can expose only that which at a certain moment can become present, manifest, that which can be shown, presented as something present, a being-present in its truth, in the truth of a present or the presence of the present. Now if difference ~~is~~ (and I cross out the ‘~~is~~’) what makes possible the presentation of the being-present, it is never presented as such. It is never offered to the present. Or to anyone. Reserving itself, not exposing itself, in regular fashion it exceeds the order of truth at a certain precise point, but without dissimulating itself as something, as a mysterious being, in the occult of a nonknowledge or in a hole with indeterminable borders (for example, in a topology of castration). (Derrida, 1982: 5-6)

Just as one cannot present the open system, any attempt to write *différance* immediately within language results in the presentation of presence which obscures *différance*. A similar problem

is encountered in Heidegger's reflections on *alethia* and the dialectic of concealment and disclosure of Being in the *Origin of the Work of Art*<sup>101</sup> (Heidegger, 1993b). Each moment in which Being is revealed is simultaneously a moment in which Being is concealed. Indeed, concealment becomes the necessary condition for disclosure, analogous to a certain Nietzschean forgetting, as one cannot reveal in language the entire world at any one moment but always and necessarily creates particular closures. From this interpretive back and forth truth emerges as a product of this struggle – a work of art in the making. Likewise, for Derrida *différance* stands behind and exceeds the bounds of presence as the condition of possibility which enables meaning.

The excess of *différance* within what is presented forms the trace, the symptom of an inevitable failure of the system to attain closure. The trace, as signalling *différance*, represents a sublime moment which highlights the limitations of a particular closure. While not in itself a moment of transgression, it is a moment upon which transgression can be built; a moment at which the system of representation begins to breakdown and other possibilities are signalled. This is a moment in which the other of language, and with it the failure of language to grasp the other becomes apparent. In exploring the temporality of the other, Levinas uses the example of the irrecoverable alterity of the past, a past that has never become and never will become present but nevertheless remains as a trace in the present (Derrida, 1982: 21). This concept of the past which has never become present opens up history and the reading of history to contingency and the possible alternative trajectories that have been suppressed or hidden behind 'what was' and 'what is'. Derrida perhaps more fruitfully speaks of the unrepresentable future, the future

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<sup>101</sup> Likewise, this relation can be found in Althusser regarding sight and oversight (Althusser, 1997).

which is yet to come, which moves us from a nostalgia for lost pasts to hope for possible (or more precisely, impossible) futures (ibid: 13).

As *différance* is a relation, it is important to point out that there is no domain or kingdom of *différance* (ibid: 22). Instead, *différance* is the subversion of any kingdom and any attempt to establish closure, certainty, identity or totality, i.e. the creation of pure presence. *Différance* is a threat against everything which desires a kingdom and to the stability this represents (i.e. the stability of the metaphysics of presence). *Différance* is always anarchic, transgressive and transcending<sup>102</sup>. Because of this apparently radically apophatic stance, Derrida distinguishes *différance* from negative theology. In negative theology the Being of God is only known or knowable through the negation and sublation of positive predicates. While Derrida concedes *différance* may resemble negative theology, and even be indistinguishable from negative theology at points (Derrida, 1982: 6), unlike the divine object of negative theology, *différance* has no Being. *Différance* neither exists nor does it have essence (ibid: 6) while negative theology is concerned with delineating a super-essentiality, a divine infinity expressed in, but exceeding finite categories (ibid: 6). Negative theology reveals itself as still concerned with articulating Being, and onto-theological Being at that. Alternatively, *différance* is incompatible with such an ontological, theological or onto-theological appropriation (placing 'is' under erasure to avoid ontologising *différance*). *Différance* is rather the very opening that makes such appropriations possible. This is to say, *différance* is a relation which cannot be tied to any system or master-signifier or transcendental signification. It is precisely that which eludes mastery and represents the structural limit of mastery. Accordingly, *différance* signals not only the limit condition but the impossibility of any formalist or totalising project in language.

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<sup>102</sup> i.e. it is Dionysian.

Yet, if this is so, can it be possible to conceive of or articulate the real? This question is not easy to answer. The real, that which is outside the text, properly escapes every determination, and ultimately rejects every name it might receive. Every text is a new inscription of the real. There is no proper word or unique name, no master-signifier or kerygmatic proclamation upon which we can rest, and this perpetual failure must be thought without nostalgia or pathos. There is no transcendental signified, no presence or self-presence that might ground the possibility of realism. The real is strictly speaking unnameable within the finite system of language. This is to say, any conception of realism after deconstruction must be a realism of *différance* and not a metaphysics of presence. Indeed, far from preventing the possibility of ontological discourse, *différance*, I hope to show, makes space for the proper analysis of ontological relations.

## Chapter 3: Blanching Mythology – Realism and Language

It has become almost ‘common sense’ that every act of understanding is embedded in a cultural and historical context of meanings and presuppositions that can never be exhausted by rational explanation. Theory is deluded if it believes it can approach a text or object from some ideal vantage point of pure disinterested knowledge able to transcend its own cultural milieu. Of course, there are those who reject this ‘common sense’ position as a conservative or despairing resignation before the inevitable determination of the *status quo*. Instead, theory is defended as justified in its claim to transcend the various kinds of local meanings or cultural embedding. On one side of the divide are the advocates of a strong hermeneutics or sociology who hold that all knowledge is at root a largely irrational (or perhaps better arational) choice between rival paradigms, research programmes and interpretations. All thought, even the most rational, abstract or theoretical, cannot escape from its implicit or tacit assumptions and values. This position rests on the idea that prejudice, in the proper Burkean sense, is so deeply built into our traditions of thought that no amount of rational thinking can dislodge it (Norris, 1985: 24). On the other side of the divide are the thinkers who argue that reason is still able to comprehend, criticise and change. On this account, reason functions as a process of self-reflection able to transcend our situation and critique common sense or convention through appeals to rigour, logic and universality. Thought is recognised as capable of a positive, emancipating thrust without necessarily becoming embroiled in conformist dogma.

As always, the dividing lines are clearly drawn: modern vs. postmodern, philosophy vs. rhetoric, truth vs. error, Plato vs. the sophists. Philosophy is understood as seeking the truth

guided by the light of reason in the academy, while rhetoric or ‘writing’ is concerned with the creation and interpretation of pleasing fables in the marketplace. In the *Phaedrus* Plato embodies this relationship in the myth of King Thamus<sup>103</sup> who is visited by Theuth (Thoth) and offered the gift of writing (*Phaedrus*: 274e). The former, after careful consideration, refuses the gift arguing that humanity is better off without writing. It is suggested that writing is a dangerous gift because it substitutes the mere inscription of arbitrary and lifeless signs for the living presence of spoken language (c.f. Derrida 2004). With writing, the real powers of memory will decline and pupils will learn without the direct benefit of a teacher’s instruction thereby having the appearance of wisdom but not the access to self-present truth. Following the logic of Thamus, Plato argues for the necessity of dialectics and *anamnesis*<sup>104</sup>, dialogue coupled with an unforgetting that recollects spiritual truths the soul has forgotten in its fallen state (*Phaedrus*: 276a). Despite our confinement in the prison-house of the senses and the material world, these truths can still be summoned to mind through wise teaching and the discipline of self-knowledge.

This Platonic position is captured in Saint Paul’s proclamation ‘the letter killeth but the spirit giveth life’ (2 Cor. 3:6), and is reproduced in countless philosophies and theologies. Operating in these instances is a rigorous logic of exclusion determined by the need to protect the sovereign claims of truth against the bad degenerate effects of writing (Norris, 1987: 32). Indeed, writing, along with its twin ‘mythology’, is condemned because it rests on an appeal to fables arising from second-hand ‘truths’ rather than the true path of direct self-knowledge.

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<sup>103</sup> As Derrida highlights, as an Egyptian myth Thamus is the embodiment of the King of Kings and the King of the Gods (Ammon), who “has no need to write. He Speaks, he says, he dictates, and his word suffices” (Derrida, 2004: 81). Writing is therefore a poisoned present which in some senses does away with the real presence of the God-King. Writing is a regicidal act which substitutes the breathless sign for the living voice equating writing with death (ibid: 81ff).

<sup>104</sup> Although the doctrine of anamnesis (developed in *Meno* and *Phaedo*) is only alluded to here as “knowledge in the soul of the listener” (276a).

As Plato's spokesperson, Socrates is always able to convict his opponents of not really knowing what they claim to know because they merely repeat whatever fancy captures the public's imagination. Indeed, the proliferation of fables relies purely on rhetoric and argumentation to give the appearance of wisdom. Thus, writing is opposed to speech, mythology to logos, opinion to knowledge, death to life and repetition to origin: "What Plato is attacking in sophistic, therefore, is not simply a resource to memory, but within such recourse, the substitution of the mnemonic device for live memory ... the passive, mechanical 'by heart' for the active reanimation of knowledge, for its reproduction in the present" (Derrida, 1981: 108). As Norris summarises, "[i]t is through writing that logos is deflected from its proper, truth seeking aim and abandoned to a state of hazardous dependence on the vagaries of unauthorised transmission" (Norris, 1987: 33). However, there are a number of slippages in Plato. In his analysis of Plato's mythology Derrida reveals a constituent failure of the text to achieve what its arguments require (Derrida 2004). At a very basic level, such moments are represented by a series of appeals to metaphors and myths which themselves undermine the binary opposition Plato himself attempts to erect. Plato is unable to define what should count as the 'good' employment of language or reason without falling back upon metaphors and myths drawn from writing. This contradiction appears even when Plato's Socrates is speaking with force against the dangers of writing:

There is a perpetual double movement in Plato's text by which positive values (speech, self-presence, living memory) are defined only by contrast to whatever threatens to invade their privileged domain. So speech is represented, not only as the opposite of writing, but as a 'good' kind of writing that is inscribed in the soul by revealed or self-authorised truth. (Norris, 1987: 35)

Plato is inescapably condemned to write even as he seeks to denounce its effects in the name of a self-present truth (speech). This contradiction is not particular to Plato but presents a

challenge to philosophy itself as inescapably a form of writing and interpretation. It has been argued, following this, that philosophy is only able to be what it is by forgetting or repressing its own rhetorical character in order to stake its claim to rationality and certainty.

Richard Rorty, offering a pragmatic and liberal reading of deconstruction, famously argues in *Philosophy as a Kind of Writing: An Essay on Derrida* (Rorty 1982), that philosophy should surrender its pretensions to intellectual grandeur and learn to recognise itself as simply another voice in the cacophony of cultural exchange. Philosophy is no master discipline but has a future only if it gives up its legislative and transcendental claims and settles down to the critical interpretation of text and meaning within culture. For all intents and purposes, objects and texts are no longer defined by appeals to truth, but rather the role they play in the context of this or that present-day debate. From his pragmatic and cultural viewpoint, “there is no interesting difference between tables and texts, protons and poems” (ibid: 153), aside from their possibilities for use and their “redescription, reinterpretation and manipulation” (ibid: 153). This has the effect of levelling out all truth claims and exchanging the pursuit of ultimate answers for a *dialogic* cultural interpretation of meaning. This position goes hand in hand with rejecting the cherished metaphors of philosophy as enlightenment (extending from Plato to Kant), the mind as the mirror of nature and epistemology as concerned with clear and distinct ideas. Instead, the governing metaphor is of the marketplace, in particular, the free market:

... that there are no constraints on inquiry save conversational ones – no wholesale constraints derived from the nature of the objects, or of the mind, or of language, but only those retail constraints provided by the remarks of our fellow inquirers. (Rorty, 1982: 165)



Against the great foundationalist project of philosophy, Rorty is concerned to return to its literary and anti-foundationalist roots by reclaiming Sophism. Rather than diverting philosophy away from storytelling and metaphor, Rorty is concerned to show that philosophy has always been in the business of constructing fictions; lest we forget, Plato's philosophical concepts (let alone his harsh strictures against poetry) were embellished by means of fictions, parables and imaginary dialogues. Indeed, philosophy has never been anything but *sophisticated* fables. Omniscient narration should be exchanged for a more flexible and provisional account of how things hold together within a certain cultural perspective concerned with keeping the cultural conversation alive. Indeed, Rorty argues for philosophy as an endeavour in narrative whose role is to create new stories, new metaphors and new practices.

In his attack on philosophy Rorty critiques both Nietzsche and Derrida for their inability to be done with metaphysics. While the good side of Derrida is able to acknowledge philosophy as the "self-conscious play of a certain kind of writing" (ibid: 103) the bad side of Derrida is represented by his continual return to ontological terminology (such as trace and *différance*) which operates, in the manner of an apophatic theology, as a *via negativa* leading to the transcendental signified, even if it never truly arrives. This tendency to 'go transcendental' and become a *philosopher* of language must be avoided at all costs to prevent the closure of the cultural conversation. Rather, deconstruction should be concerned to show how philosophic arguments come down in the end to a variety of narrative pretexts. Concepts are reducible to metaphors, and truth to fiction. While this conception of deconstruction is particularly prevalent within the Anglo-American tradition, and is held equally by both its proponents and detractors, this presents a particularly anaemic version of deconstruction.

Against this, deconstruction can in fact offer a rigorous critical thought able to underlabour for both philosophy and science in pursuit of the real. Deconstruction is not simply a ‘method’, ‘technique’ or species of ‘critique’, nor has it simply to do with textual interpretation, a means of saying new and provocative things about texts (Norris, 1987: 18). To treat deconstruction as an open invitation to new and more adventurous forms of interpretative criticism is to mistake what is most distinctive and demanding in Derrida’s texts (ibid: 20). It might even be suggested that the form of American deconstruction represented by Rorty is an enterprise distinctly alien to Derrida’s own serious preoccupations and interests<sup>105</sup> (ibid: 18). Likewise, the reduction of deconstruction to an-albeit sophisticated literary free-play is to grossly misread the implications of deconstruction and, more importantly, the nature of language that deconstruction brings to light. Derrida is not simply a mischievous modern sophist bent upon reducing every discipline to a species of rhetorical play (ibid: 21). While certain disciplines, like philosophy, are prone to suppress, repress or sublimate their own written character, the task is not to break with them, to refuse them in the name of an all-encompassing triumph of writing and literature, but rather to rehabilitate and redress damaging readings. All writing is intertextual through and through, and all philosophy is writing, but this is not a licence for rejoicing in literary vandalism.

In this section I will focus on the essay ‘White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy’<sup>106</sup> (Derrida, 1982), which provides an important analysis of the concept of metaphor and the conditions of possibility and limitations of philosophy. On the one hand, the essay critiques philosophy as a specialised or privileged discipline that has sought to distance itself from its literary base, while on the other it presents philosophy as a constructive exercise

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<sup>105</sup> A qualification to this is of course that certain texts in Derrida oeuvre such as *Spurs* (1979) seem to represent the more poetic and *avant-garde* approach that resemble Rorty’s hope for philosophy, but only on the condition that they are removed from the broader ontological preoccupations of deconstructions.

<sup>106</sup> From here on simply ‘White Mythology’.

naturally arising from the problems encountered in language, in particular, the problem of metaphor. ‘White Mythology’ is instructive, offering a complex and detailed account of the role of metaphor in the Western philosophical tradition and in the logic of scientific discovery. Derrida is concerned above all to take up the challenge the metaphorical nature of language poses to rigorous disciplines such as philosophy or science<sup>107</sup>, historically concerned with the pursuit of clear and distinct ideas and apparently undermined by their reliance upon it. As linguistically mediated both disciplines inexorably rely upon the articulations of language for expression. However, far from undermining philosophy, the questions encountered in the use of language create the space for philosophical investigation. In particular, the very notion of metaphor inevitably and necessarily prompts a certain form of transcendental philosophical discourse concerned with the nature of language itself and the relation between language, conceptuality and the nature of the world including “opposition of the proper and the non-proper, of essence and accident, of intuition and discourse, of thought and language, of the intelligible and the sensible” (ibid: 229). ‘White Mythology’ thus functions as an exploration of the conditions of possibility, that is the transcendental and formal conditions of metaphor, and with this, of the conditions of possibility of philosophy itself (ibid: 227).

### **3.1 Uncovering the privilege of philosophy**

The relationship between philosophy and writing is one of contention. Philosophy has largely been concerned to elide its metaphoricity, and ‘White Mythology’ begins with an analysis of this discussion in Anatole France’s *Garden of Epicurus* in which we encounter the problem that “[a]bstract notions always hide a sensory figure” (ibid: 210). Following a critique of Plato, Anatole France presents metaphysical language as always concerned to erase the traces of the

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<sup>107</sup> For the most part I will simply use the term philosophy for the sake of economy.

sensory. So disfigured, the language used by the metaphysicians, which goes under the name of 'concept', is no longer sensory but abstract and rational in character, with all sensorial elements having been stripped of the stamp of time and space, losing their particular physical or historical reality and gaining in the process an inestimable universal value (conceptuality). Primitive (sensuous and material) meaning is displaced and forgotten while simultaneously an abstract meaning is placed into circulation. As with the distinction between use-value and exchange-value in Marx, in language the appearance of a universal currency of exchange (that is, the concept) effects a necessary erasure and transmutation of value represented by the (conceptual) symbol. In the case of language, as in the case of value, the metaphorical aspect is no longer noticed, but is taken for the proper value itself. In this newly created state the original value of metaphor in the sensuous and material world is forgotten. Indeed, for Anatole France philosophy, as metaphysics, is a process of metaphorisation that gets carried away with itself. Because it is concerned with the abstract, it must work with the most worn of words and phrases, that is the concepts most removed from the particular and which are therefore the most universal, in order to avoid invoking contingent or accidental qualities. As Derrida suggests, this logic reaches its apogee in the philosophical penchant for negative concepts, absolute, infinite, intangible, non-Being, allowing for the dissolution of any finite determination altogether. These negative concepts break the tie that binds them to the meaning of any particular being, that is, to the totality and particularity of what is (ibid: 212). In so doing, they suspend the particulars of metaphoricity for the universality of conceptuality. This 'hatred' of the particular for which Nietzsche castigated science (Nietzsche 1974; 1979) is expressed in the erasure of metaphor in the exchangeable universality of the conceptual symbol. What is non-identical comes to be identical in the domain of the concept leaving behind the particular determinations, including the accidental and contingent characteristics, inherent in the metaphor itself. The process is summed up in the passage from the *Garden of Epicurus* in part

providing the basis of the title for the essay. Even reduced to a 'schema' (or symbol or concept), defaced and with little of its original brilliance, the image still remains a metaphorical image. Metaphor always escapes the philosopher's desire to escape metaphoricity into conceptuality:

I think I have made you realise one thing, Aristos, that any expression of an abstract idea can only be an analogy. By an odd fate, the very metaphysicians who think to escape the world of appearances are constrained to live perpetually in allegory. A sorry lot of poets, they dim the colours of the ancient fables and are themselves but gatherers of fables. Their output is mythology, an anemic mythology. (ibid: 213)

For Anatole France, philosophy can never do away with its metaphorical nature but is always haunted by the particularities of language and metaphor which can never be fully erased. Accordingly the metaphysician is an absurd creature who is unable to recognise their own activity as mythologisers. Opposed to the self-aware poetic creator of myth, the metaphysician believes they are escaping the deceptive world of appearance and mythology for the certain world of ideas and concepts. What they actually succeed in doing is producing an emaciated mythology which is devoid of the potential richness of language. Anatole France rehearses a certain familiar thematic within the 'Age of the Poets' (Badiou, 2014) which departing from the cold austere logic of modernity for the reminiscences of the subjective and cultural experience of being in the world (c.f. Heidegger 1997, 1993c, 1993d, 1993e). However, Derrida is not concerned with reproducing this romantic nostalgia or its rebirthed form in the postmodern emphasis upon aesthetics, narrative or cultural conversation. Instead, Derrida modifies the last sentence to read "They produce white mythology" (*mythologie blanche*). This modification contains Derrida's positive deconstructive project in total.

In true Derridean fashion, here we have an overdetermined and evocative phrase. *Mythologie blanche*, in which *blanche* stands as the predicate white, finds an immediate application in the text as referring to the formative mythology of philosophy as an Indo-European (i.e. white) fantasy bound up in rationality (ibid: 213). Metaphysics, as the white mythology *par excellence* reassembles and reflects the attempt of Western philosophy to pursue the universal form of *logos* i.e. the metaphysics of presence. However, *blanche* also brings to mind the verb *blanchir*, which carries the meaning to whiten, to turn white or pale, to extract colour<sup>108</sup>. Accordingly, we could also read this as per Anatole France, and suggest metaphysics is not only a white-washed mythology but an impoverished and anaemic mythology. Taken together this (over)determination of ‘white mythology–metaphysics’ can be understood as the attempt to erase difference and particularity and erect a universality founded upon reason, all of which establishes the great mythological (meta)narrative of Western thought. But, there is an important and latent third meaning which requires some theoretical preparation and connects the Derridean project to the philosophy of science and the process of critical rectification (Bachelard).

Beginning with the critique of Western philosophy, Derrida offers a whole series of examples whose literal meanings are drawn from the sensory world, which were taken over by the abstract discourse of philosophy and subject to the process of attrition, in which the original sensory meaning was suppressed. For the most part, these metaphors are visual and have to do with seeing, perceiving, or embody some relation to the visual domain. This includes terms such as enlightenment, insight, or the Cartesian ‘clear and distinct’ ideas. In each case, the sensuous progresses to the abstract and loses the poetic power to evoke the vivid particularities

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<sup>108</sup> This implicit reference we be when Derrida quotes Bachelard “A psychoanalysis of objective knowledge, then, must set itself to blanching, if not erasing, these naïve images” (Derrida, 1982 : 259).

of experience for an abstract and dry collection of symbols and schema. However, the metaphorical nature of these terms inevitably remains as a trace and philosophy is never quite able to escape from metaphor insofar as it is unable to avoid invoking metaphorical language at both the centre and margins of its practice.

In an attempt at reconciliation, this metaphor becomes and remains, in all its essential characteristics, a classical *philosopheme* and a metaphysical concept *par excellence*. The problem of metaphor appears as a particular problem within the field of philosophy which as a conceptual enterprise would naturally seek to dominate, i.e. to create the concept of metaphor. Yet, however much it tries, conceptuality is unable to avoid invoking the metaphor of metaphor in attempting to conceptualise metaphor. Indeed the (philosophical) concept of metaphor is unable to include under its own law the totality of the field to which the product belongs (ibid: 219). As Norris highlights, the critical aspect of this analysis is a challenge to the Kantian conception of knowledge, and the idea, prevalent within the philosophy of science, that phenomenal intuitions (or observational data) must be ‘brought under’ adequate or corresponding concepts which have a universal and logical characteristic (Norris, 2000: 98). Contra Kant, Derrida asserts that philosophy will always at some point encounter a limit to its powers of conceptualisation given the extent to which all theories or concepts are themselves caught up in a chain of metaphorical swerves, displacements and substitutions which philosophy can never control or comprehend (ibid: 81). There will always be one last metaphor which necessarily escapes definition and cannot be dominated by the conceptual scheme since it plays a strictly indispensable role in the process of conceptual elucidation and critique (ibid: 79). This or these terms are undecidable and cannot be exchanged as they have no literal counterpart. They are inextricably rhetorical. The founding concepts of philosophy themselves, *theoria*, *eidos*, *logos*, are already metaphorically charged. These are metaphorical concepts

resisting all meta-phorics and establish the founding values of conceptuality, foundation, and theory in which white mythology operates (Derrida, 1982: 224). These founding metaphors correspond to the desire for a firm and ultimate ground, a terrain to build on and an earth to support an artificial structure. *Logos* is particularly instructive concept due to its overdetermined metaphorical meaning encompassing ‘a ground’, ‘a plea’, ‘an opinion’, ‘an expectation’, ‘word’, ‘speech’, ‘account’ and ‘reason’. Language as a mass of metaphors always resists the attempt to create the closure of formalisation under conceptuality. Indeed, in the attempt to expel the particularities of the sensible, philosophy cannot avoid using visual, auditory and tactile metaphors to do so. Here we are, as Norris highlights, caught in a certain bind:

... [P]hilosophy cannot but attempt to theorise metaphor on its own conceptual terms, terms that have defined the very nature of philosophical enquiry from its ancient Greek inception to the present. Yet in so doing it will always find itself caught up in the process of circular appropriation, a dependence on certain metaphors (‘fundamental’, ‘structuring’, ‘original’ tropes) for which there exist no literal, plain-prose equivalents, and which therefore constitute the absolute limit of any such enquiry. Indeed, there is no choice for theorist of metaphor – whether philosophers, rhetoricians, or literary critics – but to work with a concept (that of ‘metaphor’ itself) ... (Norris, 2000: 92)

This inescapability of metaphor and rhetoric is explored by Derrida’s reflection on the Sun as the arch-metaphor of philosophy itself (c.f. Plato, *The Republic*: VI. 507b–509c). For philosophy, the sun does not simply provide an example of the nature and relation of Being and appearance; rather, the very opposition of appearing and disappearing, and the entire language of phenomena and *aletheia*, of visible and invisible, of present and absent, is made possible by the sun, not as a natural sensible object, but as a rhetorical and metaphorical device grounded in a particular structure of the world:



Insofar as it structures the metaphorical space of philosophy, the sun represents what is natural in philosophical language. In every philosophical language, it is that which permits itself to be retained by natural language. In the metaphysical alternative which opposes formal or artificial language to natural language, 'natural' should always lead us back to *physis* as a solar system, or, more precisely, to a certain history of the relationship earth/sun in the system of perception. (Derrida, 1982: 251)

From Plato to Kant, the most formal systems have been structured and conditioned by this 'heliotrope'. However, this relationship, while resting on a natural base, is not a natural relationship. It is already thoroughly imbued in metaphor. Indeed, any attempt to delineate between clarity and obscurity suffices to confirm that the philosophical delimitation of metaphor is already captured by a particular enabling metaphor. However, while embedded in metaphor and entangled in its genealogical roots, none of this is to say that philosophy is simply rhetoric. The reduction of a signified concept to its signifier is not a reducible contingency. The nature of metaphor may remain indeterminable as a first order moment; however, it still provides the condition of possibility for philosophical practice and knowledge. This at once prohibits a philosophical definition of metaphor, but it also assigns a checkpoint, a limit, and a fixed place, that is to say a condition of possibility and impossibility for philosophy as an exercise thoroughly immersed in metaphor.

While this can be seen as a critique of the dichotomy between concept and metaphor, sensible and rational, writing and philosophy, Derrida is not content with simply replacing philosophy with an analysis of rhetoric. Of course, faced with this condition of impossibility, Rorty's advice is that we drop the metaphor-concept distinction *tout court* in favour of the distinction between the 'normal' and 'revolutionary' phases of science *à la* Kuhn, the former typified by

its rigorous insistence to form powerful tools against decadent sophists, the latter by its courageously seeking out new and vital forms for the cultural conversation (Rorty, 1982: 108). However, in contrast to the hopes of Rorty, 'White Mythology' does not signal the death of philosophy in this way. Rather, Derrida suggests philosophy cannot be reduced to rhetoric, namely because every time metaphor is used or defined, not only is a philosophy implied but philosophy itself is constituted and opened (Derrida, 1982: 230). In pursuing the question of metaphor we cannot but be faced with a full range of philosophical questions. The concept of metaphor itself, along with all the predicates that present its extension and comprehension, opens the space for properly philosophical problems, albeit ones which cannot subsume or leave off metaphoricity (ibid: 228). This necessarily includes the complex relation of proper and non-proper, essence and accident, intuition and discourse, intelligible and sensible, mimesis and correspondence, all of which is internal to metaphoricity itself in both practice and theory (ibid: 228). Just as philosophy cannot be done with metaphor, so too metaphor is never done with philosophy. Instead, metaphor opens up the questions raised by philosophic reason in so far as the good or bad use of metaphors begins a path to proper or literal signification, reference and truth (Norris, 2000: 80). While these may in fact be impossible ideals to attain, any adequate treatment of metaphor will need to respect the traditional requirements of rigour, clarity, conceptual precision and logical consistency in attempting to outline a metapoetics in which the proper place of metaphor is understood within this broader framework of proper philosophical questions. Thus, the discourse of metaphor is always a discourse which raises philosophical questions; indeed, it can be said to properly open the critical space of philosophy itself, and present philosophy with its unique question (the relation of language or concept to the world). While not endorsing philosophy as a master-discourse with privileged access to truth, neither is Derrida advocating philosophy as simply writing, rhetoric, poetry or mythology. Instead, the question of metaphor, far from signalling the

condition of impossibility for philosophy, raises the necessary condition of possibility for philosophy. That is to say, the condition of possibility for metaphor appears as the condition of possibility for truth, insofar as truth is always constituted linguistically. Accordingly, the analysis of metaphor opens the historical and theoretical distributions of philosophy, whose limits, divisions and gaps remain to be interpreted and delineated (Derrida, 1982: 214).

### 3.2 Rethinking mimesis

In attempting to address the question of metaphor Aristotle is invoked against Plato<sup>109</sup>. Indeed, while neither invented the word or the concept, Aristotle attempts to provide the first systematic and philosophical answer to the questions posed by metaphor, and begins on the one hand the subsumption of metaphor under philosophy and on the other the conceptual material resource on which we must necessarily act. In Aristotle metaphor is defined accordingly:

Metaphor (*metaphora*) consists in giving (*epiphora*) the thing a name (*onomatos*) that belongs to something else (*allogriou*), the transference (*metaphora*) being either from genus to species (*apo tou genous epi eidos*), or from species to genus (*apo tou eidous epi to genos*), or from species to species (*apo tou eidous epi eidos*), or on the grounds of analogy (*e kata to analogon*) (*Poetics*: 1457b6-9; cited in Derrida, 1982: 232)

Notably, this philosophical thesis on metaphor joins together a broad ontological system of interpretation which unites *metaphora*, *mimēsis*, *logos*, *physis*, *phōnē*, *sēmainein* and *onoma*. Within the *Poetics* the discourse on metaphor belongs to a theory of *lexis*, that is a theory of diction and thought. Metaphor exists as an attempt for thought to express itself clearly by making apparent a relation which is or remains unclear, hidden or latent. In this process thought

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<sup>109</sup> For Plato mimesis is the realm of simulacrum and removes us from the Forms. Ironically for much of what passes as postmodernism, the denial of the possibility of mimesis is an arch-Platonic gesture.

stumbles upon a metaphor in the attempt to express itself in light of its own failure of perception or communication. Metaphor is a transference<sup>110</sup> of a known relation which invokes resemblance. As Derrida summarises, such tropes “consist in presenting an idea under the sign of another idea that is more striking or better known, and which, moreover, has no other tie to the first idea than that of a certain conformity or analogy” (ibid: 235). However, the theory of metaphor in Aristotle is situated within what Derrida calls the “great immobile chain of Aristotelian ontology”, a deeply problematic metaphysics which relates “its theory of the analogy of Being, its logic, its epistemology, and more precisely its poetics and its rhetoric” (ibid: 236). Within this framework, the condition of possibility for metaphor in Aristotle appears as a certain “systematic indissociability of the value of metaphor and the metaphysical chain holding together the values of discourse, voice, noun, signification, meaning, imitative representation, resemblance” or to give them their proper names, “*logos, phōnē, sēmantikē, sēmainein, onoma, mimesis, homoiosis*” (ibid: 237). Indeed, metaphor is on this account an extension of natural relations, that is to say, an extension of a metaphysical principle of *homoiosis* in the great chain itself. To produce a good metaphor is to see and express a likeness (*homoion*) within this chain (*Poetics*: 1459a7-8). Furthermore, the imitative or mimetic act is made possible by humanity for whom imitation is both natural and delightful (ibid: 1448b4-9). On this account metaphor is simply an effect of *mimesis* and *homoiosis*, but within the Aristotelian framework this takes on a particular manifestation of the *analogia entis*, and is accordingly a means of knowledge operating in the service of truth which is subordinate to philosophy<sup>111</sup>.

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<sup>110</sup> Metaphor comes from the Latin *metaphora*, meaning "carrying over", derived from the Greek μεταφορά (*metaphora*) meaning "transfer"; μεταφέρω (*metapherō*) "to carry over" or "to transfer" - μετά (*meta*), "after, across, with" + φέρω (*pherō*) "to bear" or "to carry".

<sup>111</sup> This has the function of uniting a metaphysics of presence (Derrida) with a metaphysics of identity (Deleuze).

As one might expect, Derrida highlights the way in which metaphor in Aristotle plays a peculiarly ambivalent role. Notably, for Aristotle there can be bad metaphors, which disrupt the semantic system and risk the clarity of truth itself in so far as metaphor arises precisely where thought strains and, more to the point, where the great chain is indistinct. Accordingly, the metaphor is not neutral but “marks the moment of the turn or the detour during which meaning might seem to venture forth alone unloosed from the very thing it aims at however, from the truth which attunes it to its referent, metaphor opens the wandering of the semantic” (Derrida, 1982: 241). This moment of possible meaning is pregnant with the possibility of both truth and non-truth, and straining reaches out at the point at which thought encounters its own limit condition. The use of metaphor always risks taking a detour in which the truth might be lost and, more importantly, in which nature has not found its proper nudity. In short, metaphor is a site of *différance* which opens the space between the subject and object, and disrupts any possibility of immediate or natural relation. Within the Aristotelian system, this is a moment of ambivalence in which the great chain is weak and is marked by the peculiarity of analogy. Here analogy is presented as metaphor *par excellence* but at a moment in which the great chain of being ceases to be determinate. Analogy imposes itself within language as an indirect and hardly visible chain whose first link is quite difficult to exhibit and whose task is “to describe a fact in an impossible combination of words” (*Poetics*: 1458a26-27)<sup>112</sup>. In analogy one encounters the way in which language is caught up in a complex system of metaphorical relations of resemblance requiring an impossible act. But in analogy the question of metaphor also returns to the question of nature. Indeed, for Aristotle nature gives itself to humanity in metaphor, but likewise presents itself in such a way that it is both amenable to metaphor and resists metaphorical inscription. While the ideal of metaphor, and of language, is to bring to knowledge the thing itself, it does so in a way which is not without risk (Derrida, 1982: 247).

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<sup>112</sup> The Lyotardian resonance should not be lost (c.f. Lyotard 1994).

The possibility of good and bad metaphor is predicated on the possibility of the metaphor as bringing us closer to the thing's essential or proper truth by seizing upon a similar yet different (and impossible) relation. But because of this possibility and impossibility of reference, metaphor immediately raises within the space of language and philosophy the critical questions of essence, the proper<sup>113</sup> and accident:

1. While a word may have several meanings, this *polysemia* is always finite and there is a proper meaning ascribed to words without which language would not only strain but become inconceivable. While language operates on a principle of *différance* this cannot be conceived as infinite without erasing itself. If words had an infinite number of meanings language, and reasoning, would be impossible. Language is what it is and operates how it does precisely because of this polysemic complexity which none the less allows for a certain degree of mastery. This is to say, language requires a coherent but polysemic interiority which allows communication to take place with oneself and with others<sup>114</sup>. Here univocity is always the essence, or better, the *telos* of language. Following suit, philosophy has never renounced this Aristotelean ideal, or better, this (impossible) ideal is philosophy (ibid: 247). A proper noun, for example, represents this as the limit point of identity possible within language which denotes or names a particular rather than a common thing.
2. While inseparable from essence, the proper is distinct from essence. It is this distinction which permits the space for metaphor and analogy to operate. The proper can manifest properties or can be known on the basis of resemblance without appealing to a notion of essence. In metaphor, these properties become 'transported significations' which are distinct from the thing itself or its essence. This transportation causes metaphor to

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<sup>113</sup> Encompassing its full lexical range of usual, correct, individual and particular.

<sup>114</sup> i.e. Language is both obscure and distinct.

remain mediate and abstract as the property is removed from immediate context and given life elsewhere. Accordingly, for metaphor to be possible it is necessary that one can substitute properties for one another. Without involving the things themselves in the substitutions, these properties can then be said to belong to the same essence of the same thing, or alternatively they may be extracted from difference essences (ibid: 249).

3. This in turn raises the problem of what is proper or essential to a thing and what is not. Bad metaphors are possible precisely because the capacity for abstraction does not necessarily bring clear and certain knowledge. The metaphor as transference is always a relation of *différance* which prevents mastery or totalisations. All metaphors are always imperfect metaphors. Rather, they provide us with too little knowledge as the terms directly implied in the substitution cannot be known in what is proper to it, and too much in so far as they place two non-identical things into a (albeit complex) relationship of identity (ibid: 250). Metaphors always mean that the thing is always im-properly known and im-properly named (ibid: 250).

As Derrida suggests, “[m]etaphor is less in the philosophical text than the philosophical text is thoroughly within metaphor” but this is not to abandon philosophy and fall into the void (ibid: 258). Indeed, metaphor functions precisely by adding to our knowledge of what is indicated on the basis of some perceived similarity. The condition for metaphor (for good and true metaphor) remains as the condition for truth, although in Derrida it is now placed into a more complex relation and separated from the static chain of Aristotelean ontology. Metaphor, that is to say, ‘good’ (truth-conducive) metaphor enables us to ‘see resemblances’, or equally to break with routine habits of thought and perception and change our perspective on something (Norris, 2000: 99). Accordingly, it is no surprise that the *Poetics* should open as a treatise on *mimesis* as metaphor is always a double inscription of identity and non-identity. Mimesis is

*différential*. Indeed, this relation of identity and non-identity embodies the same relation as that between metaphor and philosophy.

### 3.3 Metaphor and metaphysics

Rhetoric is the mass out of which philosophical text takes shape, but equally rhetoric is inextricable from the nature of philosophy (Derrida, 1982: 258). How than to conceive of a philosophy which balances these two aspects? For Derrida, this question seems to be largely answered by two proper names: Gaston Bachelard and Georges Canguilhem. It is of no small point that both are philosophers of science deeply concerned with the complex role of language and conceptuality in the history and practice of scientific enquiry. For Bachelard, metaphor presents no necessary obstacle to scientific or philosophical knowledge but nevertheless remains a problematic site. It has a central and ambiguous role in relation to the development of scientific ‘concepts’. While metaphors can work to rectify or illustrate knowledge during the production and process of scientific discovery, they can equally become “verbal obstacles” to scientific knowledge, in the form of “metaphorical contrivance”, “generalised image”, or simply as a “deficient metaphorical character of the explanation” (Bachelard, 1938: 74f, cited in Derrida, 1982: 259). In such cases metaphors operate as *idée fixe* which “seduce” (Bachelard, 1938: 78 cited in Derrida, 1982: 259) the scientist away from true knowledge. However, rather than reinstating the Platonic stance of distancing concept from metaphor, the path undertaken by Bachelard is the denunciation of immediacy in the form of ‘immediate metaphors’. As Bachelard suggests:

The danger of immediate metaphors in the formation of the scientific spirit is that they are not always passing images; they push toward an autonomous kind of thought; they



tend to completion and fulfilment in the domain of the image. (Bachelard, 1938: 81, cited in Derrida, 1982: 259)

Initial intuition is presented as an obstacle to scientific thought insofar as it functions to naturalise certain metaphors which are readily and immediately presented before the imagination of the scientist. The immediacy of such metaphors functions to normalise their status, and prevent any ongoing questioning and development. The problem is not metaphor *per se*, but the prevalence of bad metaphor in the form of immediate transferences. The most prominent examples of the complex place metaphor occupies within Bachelard are the circles and ellipses of Aristotle and Newton.

Even in the simple domain of images, we have often usefully attempted conversions of values. Thus we developed the following antithesis in our teaching. For Aristotelian science, the ellipse is a poorly made circle, a flattened circle. For Newtonian science, the circle is an impoverished ellipse, an ellipse whose centres have been flattened one onto the other. I made myself the advocate of the ellipse: the centre of the ellipse is useless because of its two distinct focal points; for the circle, the law of areas is a banality; for the ellipse, the law of areas is a discovery. Little by little, I slowly attempted to pry the mind loose from its attachment to privileged images ... Also, I have little hesitation in presenting rigour as a psychoanalysis of intuition, and algebraic thought as a psychoanalysis of geometric thought. Even in the domain of the exact sciences our imagination is a sublimation. It is useful, but it can fool us to the extent that we do not know what we sublimate and how we sublimate it. It is valid only insofar as one has psychoanalysed the principle. Intuition must never be a given. It must always be an illustration. (Bachelard, 1938: 237 cited Derrida 1982: 260)

The role of metaphor here is ambivalent in its relation with the concept and intuition. It retards, impedes, provokes, directs, and even follows the movement and development of a scientific concept. For Bachelard the danger of metaphor is its liability to become an *idée fixe* which ceases to become an illustration which retains a degree of difference and dissociation, instead becoming enraptured with and unable to move beyond a particular and forceful image. On the other hand, metaphor is useful, necessary and unavoidable in illustrating new knowledge, or equally rescuing knowledge from the grasp of a bad metaphor. To this end, Bachelard's 'psychoanalysis of objective knowledge' is concerned with a process of conceptual and metaphorical rectification which is self-aware of certain psychological tendencies towards stasis, naturalising intuition and immediate forms (what Husserl would call the "natural attitude"). Rather, introducing us to the latent meaning of white mythology, science must "set itself to *blanching*, if not to erasing naïve, immediate, or simply bad, images" [italics mine] (Bachelard, 1938: 78, cited Derrida, 1982: 260). For this to happen illustration must operate in conjunction with scientific thought. Accordingly, scientific 'concepts' emerge from a crucible of metaphor, analogy and image-based thinking with anthropomorphic residues, in which immediate intuitive conceptions are taken up and developed through a process of rectification and critique. While doubts are, and must be raised as to whether any line of demarcation can be drawn between metaphor and scientific concept, there is never the less a strong account presented here in which science, enmeshed in metaphor though it may be, does indeed make progress, and does advance from "less efficient" to "more efficient tropic concepts" (Norris, 200: 82). Within this process, certain metaphors eventually prove or disprove themselves capable of development according to their descriptive-explanatory grasp (ibid: 82). In short, for Bachelard "the initial intuition is an obstacle to scientific thought; only an illustration working beyond the concept, *putting a bit of colour* on the essential characteristics, can aid scientific thought" [italics mine] (Bachelard, 1938: 78, cited Derrida, 1982: 260).

As with his mentor Bachelard, the relationship between conceptual scientific progress and the metaphor is given particular importance by Canguilhem. The use of metaphor in Canguilhem in the history of biology, medicine and the life sciences is concerned with the rectification of images and metaphors which, while borrowed from other domains, find appropriate deployment in vaguely analogous domains. For Canguilhem, transference of images through the use of “scientific loans” and the inherent overdetermination of all metaphors has interesting and unintended, even beneficial, implications in the development of scientific concepts. Of particular infamy is Canguilhem’s account of the discovery and framing of cellular theory in biology and the beneficial theoretical consequences of using a metaphor not only to capture something about the discovery of a thing, but the concept of the thing itself:

With the cell, we are in the presence of a biological object whose affective overdetermination is incontestable and considerable. The psychoanalysis of knowledge from now on may count among its happier successes its pretension to the status of a genre to which several contributions may be brought, even without systematic intention. Everyone will find among his memories of studying natural history the image of the cellular structure of living beings. This image has an almost canonic constancy. The schematic representation of an epithelium is the image of the honeycomb. Cell is a word that does not make us think of the monk or the prisoner, but of the bee. Haeckel has pointed out that cells of wax filled with honey perfectly correspond to vegetable cells filled with cellular essence. Nevertheless, the influence over the mind of the notion of the cell does not appear to be due to the completeness of the correspondence. Rather, who knows whether, in consciously borrowing from the beehive the term cell in order to designate the element of the living organism, the human mind has not also borrowed from the hive, almost unconsciously, the notion of the cooperative work of which the

honeycomb is the product? Just as the alveolus is the element of an edifice, bees are, in Maeterlinck's expression, individuals entirely absorbed by the republic. In fact, the cell is both an anatomical and a functional notion, the notion of an elementary material and of a partial, subordinate individual labour. (Canguilhem, 1969: 49 cited in Derrida, 1982: 261-2)

In this example, it is precisely the systemic and referential (*différential*) nature of the linguistic metaphor which provokes an unintended development in conceptual understanding. The metaphorical notion as a naïve ascription initially finds a basis in a certain intuitive appeal; nevertheless, while initially a useful and imaginative metaphor, the cellular theory moved beyond the simple image-based, analogical mode of thought belonging to a properly pre-scientific moment, and becomes a mature scientific notion. Moreover, the metaphorical use of cell as an inexact correspondence allowed for openings and developments present in the overdetermined (*différential*) nature of the metaphor which, while initially unconscious, allowed for the furthering of knowledge. For Canguilhem, as for Bachelard, this process of critical rectification of naïve or immediate images allows for the complex development of metaphor and concept within science. Leaving aside his critique of scientific anthropomorphism, this developmental aspect of science is well captured by Nietzsche in 'On Truth and Lies in a Nonmoral Sense':

As we say, it is language which has worked originally at the construction of ideas; in later times it is science. Just as the bee works at the same time at the cells and fills them with honey, thus science works irresistibly as the great columbarium of ideas, the cemetery of perceptions, builds ever newer and higher storeys; supports, purifies, renews the old cells, and endeavours above all to fill that gigantic framework and to arrange within it the whole of the empiric world, i.e., the anthropomorphic world. (cited in Derrida, 1982: 262)

The scientist cannot but work on their inherited conceptual material to refine and purify the scientific edifice by way of further and continued engagement with the world of intuition (c.f. Bhaskar, 1998: 37). However, in order not to wind up with an empiricist reduction of knowledge which enshrines intuitive metaphors, an abstract conceptuality which departs from the world of intuition and seeks to escape from metaphors, or some fantastic ideology of truth such as in excessively postmodern readings of Nietzsche, the relation of metaphor and concept should be placed under erasure, into question, suspended or, better, the classical opposition simply done away with for a new articulation which recognises the complex unity of the trope. All metaphors are inherently conceptual, just as all concepts are inherently metaphorical. The value in setting metaphor against concept is an inherently problematic endeavour. This is not to say that all metaphors are equal. There can be bad metaphors. However, the scientific process of critical rectification allows us to proceed from an inefficient tropic (metaphor-concept) that is poorly constructed, ill-conceived, or immediately grasped by and enshrining intuition or presence, to an operative tropic that is more refined and more powerful in a given field at a determined phase of the scientific process (Derrida, 1982: 264). For Bachelard and Canguilhem, it is the chief virtue of scientific metaphor to enable a creative passage which opens possibilities beyond the limits of received or orthodox thinking, a virtue, incidentally, which is shared with poetic imagination (Norris, 2000: 93). Metaphors are not “simple idealisations which take off like rockets only to display their insignificance on bursting in the sky” (Bachelard, 1964: 80, cited in Derrida, 1982: 265) but, on the contrary, express the properly poetic moment of scientific consciousness and imagination as “more coordinated than sensation” and within a complex “syntax of metaphors” (ibid: 80). Science, insofar as it expresses itself in language<sup>115</sup>, must inevitably have recourse to analogy and metaphor, all the

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<sup>115</sup> Of course, one might also suggest there are a number of elements within the sciences which are based in precise mathematical expressions and equations. Within recent French philosophy the work of Alain Badiou (2005) and Quentin Meillassoux (2008) has argued on this basis for the strong position that ontology is mathematics and the postmodern fascination with writing and metaphor is predicated on a category error

more so during periods of revolution or paradigm-shift in which the old metaphors cease to be of value and become worn, unhelpful or misleading and new tropics are required. Such tropics operate in conjunction with the critical application of reason which moves from adherence to naïve (intuitive, common-sense, or image-based) modes of understanding to more complex and refined modes. Indeed, scientific advances come about only through a constant dialectic (*le applique rationaliste*), that is a process of mutual interrogative exchange, between intuitive insight and rational method (Norris, 2000: 89). The attempt to avoid rationality by proclaiming the ubiquity of metaphor and the mediation of language is as ill-founded as the attempt to evade language and retreat into pure conceptuality untainted by metaphor and particularity. The postmodernism of a strong-textualist vein, à la Rorty, is a regressive and unsophisticated mode which does violence to the complexity of concept and metaphor, reason and rhetoric, or philosophy and literature by reducing the former to the latter and thereby participating in the reproduction of the metaphysics of presence by its antagonistic reflection. This is clearly not the path Derrida (following Bachelard and Canguilhem) takes. For Derrida the reduction of conceptuality to metaphor cannot account for the rational development of science and its ability to distinguish valid from invalid theories or pseudo-scientific reverie. The attempt to break with metaphor, on the other hand, ironically cannot explain how science is able to make progress beyond the given framework of conventional scientific accounts by seizing upon new tropics<sup>116</sup>.

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concerned with reducing the world to the perspective of the finite subject. While occasionally illuminating, this operates as an uncritical reaction culminating in the claims of Meillassoux that mathematics (alone?) provides access to the things themselves, while empirical sciences are concerned only with things as they are for-us (correlations). A complete account of science must encompass both moments.

<sup>116</sup> This complex approach to metaphor can be viewed in the duplicitous and indeterminable meaning of the chapter titles. This is Derrida at his punning best. As ‘White Mythology’ itself embodies both the mythological status of metaphysics which believes it has cast aside rhetoric and metaphor for conceptuality, and the Bachelardian account of critical rectification, *Plus de métaphore* equally expresses both ‘more metaphor’ and ‘beyond metaphor’ (or ‘no more metaphor’), while *La métaphysique – relève de la métaphore* expresses the infamous double meaning of *relève* as a translation of Hegel’s equally infamous *aufhebung*. *Relève* can be read in this context as a both noun and verb. If used as a noun, the title reads metaphysics – the *relève*, the sublation (*aufhebung*) of metaphor. Of course, this itself has the same indeterminate meaning as ‘White Mythology’.

### 3.4 Metaphor as *pharmakon*

The philosopher, even at her most conceptual, is inescapably condemned to writing and speaking in metaphor, just as the self-reflexive writer is continually engaged in philosophy by employing metaphor. This entails we are obliged to push beyond the structured oppositions of writing and philosophy, but in doing so one is not giving up all claims to consistency or rigour, or the different moods in which these activities take place. Quite the opposite. The relation of metaphor as Derrida presents it is an important extension of his analysis of *pharmakon* (Derrida, 1981). *Pharmakon* is an ambiguous term which appears throughout Plato and has two distinct but opposite senses. On the one hand *pharmakon* means poison, on the other hand cure or remedy. Indeed, it is precisely in this indeterminate sense that metaphor or writing is presented as both poison and cure. On the one hand metaphor is presented a threat to the living and authentic presence of knowledge (c.f. Plato *Phaedrus*), on the other hand it is an indispensable means for recording or transmitting and critiquing knowledge. However, *pharmakon* is ambivalent precisely because it constitutes the medium in which opposites are opposed and united, providing the reserve of meaning and play; the storehouse of *différance* which refers back to the same but not identical. When translators reduce *pharmakon* or metaphor to one or the other of its violently disjunctive senses, they ignore the nature of the problem in favour of erecting a privileged mode in order to halt the slippage of meaning and reinstitute certainty. Ironically, this is precisely what Rorty does by reducing philosophy to ‘just another form of writing’. The attempt to treat philosophy as a sub-genre of literature, concerned with purely rhetorical aspects and without the regard for logic or rigour is to miss the point or, more importantly, to miss the necessary philosophical implications of

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Alternatively, if taken as a verb, which would be the more natural reading, the subtitle would read ‘Metaphysics derives from, takes off from, metaphor’ with similar interpretive implications.

metaphoricity. It is not a question of breaking from either ‘reason’ or ‘language’, or coming out once and for all on one side of the debate. These claims can only ever be founded on a self-deluding misrecognition. Quite simply, there is no alternative ground on which to stand. Language is marked through and through with both metaphoric and philosophical assumptions, which cannot simply be overcome by wilful fiat. There is no simple reckoning with the pharmacology of metaphor. As *pharmakon* serves as a paradigm for opening up the question of self-identity, metaphor serves as a paradigm for the question of identity *par excellence*. In particular, metaphor as *mimesis* opens up a complex reflection on the nature of identity and truth<sup>117</sup>. Indeed, Derrida is concerned to resist both the Platonic, and equally the anti-Platonic<sup>118</sup>, drift which would restore interpretation or philosophy as a quest for self-present and certain meaning and truth, or equally reject philosophy on the grounds that truth, certainty and meaning is not self-present. When viewed as *pharmakon* metaphor opens the entire problematic of philosophy and our relation with the real. As Derrida suggests:

This is why the philosophical evaluation of metaphor always has been ambiguous: metaphor is dangerous and foreign as concerns intuition (vision or contact), concept (the grasping or proper presence of the signified), and consciousness (proximity or self-presence); but it is in complicity with what it endangers, is necessary to it in the extent to which the de-tour is a re-turn guided by the function of resemblance (*mimesis* or *homoiosis*), under the law of the same. The opposition of intuition, the concept, and consciousness at this point no longer has any pertinence. These three values belong to the order and to the movement of meaning. Like metaphor. (Derrida, 1982: 270)

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<sup>117</sup> This element is particularly lost in Rorty’s valuable but ultimately unsophisticated critique of mimesis and representation in *The Mirror of Nature* (1979).

<sup>118</sup> For Derrida, and indeed for Deleuze, Platonism never refers simply to Plato: “‘Platonism’ here standing more or less immediately for the whole history of Western philosophy including the anti-Platonism that regularly feeds into it” (Derrida, 2004: 204).



Certainly deconstruction, in the vein of postmodernism, has always paid the most meticulous attention to those moments of stress and fracture in a philosophical text where writing exceeds and disturbs the order of mimesis, presence and origins (Norris, 1987: 53). Ironically however, this is not to depart from the problematic of identity altogether. One cannot simply altogether break with, abandon or come out once and for all against an old or discredited regime such as *mimesis* (or for that matter identity or realism). To regard deconstruction as declaring an 'end' to 'Western metaphysics', 'logocentric thinking', 'Identity', 'Platonism' or 'realism' is to critically misunderstand Derrida and deconstruction.

The ideology of a radical break with all forms of mimetic representation is deeply problematic. Language is intrinsically marked through and through by complex referential (or mimetic) assumptions (ibid: 54). While classical ideas of reference have greatly simplified its nature, it is an equally mistaken assumption to proceed from the deconstruction of *mimesis* and the mirror of nature to the impossibility of reference. This has been the postmodern temptation and there is no shortage of rather facile strains of linguistic analysis within postmodernism and poststructuralism which have attempted to pass from the 'arbitrary' and contingent nature of the sign to the notion that texts cannot possibly 'refer' to anything beyond their own relations or domains. Here, the lack of any natural, necessary or determinate link between signifier and signified, or sign and referent, is taken as suggesting there is no way of bridging the two. But this is not the case. To understand the complex position Derrida is arguing for in his use of *mimesis* we need to distinguish between two concepts of truth (or *mimesis*) that have dominated philosophy both founded in presence and certainty. First, is the strictly referential idea of truth as adequation, a correspondence between words and the things. The nature of these 'things' may itself be of a long-running debate in metaphysics and epistemology as to whether the reference describes sense-data or real-world objects, but, nevertheless, the relation of reference

is understood as primary (ibid: 54). This has the added assumption that a truthful statement can be tested, verified or falsified by considering its relationship to the external reality it attempts to describe (i.e. via positivist verification). This theory of truth, often simply called correspondence theory, in its simpler manifestations, presents truth as an unproblematic adequation between words and things and it is this conception of truth which has been placed under particular attack from postmodernism, deconstruction and post-structuralism which has (correctly) highlighted the contingency of our representative structures and the problematic status of (naïve) reference<sup>119</sup> (Norris, 1987: 54).

However, there is another concept of *mimesis*, equally entrenched in the Western philosophical tradition deriving from Plato, resurgent in postmodernism in a peculiar guise, which has historically operated where language resists or evades referential treatment (ibid: 54). This is the concept of truth as *aletheia*, translated as unforgetting or inward revelation which is understood in Plato with conjunction to *anamnesis* (remembering). *Aletheia* is the moment of epiphany in which knowledge is given to the soul through a direct exercise or apprehension of ‘reason’ which transcends all forms of sensory perception (ibid: 55). This knowledge Plato conceives as more authentic as it is closer to the origin and the nature of things, without contamination by the contingency and accidental aspects of materiality or the sensory apparatus, and is therefore higher than any truth attainable from copying or referring to external reality. This wisdom consists in seeing beyond the world of material objects and events to the higher reality of essences, forms and ideas. This knowledge is learnt through dialogue (speech) rather than writing and allows an immediate apprehension of the truth to take hold in the disciple’s mind. While the immediacy and self-presence of this form does not necessarily rely

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<sup>119</sup> The critique of adequation in these forms is particularly informed by Martin Heidegger. See 1962: 214f/257f; 1993a; 1993b. 1993c.

on a Platonic realm of Ideal forms, it operates as a mystical or poetic embrace which unifies subject and object<sup>120</sup>. Ironically, it is only by retaining some residual traces of reference in language, a mimetic albeit obscured dimension entirely removed from classical (naïve) *mimesis*, that thought can hold out against the drift toward immediate origins and self-present truth (ibid: 55). The aletheic account of truth is risked whenever reference is completely abandoned. Certainly certain postmodern infatuations with the aesthetic dimension risk returning to this deeply problematic conception of truth, and hence to ‘authentic’ immediacy, origin and self-presence, plunging headlong into the abyss of relativism and reinstating a new form of certainty. Yet, it is clear that in the concept of metaphor Derrida is concerned to break with both paradigms. Indeed, Derrida is concerned to avoid the Platonising drift in its positive and negative moments which would restore interpretation to a pursuit of a self-present meaning or truth, thereby establishing a perfect economy of meaning between subject and object in either correspondence or poetic aletheia (ibid: 60).

This conception of *mimesis* finds a similar expression in the work of Bhaskar. While Bhaskar undertakes a significant critique of metaphors and models as expressed in the philosophy of science (Bhaskar, 2008: 148f), he returns to the problem within the context of outlining the (anti)methodology of transcendental realism. Bhaskar rejects the idea of an automatic or mechanical science, and with this the Baconian pursuit of a “sure and certain method” which would eliminate the need for human thought and thus human error (ibid: 168). Instead Bhaskar defends the use of analogy while distancing himself from any simple theory of correspondence. For transcendental realism any tropic has a double relationship with the subject as well as with

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<sup>120</sup> This is closer to Heidegger’s conception of aletheia as world disclosure, although Heidegger decouples the notion of truth from aletheia insofar as truth understood in the natural sense is the correspondence of knowledge with being while aletheia is thought as clearing which grants the possibility of truth, leaving the resolution of aletheia and truth to thought (1993e: 446).

its source<sup>121</sup>. Indeed, it is precisely from the nexus of this double inscription that new knowledge is produced as inextricably both subjective and objective (transitive and intransitive) and thus as both a social product and knowledge of a natural thing. Importantly, this double inscription expresses two different relations: a relationship of analogy; and a relation of adequacy (ibid: 167). A great many philosophical problems arise from misunderstanding this double inscription in particular the latter term (ibid: 167). For Bhaskar, adequacy is not a relationship of correspondence. While tropics may play an important role in scientific thought, the terms of the relationship are not inherently like each other and therefore there can be no equivalence or identity. As such, there are no general criteria for judgments of adequacy. Concepts of adequacy are always and necessarily intrinsic and immanent to a particular scientific practice. Yet, this relationship is not simply one of convention or coherence. Rather, there are “no general philosophical criteria” which can be “laid down” (ibid: 167). Indeed, science is presented as a work that requires creative intelligence for which there is no mechanical surrogate (ibid: 167). This, however, is not to say there are unlimited possibilities; science must constrain the number of possible explanations by testing not only for plausibility but for truth (ibid: 166). This delineation of truth and plausibility in explanation “cannot be identified by purely syntactical or formal criteria but depends on a complex relationship between what is so far known about the process generating the behaviour in question and established explanation patterns drawn from analogous fields” (ibid: 167). Here there is no correspondence other than as a loose metaphor which rejects the conformity or similarity between objects and thought without thereby rejecting realism (Bhaskar, 2009: 99). Here, there is just the “general relativity of our knowledge” which insists upon “the impossibility of knowing objects except under particular descriptions” (Bhaskar, 2008: 249).

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<sup>121</sup> This is to reiterate the distinction between the transitive and intransitive domains.

Here there is no guarantee; no theory of truth to provide a criterion or stamp of knowledge.

Here “[t]here is just the expression (of the world) in speech (or thought)” (ibid: 249).

## Chapter 4: The Violence of Ontology

It was a Greek who said, “If one has to philosophise, one has to philosophise; if one does not have to philosophise, one has to philosophise ... One always has to philosophise” (Derrida, 1982: 191)

In the previous two chapters I have outlined the Derridean account of language through the role of *différance* and metaphor in defining the linguistic conditions of possibility and impossibility for realism. Within this context realism must avoid the metaphysics of presence and immediacy as it attempts to account for reality within the decentred structures of language. However, if *différance* moves us away from a focus on presence, this need not resign us to the embrace of a pure and incoherent disorder. Deconstruction is not a form of irreverent vandalism which proves meaning is impossible, but a form of analysis concerned with teasing out the presuppositions of any particular reading and pursuing the logic of the text and its meaning in an effort to displace our metaphysical disposition towards presence. In this chapter I now wish to turn towards the question of realism proper, and what if anything, constitutes the other of language for Derrida. Far from having nothing to say about ontology, Derrida’s engagements with Levinas and Marx provide important ontological contours for the possibility of any realism which is concerned to break with the metaphysics of presence.

#### 4.1 The violence of light

In his essay ‘Violence and Metaphysics’ (Derrida, 1987) Derrida offers an important deconstruction of phenomenology through engagement with Levinas’s problem of *theoria* and the ethical dimensions of the Other. Specifically, Levinas is concerned to escape the imperialism and totalisations of phenomenological *theoria* which he considers subordinates everything according to a relation of the same (ibid: 108). Rehearsing a particular Heideggerian gesture, Levinas suggests the history of philosophy is founded on the grounds of forgetting the Other. In contrast to the imperialism of *theoria*, our relationship with the Other is a relationship which escapes the possibility of objectification under the cold light of reason; it is relationship of interlocution. While this is not bereft of a desire for understanding, our relation with the Other exceeds the confines of understanding (Levinas, 2006: 5). Knowledge of the Other is instead always already an ethical relation which eschews impassive and impersonal contemplation for sympathy and love. The paradigmatic example of this for Levinas is being-with-the-other-person [*miteinandersein*]. For Heidegger being-with-the-other-person takes on an ontological relation of letting be, i.e. to “understanding them as independent of the perception that discovers and grasps them” (ibid: 5). For Levinas, the Other is not simply either object of understanding or an interlocutor, but always already both. Addressing the Other is inseparable from understanding the Other; however, understanding exceeds the bounds of conceptuality. The Other does not affect us by means of a concept and is irreducible to understanding (ibid: 5). Indeed, the relation to the Other is not one of ontology; it is one of religion. This is a religion without God, without the word sacred and without theology (ibid: 7). It is instead the sociality of the meeting, irreducible to any property of the given and distanced from any relation of power. This is primarily an ethical relationship to a being as a being in which the particular joins the infinite i.e. in which the particular operates as a trace (or face) of the infinite. For Levinas this allows us to escape the horizon of being and beings, and

frees us from the categories adapted solely to the description and understanding of inert things<sup>122</sup>.

In so far as phenomenology is concerned with getting ‘to the things themselves’ it encounters the limit condition of its own comprehension in the Other. Levinas attempts to move beyond the subject-object correlation endemic to phenomenology, which in the final analysis is unable to escape the naivety of the glance which determines being as objects for a subject (Derrida: 1978: 105). In the glance understanding carries out an act of violence and negation against the infinite Other (Levinas, 2006: 8). This negation denies the independence of being by making them beings under my power; they are mine, they belong to me as objects. Accordingly, the act of determination inherent to understanding or conceptuality is always an act of violence which subjects beings to the subject and to relations of the same (particular horizons). However, a meeting with the Other as person escapes this possessive relationship. Despite the attempt to determine the Other and bring them under my dominion they escape in the final instance. Indeed, what escapes is precisely the interiority of being, the in-itself, which cannot be grasped or possessed by the understanding. The total system, the attempt to assimilate and control being, is unable to totally subsume this element. That is to say, it always remains transcendent:

The infinite is unassimilable otherness, absolute difference in relation to everything that can be shown, symbolised, announced, and recalled – in relation to everything that is presented and represented, and hence ‘contemporarised’ with the finite and the same. He is He, illeity. (Levinas, 2006: 50)

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<sup>122</sup> This is of course a particular realisation of the Kantian ‘Kingdom of Ends’ [4:438f] applied to the category of Other (Kant, 1998b).



The relation with the infinite is not a knowledge but a proximity to depth which cannot be incarnated, preserving the uncontainable excess beneath the surface from the mutilations of representation. This is a radical heterogeneity beyond language which blocks the possibility of any unified ontological discourse. This is an encounter without intermediary and without communion; it is neither mediate nor immediate, neither absolute proximity nor absolute distance. The Other is the appearance of a phenomenon that is a certain nonphenomenon; its presence is always an absence, not a pure absence, but a certain absence which nonetheless retains its difference in its presence (Derrida, 1978, 112-113).

For Levinas the task remains to break with the notion of Being as unity without Other. The unity of the One excludes all multiplicity even and especially the distinction between thinker and thought. In Plato's *Sophist* the reduction of Other is embodied in the Eleatic stranger who resigns defeated before language which inextricably shapes non-Being according to Being. As a result the stranger bids farewell to any unnameable opposite of Being and instead confines non-Being to its relativity to Being, within Being (ibid: 110). That which is not Being remains subordinate and defined by Being as the moment of alterity or difference within Being (ibid: 110). This Parmenidean problem of the One and nostalgia for unity still haunts philosophy, not only in the form of totalitarian and systematic discourse but in mystical unity and dissatisfaction with the intellect (Levinas, 2006: 115). Rather than suggesting with Heidegger (1969) that multiplicity and alterity should be included within and subjected to the relation of identity, i.e. that unity itself includes multiplicity as 'belonging together', we must completely break with Parmenides towards a pluralism, or rather a dualism, which resists any fusion into unity (Derrida, 1978: 110). While Parmenides has been subject to numerous attempts at patricide (beginning with Plato), they have largely been unsuccessful. In moving away from the schema of unity, the infinite Other posits an inextricable original difference able to (at last)

finish off the long legacy of Parmenides. Beneath and prior to any unity, there is always an originary and irreducible relation with the Other which inscribes opposition into the world. Without this original and irreducible relationship of alterity, phenomenology and ontology become philosophies of violence which make common cause with oppression and totalitarianism under the name of the same (ibid: 113). Without this difference, ontology becomes concerned with power; possessing, seizing, and knowing the Other, such that it would no longer be Other but subsumed under a relation of the same i.e. Being (ibid: 113). For Levinas, Parmenides represents a cold world of light and unity without Other and thus without time, without history and without change. In such a world, to see or to know, to have or to will, can only unfold within an oppressive and luminous identity of the same (ibid: 113-114). The fundamental categories of phenomenology are, in the final analysis, predicated on an inextricable subordination of object to subject and of difference to the same: “that which is given to me within light appears as given to myself by myself” (ibid: 114).

#### **4.2 The ontological economy of violence**

If ontology and phenomenology are inextricably entwined in an economy of violence, for Levinas the ethical alternative is a desire directed to the respect and knowledge of the other as Other. This is an ethico-metaphysical moment whose transgression consciousness must forbid (ibid: 115). If vision or thought is itself an act of determinate violence the Other must be preserved as infinitely Other and therefore as phenomenological invisible. It remains beyond representation, limitation, or any conceptual relation to the same (ibid: 117). The concept and the material of language cannot, by definition, include the Other; therefore language cannot make its own possibility a totality as the Other always remains outside. As there is no way to conceptualise the encounter, it is made possible by the pure relation of the Other as the unforeseeable resistance to all categories. The infinitely Other cannot be bound by a concept

or a horizon, as such a horizon is always a horizon of the same. Nevertheless, the horizon operates as the elementary unity which includes within itself the possibility in which eruptions and surprises as limit conditions and exceptions are recognised by the understanding (ibid: 118). If it appears, the Other always appears as the miraculous event, the always unexpected moment which disrupts the certainty of any totality. The concern here is not to think the opposite (which remains in complicity with the classical alternatives) but “to liberate thought and its language for the encounter occurring beyond these alternatives” (ibid: 118). The Other appears not as a presence but as a trace of the unforeseeable: the opening of time, of the past and of the future in the present (ibid: 119). Here, face to face with the other as a trace (a depth beneath a surface), one encounters an event which interrupts all totalities, as a being-together, a separation which precedes or exceeds unity, language, conceptuality, rationality, society, collectivity, and community (ibid: 119). This relation opens ethics as the proper and universal ground of all relations with all others in the form of a total passivity. This is characterised as “a distress and denuding, a supplication, a demanding prayer addressed to a freedom, that is, to a commandment: the only possible ethical imperative, the only incarnated nonviolence in that it is respect for the other” (ibid: 119).

For Levinas, this relationship of the Other to being and non-being allows for the revindication of a new metaphysics which avoids the violence of subject-object correlation through the critique of all ontologising discourses. In this context, ontology can only ever concern the inseparability of being from the comprehension of being, an act which neutralises the Other by inscribing a totality and unity of the same. Here ontology is imbued with its full etymological heritage of the union of *ontos* (being) and *logos* (word, speech, account, opinion, or reason). Yet the rupture of the reign of logos by the Other is not the beginning of irrationalism and incoherence but the wound “which opens speech and then makes possible every logos or every

rationalism” (ibid: 121-122). Ontology necessarily contains within itself a relation of the Other as the difference between existent (*ontos*) and expression (*logos*) which necessarily appears before the explicit onto-logical level. This relation precedes all ontologising discourse as a metaphysical condition of possibility for all ontological acts. This also means that prior to any unveiling or articulation of being there is a relationship with the existent expressed before the ontological level, inextricably concerned with the ethical level. Metaphysics must be said to encompass ethics, and ethics metaphysics such that “[m]orality is not a branch of philosophy, but first philosophy” (ibid: 122).

Metaphysics therefore properly begins where theory is able to criticise ontology as concerned with relations of the same, and where metaphysics recognises its ethical dimension by being placed into question by the Other. Indeed, metaphysics as the theoretical and ethical critique of ontology is rightfully first philosophy. If philosophy most often has been an ontology it is one dominated by a reason predicated on identity which can only ever recall itself to itself, amounting to a tautology and correlation which has always acted to neutralise the Other (ibid: 119-120). In contrast, the inscription of the infinite Other allows for the overflowing of ontologies as totality, or the unity of the same, is incapable of constraining or representing it:

The absolute overflowing of ontology – as the totality and unity of the same: Being – by the other occurs as infinity because no totality can constrain it. The infinitely irreducible to the *representation* of infinity, the infinity exceeding the ideation in which it is thought, thought of as more than I can think, as that which cannot be an object or a simple ‘objective reality’ of the idea – such is the pole of metaphysical transcendence. (Derrida, 1978: 122)

Yet here, for Derrida, we encounter the contradiction to which a thought rejecting theoretical rationality will necessarily face. This contradiction is reminiscent of the relation between speech and writing. Levinas can never but appeal to the most uprooted rationalism and universalism against the violences of ontology (ibid: 107). What Levinas embroils us in is a metaphysical bad faith unable to escape its ancestry in light (ibid: 147). As philosophy is always a bringing to light or an unveiling (Levinas, 2006: 46), we are faced with an inextricable war of light. While attempting to escape violence, Levinas, by employing reason, can tend toward justice only by engaging in violence such that we face an inextricable economy of violence as violence is set against violence and light is set against light (Derrida, 1978: 146).

For Levinas, as all determination is conceived of as violence, all violence is a violence of the concept, of which predication is the first violence (Derrida, 1978: 175). This is not the approach Derrida takes. In contrast, for Derrida language and conceptuality is a complex relation which diffuses the violence of ontology through *différance*. At one and the same time language illuminates and hides its other through displacement, metonymy and metaphor, but this recognition is inscribed internally within language as its condition and limit. The other of language remains resistant to every inscription, or every presence, without thereby remaining totally Other (ibid: 173). This allows not for a constitution of horizons, but horizons of constitution, with indefinite openings which necessarily keep the Other away from all totalisations but prevent it from remaining or becoming totally Other (ibid: 150). Accordingly, for Derrida, the best liberation from violence is a certain putting into question, which makes the possibility of totalisations and the erection of an immutable order impossible (ibid: 176).

In contrast, the erection of new 'politics' and 'metaphysics' can only escape ethical violence through economy: by directing violence against the violence (ibid: 176-177). If language is pure violence one never escapes the economy of war while using language. In contrast, by inscribing *différance* into language the bounds and limits of language are recognised in each moment. Most importantly, alterity becomes inscribed into language itself, not as an extrinsic and infinite Other, but as an intrinsic recognition of its limitations. However, as Derrida suggests, this was always the condition of possibility for phenomenology itself and a central tenet of Husserl:

Husserl's most central affirmation concerns the irreducibly mediate nature of intentionality aiming at the other as other. It is evident, by an essential, absolute and definitive self-evidence that the other as transcendental other (other absolute origin and other zero point in the orientation of the world), can never be given to me in an original way and in person, but only through analogical appresentation (Derrida, 1978: 154).

Analogical appresentation does not concern a reduction of the Other to the same or the imperialism of *theoria*, but rather confirms and respects separation in its inscription (ibid: 154), that is, the unsurpassable necessity of (non-objective) mediation. Without analogical appresentation, the Other would cease to be Other as otherness is itself a relational term which requires a frame of reference (ibid: 154). Moreover, the inextricability of the subject-object correlate only arises so long as we remain in the 'natural attitude' and forget the contested nature of reference. Yet, even here this only concerns the objectivity of knowledge, as the objects of knowledge, bodies and other natural things, remain recognised as Other to my own consciousness. This is simply to take seriously the reality of the external world which is already a sign of irreducible alterity without needing to introduce infinite Otherness as a corrective. Nevertheless, Derrida broadly agrees with Levinas that violence consists in the collapse of

Otherness, but far from initiating a world of cold light, phenomenology already recognises and attempts to preserve this relationship.

If discourse is originally violent it can only do itself violence in order to both negate itself and to affirm itself, in which case it makes war upon the war and reinstitutes itself without ever being able to reappropriate negativity (ibid: 162). In such a context negativity always remains external. Instead, by internalising negativity in the form of *différance* we are able to face a more productive war against forms of totality:

This secondary war, as the avowal of violence, is the least possible violence, the only way to repress the worst violence, the violence of primitive and prelogical silence, of an unimaginable night which would not even be the opposite of nonviolence; nothingness or pure non-sense. Thus discourse chooses itself violently in opposition to nothingness or pure non-sense, and, in philosophy, against nihilism (Derrida, 1978: 162).

This is the proper terrain of philosophy as a finite exercise resting between original tragedy and messianic triumph (ibid: 163). Violence is returned against violence within knowledge in which the Other is respected within, and by, a differential which refuses to collapse into tyranny. The ‘infinite’ cannot be infinitely Other without renouncing not only the limits to language, but language itself and falling into non-sense and nihilism. If one thinks, as Levinas does, that one necessarily requires not only alterity but infinite alterity as the condition for nonviolent metaphysics, then one must renounce all determinations, including language, above all the words, ‘infinite’ and ‘Other’ (ibid: 142). In contrast, for Derrida, infinity cannot be understood as Other except in the form of the in-finite, the infinite complexity of *différance*. The attempt to think infinity as a positive plenitude completely anterior or ulterior to all finite discourse

means only that the Other becomes unthinkable, impossible, and unutterable and we ourselves fall into incoherence and contradiction in the discourse of alterity (ibid: 142). The problem we must face is the inescapable limitation of conceptuality and language without falling into incoherence or infinite openness. This relation however not only extends to language, but is concerned with the other of language; ontology.

#### **4.3 The spectres of the real – towards a metaphysics of *différance***

In conceptualising the relation of the other of language against Levinas, Derrida invokes *différance*. Against an ontology of infinite otherness what Derrida offers is less an ontology than an *hauntology* - a play on the inaudible *différance* between ont- (*ontos*) and haunt (*haunter*) in French (Derrida 1994). Hauntology moves from the real as solid to the real as spectral where, as Fredric Jameson puts it, “the living present is scarcely as self-sufficient as it claims to be; that we would do well not to count on its density and solidity, which might under exceptional circumstances betray us” (Jameson, 1999: 39). Accordingly, hauntology situates the possibility of realism in a deconstruction of the real without invoking infinite Otherness but without returning to simple presences.

Within hauntology the thing is no longer understood as a simple thing; instead, it takes on a spectral existence. Spectrality blurs the lines of existence and presence such that the spectral can be said to be *différential*; neither present nor absent, neither dead nor alive, but present and absent, dead and alive at once (Derrida, 1994: 192). This is to say its effect/affect are born from a relational ontology (ference, re-ference, defer-ence, differ-ence, *différance*) (ibid: 193). The being of the spectre is out of joint, it is a dislocated presence rather than a self-presence (ibid: 193). Through this spectral element the relation between materiality and immateriality is called



into question. The spectral is a body without body, appearance without appearance and solidity without solidity; the thing is no longer altogether a thing (ibid: 190). Rather spectrality recognises the blurred distinctions of identity and reality characteristic of *différance* which makes the existence of the thing undecidable but not indiscernible (ibid: 188). This is an attempt to make the present, as a material reality, waver (Jameson, 1999: 38). It challenges the belief in the stability of reality, being and matter and in place of the ‘unmixed’, that is, the pure, self-sufficient, autonomous account of phenomena, suggesting instead a general mess of mixed, incestuous, multivalenced and hybrid phenomena (ibid: 38). This spectral element is particularly evident in the fetish form in general and the commodity form in particular as a form of natural/social object/subject hybrid. In the fetish form wood comes alive and is peopled with spirits which appear to grant it a form of autonomy in the marketplace (Derrida, 1994: 191). It is able to move itself on its own initiative, animate within an artificial body, autonomous and yet automaton – it comes to take on a life of its own (ibid: 192). The result of this fetishism is the subjection to independent social relations, but more interestingly, the relations become social relations amongst the things themselves, which cease to reflect any object-ivity (ibid: 196). The market relationship and the fluctuation of commodity prices is viewed not as a social relationship between people, but as a relationship between the things themselves. The spectral quality of these things represents a particular autonomy, obscuring the social relation within itself and in so doing making its existence a unity of social and natural forms. As the spectral becomes increasingly corporeal, and the corporeal increasingly spectral, the human being begins to fade away in a perverse exchange value, a ‘quid pro quo’:

The term is Marx’s. It takes us back once again to some theatrical intrigue: mechanical ruse (*mekhanē*) or mistaking a person, repetition upon the perverse intervention of a prompter [*souffleur*], *parole soufflée*, substitution of actors or characters. Here the theatrical *quid pro quo* stems from an abnormal play of mirrors. There is a mirror, and

the commodity form is also this mirror, but since all of a sudden it no longer plays its role, since it does not reflect back the expected image, those who are looking for themselves can no longer find themselves in it. Men no longer recognise in it the *social* character of their *own* labour. It is as if they were becoming ghosts in their turn. The “proper” feature of spectres, like vampires, is that they are deprived of a specular image, of the true, right specular image (but who is not so deprived?). How do you recognise a ghost? By the fact that it does not recognise itself in a mirror. Now that is what happens with the *commerce* of the commodities *among themselves*. These ghosts that are commodities transform human producers into ghosts. And this whole theatrical process (visual, theoretical, but also optical, *optician*) sets off the effect of a mysterious mirror: if the latter does not return the right reflection, if, then, it phantomalises, this is first of all because it naturalises. The “mysteriousness” of the commodity-form as presumed reflection of the social form is the incredible manner in which this mirror sends back the image (*zurückspiegelt*) when one thinks it is reflecting for men the image of the “social characteristics of men's own labour”: such an “image” objectivises by naturalising. Thereby, this is its truth, it shows by hiding, it reflects these “objective” (*gegenständliche*) characteristics as inscribed right on the product of labour, as the “socio-natural properties of these things” (*als gesellschaftliche Natureigenschaften dieser Dinge*). (Derrida, 1994: 195)

Marx points out that such fetishes do not actually walk by themselves, do not go to market by themselves and correspond to nothing but the borrowed autonomy gifted to the fetish by a forgotten anthropomorphic projection and human practice (Marx, 1977: 436). What appears as a physical relation is in fact only a social relation and the spirit of commodities is only a gifted and misrecognised spirit human spirit: “[t]here is a definite social relation between men, that assumes, in their eyes, the fantastic form of a relation between things” (ibid: 436). However,

while this may be the case in the final analysis, we cannot escape that this gifting results in a particular haunting in which origins are obscured and become intangible precisely by the creation of these spectres which come to have tangible results:

Persons are personified by letting themselves be haunted by the very effect of objective haunting, so to speak, that they produce by inhabiting the thing. Persons (guardians or possessors of the thing) are haunted in return, and constitutively, by the haunting they produce in the thing by lodging their speech and their will like inhabitants. (Derrida, 1994: 198)

Under the influence of their own creations, humanity become frightened by their own ghosts which take on an objective, albeit spectral existence. This raises a peculiar problem for Marx in his critique of Max Stirner in *The German Ideology* and his analysis of the commodity form and fetishism in *Capital*. Against Stirner Marx famously quips that “[o]nce upon a time a valiant fellow had the idea that men were drowned in water only because they were possessed with the *idea of gravity*” (Marx, 1970: 37). Yet in *Capital* the idea of the fetish and the commodity displays this exact quality.

What is particularly interesting about the operation of the fetish form is the play of *différance*. The form is not actually present, but operates through the *différential* relations themselves, creating effects in spite of being ‘out of joint’ with the present. Here hauntology is presented as the spectral relationship between the ideal and material (or what we might call the virtual). Thus:

To haunt does not mean to be present, and it is necessary to introduce haunting into the very construction of a concept. Of every concept, beginning with the concepts of being

and time. That is what we would be calling here a hauntology. Ontology opposes it only in a movement of exorcism. Ontology is a conjuration. (Derrida, 1994: 202)

These last two lines are particularly revealing for understanding the relationship between Derrida and ontology. While hauntology undermines the solidity of the present and of ‘the real’ by appealing to the spectral, ontology functions by appealing to the real and the present in order to dispel the spectral. Ontology attempts to effect an exorcism through a dis-illusioning of the ideal by way of appeal to ‘the real’ i.e. the present. Thus, for Marx, the phantasmagoric fetish form requires exorcism by a recognition of the historically determined mode of production:

The categories of bourgeois economics consist precisely of forms of this kind [i.e., delirious, Marx has just said]. They are forms of thought which are socially valid, and therefore objective, for the relations of production belonging to this historically determined mode of social production, i.e. commodity production. The whole mystery of commodities, all the magic and necromancy that surrounds the products of labour on the basis of commodity production, vanishes therefore as soon as we come to other forms of production (Marx cited in Derrida, 1994: 206)

For Marx, the dark night of magic and spectres will disappear in the truth of day through an invocation of the real. For Derrida it is not quite so simple. Because the real is itself destabilised there can be no simple appeal to corrective presences. In the case of the commodity form, the spectres it engenders are not simply the products of a specific mode of production i.e. spectres are not exclusively the provenance of Capitalism. Instead spectres are concerned with the manner of production itself as a dislocated process<sup>123</sup> in which fetishism as spectrality arises naturally enough. In other words, where there is production “there is fetishism: idealisation, autonomisation and automatisisation, dematerialisation and spectral incorporation” (Derrida,

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<sup>123</sup> Entailing difference and deference.

1994: 209). For Derrida, ontology attempts to diffuse the mystifications by appealing to a primary reality, original simplicity, presence or phenomena, in short a corporeality imbued with an autonomous existence, a transcendently fixed point from which we can banish phantoms and avoid the dematerialisation of the real. However, this conjuration is also always an exorcism of the unavoidable spectres which haunt the world on account of *différance* and the spectrality of hauntology. Exorcism is the attempt to both to destroy and to disavow the haunting of spectral relations by inaugurating a metaphysics of presence which expels *différance*. The logic of this is simple enough. What we previously believed to be real was in fact an illusion – fancies born out from the human head, but here and now we have grasped the real. Such an exorcism functions to declare the spectre dead in order to put it to death, reassuring us that what is dead is indeed dead (ibid: 59). Yet, such an operation of ontology only ever conjures away the spectre in a way which is equally irrational; in being able to name the demon, and withholding our belief we can put it to rest (ibid: 59). In order to exorcise the conjurations of capitalism, Marx must produce an ontology which reintroduces the source of the problem by masking and inviting the continued haunting of *différance* and the necessity for further exorcisms. While Marx's ontology is critical, it is still a pre-deconstructive ontology of presence concerned with actual reality and objectivity i.e. it still attempts to present *the real* nostalgically as a lost or obscure presence we can recover.

For Derrida it is precisely this dimension of *the real* that must be deconstructed. Even so, for Derrida 'pre-deconstructive' is not equivalent to false, unnecessary, or illusory (ibid: 214). Instead, pre-deconstructive characterises a form of relatively stabilised knowledge whose form requires surpassing. In particular pre-deconstructive ontology remains haunted by the spectre of religion (ontotheology) and in seeking to exorcise this demon forgets its own existence as a particular mode of historical production. It sets itself against the spectral and the illusory, but

in so doing invites itself to be haunted as the present or the real is always less stable than ontology would like. What costs us dearly is to believe that we are done with ghosts and that we have finally grasped the real of history (i.e. the end of history). Thus, to do hauntology is to dissociate from the messianic appeal that we have finally arrived and that the real is in any sense present. While this is illustrated through Marx, for Derrida this is more truly a critique of postmodern excess and Capitalist triumphalism which believes it has already exorcised its ghosts and is now without past, without future, without spectrality, a pure presence of a free and open world market i.e. late capitalism in which the awaited future, the real, is finally here (Jameson, 1999: 59)<sup>124</sup>. But if the real is spectral, the question becomes whether it is possible to move towards any conception of realism which recognises the relations of *différance* while being embodied in the present.

A concrete expression of this is the idea of the democracy *to come* as a political expression of deconstruction (Derrida, 1994: 81) the logic of which has been well captured by Simon Critchley as a perpetual hermeneutic of critique and dissolution:

Such processes of democratisation, evidenced in numerous examples (new social movements, Greenpeace, Amnesty International, *médecins sans frontières*, indigeneous rights groups, alternative globalisation movements, etc.), would work across, above, beneath and within the territory of the democratic state, not in the vain hope of achieving some sort of ‘society without the state’, but rather as providing constant pressure upon the state, a pressure of emancipatory intent aiming at its infinite

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<sup>124</sup> That *Spectres of Marx* opens with and continually engages Francis Fukuyama’s infamous thesis on the end of history (Fukuyama 2012) should not be lost.

amelioration, the endless betterment of actually existing democracies, or should I say what passes for democracy at the present moment. (Critchley, 2008: 10)

It would not be incorrect to suggest that here the *to come* operates as a continual haunting of ontology and ontologising by *différance* in which the real as present is continually exposed to critique. Indeed, the democracy to come presents a radical reformist, even revolutionary programme of critique based in a continual exposure of a position through the application of constant pressure expressed as a continual questioning. What is particularly insightful here is the developmental aspect of deconstruction. The ground clearing is not intended as a return to the primordial unity or chaos of being or the dissolution of all form, but, like a critical rectification, represents a form of progress as a perpetual revolution. As such, this critical exercise can never result in a good conscience, as it can never do enough to discharge its obligation to the infinite demand of the future; the present always capable of and requires further critique. Yet, insofar as it is a Benjaminian opening to a future, redemption is made possible by a preparatory and necessary intervention in the present. Even so, this is a delicate balance.

#### **4.4 The realism of the other – an apotheosis of the apophantic?**

The development of this theme in some of Derrida's latter works (1995; 2002) returns to the problem of the other and presents a particular conception of the messianic as concerned with an irreducible and infinite opening (to the future). Against all forms of ontology and the metaphysics of presence, Derrida now appears to offer an (atheological) understanding of the messianic as hope, hospitality, a 'yes' to the *arrivant*, or an invitation to the other or to the stranger. The real becomes the gift, love, the future which cannot be anticipated or justice beyond the law. Here *différance* becomes transformed into an affirmation of openness which

stands against anything which harbours ontological weight. It appears as a purely open gesture, waiting for the event to come without a horizon of expectation. This is waiting on the impossible, an affirmation of that which cannot be deconstructed, that which is otherness itself; the arrival of *différance*. Yet, far from being a passive waiting for a ‘God to save us’<sup>125</sup> it operates as a continual clearing of a present which is made an open site for the arrival of the other. In *On the Name* (Derrida, 1995) this is articulated by way of an appeal to the *khôra* in Plato. In the *Timaeus* the *khôra* is the starting point of the universe which is a receptacle of all becoming (Tim 49a). It is neither present nor absent, being nor non-being but its nature is to be available to always receive things, making it appear differently at all times and places (50b - c). It is the mother who receives varying imprints and in some senses becomes these imprints (50d). The practice of deconstruction becomes almost viewed as an eternal return to this pure state or site of receptivity which is made ready to receive the other in a gesture of openness and possibilities.

This peculiar relationship between deconstruction, realism, the messianic and the other is captured in the ‘Danish’ (i.e. Kierkegaardian) deconstruction of John Caputo. This particular reading of Derrida and deconstruction highlights the peculiar way in which certain currents of deconstruction and readings of *différance* (particularly drawing on Derrida’s later writings) are open to overly mystical interpretations, with the continually differing/deferred nature of reality in the ‘to come’ reinvoking a sentimental Levinasian Otherness. Caputo draws upon Derrida in an effort to effect a post-secular, post-liberal (a)theology of the unconditional other based in a religion without religion and a messianism without a messiah grounded in the undeconstructable i.e. *différance*, justice, the promise, the *tout autre*, the gift, hospitality,

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<sup>125</sup> C.f. Heidegger 1976



*l'avenir* (Caputo, 1997: 128). For Caputo deconstruction is a labour of love which is not so much concerned with realism or anti-realism as with hyper-realism<sup>126</sup> (Caputo, 2004: 40). This is to suggest deconstruction is "affirmative" of something which is undeconstructible, but this is an affirmation without being 'positive' and without staking out a plannable project or a programmable position (Caputo, 1997: 129). This is an affirmation of the ground beyond the distinctions between real and ideal, positive and negative, foundational and antifoundational, faith and reason (ibid: 129). Hence it is hyper-real; the real beyond the real. In pursuit of this hyper-reality, deconstruction is presented as "infinite vigilance, infinite questioning in the name of what is coming, infinite suspicion based upon the faith that the only one who or the only thing which is above suspicion is not here yet" (Caputo, 2004: 40). Such a deconstruction operates as an infinite suspicion against all realisms, which is to say the attempt to appeal to any transcendental signified. This is not to suggest that texts and languages have no 'referents' or 'objectivity' or that deconstruction denies the distinction between reality and fiction, only that "the referent and objectivity are not what they pass themselves off to be, a pure transcendental signified" (Caputo, 1997: 80). As such, deconstruction will continue to take devilish delight in showing the way in which what is taken for reality, or what dares to pass itself off as real, is ultimately conditioned upon 'unreality' and 'irreality' such that all transcendental schemes including realism break down (Caputo, 2001). As Caputo suggests, deconstruction never tires, and will never tire, of telling 'realists' the story of how the real world is a fable and how the thing itself always 'slips away' at the final moment (Caputo, 2001). In a manner of speaking, this is simply to draw attention once again to reality as characterised by open systems and the relations of *différance*<sup>127</sup> which resists inscription into the present and to preserve the distinction between reference and referent. As Derrida suggests:

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<sup>126</sup> Although this should not be confused with Baudrillard's conception of hyper-realism.

<sup>127</sup> Alternatively, to characterise this in terms of set theory, the set of all sets cannot be presented (Lyotard 1984; Badiou 2005).

... [C]ontrary to what phenomenology—which is always a phenomenology of perception—has tried to make us believe, contrary to what our desire cannot fail to be tempted into believing, the thing itself always escapes [*la chose même se dérobe toujours*]. (Derrida, 1973: 104)

The thing itself is more appropriately understood as the object of longing, the nostalgic desire for presence, immediacy and unity (c.f. Derrida, 1976: 143). Indeed, ‘reality’ is represented here as that which is denied to us contrary to our longings (or rather contrary to the demands) of our desire for presence. The thing we attempt to represent, the real, always slips away as it is constituted by *différance*. As Caputo suggests, the real is never real enough because what is given and what shows up is never enough i.e. the (spectral) thing is characterised by relations of *différance* which remain unrepresented or not present (Caputo, 2001). In other words, reality when *present*-ed is always deconstructable. By appealing to the *a venir* Derrida and Caputo are concerned with understanding the nature of the real as that which must always elude articulation in the present mode. This means we can only have recourse to the Other as the realisation of *différance* via the absencing of presence and determinations. Of this unconditional Other we cannot say that it *is*, which is to say too much, only that ‘it comes’ or it ‘is given’ (*es gibt; il y a*). It is this aspect which keeps the world open and revisable, which fractures and splits ‘the real’, providing openings for new growth. Here there can be no ‘end’ of interpretation any more than there can be an absolute beginning or self-presence. This is the real (or hyper-real) as the khôral ground, the condition of possibility for the encounter with that which we did not expect or plan for, the absolute surprise of the other breaking in. But this now made conditional upon letting the Other remain Other and not imposing conditionality i.e. not making the other equivalent with the present but accepting it as given. For Caputo, the ‘love’ of deconstructive is to give oneself to the Other by letting the Other remain Other while preparing a space for them through the deconstruction of the present (Caputo, 2001). Broken in the

present we long with tears and prayers to be filled and redeemed by the unconditional thing that is to come to which we never have naked access (Caputo, 2004: 41):

The thing itself always slips away—leaving us to pray and weep, to hope and long for it to come. That is *the* impossible, and we get going, we begin, *by* the impossible. For that is what we love. “*Inquietum est cor nostrum*” is the motto of this Jewish Augustinian messianic hyper-realism, whose “Circumfession” opens with a prayer: *viens, oui, oui*. (Caputo, 2004: 41-42)

This aspect is finds expression in Derrida’s earlier works as the tension between play, history and presence which in his later work (and in the work of Caputo) takes on a more serious ethical aspect and becomes hope:

Play is the disruption of presence. The presence of an element is always a signifying and substitutive reference inscribed in a system of differences and the movement of a chain. Play is always play of absence and presence, but if it is to be thought radically, play must be conceived of before the alternative of presence and absence. Being must be conceived as presence or absence on the basis of the possibility of play and not the other way around. (Derrida, 1978: 369)

This aspect of play (or hope) is contrasted with nostalgia for lost origins and an ethic of natural innocence (Derrida, 1978: 369). Turned towards the lost and impossible presence of absent origins such a position creates a thematic of broken immediacy which engenders a saddened, negative, nostalgic, guilty mood hovering over life<sup>128</sup>. Against this we must pose joyful Nietzschean affirmation of the present as *différance*. This is the affirmation of the play of words, the innocence of becoming, the affirmation of signs without fault, without truth, without origin, without end: “[t]his affirmation determines the non-centre otherwise than as loss of the

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<sup>128</sup> Represented by Rousseau, Heidegger and Levi-Strauss.

centre” (ibid: 369). Accordingly, it plays without security and without fear of insecurity. It creates an undecidability in the real itself. Here we are faced with the task of a conception, formation, gestation and labour which turns its eyes toward the as yet unnameable and which must necessarily proclaim itself “only under the species of nonspecies, in the formless, mute, infant, and terrifying form of monstrosity” (Derrida, 1978: 370).

The poetic gesture of a messianic slouching towards Bethlehem provides a peculiar quality to realism. This is a conception of the real based in *différance* rather than presence, a differing/deferred realism; a realism that is to come. The hyper-realism of Caputo captures this with the prefix ‘hyper-’. Without the ‘hyper-’, realism operates within a horizon of *adequatio* or correspondence, and assumes a congenial fit between *intellectus* and *res*, a suitable proportionality, so that the *res* is in principle perfectly knowable by the mind, i.e. capable of being made present, immediate and certain (Caputo, 2006: 11-12). In hyper-realism, the real, alterity itself, is constituted by an irreducible excess which exceeds all interpretation. In the later Levinasian-esque ethics of Derrida, this is not a gap to be crossed, but an ethical difference which must be preserved; it is the condition of love directed towards the real itself. Thus deconstruction, Derrida says, amounts to an act of “respecting, loving even the invisibility that keeps the other inaccessible” (Derrida, 1995: 74)<sup>129</sup>.

If the real appears as the undeconstructable, that is, the unconditional and infinite ground it must still be necessarily momentarily housed in something conditioned and finite. But this infinite is less the unifying ground which harmoniously conjoins than the disjunctions and

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<sup>129</sup> Here we might note that in spite of its poetic language, what Derrida is suggesting is the need to maintain the separation of the transitive and the intransitive dimensions.

dislocations effected by *différance*. Here any sense of realism is dependent upon a transgression which breaks open and disjoins what is gathered together and what closes in upon itself in self-proximity (Caputo, 1997: 154). The task of deconstruction is always to impishly (or piously) reaffirm the infinity that is the transcendence of the undeconstructable. Deconstructive thinking represents a sensitivity to the contingency of our constructions, and the deeply historical, social, and linguistic nature of our beliefs and practices (ibid: 52). This is to say, “deconstructive thinking is a way of affirming the irreducible alterity of the world we are trying to construe” (ibid: 52). The real as Other is always distinguished from its inscriptions (our constructions) by reason of its polyvalence, complexity and undecidability (Caputo, 2006: 3). It is precisely however the alterity of the world which language is trying to translate, “like runners thrusting themselves forward toward a finish line that never appears” (ibid: 3). In language we are trying to get at something, a ‘I know not what’ or rather in the case of Caputo, towards “God knows what” (Caputo, 2006: 3). When directed towards the *a venir*, deconstruction becomes concerned with the impossible moment which never arrives, while trying to make it happen, while trying to preserve the Other from collapse into language. In this context Being is always an excess, uncontainable, and therefore in the final analysis unknowable. It is “something which groans to be born” and cannot be restricted to the languages of the ontic or ontological order (ibid: 5). The real is that which exceeds, a restlessness or anxiety which makes possible temporary stability but always carries with it its own instability and resources of deconstruction. In Caputo’s hyper-realism, the real is freed from service to *res* while not quite denying ‘reference’. Hyper-realism is the pulse of transcendence which “calls us beyond ourselves, into unplotted paths and into unexplored lands, calling us to go where we cannot go, extending us beyond our reach” (ibid: 11). In reaching beyond the real, hyper-reality reaches to the not-yet-real, that which no eye has seen in the open-endedness of an uncontainable, unrestrictable, undeconstructible event (ibid: 12). Such a poetics disrupts, interrupts and

challenges the workings of 'the real' by evoking another possibility, the possibility of the real to come or the real beyond the real (present). Here the idea is of an affirmation of anarchy which settles into, rather than dissolves or breaks, the tensions of being between the possible and the impossible, the real and the not-yet-real, creating a disturbing and dangerous space which is a challenge to all inscriptions and all kingdoms. Yet, this must be understood not as an invitation to scepticism or relativism. This is not sceptical despair or a resigned 'anything goes' any more than it is a cold rationalism or an attempt to anchor the endless drift of movement (ibid: 116). It is rather to suspend the question of ontology altogether as a gesture to the hyper-reality of the world. This is an advent, an adventure, a future, a call and claim, a hope against hope which rests in the call, tears and prayers of *viens, oui oui!* (ibid: 124) This is a prayer *sans voir, sans avoir, sans savoir* (without seeing, without having, without knowing) and we might add *sans saviour* (without saviour or salvation) praying and weeping before an unknown which turns on keeping the gap between the name and the event open (ibid: 299). As a post-secular (a)theology it is a carnival, an extravagant excess and transgression of the world. In this Dionysian carnival god cannot be contained by word or world (ibid: 291). Such a deconstructive realism boils down to the affirmation of other coupled with the assertion that nothing is safe (ibid: 293).

#### **4.5 Realism yesterday realism tomorrow - but never realism today**

Through this (Kiekegaardian/Levinasian) digression the problematic of a deconstructive realism become apparent. Insofar as deconstruction attempts to prevent the collapse of language and its Other, it is certainly concerned with a particular gesture of realism. However, the ethical relationship of preserving the Other (in particular moments) becomes almost paralysed to move beyond the negativity of *différance* to any possible affirmation beyond an affirmation of the undeconstructable Other. Instead, we return to the Levinasian problem that

all 'positivism' is violence perpetrated against the Other, and thought is liable to retreat into the arms of a mystical openness. Such a direction however moves not only against Derrida's own earlier substantive critique of Levinas, but against his own (earlier) assertions that deconstruction does not mean that we are lost in a haze of confusion, relativism and indeterminacy. Rather, deconstruction (and even Derrida's earlier ethics of the Other) is precisely the attempt to avoid this by delineating the context of language in between the determinations of the present and the indeterminacy of the future. As Derrida suggests:

[U]ndecidability is not indeterminacy. Undecidability is the competition between two determined possibilities or options, two determined duties ... Now, because there are contexts and singularities, there are movements, processes and transformations, and *for transformation to occur something has to be determined, something is determinable ...* There is, however, the future, what is to come, and I would say there *is indeterminacy of the coming of the future*. But that is not a relativity of meaning. [italics mine] (Derrida. 1999: 79)

While Caputo largely desires to dwell in the openness of the future, Derrida recognises the necessity of intervention in the present and the manner in which *différance* not only makes this possible but prevents its abuse. But herein lies the problem. Insofar as deconstruction has by and large been concerned to destabilise the present and situate the relation of language and its other, it is without resources for the construction of concepts in the present. Instead it becomes a negative dialectic which preserves the real through deconstructive critique (critical rectification) rather than construction. This has the peculiar effect that what Derrida considers to be the bulwark against relativism and anti-realism is for many a realist precisely the site of his relativism and anti-realism; a denial of the possibility of ontology or realism in the present in favour of the realism that is to come and never arrives (albeit coupled with the necessity of action). Here the real as other or as the 'to come' becomes properly undecidable. It is the site

of both Derrida realism and anti-realism, or, rather, the basis of a complex de-centred realism of *différance* which rejects the metaphysics of presence. This problem of the Other reproduces precisely the same problem as his earlier infamous proclamation that ‘there is nothing outside the text’:

Yet if reading must not be content with doubling the text, *it cannot legitimately transgress the text towards something other than it, toward a referent (a reality that is metaphysical, historical, psychobiographical, etc.) or toward a signified outside the text whose content could take place, could have taken place outside of language*, that is to say, in the sense that we give here to that word, outside of writing in general. That is why the methodological considerations that we risk applying here to an example are closely dependent on general propositions that we have elaborated above, as regards the absence of the referent or the transcendental signified. There is nothing outside of the text [there is no outside text; there is nothing outside the context; *il n’y a pas de hors texte*]. *And that is neither because Jean-Jacques’ life, or the existence of Mamma or Therese themselves, is not of prime interest to us, nor because we have access to their so-called ‘real’ existence only in the text and we have neither any means of altering this, nor any right to neglect this limitation ... [I]n what one calls the real life of these existences ‘of flesh and bone’ beyond and behind what one believes can be circumscribed as Rousseau’s text, there has never been anything but supplements, substitutive significations which could only come forth in a chain of differential references, the ‘real’ supervening, and being added only while taking on meaning from a trace and from an invocation of the supplement, etc. And thus to infinity, for we have read, in the text, that the absolute present, Nature, that which words like ‘real mother’ name, have always already escaped, have never existed; that what opens meaning and*



*language is writing as the disappearance of natural presence.* [italics mine] (Derrida, 1976: 158-159)

To avoid any further possible ambiguity, elsewhere (Derrida 1988) Derrida makes clear that textuality is used in this context in a broad sense:

What I call "text" implies all the structures called "real," "economic," "historical," socio-institutional, in short: all possible referents. Another way of recalling once again that "there is nothing outside the text". That does not mean that all referents are suspended, denied, or enclosed in a book, as people have claimed, or have been naive enough to believe and to have accused me of believing. But it does mean that every referent, all reality has the structure of a differential trace, and that once cannot refer to this "real" except in an interpretive experience. The latter neither yields meaning nor assume it except in a movement of differential referring (Derrida, 1988: 148)

To suggest there is nothing outside the text is precisely to highlight the problem of realism in relation to the metaphysics of presence. This is not a Kantian-like rift or linguistic idealism. Language for Derrida is never a prison house. It is precisely because Derrida introduces *différance* into the equation that language encounters the recognition and crisis of its limits which disrupts any possibility of immediacy and presence, that is to say, any possibility of 'realism' in the present. The relationship of subject and object are placed out of joint, but this unhinging does not turn into a new immediacy in which the subject has free reign. Language is central, and affects our relation to the extra-linguistic, but it does not operate in a purely restrictive let alone determining fashion. Language is presented as a crucial medium by which we must categorise, comprehend and represent the world in which we find ourselves. Language is an empowering limitation which both enables and constraints our attempt to articulate the world and find security in the real. This will necessarily entail differing degrees of violence

insofar as the particular determinations we use will fail to represent the objects as they exist in different domains. Yet, the inexorable presence of *différance* in the structure of language and the spectral existence of objects ensures that deconstruction is always possible where language, concepts (or practices) become too rigid or totalitarian or simply too immediate and too present. Accordingly, there is no need for the Levinasian ethical gesture of infinite alterity. *Différance* as both a linguistic and ontological structure immanently does the work and prevents the closure characteristic of the metaphysics of presence. Even so, deconstruction is, by and large, less concerned with the possibility of construction, than the possibility of deconstruction. The problem Derrida and any deconstructive realism faces is not that *there is nothing outside the text*, but precisely that *there is something outside the text* and we only have an equivocal tool with which to articulate it.

## Chapter 5: The Clamour of Metaphysics

There is no holding nature still and looking at it. (Whitehead, 1920: 15)

### 5.1 Deleuze ... charlatan?

The aim of this chapter is to situate Gilles Deleuze within the problematic of representation and the possibility of ontology and realism under postmodernism. Where Derridean deconstruction is seemingly unable to come to terms with the construction of conceptuality, Deleuze, expressing numerous similarities with Derrida, is particularly concerned with the possibility of the intelligibility and conceptual articulation of the natural and social world. Even more so than Derrida, the conventional readings of Deleuze portray him as a vandal and a nonsensical charlatan; a difference-intoxicated madman in the orgiastic *jouissance* of Dionysian abandon. He is dismissed as fashionable nonsense (Sokal and Bricmont, 1999); fatalist and aristocratic (Badiou, 2000); extra-worldly<sup>130</sup> (Hallward, 2006); or in the case of critical realism, unserious and irrealist (Norrie, 2012). In short, Deleuze becomes another veritable symptom for all the problems of postmodern philosophy. If, as Foucault suggested, this century is to be remembered as Deleuzian (Foucault, 1998: 343), then so much the worse for us. Yet, against this reception, there is a growing reading of Deleuze represented by Manuel DeLanda (2002, 2006, 2010), Jeffrey Bell (2006), John Marks (2006) and Levi Bryant (2008) which presents his philosophy as a form of complex scientific realism and a means of escaping the relativistic currents within postmodernism. Deleuze is taken to be a serious philosopher

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<sup>130</sup> "Deleuze is most appropriately read as a spiritual, redemptive or subtractive thinker ... Deleuze's philosophy is oriented by lines of flight that lead out of the world; though not other-worldly, it is *extra-worldly*" [emphasis in original] (Hallward, 2006: 3).

concerned with explicitly thinking ontology and metaphysics through the analysis of dynamic processes, powers and relationships, taking up and turning us towards the nature of mind-independent reality and providing not only a deconstruction of the metaphysics of identity, but a new metaphysics which moves beyond the primacy of identity by transcendently reconstituting empiricism on the basis of difference. As such Deleuze functions as a bridge between the postmodernism concern with difference and the Bhaskarian concern for realist explanation coupled with epistemic relativism.

## **5.2 The metaphysical turn in postmodernism**

The basis of Deleuzian realism is a departure from the philosophies of representation characterised by the metaphysical primacy of identity. Instead of focusing on the possibility of representation, Deleuze turns towards the aesthetic and empirical dimensions of reality as constituted by difference. Through this, Deleuze is concerned to account for the intelligibility and the conditions of possibility of real experience, that is, how the given is given. In particular, Deleuze is concerned to provide a transcendental explanation of empiricism which accounts for the way in which we apprehend directly in the sensible that which can only be sensed, coming to an account of “the very being of the sensible” namely being “as difference, potential difference and difference in intensity” which provides “the reason behind qualitative diversity” (Deleuze, 1994: 56-57). As Bryant suggests: Deleuze seeks to determine the conditions under which sensible receptivity to the world on the one hand and the intelligibility of the world on the other, is itself possible (Bryant, 2008: 9). This departs from the Kantian project insofar as it is concerned less with the conditions under which experience is possible through the synthesis of concepts and intuition, than the conditions under which sensibility is possible and the way in which concepts function to articulate the sensible while both departing from and being grounded in the sensible. To this end, Deleuze rejects the Platonic conception of forms

as determinative of being and the field of sensibility as unintelligible and irrational appearance. Rather, the Deleuzian project of transcendental empiricism<sup>131</sup>, I will argue, should be read as concerned with providing an alternative to the language (and metaphysics) of identity and representation, including causation and essence, grounded in the dislocation of subject and object and a break with the ontological priority of identity (the metaphysics of identity) in order to provide an account for the possibility of realism irreducible to either empiricism or rationalism. While Bryant characterises this peculiar stance as more truly a form of hyper-rationalism rather than empiricism, in which empirics have their own immanent rationality of logics in the form of logos and the differential rules of intuition (Bryant, 2008: 9 -10), I want to suggest this in fact functions in a very similar manner to Bhaskarian transcendental realism and is concerned with providing a transcendental account of events. Accordingly, Deleuze sets out to undermine any complacent or mechanical assumptions about the nature of presence, presentation and representation without thereby abandoning realism.

In rethinking the contours of empiricism Deleuze is concerned to undermine the implicit mechanistic ontology of empiricism. Philosophy, it is held, has (often implicitly) presented identity as a metaphysically primitive term and has defined the possibility and conditions of experience and representation according to this metaphysical postulate (Deleuze, 1994: xix). Instead, Deleuze positions himself against both naïve empiricism and transcendental idealism (including mental and social constructionism), the plausibility of which rests on the formation of an immediate and identical relationship between object and subject, namely, subject as constituted by sense and experience, and/or object as constituted by mind. Both forms establish a direct mediation of subject and object in which all objectivity is definable only in terms of a

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<sup>131</sup> Which, like Bhaskar's transcendental realism, transcendental empiricism presents itself as a bastard child of Kantian critical theory (see Deleuze 2008).

subject. In such accounts, reality can always be reduced to the machinations of a subject, while the object becomes a bottomless, undifferentiated, indeterminate and unintelligible abyss. Construing this relationship in terms of forces and their relations, the human mind becomes active while the mind-independent world becomes reactive functioning as the receptacle for thought<sup>132</sup>. Against this epistemological postulate and its metaphysical correlate, Deleuze is concerned to overturn the Platonic presuppositions of empiricism, namely: (1) intuition as passive and receptive, that is, without productivity, and more importantly; (2) that the givens of intuition are themselves passive, inert and without intelligibility (c.f. Bryant, 2008: 9). For Deleuze, operating behind the forms of intuition and sensibility is not a sovereign and autonomous subject reflecting upon and imposing form upon dead and inert matter, but an ontological production in which we are swept up, and to which we respond both practically and theoretically. Our thoughts do not simply originate with us but rather arise from a complex engagement and negotiation with the world. As Bryant outlines:

We do not set the problems to be solved, but instead find ourselves in the midst of problems which function like imperatives to which we must respond. In this respect, Deleuze's position cannot be situated in terms of debates organized around realism and anti-realism, foundationalism and anti-foundationalism. Since we are not ourselves the creators, it would be wrong to call Deleuze's position an anti-realism or an anti-foundationalism. Anti-realism and anti-foundationalism only apply in discourses

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<sup>132</sup> See Deleuze (1983). Ironically, social constructionism, despite its pretensions to being Nietzschean, can be understood as a return to the nihilistic philosophy Nietzsche condemns. In contrast Nietzsche desires to effect a return to the earth away from idealism and not into its open arms:

To overthrow idols (my word for 'ideals') – that ... is my business. Reality has been deprived of its value, its meaning, its veracity to the same degree as an ideal world has been fabricated ... the 'real world' and the 'apparent world' – in plain terms: the fabricated world and reality ... The *lie* of the ideal has hitherto been the curse on reality, through it mankind itself has become mendacious and false down to its deepest instincts – to the point of worshipping the *inverse* values to those which alone could guarantee it prosperity, future, the exalted *right* to a future. (Nietzsche, 2004: 4)

organized around the oppositions of subject and object, culture and nature. (Bryant, 2008: 10)

For Deleuze overcoming the Platonic heritage entails outlining a metaphysics accounting for and undermining the inherited relations between the finite and infinite, the universal and the particular, and perhaps above all, being and thinking (Bryant, 2008: 10). In particular Deleuze seeks to transform the physical and social sciences by eschewing the analysis of transcendent laws and essences grounded in identity, for a transcendental analysis of intuition, processes, powers and assemblages grounded in difference. This is a metaphysics of a complex, dynamic and open world, full of divergent processes, yielding novel and unexpected entities and results. This is a world which will not sit still long enough for us to take a snapshot of it and present this snapshot as any kind of final truth (DeLanda, 2002: 7). Indeed, reality can only begin to yield its secrets to a science or philosophy concerned with understanding dynamic processes, powers and relations as its proper 'object' (c.f. Whitehead 1920). Accordingly, this is a realism with a caveat; Deleuze is a realist about ontology and about the real world, but he is not a realist about essences, or any other transcendent entity (DeLanda, 2002: 5). Rather, the basis of Deleuze's particular 'neo-realism' is a transcendental and not transcendent account as to what gives objects their identity through time by focusing on the immanent processes and powers that operate to individuate and form entities.

### **5.3 Overturning Platonism**

The possibility of resituating empiricism rests in overturning the legacy of Platonism (Deleuze, 1994: 59). What this entails is nowhere clearer than with Deleuze's treatment of the concept 'difference'. Indeed, the analysis of difference functions as a site in which the entire project of anti-Platonism is concentrated. Conventionally, difference is conceived of as an empirical or

logical relation between two terms, each of which has a prior identity (self-identity) of its own represented in the logic “x is x” and “x is different from y” (“x is not not-x”). Deleuze inverts this relationship. Identity persists, but is now regarded as a something emerging from a prior relation between differentials, i.e. difference is understood as  $dx$  rather than ‘not x’. Identity is accounted for as an operation which takes place on the primary terrain of difference rather than difference being an operation of differentiation between prior identities. Yet, this seeming reversal also requires rethinking the nature of difference itself. For Deleuze, difference is not reducible to negativity, opposition, contradiction or diversity. Rather, difference is understood through intensity. Here, the diversity of reality is simply taken as an empirical given while difference is understood as that by which the given is given, i.e. that by which the given is given as diverse (ibid: 222). To place this in more familiar Kantian terminology, difference is not a phenomenon or a predicate of phenomena, but rather the noumena or noumenon closest to the phenomenon, the condition of possibility for the production and intelligibility of diversity itself<sup>133</sup> (ibid: 222). Accordingly, it is difference, and the interplay and intensity of difference, which accounts for phenomena and not the other way around. Here, matter as difference is seen as possessing its own immanent resources for the generation of form and plurality<sup>134</sup>.

Operating alongside the primacy of difference is a powerful Nietzschean critique of representation<sup>135</sup>. Platonism, it is argued, always subordinates difference to a prior unity by appealing to the One, the analogous, the similar and the negative through the elevation of the

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<sup>133</sup> The parallels with Derrida are not insignificant again see Protevi and Patton (2003).

<sup>134</sup> Indeed, if Deleuze’s philosophy is anti-Platonism, this is also to say it is anti-Kantian while availing itself of Platonic and Kantian resources where necessary – one cannot begin from nowhere.

<sup>135</sup> Derrida and Deleuze represent two sides of a linguistic relation to Nietzsche. Whereas Derrida develops the Nietzschean account of language as metaphor and metonymy, Deleuze develops the Nietzschean ontology upon which language operates. Both present difference as primary and are concerned with de-centring structure, but pursue this on different but overlapping terrains (the former primarily linguistic, the latter primarily ontological).



model over the simulacra. These terms define difference by situating it within the relationship of identity and non-identity, in which identity is posited as a metaphysical principle and which is, in turn, the basis of representation<sup>136</sup>. Within this context difference appears as negativity, and arises within the gaps created by a fourfold ontological manoeuvre expressed as “identity in the concept, opposition in the predicate, analogy in judgment and resemblance in perception” (ibid: 262). Here, the world of representation presupposes a certain type of sedentary distribution such that representation is taken to imply an analogy of being in which being (or matter) is distributed (or distributable) amongst fixed categories or essences which can be mirrored in the intellect (ibid: 303). These ‘essences’ act as models or blueprints, maintaining their identity and self-identity across time, and it is these models which operate as both the basis for accounts of genesis and representation. While these forms may be immanent to matter as in the case of Aristotle<sup>137</sup>, Deleuze argues that, generally speaking, philosophers have preferred to think of our concepts as a sort of given knowledge which can be explained by reference to the formative faculties of mind, namely: Platonic Forms, nous, intuition, abstraction, generalisation, convention, language, judgment<sup>138</sup> etc. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 11). These ‘essences’ offer an account of morphogenesis in which physical entities are viewed as more or less faithful realisations, that is, copies and repetitions which resemble their ideal forms with higher or lower degrees of perfection (DeLanda, 2002: 6). In such accounts difference always remains external. Not only does this mean difference, and therefore divergence, is exogenous to essence, but it is approached as pathological and problematic. The world can only become thinkable when difference is avoided and reality is tamed by subjecting it to the “four iron collars” of representation, i.e. identity in the concept, opposition in the predicate, analogy in judgement and resemblance in perception (Deleuze, 1994: 262). This

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<sup>136</sup> This is to say, reference and referent are created together.

<sup>137</sup> Although Aristotle is, at best, ambiguous about the metaphysical nature of these entities if not reverting to a form of Platonism (Bhaskar 1995; Norrie 2010).

<sup>138</sup> This is to say, the transcendental subject.

*mathesis*, at once ontological and conceptual, co-ordinates and measures the world through a representation which is isomorphic to an ontological system founded on a hierarchy of identity and a *de facto* if not *de re* unity of subject and object (see Foucault, 1989a). In the typologies of essences, the diversity of objects in the world is confronted by a careful account of what stays the same and what differs among them (DeLanda, 2002: 70). Accordingly, difference, as a category of the relations of identity, exists only in the cracks between positive beings i.e. difference is defined as other to being, that is, difference is defined as non-being. Difference appears only as a relation between diverse objects and is viewed in terms of a lack of similarity, divergence or mutation from an original identity. Such an account must presuppose the existence of identities for which the concept of difference plays a purely negative and analogical role (ibid: 70). As representation is concerned with identity, difference is relegated to the domain of simulacra, and is condemned as illusory. Indeed, what is condemned in the simulacra by Plato is the elevation of an irreducible pluralism which collapses the order of representation to a “state of free, oceanic differences, of nomadic distributions and crowned anarchy” (Deleuze, 1994: 265). The critical and defining Platonic gesture is therefore always concerned with the exorcism of simulacra (difference) from the system by suggesting the simulacrum has only a negative ‘illusory’ existence removed from reality (simulacra is non-being), and can only introduce confusion and chaos into thought by attending to and reproducing appearance and not essence i.e. that which is truly real<sup>139</sup>. Accordingly, for Deleuze, overturning Platonism<sup>140</sup> means nothing less than denying the primacy of ‘order’ over

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<sup>139</sup> Plato’s condemnation of simulacra is captured quite well by Lyotard: “In principle mimesis [simulacrum] must be rejected. It creates a second nature, it favours impropriety by multiplying disguises and *metabolai* (Republic III, 395d, 397b). It’s okay for the carpenter to be to the bed as the god is to the idea of the bed. That’s the dual, miserable, but ontological organisation of appearance and existence. But when the painter adds the image of the bed to this, we have a pitiful artefact that does no more than double the ontological misery by doubling the most infirm and the most sensible existent” (Lyotard, 1988: 22).

<sup>140</sup> Deleuze would also make sure we are clear that the overturning of Platonism is also an overturning of modernity in so far as modernity represents the return of the characteristics of Platonism in the figures of Descartes, Kant and Hegel: “[i]t behoves philosophy not to be modern at any cost, no more than to be nontemporal, but to extract from modernity something that Nietzsche designated as the untimely, which pertains

‘chaos’ including identity over difference, original over copy and model over image (ibid: 66). Instead, anti-Platonism glorifies in the reign of simulacra as the recognition of the inextricable ontological nature of difference. As a result, in anti-Platonism identity is replaced by difference, concept replaced by simulacra and indeed cosmos is replaced by chaos; however the meaning of the latter terms undergo significant transformation.

#### **5.4 Intensive difference, intensive presence**

In this new ontology, difference is understood as an internal heteronomy which is not reducible to negation or contradiction but appears as an overdetermined, open and productive intensity. This positive conception of difference means that difference is not treated as mere diversity, but rather diversity is taken as a given while difference is “that by which the given is given”, that is, “that by which the given is given as diverse” (Deleuze, 1994: 222). From this it follows that divergence, limitation and opposition, as particular categories of difference (i.e. difference as negativity), must be understood as first- and second-dimension *surface* effects arising from operations which take place upon and within (intensive) difference as the living depth, i.e. that which is populated by a positive conception of difference (ibid: 266-267). Here, difference as it is in-itself appears as that which cannot be thought, or rather, that which cannot be presented in thought so long as it is subject to the requirements of representation which depends upon establishing relations of identity and collapsing the intensity of difference<sup>141</sup> (ibid: 262). As intensive difference ‘being’ in-itself is, strictly speaking and with regard to representation, ‘indeterminate’<sup>142</sup>. Because of this, any act of determination, above all representation, is always

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to modernity, but which must also be turned against it – “in favour, I hope, of a time to come” (Deleuze, 2001: 302).

<sup>141</sup> Paralleling Derrida’s conception of difference, albeit for slightly different reasons.

<sup>142</sup> The term ‘indeterminate’ here serves a purpose but is misleading. Being is only indeterminate as regards the criteria and logic of representation. In many respects, the problem outlined here is the problem of the infinite and the finite in Spinoza, between substance, attributes and modes.

a productive and creative act of construction out from the intensity of difference. However, this construction is not simply a provision or impartation of form from the subject. Instead, the possibility of determination in thought, and equally the formation of the concept, occurs as something of the 'ground' rises to the surface. Thought only thinks when it is constrained to do so in response to the appearance of a particular problem caused by the intensity of being on the one hand, and the appearance of particular determinations which disrupt our prior conceptual understanding and representation of things (ibid: 275). In response to this problem, thought is forced it to think, and forced to search for new forms of expression<sup>143</sup> (ibid: 275). Platonism, and in particular the hylomorphic notion of representation (summarised by the matter-form couple) is insufficient to describe the complex interrelations of indetermination and determination which takes place in thought, and through which the new arises. Against Plato Deleuze asserts matter is already intensely informed and provides the ground of any particular conceptual determinations which always act as responses to encounters. Moreover, the conceptual form which is created is not separable from the act of conceptual determination (ibid: 275). Concepts are not necessarily discoveries or products, but a complex interrelation of subjective responses to objective happenings (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 5). From the perspective of epistemology Deleuze is concerned with accounting for the creation of concepts which are not solely linguistic creations, but which are also not simple or immediate responses to the world. Concepts are not waiting in the world or in our minds ready-made; instead, they must be invented and thus always carry with them their creator's signature (ibid: 5). Equally however, moving away from the delineations of epistemology, we must also suggest that no concept is without ontological grounding<sup>144</sup>. The creation of concepts is a constitutive and intensive process which arises as a response to particular ontological thresholds which impose

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<sup>143</sup> Here the intensity of difference functions in a similar manner to the Kantian or Lyotardian sublime driving forward thought.

<sup>144</sup> This is to say, reference always posits its own referent and always secretes a metaphysics.

particular layers, splits and directions to thought, and yet which are inextricably caught up in the lessons of grammar, the experience of perception, the values of the imagination, historical formations, prevailing or commonly held beliefs, positivities and non-discursive practices (Deleuze, 2006: 44). Accordingly, in the creation of concepts we are dealing with a difficult relation between the plurality and intensity of objects and subjects, taking place in a world that takes shape *in* a language which gives it ‘reality’, but in which ‘reality’ also provides the ground upon which this taking shape occurs. In essence, this entails a double-break with the hylomorphic account of Platonism such that: 1) the subject is not viewed as purely passive or active; and 2) matter is not viewed as purely inert or indeterminate (Table 5.1). Rather, Deleuze sees reality as dynamic, with intensive difference providing the basis for which our concepts are always a response. This is to say, the formula for Deleuze is not ‘I speak’, or ‘it speaks’<sup>145</sup> or the ‘world speaks’ but always a complex interaction and negotiation between these elements.

Table 5.1 The relation of subject, matter and epistemology in empiricism, transcendental idealism and transcendental empiricism.

	<b>Empiricism</b>	<b>Transcendental Idealism</b>	<b>Transcendental Empiricism</b>
<b>Subject</b>	Passive	Active	Active
<b>Matter</b>	Inert	Inert	Active
<b>Emphasis</b>	The world speaks	I speak, it speaks	I/It/The world speaks
<b>Epistemology</b>	Naïve Naturalism	Mental or Social Constructionism <sup>146</sup>	Neo-realism

<sup>145</sup> i.e. linguistic structuralism.

<sup>146</sup> Accordingly, while constructivists may declare themselves as anti-essentialists, they share with the essentialist (i.e. the Platonist) an implicit ontology which views matter as inert and plastic. Where they differ is simply in perspective. Instead of viewing form as coming from heaven or from the mind of God, it simply comes from the faculties of human being or their cultural and linguistic conventions.

## 5.5 Assembling intensity

As a rejection of the metaphysics of identity, it should be no surprise that language and conceptuality is also viewed through the lens of intensive difference. Concepts are always an intensive but particular construction of statements and visibilities (c.f. *ibid*: 44). One concept is always involved and entangled in a series of relationships with other concepts such that concepts link up with each other, support each other, coordinate their contours and articulate their respective problems while having their own different and distinct histories (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 18)<sup>147</sup>. Each concept, including its component parts and relations, have an intensive distinctiveness which is also simultaneously fragmented and decentred (*ibid*: 19). This gives the concept the peculiar quality of being paradoxically both distinct and yet obscure (Deleuze, 1994: 213). Each concept has a zone and a threshold of indiscernibility, but as a particular operation, the situation and relations of its components give it a certain consistency and particularity. Concepts thus remain distinct in defining a particular ground, but heteronomous insofar as meaning always moves from one concept to the next such that boundaries can never be clearly established but are instead mobile and fluidic. What is then created is an equally defined but heterogeneous space with a moving threshold of internal consistency defined by its external relationality (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 20). However, this is not simply a problem arising from the nature of language but an ontological problem arising from the nature of things to which our concepts are always a response. From the perspective of biology, this quality of being distinct and obscure is perfectly captured by the biologist Arthur Winfree who suggests:

The sciences of life have never been admired for quantitative exactitude ... But it cannot be said that living things are at heart sloppy, fuzzy, inexact and unscientific.

How does an oceanic salmon find its way home to spawn on the very rivulet it left in

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<sup>147</sup> i.e. language is constituted by *différance*.

Oregon three years earlier? How is a meter-long sequence of billions of nucleotide base-pairs reversibly coiled without entanglement into a nucleus no more than a few thousand base pairs in diameter? ... Such miracles bespeak of reproducible precision. But that precision is not the kind we know how to write equations about, not the kind we can measure to eight decimal places. It is a more flexible exactitude which evades quantifying, like the exactitude of a cell's plasma membrane dividing the universe into an inside and an outside with not even a virus-sized hole lost somewhere in all that convoluted expanse: topological exactitude, indifferent to quantitative details of shape, force, and time. (cited in DeLanda, 2002: 64)

In attempting to represent a world constituted by intensive difference and mobility we are concerned with a form of thought governed by a necessarily flexible exactitude reflecting and limited by the ontology of its object. As opposed to the black and white of Platonism, the distinct-obscure is the paradoxical double colour with which philosophy and science necessarily paints the world (Deleuze, 1994: 280).

This introduces us to an important structural element present in both ontological and conceptual relations in Deleuze. Operating in lieu of identity or essences are assemblages, which can be defined as heteronomous and heterogeneous wholes characterised by their contextual relations i.e. their *exteriority* (DeLanda, 2006: 10). The exterior nature of these relations implies the contingent, historical nature and fuzzy boundaries of any 'identity' such that assemblages are presented as mobile armies of components defined by their context<sup>148</sup>. As the component parts within an assemblage are mobile, they may be detached from and placed into different networks of relations in which their interactions will be necessarily affected. This creates a certain

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<sup>148</sup> One would not be wrong in detecting here structural or metonymic causation (c.f. Deleuze, 2004: 181).

dependency of the interrelated components of assemblages (as of a part to a whole) such that a relation may change without the terms changing (Deleuze and Parnet, 2007: 55). The nature of these relations does not entail any logical necessary or fixed dynamics; they are only ever contingent and aleatory obligations<sup>149</sup> as result of their historical development and present location (DeLanda, 2006: 11).

As a particular form of assemblage, concepts are ideational (or better, incorporeal) and yet are individuated, effectuated, contextualised relations of intensive difference (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 21). Alongside being obscure and distinct, the concept also has the peculiar character of being both absolute and relative (ibid: 21). As a whole it is absolute, establishing a condensation and a particular identity over an event, haecceity or entity; as relative it is proximate to its own components and their history, appearing within a certain defined problematic (context) which is always and necessarily heteronomous (ibid: 21). As such, concepts operate as (decentred) webs of vibrations operating in a network of complex ideational and ontological relations. They neither cohere nor correspond, but have the more indiscernible quality of resonance (ibid: 23). Their relativity and absoluteness represent the peculiar tensions of their own ideality and reality such that a concept can be said to be “real without being actual, ideal without being abstract” (ibid: 22). A concept is thus, on the one hand, defined by its consistency, but on the other has no reference which is not already self-referential within its web of relations. It therefore can be said to posit itself and its object at the moment it is created i.e. reference and referent arise together as part of the one operation (ibid: 22). This is, for Deleuze, the necessary and difficult realism of a constructionism which rejects

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<sup>149</sup> Alternatively, contingent necessities (c.f. Meillassoux 2008).



any simple hylomorphic, nominalist or essentialist account of the relationship between concept and matter or reference and referent.

Returning to the Platonic problematic of representation, Deleuze captures this complex referential nature of conceptuality in the elevation of the simulacra over the model. As opposed to the clear-and-distinct concepts of Platonic representation, simulacra exist in obscure zones in an “indifferenciation which is nevertheless perfectly differentiated, in a pre-individuality which is nevertheless singular” (Deleuze, 1994: 280). The obscurity of this zone is permeated by a chaotic intoxication which can never be calmed but is always present and unsettling, providing a necessarily fuzzy and fragmented quality to any attempt at representation. Indeed, the only unity within this system is an informal and heteronomous chaos presented in and through the appearance of different simulacrum. This means, however, that no series or representation enjoys a privilege over others, as none are able to claim the self-same identity and rigidity of a Platonic model, and therefore, none are able to enjoy the ontologically secure status granted to models or copies in Platonism. As differing representations these bundles of simulacrum are not opposed or analogous to one another but represent the ontological intensity of difference itself in its appearance realised in conceptuality and grounded empirically. The reign of simulacra is not a sedentary hierarchy of essences and appearances or illusions, but a crowned anarchy of nomadic distributions or assemblages which appear, settle and disperse on the surface of the world as so many different perspectives which are, nevertheless, intelligible. The simulacrum is not only an epistemological category insofar as it grounds the concept, but an ontological category insofar as it represents the objective appearance of surface effects and the basis for conceptual responses. Simulacra operate as a complex theme of multiple, non-localisable spatially diffracted connections and perspectives, individuated in real relations and actual terms, but irreducible to these terms (ibid: 183). Here we might suggest simulacra

operate as objective perspectives. Beneath the appearance or presentation of 'sameness' rumbles an entire multiplicity which makes itself felt through diverse surface phenomena and in which the differential relations between multiplicities and the differences within multiplicities replace the schematic and crude oppositions of Platonic representations (ibid: 182). Against the primacy of identity, there is only an intensity of difference and the variety of multiplicity it produces. Accordingly, concepts can be no longer characterised as essences, but are sites of movement and difference, of objects, events, affections, perspectives and accidents, both empirical and conceptual, objective and subjective. The reign of simulacra replaces the relation of essence-appearance with a complex system of contingent, aleatory historical formations, positivities, empiricities, multiple perspectives, connections, appearances and differential relations between differential elements; an open and dynamic system of representation in an open and dynamic world. In capturing this quality, and as a corrective to Platonism, Deleuze tends to embellish the fleeting nature of concepts or simulacra by presenting them as differential glimmers, will-o'-the-wisps or 'virtual trails of fire' (ibid: 194). While such descriptions give the simulacra or the concept an appearance of relativism, we might reply, tongue in cheek, that this is only an appearance. Instead, the simulacra functions as a bridge between the ontological and epistemic, providing a means to understand the nature of appearance without denigrating appearance and introducing unnecessary bifurcation into nature<sup>150</sup>.

## **5.6 The problem of being: (non)-being and ?-being**

In thinking difference as intensity rather than negation and contradiction, Deleuze affirms that being must be thought of as the full positivity or pure affirmation which arises from being as

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<sup>150</sup> Indeed, simulacra function much as events and experience do in the domain of the actual and the empirical for Bhaskar (Bhaskar 2008).

difference or being as (non)-being. (Non)-being signifies the site of intensive difference which is characterised by the being of the problematic rather than of the proposition or the predicate. This conception of being concerns being as objective problems and questions (i.e. problematics)<sup>151</sup>. If our concepts appear as an archipelago of relations and appearances, the (non)-being or ?-being is the reservoir or reserve which provides the base for conceptual and ontological events. Here, concepts can be said to occupy or populate this plane, while the plane itself is understood as an indivisible milieu of decentred structure from which conceptuality arises and on which conceptuality is based (functioning much in the same fashion as Derridean *différance*). (Non)-being is being as open and differentiated systems in which many movements are immanently caught up with or folded in together, allowing for the possibility of different connections to take place (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 36f). However, it is essential not to confuse this plane of immanence and the concepts that occupy it<sup>152</sup> (ibid: 39). This space is akin to a moving desert which nomadic concepts periodically populate (ibid: 41). This is properly speaking the chaotic condition, the base materialism<sup>153</sup>, which constitutes the necessary but insufficient condition for conceptuality. On this plane, concepts are created as a response and a resolution to an event, an objective problem, which occurs or arises in the world (ibid: 16). It is as if a calm and restful world is disrupted by the appearance of something which is different, not necessarily contradictory, but which brings the present conceptual scheme into

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<sup>151</sup> This is similar to Lyotard's conception of the *différend* but equally contains elements of Derrida's conception of binaries. As an example we might consider the relations of structure and agency, economics or the nature of the human subject as particularly notable examples of a problem site.

<sup>152</sup> Or we might say, to confuse epistemology and ontology.

<sup>153</sup> See Bataille (1985). "Most materialists, even though they may have wanted to do away with all spiritual entities, ended up positing an order of things whose hierarchical relations mark it as specifically idealist. They situated dead matter at the summit of a conventional hierarchy of diverse facts, without perceiving that in this way they gave in to an obsession with the ideal form of matter, with a form that was closer to any other to what matter should be. Dead matter, the pure idea, and God in fact answer a question in the same way (in other words perfectly, and as flatly as the docile student in a classroom) – a question that can only be posed by philosophers, the question of the essence of things, precisely of the idea by which things become intelligible." (Bataille, 1985: 15). In contrast to this, "base matter is external and foreign to ideal human aspirations, and it refuses to allow itself to be reduced to the great ontological machines resulting from these aspirations ... [it is] a question of disconcerting the human spirit and idealism before something base, to the extent that one recognises the helplessness of superior principles" (ibid: 51).

question or crisis and provokes a new response (Figure 5.1)<sup>154</sup>. This appearance is neither necessarily real or actual, but it exists nonetheless; it is real without being actual, contained within the event as an ‘opening’, a ‘gap’, an ontological ‘fold’ in being, which we encounter, and which provokes us to respond by way of offering solutions in the form of practical and conceptual assemblages (Deleuze, 1994: 64). As the site of (non)-being this represents the intensive differential ground itself in which affirmation, or rather multiple affirmations, find sense (ibid: 64). This site allows for multiple readings and constitutes the condition of possibility and impossibility for all forms which attempt to resolve the contested site through particular conceptual or practical determinations. While not entailing contradiction and negativity, contradiction and negativity nevertheless arise as ‘knowledge’ determines the ‘essential’ and ‘inessential’ components in a process of resolution, allowing it to both highlight and eliminate one aspect in order to isolate the other for the purpose of producing a particular determination in line with a certain vision, allowing for certain visibilities while masking others (cf. Althusser 1997: 26, 38-39). The field of the problematic becomes defined by an act which retroactively reconstructs the problem it defines and solves, and in so doing creates and defines the problem and solution, reference and referent in the same moment. In our encounter with ?-being we are faced with the paradox that, using Althusser’s image, the light of vision appears to come from both the eye and from the object (ibid: 26). In accordance with the vision, certain readings will become visible while others will become invisible, nevertheless each is made possible by particular exclusions arising from particular affirmations in the plane of ?-being. Alternatively, to change our language, we are faced with the paradox that the referent which is supposed to ground meaning is heterogeneous, capable of holding many different senses and even functions to generate alternate and even contradictory senses, meanings or possible

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<sup>154</sup> This is akin to Lyotard’s exposition of set theory and paralogy in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge* (1984).

resolutions. This is to say, if we take ?-being as an open system, it is capable of supporting multiple closures, some of which overlap, others of which contradict<sup>155</sup>. But the contradictions which arise appear only as the shadow cast by prior affirmations i.e. particular operations or determinations. Thus contradiction is retroactively carried into being, but this contradiction is only ever the appearance, the epiphenomenon, projected by the problematic when it is resolved in particular ways. As intensive, these problematics are “positive multiplicities, full and differentiated positivities described by the process of complete and reciprocal determination which relates problems to their conditions” (Deleuze, 1994: 267). Operating on this site, problematics give rise to propositions, representations and practices, in the form of answers or solutions representing particular affirmations and resolutions. For Deleuze, we should say not only that they are different possible affirmations but that they are affirmations of differences, arising from, and as a consequence of, the multiplicity which belongs to each concept and to being itself (ibid: 267). It is for this reason that the peculiar ‘non-being’ of difference is written as ‘(non)-being’ or ‘?-being’ representing the positive and productive nature of intensive difference rather than the negative and contradictory nature of difference (non-being). For Deleuze this ontological relationship is expressed as: “beyond contradiction, difference – beyond *non*-being, (non)-being; beyond the negative, problems and questions” (ibid: 64).

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<sup>155</sup> This follows the Spinozan logic that ‘all determinations are negations’ [*omnis determinatio est negatio*] a formula not actually coming from Spinoza but Hegel (1892: III.2.1.A.2).

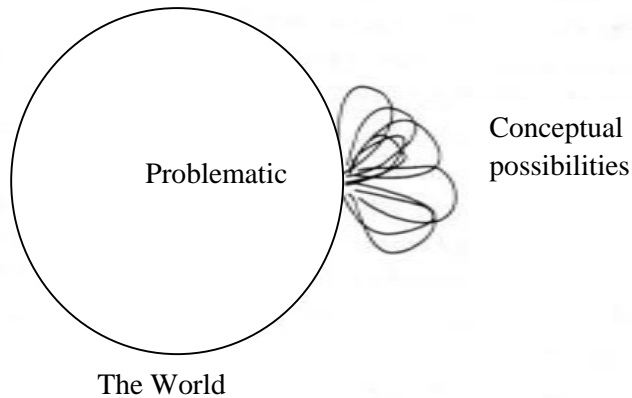


Figure 5.1 The event of the problematic (c.f. Deleuze, 1993: 26)

The being or beings of ?-being have a peculiar status. Drawing on Samuel Butler (1985) to illustrate this, Deleuze refers to the nomadic and differential multiplicities or assemblages which constitute the basis of conceptual affirmation as “erewhons”, which function as the conditions of real (and not only possible) experience (ibid: 285). These erewhons are relatively moveable complexes of space and time, which are mobile on condition that they impose their own scenery i.e. they are assemblages or relational machines which affect and are affected by their context. As nomadic distributions, erewhons are not only a disguised no-wheres but rearranged now-heres (ibid: 333). They are not simple or sedentary presences or essences, and they are not mechanical or vital processes or unities (Deleuze and Guattari, 1977: 284-285); rather they have the same quality of simulacra in which certain spatial and temporal pockets of stability are momentarily established. In erewhons identity is displaced, decentred, mobile, fuzzy and contextual. These objects are distinct and obscure sites, hence erewhons; neither properly present nor absent, alive or dead (Deleuze, 1994: 252). Indeed, they are, in the proper Derridean sense, spectral entities.

This chaotic and spectral quality of (non)-being in Deleuze is characterised less by the lack of determinations (which would be to reintroduce hylomorphism) than by the infinite speed with which determinations take shape and vanish in the intensity of difference (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 42). This is strictly speaking not indeterminacy or a movement from the passage of one determination to another, but a hyper-determinacy or hyper-fluidity which resembles Bergson's conception of temporality as duration (Bergson 1944; Deleuze 1991). In order to resolve the intensity of the site it is necessary to create the points of reference which in turn eclipses the original intensity, but in which the original intensity always remains as the chaos lingering behind the inscription of order. Here chaos (or matter) does not exist in an inert or stationary state, and neither is it a succession of states or a chance mixture of the two. Rather, it is a dynamic chaos-cosmos (chaosmos) which makes chaotic and makes cosmos, simultaneously undoing the possibility of inscribing consistency and stability while nevertheless forming moments of (fuzzy) identity and thereby providing the basis for the transcendental illusion that identity is found in being<sup>156</sup>.

Alongside the relation of intensive difference is the relation of univocality. Univocality is to suggest being is univocally intensive difference i.e. being itself is univocal and monist, while that of which it is said is equivocal and different. In *A Thousand Plateaus* this paradox is expressed in the formula "pluralism=monism" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 20) while in *Difference and Repetition* it is conveyed through the exclamation: "[a] single voice raises the clamour of being" (Deleuze, 1994: 35). In univocality we are faced with the difficult task of imagining difference and monism, determination and indetermination together as a heteronomous multiplicity without collapsing difference or making difference parasitic on a

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<sup>156</sup> This represents in Nietzsche the relation between Apollo and Dionysus as the continual process of formation and destruction.

prior identity. Being, 'what is', is spoken through different and diverging forms which do not break the unity of its sense, nor break the difference and divergence of its expressions. This is a difference not reducible to either the One or to the multiple but instead remains indifferent to such traditional problems (Deleuze, 2006: 13; Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 21). There is neither the one nor the multiple. Rather, being is said in a single and same sense throughout all its different forms giving a particular equal weight to different interpretations and perspectives, creating a flat and democratic ontology<sup>157</sup>. This is a crowned anarchy in which being is univocal, but it is differing, dynamic, unstable and changing<sup>158</sup>.

### **5.7 Non-essential realism**

This conception of the univocality of being raises most clearly the question of relativism in Deleuze. While this is not a linguistic relativism, the formula 'pluralism=monism' entails a particular form of hyper-empiricism. In his metaphysical project, Deleuze is concerned to provide a metaphysics which accounts for the possibility of all possible experience and conceptuality. Reality is conceived of as an inexhaustible plurality for which there are a potentially infinite number of ways in which it can be thought of and experienced. However, this is not to say that there are not illusions and errors, only that illusions and errors, whether empirical or transcendental, have an 'objective' base in the chaos of simulacra and the formation and resolution of problematics<sup>159</sup>. In this context, philosophy is presented as a

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<sup>157</sup> Albeit, one with the possibility of critique.

<sup>158</sup> This resonates with the Spinozan doctrine that everything which exists is a modification of the one substance, God or nature (Spinoza, 1996) however for Deleuze ontological monism requires an intrinsic conception of pluralism.

<sup>159</sup> Representation has already been presented as the one site of transcendental illusion consisting in covering over being with an image which distorts both its operation and its genesis in difference (Deleuze, 1994: 265). Following the illusion of representation is a parade of illusions including the subordination of difference to resemblance, negativity and analogy (Deleuze, 1994: 266-269); the illusion of the eternal in which thought has forgotten that concepts must be created, and the illusion of discursiveness which confuses propositions and concepts (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 49-50). Notably, each of these illusions proceeds by subordinating difference to identity.



continual restoration of and struggle against illusions (ibid: 59). Philosophy must refuse to hand itself over to illusion (and thus to error), while effecting a continual return to the immanent plane of difference, the world beyond language and representation. It must continually return to think what cannot be thought i.e. to think difference immanently through a series of to-ing and fro-ing, moving inside and outside of thought to show the possibility of the impossible and through this to return to, and even better to comprehend, the plane of immanence i.e. the univocity of being (ibid: 59-60).

From this, it could be suggested that for Deleuze, reality in itself is amorphous and unknowable only in so far as we are fixated on the reality and nature of things (what is actual or present), and not powers and processes which constitute them<sup>160</sup>. The boundaries of reality are not only products of human experience drawn by the interplay of concepts, but the products of complex, definite, material, objective processes of individuation. This relationship and the possibility of explanation is particularly evident in *A Thousand Plateaus* and the attempt to outline the contours of a nomadic social thought<sup>161</sup>. Nomadic thought or nomadology is concerned with thinking difference, individuality and mobility by attending to the processes of formation and movement. In so doing, it does not confine itself to the strictures of an ordered, static citadel, but rather moves about freely. It does not respect artificial and fixed divisions but replaces restrictive categories and analogy with conductivity and topology (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: xii). Instead of the closed equation of representation  $x = x$ , and not- $x$ , it is concerned with the differential function  $dx$ ; an open equation always caught in the middle and always subject to and seeking to account for change and transformation. If the exemplary state of representation

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<sup>160</sup> Which is to place Deleuze in the tradition of Whitehead.

<sup>161</sup> Here I take there to be no serious discontinuity, other than literary style, between Deleuze and Deleuze and Guattari (c.f. Bryant, 2008; Žižek, 2012).

is an ‘either-or’, the exemplary state of the differential is ‘and’ ( $a_1 + b_1 + \dots + y_1 + z_1 + a_2 + \dots + y_2 \dots$ ).

Accordingly, the predominant relation in the nomadology is expressed by reference to root and rhizome (from Greek *rhízōma* meaning mass of roots). The basis of this metaphor is the rejection of the distinction between the closed and static equation embodied by the vertical, binary and hierarchical logic of the ‘tree root’ as a metaphor for structural systems (Figure 5.2) and the affirmation of the fundamental horizontal dynamic and decentred fuzziness of the rhizome as constituted by immanent mobile powers (Figure 5.3). It is suggested that as a metaphor for structure, the tree root has dominated the Western imagination for too long. It is synonymous with implicit notions of deep temporal foundations, genealogy and diachrony, as well as structural and generative models of linear development. More importantly, in the tree root, difference is always conceived a departure from an original unity such that difference or multiplicity appears only in relation to identity and thus dichotomy, division, contradiction and binary. This one image effectively condenses Deleuze’s particular critique of difference defined as diversity, divergence or contradiction and therefore subjected to identity.

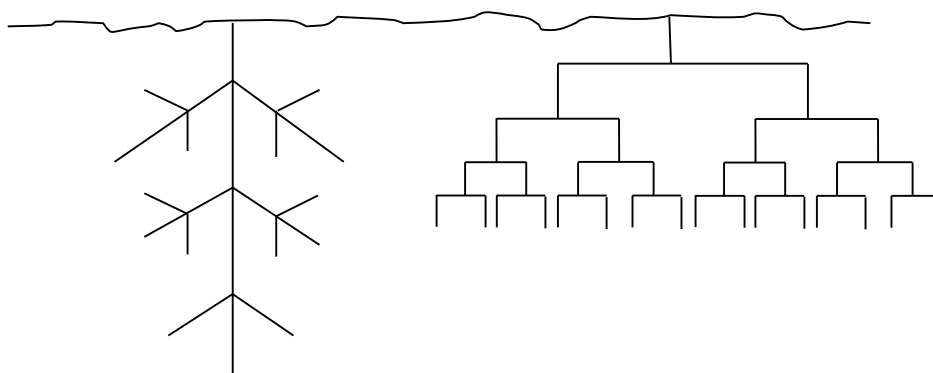


Figure 5.2 Structure as root – vertical and hierarchical structure

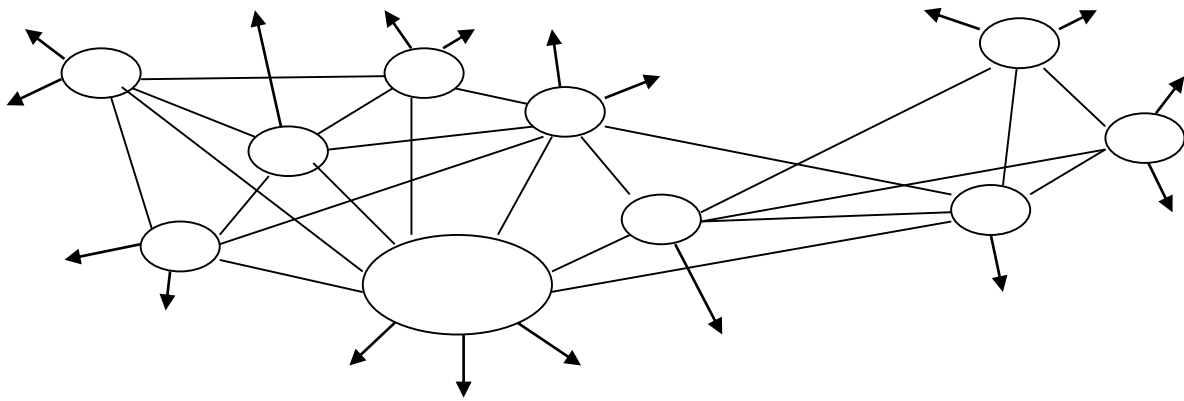


Figure 5.3 Structure as rhizome – horizontal and decentred structure

In contrast, the rhizome, as an alternative botanical metaphor for structure embodies an intensive system of difference and multiplicity. What characterises the distinctiveness of rhizomes from tree-roots is that rhizomes assume decentralised forms - a relatively shallow mass of roots which extends and moves in all directions. As such, the rhizome represents a different conception of consistency and totality concerned with decentred multiplicities of becoming, or transformational multiplicities (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 504). Behind this concept are four principles:

1. *The principle of connection and heterogeneity* (ibid: 7f). As a surface extension rhizomes are at any point connected to any other point, spreading across the surface of a field in a web-like interconnected pattern. While a tree plots a point and fixes an order, remaining firmly anchored in place, a rhizome is a decentred assemblage of relationships which develops by spreading across a surface. Within the rhizome any point can be connected to any other point. While a tree is genealogical in principle, a rhizome is open, resisting genealogical inscription and obscuring its point of genesis. Indeed, there are no clear points or positions in a rhizome, only lines and planes.

2. *Principle of multiplicity* (ibid: 8f). As a multiplicity, a rhizome cannot be collapsed into a unity or identity. However, in place of this we may speak of a plane of consistency defined by the stratifications, sedimentations, connections and lines effected by the rhizome. This is a consolidation of fuzzy aggregates, haecceities, individualisations and becomings. Never unifications or totalisations, instead only consistencies, consolidations and condensations which stand against all principles, categories, organisations and finalities.
3. *Principle of asignifying rupture* (ibid: 9f). A rhizome may be broken at a particular spot, but will always start up again by either reforming along one of its old lines or by creating new lines (ibid: 9). The rhizome returns again and again to a site re-stratifying, restoring formations and restoring power, signification, attribution or constitution to an object or subject. This quality of return provides it with a certain temporal degree a consistency and allows for investigation into the process of individuation and transformation which takes place on the site.
4. *Principle of cartography and decalcomania* (ibid: 12f). A rhizome is not responsive to readymade structural or generative models. Whereas the tree root represents a deep logic which can be broken down into smaller constituents and traced through an overcoding structure, the rhizome requires a map which is oriented towards practical experimentation in contact with the real (ibid: 12). The map attempts to construct the unconscious, fostering connections between fields and removing blockages by opening the multiplicity. The map is therefore open and connectable in all dimensions: detachable, revisable and susceptible to constant modification with multiple entryways and exits.

While this has the appearance of creating a new dualism, Deleuze and Guattari are quick to highlight the mixed ontology of rhizomes and tree-roots<sup>162</sup> (see Figure 5.4). Rhizomes may correspond, be transformed, become entangled with or burgeon into trees and visa versa (ibid: 17). Accordingly, we must speak of knots of arborescence within masses of rhizomes and rhizomic offshoots of roots without much difficulty (ibid: 20). Strictly speaking rhizomes and roots both represent abstracted moments of what is always an intensive ontology of becoming in which cosmos is becoming chaos, chaos becoming cosmos, rhizome becoming root and root becoming rhizome. This is an ontology which is perpetually moving between multiplicities and ‘identities’, becoming ‘unified’ and becoming ‘divergent’. This new account of structure is anti-Platonic, anti-essentialist, anti-genealogical, anti-hierarchical, anti-static and anti-dialectical (ibid: 21).

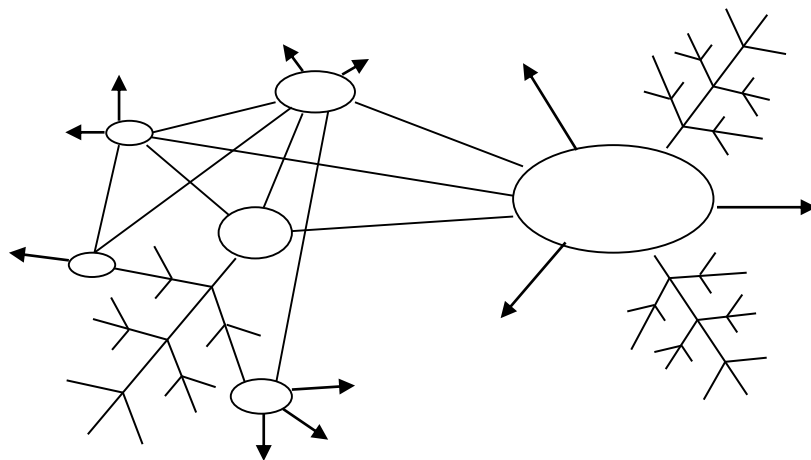


Figure 5.4 The mixed ontology of rhizomes and roots

If there is no strict dualism here, we must nevertheless recognise a dissymmetry between rhizome and root. As with difference and identity, the rhizomic-root relations have

<sup>162</sup> It is certainly tempting to suggest Deleuze-Guattari recreate a classic dualism in rhizome and root between order and chaos, diachrony and synchrony, but Deleuze and Guattari are careful to avoid suggesting the rhizome operates in such a manner. Rather, the erection of this dualism only serves as a didactic device against the dualisms established in perennial philosophy. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 13)

dissymmetric ontological priorities in which the rhizome (as the embodiment of difference) is always given priority. The root is always a particular determination of a rhizome which must necessarily eliminate difference in order to create unity and cohesion i.e. the root represents a particular tracing taking place along the structural surface of the rhizome. This tracing is always an ontological translation into a determinate image in which the rhizomic system is organised, stabilised, unified and transformed into a system of roots and radicles (ibid: 13). Consistency and hierarchy are created as the rhizome is structured by introjecting redundancies, eliminating intensive difference and blocking lines of flight to create a consistent homogenous unity. In so doing, the rhizome is made rigid, static and solid - root-like. The reproduction of a particular tracing must by its nature leave certain features unrepresented as the complexity of the rhizomic structures prevents its total inscription. To represent the complexity of the rhizomic system in which intensive difference and becoming is the norm, something must always be left out in order to create consistency<sup>163</sup>.

In contrast to centred (even polycentric) systems with hierarchical modes of communication and pre-established paths, the rhizome is an acentred, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system without a General and without an organising memory or central automaton, defined solely by a circulation of states and powers<sup>164</sup> (ibid: 21). Within nomadology all relations are understood in the manner of a dynamic becoming lacking a clear beginning or end but is rather always a “continuous, self-vibrating region of intensities whose development avoids any orientation towards a culmination point or external end” (ibid: 22). Here, we are caught in a liberating logic of immanence without transcendence. There is no vantage point from which we can look

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<sup>163</sup> This parallels Deleuze’s critique of representation but in this form takes on social implications i.e. particular social determinations, hierarchies, power structures etc. are taken as natural.

<sup>164</sup> i.e. it is a Body without Organs i.e. without an organising form which transforms it into a centred organism (Deleuze and Guattari, 1977: 9).

down or look up. Instead, we are always caught in the conjunction, in the middle. The logic governing this immanent conjunction is not a clear logic of either/or, but the fuzzy conjunction of ‘... and ... and ...’ which shakes and uproots the hyper-stasis of hierarchies, departs from top-down and linear accounts of causation for overdetermination, does away with foundations, nullifies beginnings and ends, and rejects any pretension to being Generals and Priests mediating Order and Truth. Curiously enough, it is precisely this anarchic state which makes explanation possible as it allows us to turn towards immanent dynamic processes based in the mobile and differential relations and complex balances of powers and forces.

As the logic of unity and multiplicity is transformed, so too is the concept of becoming and transformation using the categories of territory, territorialisation and deterritorialisation. The concept of territory evades easy categorisation because it is a malleable site of passage without firm borders (Parr, 2010: 280). Processes of territorialisation consist in providing definition to a territory (or assemblage) by sharpening its spatial or temporal boundaries (DeLanda, 2006: 13). However, territorialisation can also refer to processes which increase the internal homogeneity or consistency of a territory (ibid: 13). Such processes might include expelling or excluding a certain population of people from the framework, or segregating certain populations in particular areas (ibid: 13). Whereas territorialisation acts by providing definition, homogeneity or coherence, deterritorialisation is a process of destabilisation, chaos and heterogeneity<sup>165</sup>. Deterritorialisation is a deconstructive movement in which the established territory is disrupted and returned to the intensity of difference (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988: 508). If territorialisation is the establishment of a closure, deterritorialisation is a return to openness. As such, deterritorialisation operates as a negative moment in which a

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<sup>165</sup> To provide alternate contours, territorialisation and deterritorialisation embody the relations of Apollo and Dionysus.

previously existing identity is disrupted, allowing for a return to the intensity of difference, and in which new relations can be established in the place of the old territorialisations. Deterritorialisation, like Dionysus, is the great destroyer and creator, the condition of possibility in which a new land, a new earth, a new universe is constituted by an act of clearing and re-creation<sup>166</sup>. Importantly however, one and the same assemblage can have different components working to stabilise its identity as well as destabilising components forcing it to change or even transform it into a different assemblage (DeLanda, 2006: 12) This relationship of territorialisation-deterritorialisation embodies a complex relational conception of becoming as a process of morphogenesis and individuation (territorialisation) within the context of the intensity of difference. This is at once conceptual and ontological. As conceptual, the creation of a concept represents a particular territorialisation, while its deconstruction represents a deterritorialisation. Ontologically, this finds expression through the relation of intensive difference and processes and powers of individuation and diffusion. Here both conceptuality and ontology become characterised by a continual interplay of formation, deformation, reformation and transformation, or equally of construction, deconstruction and reconstruction.

### **5.8 Beyond actualism – virtuality**

The possibility of explanation within such an ontology is predicated on the rejection of essences and laws for the category of virtuality. As opposed to the concept of essence, the virtual is not an inflationary ontological move which burdens a realist philosophy with a set of transcendent entities (DeLanda, 2002: 41). Rather, as a replacement for the categories of laws and essences, the virtual as the site of intensive difference leads to an ultimately leaner ontology concerned

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<sup>166</sup> As Deleuze suggests with regard to empiricism: “I have always felt that I am an empiricist . . . [My empiricism] is derived from the two characteristics by which Whitehead defined empiricism: the abstract does not explain, but must itself be explained; and the aim is not to rediscover the eternal or the universal, but to find the conditions under which something new is produced (creativity)” (Deleuze and Parnet, 1987: vii).



with immanent processes, capabilities and relationships which account for particular territorialisations or individuations<sup>167</sup> (ibid: 41). The virtual designates the space of structure and the object of theory which has a reality proper to it, but which does not merge with any actual reality, including any past, present or possible future reality (Figure 5.5) i.e. the virtual is not equivalent to the possible (Deleuze, 2004: 178). The virtual is not undetermined; it is rather the determinations and intensity of difference. As such, the virtual should not be confused with the notion of ‘virtual reality’ in computer science, but inscribed with the full etymological weight of virtue as in ‘the quality of a thing’ and even the archaic French usage of *vertu* encompassing force, strength, vigour, qualities and abilities. In the critical formula Deleuze, drawing on Proust, suggests: “[t]he virtual is fully real in so far as it is virtual ... ‘real without being actual, ideal without being abstract’; and symbolic without being fictional”<sup>168</sup> (Deleuze, 1994: 208). As such, the virtual is not ideal but part of the real object<sup>169</sup>, “as though the object had one part of itself in the virtual into which it plunged as through into an objective dimension” (ibid: 208). The reality of the virtual consists in the differential structures, elements, relations, capabilities and powers which form and constitute the object, but in so doing it avoids giving the elements, relations and powers a reality they do not have, while not depriving them of the reality they do have (ibid: 209). This amounts to suggesting that while the reality of the virtual is structural, these structures must not be reified. As a replacement for essence, virtuality is the reservoir of intensity and multiplicity, embodying the complex

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<sup>167</sup> A number of realists continue to feel the need to defend the conception of essence (Bhaskar 2008; Sayer 2000; Groff 2013). Indeed, Groff loosely defines essences, as “a property or set of properties, the bearing of which makes something be the kind of thing that it is, rather than something else. To say that there are no such things as essences, then, is to say that what things are is not based upon something inherent in them: identity as a this or a that, the anti-essentialist will say, derives instead from an external source, e.g. God, the laws of nature, language” (Groff, 2013: 3). Yet this account is not wholly satisfactory. The spatial distinction Groff erects between inside and outside is not easy to sustain. Rather, we are faced with a contingent and aleatory engagement between differing powers, and a balance of internal and external forces. The focus upon assemblages, virtuality and individuation is an important corrective to this internalist view of essence.

<sup>168</sup> One will note, this is the same formula as the concept: i.e. the concept is a category of the virtual.

<sup>169</sup> Here, to pre-empt the chapter on Bhaskar, the virtual may be broadly understood as analogous to the domain of the real, although it is not without difference either. Ontologically, Deleuze’s virtual is a broader category than Bhaskar’s real and encompasses conceptuality.

differential existence of an entity and its relations whether they are realised, actualised or not. As such, the virtual operates as the ontological site from which we can understand the complex nature of the actual and actualisation<sup>170</sup>.

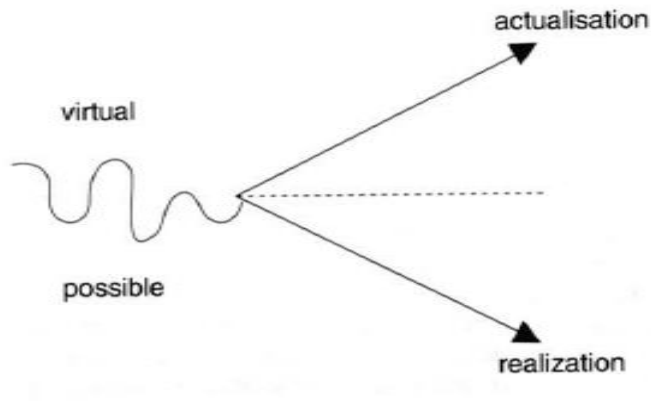


Figure 5.5 - The virtual and the possible (Deleuze, 1993: 105)

Rather than speaking of realisations or appearance, which implies essence and reduces the virtual to the possible<sup>171</sup>, Deleuze refers to a process of actualisation or of individuation in which the virtual becomes actual through the operation of dynamic mechanisms or machines. Deleuze's notion is that intensive morphogenetic processes of individuation follow differential actualisations of virtual multiplicities to produce local assemblages with intensive and extensive properties. These qualities emerge from a process of formation which amounts to an individuation or condensation of an entity from a virtual multiplicity. To become actualised means to become intensified, condensed and/or individuated. This process of individuation takes place by means of spatio-temporal dynamisms operating as actualising and differentiating agencies<sup>172</sup>. Here Deleuze draws a distinction between differentiation and

<sup>170</sup> Accordingly, the use of the actual is somewhat synonymous with Derrida's conception of presence.

<sup>171</sup> Also implying the virtual is unreal.

<sup>172</sup> The question for Deleuze, to rephrase this problematic in more Spinozan terms, is how infinite substance with the attribute of heteronomy becomes modified into finite modes.

differentiation; differentiation is a particular intensive process residing in the virtual, while differentiation is the process or product of making heterogeneous and diverse, i.e. individuations as a series of differentiations on account of the dynamic mechanisms which make the virtual actual (Deleuze, 1991: 91f; Deleuze and Guattari 1994: 207f). These mechanisms operate in the virtual “beneath the actual qualities and extensities” of things and ordinarily remain ‘hidden’ by constituted qualities and extensities (Deleuze, 1994: 214). Accordingly, the formula of explanation in Deleuze can be expressed as: from the differentiation of the virtual, to the differentiation of the actual, by means of the agencies of individuation, in response to particular problems<sup>173</sup>.

Actualisation of the virtual always takes place within a context of intensive difference and divergence (or differentiation and differentiation) which breaks with resemblance as a process and identity as a principle (ibid: 212). Individuation is always an act of genuine productive creation related to the heterogeneity of the mechanisms of production in the multiplicity of the virtual (ibid: 212). As opposed to appearance and essence, or potential and actual, the distinction between the virtual and actual does not involve resemblance or identity as primary. Instead, the emphasis is properly placed on the mechanisms of production and the processes of individuation. Individuation as such operates, subverts and overturns the genetic account of fixed identities and essences. Different forms emerge from the same virtual multiplicity and even by means of same mechanisms, such that identity when it actually appears becomes a peculiarity, even a pathology<sup>174</sup>. As DeLanda suggests “heterogeneity is the state we should

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<sup>173</sup> “[I]t is always in relation to a differentiated problem or to the differentiated conditions of a problem that a differentiation of species and parts is carried out” (Deleuze, 1994: 207).

<sup>174</sup> This reversal of normality and pathological in relation to difference and identity develops Canguilhem’s thesis in *The Normal and the Pathological* (Canguilhem, 1989):

The abnormal is not such because of the absence of normality. There is no life whatsoever without norms of life, and the morbid state is always a certain mode of living. The physiological state is the healthy state, much more than the normal state. It is the state which allows transition to new norms.

expect to exist spontaneously under most circumstances, while homogeneity is a highly unlikely state which may be brought about only under very specific selection pressures, abnormally uniform in space and time” (DeLanda, 2002: 59).

With regard to individuation, the virtual and the actual are viewed as two mutually exclusive but jointly sufficient aspects of reality (Parr, 2010: 300). If the actual consists of ‘regularities’, bodies and individuals, the virtual encompasses the immanent capacities, balance of powers and extrinsic relations<sup>175</sup> (i.e. the context) which are able to bring about the actual without coinciding with or being identified with the actual. Here, the virtual encompasses the web of active powers, latencies and potentialities which are ‘present’<sup>176</sup>, but not necessarily actualised, while the actual is understood as the differentiated products of these activities<sup>177</sup>. Through the virtual the object retains its complex multiplicity and becoming without reintroducing transcendence, essence or being. Rather, the virtual is the elusive and spatio-temporal domain of competing and ever-changing powers, possibilities and relationships in which an entity is situated and which gives rise to its particular manifestations and individuations<sup>178</sup>. In this context, the actual is understood a symptom of the virtual.

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Man is healthy insofar as he is normative relative to the fluctuations of his environment. According to us, physiological constants have, among all the possible vital constants, a propulsive value. The pathological state, on the other hand, expresses the reduction of the norms of life tolerated by the living being, the precariousness of the normal established by disease. Pathological constants have a repulsive and strictly conservative value... To be cured is to be given new norms of life, sometimes superior to the old ones. There is an irreversibility of biological normativity. (Canguilhem, 1989: 228)

<sup>175</sup> Including conceptual articulation.

<sup>176</sup> Albeit a presence which is not answerable to the metaphysics of presence i.e. a spectral presence.

<sup>177</sup> In Spinoza, this is nature as *natura naturans* (nature as active) and *natura naturata* (nature as passive). See Spinoza (1996) and Deleuze (1990).

<sup>178</sup> Critically, the notion of power appears as the central concept in Deleuze’s prolonged engagement with Nietzsche (Deleuze, 1983). Here power is considered from the perspective of activity (will to power) as an appropriating, possessing, subjecting, dominating force which imposes and creates forms by exploiting circumstances, pushing form and forces to the limit of its power, and compelling obedience. Above all, power and force are viewed from the perspective of differential relationships between unbalanced forces which directly confront one another and from this encounter become either active and dominant or reactive and passive. As Heidegger rather helpfully suggests, the identification of power and force in Nietzsche is reminiscent of

## 5.9 Staying regular?

Following this, regularities and repetitions in Deleuzian ontology are always shaped by the different possible trajectories of the virtual, made actual through the mechanisms of individuation operating with a minimum of differentiation<sup>179</sup>. Here, the relationship of virtual and actual is expressed as one of difference being made consistent and homogenous (i.e. territorialised) through the imbalanced application of forces directed towards attaining particular outcomes<sup>180</sup>. Mechanisms or machines in the virtual operate to give regular form to the otherwise heteronomous relations of the virtual creating a form of historical and contingent consistency, territory or ‘identity’ (albeit an identity based in the regularity and operation of mechanisms). This is a conception dependent on difference, but realised as a series of relatively homogeneous (territorialised or consistent) differentiations. In such a case, the virtual is almost synonymous with emergent capacities understood as sedimentations, relational affordances or structures which act with a sufficient degree of stability and enable and constrain other activities in the world. This aspect of the virtual is different from the intrinsic powers and properties of things and is rather concerned with how things interact providing a relational rather than object (or entity) -centred ontology. This sense of regularity or affordance instils a particular form of contingent necessity or obligation based in a restriction of difference and differentiation i.e. a territorialisation which provides the consistent basis for other operations.

As DeLanda illustrates:

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*dynamis*, *energeia* and *entelecheia* in the Greeks (and famously in Aristotle). He suggests that the relation of will and power in ‘will to power’ means *dynamis*, *energeia* and *entelecheia* all at once (Heidegger, 1979: 64). Coupled with Deleuze’s conception of virtual dynamics, mechanisms and machines, this provides a robust ontology of powers, similar to Bhaskar (2008), albeit without resorting to essences.

<sup>179</sup> We might think of Deleuze’s continual use of differential calculus as a sustained reflection and even metaphor for the minimal degree of differentiation in repetition or identity.

<sup>180</sup> Although we should not conclude from outcome a final cause. The system remains open and directed only by the resolution of problematics which gives rise to particular attractors as resolutions.

A piece of ground does have its own intrinsic properties of things and their affordances. A piece of ground does have its own intrinsic properties determining, for example, how horizontal or slanted, how flat, concave or convex, and how rigid it is. But to be capable of affording support to a walking animal is not just another intrinsic property, it is capacity which may not be exercised if there are no animals around. Given that capacities are relational in this sense, what an individual affords another may depend on factors like their relative spatial scales: the surface of a pond or lake may not afford a large animal a walking medium, but it does to a small insect which can walk on it because it is not heavy enough to break through the surface tension of the water. Affordances are also symmetric, that is, they involve both capacities to affect and be affected. For example, a hole in the ground affords a fleeing animal a place to hide, but such animal could also dig its own hole, thus affecting or changing the ground itself. Similarly, an animal may flee because a predator affords it danger but it itself affords nutrition to the predator. (DeLanda, 2002: 73)

Here, a complex interaction of heterogeneous elements forms an emergent assemblage which behaves with a degree of regularity and enables other operations to take place. As assemblages, these affordances are conceived as a rhizomic constellation of powers and capacities territorialised in a particular manner, in which objects, bodies, expressions, qualities and territories come together for varying periods of time to create new ways of functioning, giving rise to an appearance of repetition and regularity and providing a coherent but heteronomous plane for activity (Parr, 2010: 18). As such, the affordance granted by an assemblage is an emergent relationship in which powers remain distinct but through their interaction create a

relatively consistent and stable form of regularity<sup>181</sup>. However, the existence of this plane is contingent on the continued operation of the dynamic mechanisms of individuation. If we pursue the anti-essentialism and anti-actualism of Deleuze, this also equates to an anti-law reading of natural necessity in which difference and repetition of mechanisms in the virtual replaces the reproduction of the identical in essences or laws (in which difference appears only as so many *ceteris paribus* and *ad hoc* clauses). Instead, difference becomes an active and productive quality expressing the power of things as differential machines from which momentary forms of ‘identity’ arise. To take the metaphor of the river made famous by Heraclitus, difference recognises the river is individuated at any moment by the powers which form and constrain it, creating the bank and the waters simultaneously as an assemblage and as an affordance which constantly undergoes various territorialisations and deterritorialisations. In contrast, law mistakenly unites the changing of the water with the permanence of the river as structure or *logos*<sup>182</sup> (Deleuze, 1994: 2). From the point of view of scientific experimentation, law and repetition remain entangled as essence and appearance, but this is simply an objective illusion. In such an account of science, natural necessity is conceived of as a law of nature expressed as a repetition, and the discovery of these laws is achieved through the reproduction of repetition in experimentation. However, as Deleuze notes, “experimentation constitutes relatively closed environments in which phenomena are defined in terms of a small number of chosen factors (a minimum of two – for example, Space and Time for the movement of bodies in a vacuum)” (ibid: 3). In this environment, difference is actively suppressed (minimised) in order to create repetition. But repetition is not identity. It

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<sup>181</sup> In its multiplicity an assemblage is shaped by and in turn shapes a wide variety of developments. Through an aleatory encounter, a set of forces coalesces and combines into a new productive entity (Parr, 2010: 18). Accordingly, such an assemblage produces a new reality by making unexpected connections.

<sup>182</sup> Unfortunately, this is why Norrie (2010) is mistaken when appealing to the tradition of Heraclitus as a thinker of structure against the Heraclitus of chaos in order to critique Deleuze and Nietzsche.

is, rather, the name of a mechanism or machine operating as an individuation which functions to minimise differentiation. As such:

If repetition is possible, it is due to a miracle rather than to law. It is against the law: against the similar form and the equivalent content of law. If repetition can be found, even in nature, it is in the name of a power which affirms itself against the law which works underneath laws, perhaps superior to laws. If repetition exists, it expresses at once a singularity opposed to the general, a universality opposed to the particular, a distinctive opposed to the ordinary, an instantaneity opposed to variation and an eternity opposed to permanence. In every respect, repetition is a transgression. It puts law into question, it denounces its nominal or general character in favour of a more profound and more artistic reality<sup>183</sup>. (Deleuze, 1994: 2-3)

Why should the laws of nature naturally be repetitious? Why should they not contain variations and differentiations particularly if they are relational? Deleuze argues against the repetition of the same for a conception of repetition which recognises the dissymmetry between difference and unity and the ironic possibility of difference in repetition or repetition as the repetition of difference (differentiation and differentiation):

The first repetition is repetition of the Same, explained by the identity of the concept or representation; the second includes difference, and includes itself in the alterity of the idea, in the heterogeneity of an 'a-presentation'. One is negative, occurring by default in the concept; the other affirmative, occurring by excess in the Idea. One is conjectural, the other categorical. One is static, the other dynamic. One is repetition in the effect, the other in the cause, One is extensive, the other intensive. One is ordinary, the other

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<sup>183</sup> One should not miss the delightful irony of this anti-Humean comment. For Hume a miracle famously represented a suspension of the laws of nature and their repetitious nature for an exception (Hume, 2011b: Section 10). Here a repetition of the laws of nature, and not an exception, is viewed as the more truly miraculous moment.



distinctive and singular One is horizontal, the other vertical. One is developed and explicated, the other enveloped and in need of interpretation. One is revolving, the other evolving. One involves equality, commensurability and symmetry; the other is grounded in inequality, incommensurability and dissymmetry. One is material, the other spiritual, even in nature and in the earth. One is inanimate, the other carries the secret of our deaths and our lives, of our enchainment and our liberations, the demonic and the divine. One is a 'bare' repetition, the other a covered repetition, which forms itself in covering itself, in masking and disguising itself. One concerns accuracy, the other has authenticity as its criterion. (Deleuze, 1994: 24)

Through this Deleuze is able to assert the concept of intensive difference in a manner which undercuts identity while invoking a new conception of identity based on the primacy of difference and repetition in which the emphasis is placed onto the mechanisms of individuation and differentiation.

### **5.10 Fuzziness of realism**

Here the realism of Deleuze rests in defining difference as intensive, and placing difference before unity, difference before negation, simulacra before model, rhizome before the root, virtual before the actual and powers before laws. He stands opposed to the clear-and-distinct structures of Apollonian representation for a Dionysian embrace of becoming and difference in which being exists in obscure and fuzzy zones, preserved and maintained by the operation of changing and differential powers. This is an undifferentiation which is nevertheless perfectly differentiated, not clear and distinct but obscure and distinct. Accordingly, Deleuze does not deny that there is unity in the world, or that there are objects in the world which resemble one another, or that there are entities which manage to maintain themselves through time, or that

representation is possible. Instead, the horse must be placed before the cart. Identity and representation must be understood as the products of historical processes and operations, in short, they are not fundamental or primary categories of ontology. In making identity problematic, philosophy and the concrete sciences become concerned to examine the manner in which identity arises. Answering this entails holding in balance the intensity of difference in the multiplicity of the virtual and turning toward the dynamic mechanisms of individuation. This represents an important corrective to reifying accounts of morphogenesis including essence and law. By way of summary we might suggest that ontologically Deleuze provides a dynamic account of mechanisms and assemblages predicated on the rejection of the metaphysics of identity, and epistemologically, Deleuze provides an account of conceptuality and practice based in our constructive responses to objective problems grounded in an affirmation of simulacra and the distinct and obscure quality of conceptuality. While this provides a deep ontological basis for explanation and turns us towards processes and relationships it requires supplementation. The processes by which we identify the mechanisms of individuation and the logic of scientific discovery remains largely unexamined by Deleuze. It is however, precisely this aspect which grounds Bhaskar's approach to natural and social science to which we will now turn. Before doing so, and to pre-empt the next chapter, the Deleuzian resituation of the problematic of identity and difference allows for a new reading of Bhaskar which turns us toward the relations of difference providing the basis for an anti-essentialist, anti-systematic and anti-methodological (anarchic) reading of realism based in assemblages. The things we are concerned with are the powers and processes of individuation and territorialisation which account for the diversity of the given and the virtual reserve of difference which makes the given possible. In so doing we are able to move towards a fuzzier conception of realism based in interpretation, perspective, decentred structures, *différance*,

spectrality, contested problematics and a mixed ontology while not departing from the possibility of explanation.

## Chapter 6: Realism in the Balance

This chapter will now turn towards the work of Roy Bhaskar as a culminating and unifying reflection on the possibility of realism under the conditions of postmodernity. The work of Bhaskar serves as an important supplement to the relations of intensity, *différance* and difference developed within postmodernism by providing the contours of a realist approach steeped in contingency and turned towards transcendental explanation. It will suggest 1) Bhaskar provides an ontology which is able to account for the possibility of knowledge by 2) providing an account of powers and relations based the differentiation and stratification of ontology which accounts for the diversity and heteronomy of the given and parallels Lyotard, Derrida and Deleuze, however 3) this approach needs to be further developed by turning towards processes, powers and relations and away from the language of essences and presences. In light of this I will be reading Bhaskar's critical realism as a difficult and anarchic realism.

What Bhaskar succeeds in doing is precisely to bring down the history and philosophy of science from the heights (mathematics, logic, astronomy, theoretical physics etc.) towards the middle regions where knowledge is less deductive and much more dependent on complex processes and external conditions (c.f. Foucault, 1989c: 13). Nevertheless, as a result, science does not cease to be any less rigorous. Rather, the history and philosophy of science becomes one of paradox, complex development and change as it attempts to grasp a dynamic, differentiated and often chaotic world. It is the unsettling quality of the ignobility, contestation and contingency of knowledge and the challenge this presents to realism which Bhaskar takes

up as his problematic. In particular, the prevalence of scientific discontinuity and change has the consequence of snapping the privileged relationships which uniquely ties thought to things and grounding the certainty of science (Bhaskar, 2011: 26). Thought can no longer be unproblematically viewed as an automatic or mechanical function of given objects and immediate references (as in empiricism) but neither can the activity of creative subjects be regarded as populating the world with things (as in idealism). The prevalence and recognition of error and change undermines the unproblematic immediacy of both positions by highlighting the fragile relationship which exists between subject and object. A new position must be established in the middle ground, not as a synthesis, but a recognition of the contested and complex nature of the pursuit of knowledge in a complex world. For Bhaskar the way forward in this ignoble context is to recognise and preserve the distinction between the unchanging real objects that exist outside the scientific process and the changing cognitive objects that are produced within science as a function of scientific practice (ibid: 27). The recognition of this distance avoids the establishment of any relationship of one-to-one correspondence between a theoretical ensemble and the real ensemble of things (c.f. Althusser, 1997: 131). What is at stake here is the very concept of the real and the possibility of its representation without thereby eliding reality and representation. In creating this distance we are prevented from collapsing our theoretical pursuits into empiricist or idealist categories in which we immediately reproduce the world before us. To modify a similar problematic from György Lukács, if science is a particular form by means of which reality is reflected and represented, then it becomes of crucial importance for it to grasp that reality as it truly is, and not merely to confine ourselves to reproducing whatever manifests immediately on the 'surface' i.e. what is immediately given or present (Lukács, 1980: 33). Indeed, the goal of the realist in Bhaskar is to penetrate and uncover the deeper, hidden, mediated and not immediately perceptible networks of relationships which govern objective reality (ibid: 38). If we remain at the shallow surface and

experience or articulate the world immediately, it will remain opaque, fragmentary, chaotic and ultimately incomprehensible (ibid: 39). However, descending beneath the surface is not a simple task either. The underlying laws and mechanisms of nature not only make themselves felt in very complex ways, but are realised unevenly. The operation of these underlying laws and mechanisms are far from a simple relationship of essence and appearance or an expression of a unified structure. The world is more complex than this. Rather, to draw on Nancy Cartwright, “we live in a dappled world, a world rich in different things, with different natures, behaving in different ways” (Cartwright, 1999: 1). The world has the quality of a patchwork, a jumbled world of things with pockets of precision, but also erratic overlaps and ragged edges (ibid: 1). Or, as Bhaskar suggests in his later work on dialectic, the world is “multi-determined, multi-levelled, multi-linear, multi-relational, multi-angular, multi-perspectival, multiply determined and open” (Bhaskar 1995: 53). Yet, this chaotic and fragmented aspect of reality is not only a feature of the surface as the surface may even have a level of order and regularity which is denied to the depths. Accordingly, it would be a mistake to think that waiting beneath the surface is a world which offers a coherent image to depict, or pieces which simply need to be put together. The shattering of such simplistic illusions is always a realist moment. The realist must break up the surface and the depths, wrenching and dislocating such things apart in pursuit of the real (c.f. Bloch, 1980: 40). Indeed, the labour of the realist is extraordinarily arduous, and rests in eluding one-sided dimensionality and evading the many pitfalls patiently waiting for them. This difficulty can be summarised as the task of representing reality without *necessarily* ascribing reality to its representations i.e. being realist about realism.

In pursuing realism, Bhaskar is concerned with generating an account of natural and social science which reclaims a complex, and therefore difficult and contested, notion of reality. In

contrast, the monotony of many modern or postmodern works proceeds precisely from the decision to abandon any attempt to reflect the complexity of reality, embracing objectivity or subjectivity too quickly and too unproblematically. Characteristically, realism for Bhaskar entails rejecting any account which confers a pseudo-profundity on immediacy particular immediate experience. To this end, the main target of Bhaskar is empirical realism<sup>184</sup>, represented by the dominance of the positivist paradigm of science, and undergirding the largely unreflexive adoption of empiricist presuppositions. Within this framework, science is presented as an immediate practice dealing with empirical data, that is to say, surface phenomena. Because of this primacy of immediacy, science is understood as monistic in its development, deductive in its structure and certain in its account of things (Bhaskar, 2011: 28). Indeed, for empirical realism (or positivism) science is characterised as developing in a linear fashion on the basis of experience which, in conjunction with increasingly accurate technology, is able to unproblematically assess and represent the empirical world (ibid: 26). Under this paradigm science becomes an esoteric language of observation (phenomenology) concerned with attaining an unparalleled degree of precision and rigour. Moreover, positivism stipulates that the only valid form of knowledge is scientific and this knowledge consists in the description of the invariant patterns of observable phenomena (Bhaskar 2009: 226). As monistic, science is understood as a unified discipline with fixed and unchanging characteristics observing fixed and unchanging regularities in the world. Knowledge, presented

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<sup>184</sup> Here Bhaskar uses 'empirical realism' in an idiosyncratic manner to illuminate the problematic of 'Humean' empiricism and to denote the basis of the positivist illusion. As a result of this usage other philosophical traditions which claim the title of empirical realism should not be understood as inherently irrealist let alone disqualified tout court, and neither should the project of an 'empirical realism' be dismissed. Indeed, Bhaskar's own transcendental realism could and should be understood as a complex or highly mediated form of empirical realism based in transcendental analysis. Other traditions of empirical realism such as, for example Sellars (1956, 1963), equally represent overlapping, different and/or fruitful attempts to identify and resolve the problems raised by our empirical relation with the external world and on Bhaskar's own analysis fall closer on the spectrum to what he calls 'transcendental realism' than 'empirical realism' (c.f. Bhaskar 2009: 26). As such, Bhaskar's usage of empirical realism serves mainly to polemically illuminate certain philosophical currents and stakes.

as facts, can be read off the world and associated through the use of sophisticated methodologies such that understanding progresses via the accumulation and relation of previously undiscovered fragments; a process made increasingly possible by the development of advanced technological scientific apparatus. Unsurprisingly, this utopian account of empirical science is unable to reconcile itself to the complex, changing, discontinuous and often irrational nature of scientific discovery. As Bhaskar suggests, positivism stands above all as a theory of the “nature, omnipotence and unity of science” (ibid: 226) concerned with a world unproblematically present before us if we are only willing to look. Indeed, when Lyotard critiques instrumentalism, when Derrida critiques the metaphysics of presence or when Deleuze critiques identity, positivism remains in the background as one of the exemplars of these threads. While explicit positivism is, as Raymond Williams suggested, “a swear-word by which nobody is swearing” (Williams, 1976: 201), new accounts of scientific theory and practice have not found it easy to sustain a coherent notion of the rationality or intelligibility of scientific change and the non-deductive (or ‘irrational’) components of theory without returning to or simply reacting against positivist assumptions (Bhaskar, 2011: 11). As with the metaphysics of presence we are never simply done with it. Rather, the spectre of positivism continues to haunt our accounts of science, not only as a memory, but as the very reactions it instilled and which remain present.

As a response to positivism, two mutually reinforcing critiques arose. The first is what Bhaskar calls the anti-monist strand of epistemology, most prominently associated with Gaston Bachelard, Alexandre Koyré, Karl Popper, Thomas Kuhn, Imre Lakatos and Paul Feyerabend. These authors drew attention to the contextual and competing nature of theoretical positions within the history of science. In particular, far from being monistic or developmental, scientific theories were seen as historically constituted accounts which were regularly assessed,



challenged and superseded, and not always by ‘rational’ or ‘scientific’ means (Koyré 1957; Kuhn 1962; Feyerabend 1975; Lakatos 1978). Rhetoric, cunning, deception, politics, sociology and economics all play their part to secure the advance of science. Instead of a harmonious utopia we have a clash of competing and perhaps even incommensurable accounts of reality resolved, or not, in bitter and turbid disputes. For the anti-monists, the pursuit of knowledge was understood less in terms of discovery than complex historical and social processes. This move towards a sociological interpretation of science was unable to develop into a theory of scientific realism and continually faced the difficulty of reconciling the phenomenon of discontinuity with the seeming progressive, cumulative character of scientific development, in which there is growth as well as change. Perhaps more importantly, this anti-monistic critique of positivism, while challenging the monistic development of science, was unable to avoid the appearance of historicism, conventionalism and, in more extreme cases, pure scientific relativism in which we even appear to create and change the world with our theories. In Kuhn’s infamously ambiguous words, “the proponents of competing paradigms practice their trades in different worlds” (Kuhn, 1962: 150).

Parallel to the anti-monists, an increasingly sophisticated account of models challenged the positivist conception of science as deductive. Positivist deductivism held that experience provides the only sure foundation on which knowledge could develop and proceeded from this to necessary inferences and conclusions through deductive reason. Knowledge is presented as deriving from experience but requires translation into logical law-like statements from which we can deduce and test consequences in an attempt to verify or falsify our theoretical conjectures which translate experience. Theorists concerned with scientific practice, notably, N. R. Hanson, Steven Toulmin, Mary Hesse and Rom Harré, were careful to show how this was not the case. Rather, scientific practice generates cognitive items which are irreducible to

syntactical or logical operations articulating sense-experience (Bhaskar, 2011: 12). Models, metaphors, paradigms, heuristics, conceptual schemata etc. are generated by the scientific imagination which are essential to the empirical intelligibility and development of science, but which are not reducible to or directly translatable into empirical terminology. Contra positivism, a model is not simply a formula or summary of empirical data; nor can it be translated into observational statements without remainder. Rather models operate as imagined mental constructs, mechanisms or processes which function by way of analogy with familiar or known mechanisms or processes to account for phenomena or illustrate a set of observations. These models are not advanced as guaranteed truths, but as plausible hypotheses to investigate by offering a creative expression or new way of looking at phenomena. Yet, Bhaskar contends, this account faces a similar problem to the anti-monists in accounting for scientific development. The model ambiguously functions somewhere between myth, metaphor and pragmatic necessity, but without a referential component by means of which the model is not only helpful but legitimate, it ceases to have a place within a realist science and becomes a pragmatic tool at best (Bhaskar, 2008: 163f). While maintaining the non-identity of the theoretical object and the object of theory, it was unable to move beyond a criterion of general plausibility towards realism. Indeed, the model functions as a subjunctive exercise which asks us to imagine an unknown mechanism 'as if it were ...', leaving us to wonder whether this account is plausible and whether our imagination will accept it, rather than whether it is real and truthful (ibid: 155-156). Resting on empiricist assumptions about the imperceptibility of theoretical entities, even the more sophisticated accounts of models tended to collapse into pragmatic devices servicing the needs of the understanding, rather than the development of knowledge, and thus were ultimately dispensable devices (ibid: 156).

While these accounts were able to undermine naïve positivism as unrepresentative of the scientific process, they were unable to move forward without giving rise to further problems. Many of these attempts often came to resemble simply more sophisticated developments of positivist premises, positivism in crisis or positivism pushed to its limits. In particular, these accounts tended towards a certain theoretical *aporia* in which competing accounts of science oscillate between forms of empiricism (or phenomenology) on the one hand, and forms of transcendental idealism (or structuralism) on the other, creating a cleft-stick for philosophy and science; unable to go back to naïve positivism, but unable to move forward without falling into contradictions (Bhaskar, 2009: 28). Instead, we oscillate between the two positions, able to live off the difference by continually playing one against the other, empiricism against idealism, development against change, nomological against idiographic. The nature of this problem represents the classic *aporia* captured by Kant: “thoughts without intuitions are empty, while intuitions without concepts are blind” (Kant, 1998a: 193-194). In attempting to move beyond this the defining question for Bhaskar becomes, how can we account for both progress *and* change in science or knowledge?

### **6.1 The possibility of realism**

In answer to this question, Bhaskar presents his project as the development of a *systematic* realist account of science based on the critique of positivism (2008: 8). This allows Bhaskar to position his ‘transcendental realism’ as a comprehensive alternative (encompassing ontology, epistemology and sociology) to the field as defined by positivism. In mounting a defence for the distinctiveness and relative endurance of real objects from our understanding Bhaskar argues we are able to provide an account of science in which we can account for both the growth and change which takes place in scientific discovery (ibid: 190). The basis of scientific realism is the minimal thesis that the ultimate objects of scientific inquiry exist and act (for the

most part) independently of scientists and their activity, but through such activity the scientist is able to come to knowledge of these objects (ibid: 12). The *systematic* aspect of this account of science is concerned with defending a comprehensive project of realism by elaborating “what the world must be like prior to any scientific investigation of it and for any scientific attitudes or behaviour to be possible” (ibid: 12). The systematic approach thus encompasses the sociological, epistemological and ontological aspects of science. Importantly, such an account neither entails nor licenses a realistic interpretation for any particular theory (ibid: 12). Science is not *necessarily* a realist enterprise but is a contingent historical and social endeavour. But if science is indeed contingent in its ability to represent reality, how then do we account for its practice, in which progress is made, and in which real knowledge is actually but not necessarily produced? To answer this question, we must turn towards metaphysics and the relationship between the structures of knowledge and the structure of the world in which all scientific theories and practices must take place.

The possibility of a realist metaphysics rests on the possibility of philosophy as a distinct and external (but related) discipline to the sociology or history of science, and scientific practice itself. Specifically, philosophy concerns the possibility of developing a speculative and critical ontology which accounts for the formal conditions in which scientific practice is a meaningful exercise. While it has become a well-entrenched stance of western philosophy to be done with ‘metaphysics’ and ‘ontology’, this is simply not possible<sup>185</sup>. The idea of a metaphysical or post-metaphysical neutrality in which one can address certain kinds of questions without having asked and implicitly answered other kinds of questions or avoid metaphysics by bracketing

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<sup>185</sup> Here we must distinguish the pursuit of ontology and metaphysics from the grip of the Kantian tradition. Metaphysics is not concerned with the ‘fundamental features of reality *as it presents itself to us*’ (Carr, 1987: 2) nor is it concerned with a transcendental inquiry into what lies beyond either the realm of nature, or the bounds of possible experience (Mautner 1997). Such accounts remain committed to the prioritising of epistemology, with ontology as a subordinate division and consequence.

(*epoche*) these questions is a naïve fable or delusion (Groff, 2013: 2). Any theoretical inquiry, or for that matter any basic practice, cannot proceed without an antecedent set of basic commitments and beliefs regarding what kinds of things exist, what they are like, and how they work (ibid: 2). Any theory or practice entails some account of what the world must be like for our knowledge or practice to be possible, even if these assumptions are only ever implicit, tacit or unconscious. As Bachelard suggests “[a]ll philosophy explicitly or tacitly, honestly or surreptitiously ... deposits, projects or presupposes a reality” (cited in Bhaskar, 2009: 7). Likewise, all activity presupposes a particular quality of order and regularity in the world, without which we could not think let alone act. Quite simply, if our world exhibited no regularities, we could not speak, let alone think or achieve self-consciousness (Westphal, 2005: 314). To presuppose a scientist is concerned with the analysis of scientific laws presupposes that this is in fact possible, that the world is regular enough for such an activity to be meaningful and this regularity presents itself in a manner which can be represented in laws. Thus, far from being metaphysically neutral, our practice operates and secretes metaphysical and ontological commitments. As the scientific anarchist Feyerabend recognised: “[t]he standards we use and the rules we recommend make sense only in a world that has a certain structure” indeed, in domains which do not exhibit such structures those same standards and rules “become inapplicable, or start running idle” (Feyerabend, 1975: 251).

How then does a realist philosophical investigation into metaphysics proceed? Philosophy, Bhaskar argues, is distinguished from science by its method which is not experimental but transcendental, albeit in a qualified sense (Bhaskar, 2009: 14). This qualification is the rejection of the idealism, universalism and anthropocentrism into which Kant presses his own transcendental inquiries (ibid: 14). While traditional metaphysics sought to elaborate a comprehensive and ideally apodictic account of reality Kant, following Hume, rejects this and

argues that such ‘news from nowhere’, that is, news from anything but the perspective of the subject, generated nonsense or antinomies. While naïve (dogmatic) metaphysics was rightly discredited, in the same breath the possibility of coming to any knowledge of the world was suddenly replaced by an anthropology of finitude and an ontology subordinate to epistemology.

Leaving aside the metaphysical fantasy of disclosing the nature of being, Kant pursues (a) an investigation into the presuppositions of our knowledge of being concerned with (b) the elucidation of the conceptual structures in which being must be thought (ibid: 11). However, it is clear that while these two moments must be kept distinct, they are continually conflated or elided in Kant such that the investigation into the presuppositions of our knowledge always concerns an elucidation of the conceptual structures in which being must be thought<sup>186</sup> (ibid: 11). Their preservation but separation allows for the possibility of inverting Kantian transcendental idealism into transcendental realism by recovering a transcendental but immanent programme of ontology which is not simply equivalent or subordinate to an articulation of epistemology. For Kant a transcendental enquiry is identified as an examination into the conditions of possibility of x, where x is some significant, central or pervasive feature of our experience or practice and in which the resolution is concerned with categories of thought. In departing from transcendental idealism while still deploying transcendental argumentation, Bhaskar’s transcendental realism rejects the notion that there can be philosophy as such or in general. Instead, there is only the philosophy of the particular, that is, the philosophy of historically determinate social forms (ibid: 12). If the general form of philosophical investigation concerns the conditions of ontological, conceptual and practical activity which are not imbricated into an idealist schema, then it must be recognised that both

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<sup>186</sup> This same mistake is by and large replicated by Foucault in historicising the *a priori* in *epistemes* (Foucault 1989a).

social activity and philosophical conceptualisation will be historically transient, dependent upon causal agents rather than simply ‘thinkers’ or ‘perceivers’, and entail epistemically relativist rather than necessary or absolutist conclusions (ibid: 14). It is only in this conditional sense that philosophy can establish *a priori* truths concerning the necessary conditions of possibility for phenomena. As a socially embedded, historical and materially dependent activity philosophy only ever gets going on the basis of prior conceptualisations of historical practice, acting on, but not limited to, received and inherited traditions and not limited to the articulation of our epistemic frameworks (ibid: 14). For Bhaskar this at least means:

- (i) such an enquiry is intelligible only as an instance of the wider class of enquiries into the necessary conditions of social activities as conceptualised in the experience of agents (or in a hermeneutically grounded theoretical redescription or critique);
- (ii) generalised transcendental reflection of this kind is in turn merely a species of the wider genus of retroductive argument characteristic of scientific activity in general and not distinguished by any social logic or innate certainty of its own;
- (iii) the pattern, order or form of such arguments do not necessarily reflect, are not homologous with, seldom constitute and never determine the structure, order or nature of their subject matters;
- (iv) the activity analysed may depend upon the powers (and liabilities) people possess as material (physical and biological) causal, social and/or historical agents;
- (v) activity, conceptualisation and analysis may each be normatively corrigible, socially contested, spatially localised and temporally transient;
- (vi) the analysis may yield in the case of science, ontological, realist, epistemically relativist (rather than absolutist – or irrationalist) and domain-specific results

- (vii) such results must always be construed as conditional (praxis-dependent) and expressed in hypothetical not assertoric form. (Bhaskar, 2009: 11-12)

This is to say, philosophy is possible only in relation to a practice or an object other than itself and, as a dependent activity, is therefore always a heteronomous discipline with a particular focus (ibid: 12). Philosophy is not queen of the sciences but an underlabouring discipline which is perhaps occasionally a torchbearer. This means that one can accept certain methodological elements of Kant and critical theory without falling into idealism. Indeed, Kant's philosophical influence is limited to opening the possibility of grounding metaphysics in the contingent activity of social practices which avoids the "uncontrolled hypostases" of traditional metaphysics and the "self-nullifying reductionism of positivism" (ibid: 13). Furthermore, it follows that the province of philosophy (or metaphysics) is no longer coextensive with the domain of the necessary or logic. Kant, by conflating the transcendental with the conceptual and *a priori* realm of necessity, continually returns to rational relations as the form for transcendental relations in general and causal relations in particular. In contradistinction, a realist philosophy does not subsist apart from the practices of the various sciences nor does it contemplate a separate, autonomous or transcendent realm. On the contrary, philosophy treats the same world as the sciences, but does so transcendently rather than experimentally (ibid: 8). Specifically, in the case of science, philosophy is concerned with what the world must be like for experimental activity to be meaningful, intelligible and possibly (but not necessarily) truthful<sup>187</sup>. While science proceeds via a complex empirical engagement with the world, philosophy pursues both a project of reflection (critical rectification) on our concepts, frameworks and practices as well as an exploration into the conditions of possibility for the

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<sup>187</sup> This relationship of possibly but not necessarily truthful practice opens up the difficult task of any metaphysics which attempts to move beyond the metaphysics of presence.



theory and practice of concrete activities. In rejecting both methodological and metaphysical necessity the task of philosophy as a transcendental treatment of science is always open and contingent, bound to scientific practice while being irreducible to scientific beliefs:

Thus philosophy can mark the condition that if experimental activity is to be possible, the world must be structured and open. But it cannot anticipate what structures the world contains or the ways in which they are intricately, which remain entirely within the jurisdiction of primary scientific investigations. (ibid: 13)

Accordingly, philosophy functions as the name under which social forms at a particular historical conjuncture are organised, combined and united in the form of self-reflection, reflexivity and critique. As reflexive, philosophy is always concerned with a form of immanent and critical activity. It rejects the possibility of any notion of simplicity of beginnings, the self-evidence of arguments or the passivity of observers. As a historical contingent and immanent activity its realism is always in the mode of contestation (which is not to say sceptical suspension).

## **6.2 Transitivity and intransitivity**

Proceeding according to this transcendental mode Bhaskar distinguishes between two domains or realms of scientific objects without which scientific practices cease to be meaningful. These two domains allows Bhaskar to distinguish the independent existence of real objects from the actual account and pursuit of knowledge. These domains are called the transitive and the intransitive. The intransitive domain concerns the referential objects of scientific theory (the objects of theory), while the transitive domain concerns the scientific theories and the 'theoretical objects' it produces while attempting to understand and represent the intransitive objects. Notably, the transitive domain encompasses the historical and socially conditioned context in which knowledge takes place, including the relations of language and conceptuality,

signs and significations, traditions, paradigms, research programmes etc.. For Bhaskar, the possibility of not only a realist but an adequate account of science rests on the explicit recognition of the necessity and non-identity of these dimensions (Bhaskar, 2011: 27):

Any adequate philosophy of science must find a way of grappling with this central paradox of science: that men in their social activity produce knowledge which is a social product much like any other, which is no more independent of its production and the men who produce it than motor cars, armchairs or books, which has its own craftsmen, technicians, publicists, standards and skills and which is no less subject to change than any other commodity. This is one side of 'knowledge'. The other is that knowledge is 'of' things which are not produced by men at all: the specific gravity of mercury, the process of electrolysis, the mechanism of light propagation. None of these 'objects of knowledge' depend upon human activity. If men ceased to exist sound would continue to travel and heavy bodies fall to the earth in exactly the same way, though *ex hypothesi* there would be no-one to know it (Bhaskar, 2008: 21).

The intransitive dimension is synonymous with ontology, the world as it is in-itself whether knowable or not, while the transitive is synonymous with subjectivity and epistemology. Where these domains are elided or collapsed we fall into what Bhaskar calls the *epistemic fallacy* (2008: 16). In essence, the epistemic fallacy functions to establish the equivalence of the relations between subject and object which implicitly generates the metaphysics of irrealism. It entails that statements about the world are always translatable into or necessarily qualified by statements concerning epistemology or our 'actual' knowledge of the world (ibid: 16). When the intransitive dimension is collapsed into the transitive dimension we are left with the unsurpassable horizon of the finite subject. The world as it is in-itself remains unknown or unknowable and the great outdoors becomes the great inside. This can take many forms, but characteristically denies the possibility of referential detachment (i.e. *epoché*) and the ability

to transcend our epistemic situation to speak about the world as it is in-itself. The paradigmatic cases of the epistemic fallacy for Bhaskar include Hume and the affirmation that we cannot know causation, only the constant conjunction of events; Kant and the speculation that we can only know things as they are to us, i.e. *phenomena*, and never the things themselves, i.e. *noumena*; and finally Wittgenstein with the assertion that philosophy should “treat only of the network, and not what the network describes” (Wittgenstein, 1961: 6.35). Going hand in hand with the epistemic fallacy is the ontic fallacy (Bhaskar, 2008: 15). Whereas the epistemic fallacy elides the intransitivity of knowledge and presents the world as unknowable in-itself, the ontic fallacy elides the transitivity of knowledge, and presents the world as an immediately accessible given. If the consequence of the epistemic fallacy is an emphasis upon the inextricable mental, social or psychological mediation of knowledge, the ontic fallacy results in an epistemic naturalism (naïve realism or empiricism) which denies negativity, distance, labour and the social and historical process of knowledge. In both accounts knowledge is immediately present, immanent to nature in one and immanent to mind, culture or convention in the other. This is to say, the epistemic-ontic fallacy is complicit in the generation and reproduction of the metaphysics of closure (Lyotard), the metaphysics of presence (Derrida) and the metaphysics of identity (Deleuze) i.e. the metaphysics of irrealism.

The difficult task of a realist science is to break with the epistemic fallacy. Here we face a difficult tension between the fallible but progressive and successful nature of human knowledge, and the social, revisionary and changing nature of human knowledge. Bhaskar contends that in spite of the various mediations (historical, social, linguistic etc.) and the uneven nature of scientific development, we still come to knowledge of the world as it is in-itself. This is never an absolute knowledge, but neither is it charlatantry or chicanery. As transitive, knowledge operates as a social product dependent upon human activity and on

account of this is subject to contingent historical and geographical circumstance as well as the possibility of historical transformation and change. In particular, the production of knowledge is a process dependent upon conceptual antecedents which are taken up and developed through a process of critical rectification, experimental activity and discovery. The scientist labours upon a received body of knowledge including antecedently established facts and theories, paradigms and models, methods and techniques of inquiry, the purpose of which is to elucidate, transform, or change in order to provide a better account of the world for ongoing theoretical and practical activity (ibid: 21). Fleshing out this Bhaskarian line, we might suggest that as our knowledge progresses there may come a point at which a concept or practice, while still capturing something of the world, becomes an obstacle to further knowledge or scientific development, and must be abandoned as erroneous, even though it may be said to still represent something of the world. This is to say, knowledge is not a free-form creation of the human mind nor is it simply a form of creative writing or myth-making. Rather, knowledge always has a necessary external reference which allows for the disruptive but progressive quality of knowledge without completely throwing our received knowledge into question, but without completely justifying our representations. Despite much of the rhetoric, the revolutions of science are not great catastrophes that raze and salt the earth of a fallen past before moving on. Such a conception is in fact a nihilist and romantic reaction against reformist or monistic evolutionary theories (c.f. Lukács, 1980: 55). Where the latter sees nothing but continuity, the former sees nothing but ruptures, fissures and upheavals. Instead, the historical progress of science, like history itself, is the complex unity of continuity, discontinuity, evolution and revolution (ibid: 55). As a result of this I want to suggest, moving slightly beyond Bhaskar, that the scientific city is heterogeneous, differentiated and uneven.

This heterogeneity and disunification has significant implications for the reception and transmission of antecedent traditions insofar as it constitutes the necessarily historical and social dimension of all scientific activity. The immersion within traditions constitutes the scientific horizon as a determinate influence in shaping its theory and practice and their own understanding of its theory and practice. However, the possibility of scientific knowledge is not simply reducible to this sociological condition, even if it delineates the context in which the scientist or philosopher must necessarily operate, and even if the social conditions may in fact not be conducive to the production of truth whether due to technological or ideological obstacles (or both as the case may be). Traditions are not unified or dead identities which are simply or immediately transmitted to the passive scientist through a process of education. Rather, traditions are an ensemble of structures, practices and social relations which present a complex and heteronomous unity. The inherent disunity and contestation within the scientific city ensures that the transmission of traditions is never simple. There are always counterinductive positions (Feyerabend, 1975) from which the scientist can view and assess their work, even if it is simply the distinction between life inside and outside the laboratory. The, at times, heteronomous, polyphonic, internally conflicted, contradictory and even promiscuous or chaotic inheritance of traditions creates a space in which scientific activity is cultivated in such a manner as to allow for a gap to exist between our knowledge of the world as received through tradition (the transitive) and the world as it is in-itself (the intransitive).

While Bhaskar provides a revised Kuhnian or Lakatosian logic of scientific development which captures this process (Bhaskar, 2008: 193), it is his work in the social sciences with the problem of structure and agency which is most informative in understanding the dynamics of this relationship (Bhaskar, 1998). The logical structure of transformation is presented as depending upon the co-presence of both a material and an efficient cause with scientists (agents) operating

on received social products (i.e. traditions or structures) to produce new theories and facts (Bhaskar, 2008: 185). Following ‘Durkheim’<sup>188</sup>, we might highlight the necessary precedence of structure for human agency in providing the ‘material causes’ of human action (Figure 6.1). We are thrown into a socio-linguistic-epistemic context in which we must act and in which certain structures enable and constrain our activity by their reproduction. The scientist is informed by their upbringing, education and induction into a particular historical and cultural tradition which forms their actual and possible horizons. They cannot but use the language, concepts, practices, metaphors, literature and worldviews to which they, as a member of their society, are heirs. Working within their received tradition(s), the scientist employs “established results and half-forgotten ideas, the stock of available paradigms and models, methods and techniques of inquiry” so that the scientist often appears in retrospect “as a kind of cognitive *bricoleur*<sup>189</sup>” (Bhaskar, 1998: 37). Following ‘Weber’, we might highlight the structures of society are not reified or ossified forms of life, but rather dynamically operate through the ongoing mediation of human agency including voluntary decisions and social activities (Figure 6.1). Accordingly, we must suggest social forms are “both the ever present condition (material cause) and the continually reproduced outcome of human agency” (ibid: 44). This encompasses both conscious production and normally unconscious reproduction of the social or epistemic

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<sup>188</sup> Here both Durkheim and Weber are treated as ideal types or problematics.

<sup>189</sup> “The ‘bricoleur’ is adept at performing a large number of diverse tasks; but, unlike the engineer, he does not subordinate each of them to the availability of raw materials and tools conceived and procured for the purpose of the project. His universe of instruments is closed and the rules of his game are always to make do with ‘whatever is at hand’, that is to say with a set of tools and materials which is always finite and is also heterogeneous because what it contains bears no relation to the current project, or indeed to any particular project, but is the contingent result of all the occasions there have been to renew or enrich the stock or to maintain it with the remains of previous constructions or destructions. The set of the ‘bricoleur’s’ means cannot therefore be defined in terms of a project (which would presuppose, besides, that, as in the case of the engineer, there were, at least in theory, as many sets of tools and materials or ‘instrumental sets’ as there are different kinds of projects). It is to be defined only by its potential use or, putting this another way and in the language of the ‘bricoleur’ himself, because the elements are collected and retained on the principle that ‘they may always come in handy’. Such elements are specialized up to a point, sufficiently for the ‘bricoleur’ not to need the equipment and knowledge of all trades and professions, but not enough for each of them to have one definite and determinate use. They each represent a set of actual and possible relations; they are ‘operators’ but they can be used for any operations of the same type” (Levi-Strauss, 1966: 17–18).

inheritance. To put this relationship simply, Bhaskar attempts to capture something of the problem identified by Marx:

Men make their own history, but they do not make it just as they please; they do not make it under circumstances chosen by themselves, but under circumstances directly encountered, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living. (Marx, 1977: 300)

The transformational model of social activity presented by Bhaskar articulates a position in which certain structures, whether of a practical, social or epistemic nature, are reproduced and transformed by human agency in such a way as to avoid the one-sided tendencies represented in the ‘reification of Durkheim’ and the ‘voluntarism of Weber’ or a simple synthesis thereof which fluctuates between moments of voluntarism (or transformation) and moments of reification (or reproduction)<sup>190</sup>. Rather, social forms and traditions are an ensemble of structures, practices and relationships, which individuals both reproduce and transform, not as separable but as inexorably intertwined or co-present moments. One cannot speak of agency without structure, or structure without agency. This entails the agent is not simply a bearer of agency or structures, but is cultivated as a subject in particular ways, in order to do particular things at particular times and places<sup>191</sup>. Indeed, structure provides agency, just as it constrains agency. As Bhaskar suggests, what takes place in scientific training is less a transmission or transformation of knowledge than a transformation of agentive capacities of the scientist themselves (Bhaskar, 2008: 57). They learn to act and think in particular ways, which have particular advantages in particular circumstances<sup>192</sup>. As an individual is often inheritor to

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<sup>190</sup> While Bhaskar identifies this position with Berger and Luckmann, they are far more ambiguous about the nature of the dialectic (Berger and Luckmann, 1966: 79f, Berger, 1973:13f).

<sup>191</sup> C.f. “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses (Notes Towards an Investigation)” in Althusser 2008.

<sup>192</sup> This is to suggest with Lyotard and Foucault that science is properly *connaissance* i.e. learning (Lyotard, 1984; Foucault 1989b).

multiple traditions this allows a space for reflection, as the transmission of traditions is not only never complete, but there are numerous points of heteronomy and difference.



Model I: The Weberian stereotype

Model II: The Durkheimian stereotype

Figure 6.1 Weberian voluntarism and Durkheimian reification (see Bhaskar, 1998: 34)

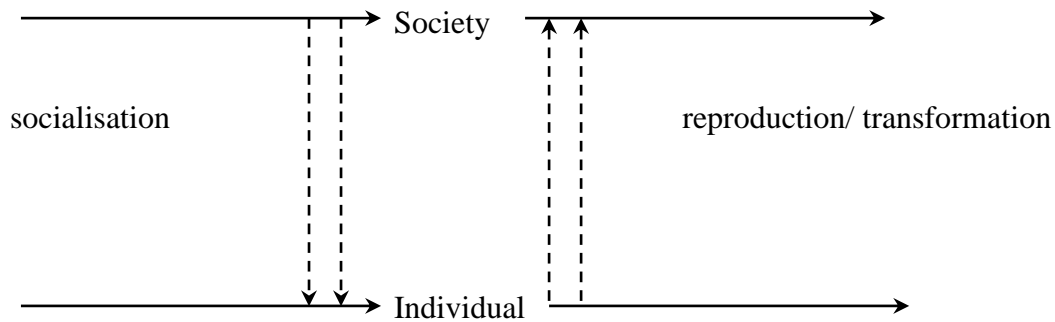


Figure 6.2 Model III: The transformational model of social activity (Bhaskar, 1998: 40)

### 6.3 Ontology in the balance

Moving from epistemology to ontology, the delineation of the transitive and intransitive dimensions has another important consequence insofar as it enables us to identify and reject the legacy of what Bhaskar calls ontological actualism. The denial of the possibility of ontology or metaphysics, through the epistemic fallacy realised as historicism, conventionalism or



empiricism, functions to generate an implicit ontology spun from the categories of experience, the logic of which proceeds along these lines:

- i) We have no knowledge of the world as it is in itself, only knowledge of phenomena which is relative to the finite subject (c.f. Kant, 1998a).
- ii) The observation of any fact or causal relation is never knowledge of essence, but only the relation to other facts in the form of succession or similitude. These relations are perceived to be regular or constant, that is, always appearing in the same way under similar conditions. The constant resemblance is what links phenomena together, and unites phenomena as antecedent and consequent (c.f. Hume, 2011a; 2011b).
- iii) Accordingly, following Popper (for example), “[t]o give a causal explanation means to deduce a statement, using as premises of the deduction one or more universal laws, together with certain singular statements, the initial conditions” (Popper, 2002: 38).

Within this implicit ontology of empirical realism, causation understood as a constant conjunction of phenomenal events is a defining feature. Indeed ontological actualism primarily refers to the doctrine of causal laws as relations between events or states of affairs which are thought to constitute the totality of objects of actual or possible experience, and the consequences thereof (Bhaskar, 2008: 64). This is a realism insofar as it is based on presumed characteristics of the objects of experience, viz. atomistic events and their relations (Bhaskar, 2008: 16), but because this realism boldly stops at the surface and only deals in appearance relative to the subject, this ontology not only commits but enshrines the epistemic and ontic fallacy. This results in a number of consequences – As outlined by Bhaskar:

- (i) The externality of causation;
- (ii) The passivity of matter and the immediacy of effects;

- (iii) The atomicity of fundamental entities;
  - (iv) The absence of internal structure and complexity;
  - (v) The absence of pre-formation, and of material continuity;
  - (vi) The subjectivity of transformation and of apparent variety in nature (i.e. metaphysically, qualitative diversity and change are ‘secondary qualities’).
- (Bhaskar, 2008: 83)

Or as Brian Ellis suggests:

- (a) Inanimate matter is essentially passive, never intrinsically active;
- (b) things behave as they are required to by the laws of nature;
- (c) the dispositional properties of things (including their causal powers) are not real properties, and are never intrinsic to the things that have them;
- (d) the essential properties of things never include any dispositional ones;
- (e) causal relations are always between logically independent events;
- (f) the laws of nature are universal regularities imposed on things whose identities are independent of the laws; and
- (g) the laws of nature are contingent, not necessary<sup>193</sup> (Ellis, 2002: 59-60)

#### 6.4 Rethinking law

The constant conjunction form of actualism itself rests upon an empiricist rejection of ‘causality’. For the empiricists, following Hume, causality is not something we directly experience but rather something we infer from our experience (which is quite correct). Hume, however, uses this to develop a critique of causality *tout court*. Indeed, what we have

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<sup>193</sup> This criterion I take as extremely misleading as it conflates Hume and Kant. For Hume certainly the laws of nature are contingent insofar as they are the product of human psychology. For Kant they are necessary insofar as they are the products of the finite subject.

understood as causality is only ever a contingent inference from a *sequence* in the world, empirically observed by the senses, united as a connection by feeling, and retained in the memory. The necessity we attribute to causality is nothing but a custom (albeit a custom which can be cultivated and refined through further experience). Thus objects and sensations may appear as *necessarily* connected, but are only ever *contingently* conjoined:

For wherever the repetition of any particular act or operation produces a propensity to renew the same act or operation, without being impelled by any reasoning or process of the understanding, we always say, that this effect is the propensity of custom. By employing that word, we pretend not to have given the ultimate reason of such a propensity. We only point out a principle of human nature, which is universally acknowledged, and which is well known by its effects. (Hume, 2011b: V.1.36)

Infamously illustrating this principle is Hume's example of the billiard balls:

The first time a man saw the communication of motion by impulse, as by the shock of two billiard balls, he could not pronounce that the one event was connected but only that it was conjoined with the other. After he has observed several instances of this nature, he then pronounces them to be connected. What alternation has happened to give rise to this new idea of connexion? Nothing but that he now feels these events to be connected in his imagination, and can readily foretell the existence of one from the appearance of the other. (Hume, 2011b: VII.2.59)

Humean empiricism is concerned with the relation of observed events causation and proceeds epistemologically, or better, psychologically and sociologically. Accordingly, the constant conjunction form, as it is presented in Hume, is a sceptical suspension of causality and not a metaphysical principle itself, which would move beyond the categories of experience and into sophisticated speculation. Indeed, the Humean critique is not an ontology but a rejection of all ontologising discourses for an enquiry into *human* nature. Thus the Humean constant

conjunction form only ever remains a contingent and imagined relation operating on the surface of the world, on account of its empiricist epistemology<sup>194</sup>. For Hume we can never move beneath the surface to the ‘occult powers’ instead we can only treat causality anthropologically.

Because causation is derived from the sense, it is only ever an observed sequence and never a necessary sequence. This prevents the constant conjunction form in Hume from attaining any modality of necessity. Something different might always happen which would disrupt our expectations as our knowledge of necessity is only ever the accumulation of observed regularities. This is to say, that causality is not a *logical* category for Hume. As A. J. Ayer argues, it is not that the inherence of an effect in its cause is undiscoverable within nature or that our observations fail to reveal the existence of any relation, but rather that there could not be such a relation, not as a matter of fact but a matter of logic (Ayer, 1970: 42). Against his (rationalist) opponents Hume maintained that it is impossible to *deduce* anything concerning the existence of one event from another. The contradiction of any law of nature is at least conceivable because it is not subject to the same burden as logic; the truth of a statement which expresses a law is an empirical matter of fact and therefore an *a posteriori* postulate not an *a priori* certainty. The Humean casting of this problem establishes that we cannot have the best of both worlds. If we want our generalisations to have empirical content, they cannot be logically secure; if we make them logically secure, we rob them of their empirical content (ibid: 45). The relations which hold between things, events or properties cannot be both factual and logical. While Hume himself spoke only of causal relations, his argument applies to any of the relations that science establishes, indeed, to any relations whatsoever (ibid: 45). As an

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<sup>194</sup> While Strawson (2014) argues Hume does believe in causal influence but insists that we cannot know its nature, this is too strong. While Strawson is right in highlighting that Hume never adopts regularity causation it is too much to suggest that he asserts any particular nature of causal influence. Our knowledge is always inextricably anthropological.

empirical fact, the discovery of a law is possible only *ex post facto*, when the existence of a connection has been empirically ascertained and tested, and necessity can be properly ascribed to it (ibid: 45). Indeed, for Ayer once we are rid of the confusion between logical and factual relations, necessity of a different kind can be ascribed which holds that a proposition expresses a law of nature when it states in the form of a proposition what invariably happens, that is to say, what events are always conjoined. On this view, 'necessity' of a law consists simply in the fact that it holds no exceptions; it is a generalisation with empirical content of which its contrary is not possible only because reality is not operative that way (ibid: 45-46). Notably at this point Ayer has departed from Humean scepticism by introducing a new form of necessity to the constant conjunction form, decidedly absent but consistent with the Humean form. Indeed for Hume, the constant conjunction form itself was itself always suspect as it was only ever an anthropological or psychological relation. Nevertheless, in spite of Hume's intentions, this epistemic relation cannot but generate an implicit metaphysics in which nature is characterised or saturated by (relatively) constant conjunctions, such that experience can at least seize upon certain regularities. Even if, this form is somewhat illegitimate in Hume it still secretes or presupposes particular ontological commitments.

This actualist form of necessity in the constant conjunction form reaches its apogee in Hempel's influential formulation:

If E describes a particular event, then the antecedent circumstances described in the sentences C1, C2 ..., Ck may be said jointly to 'cause' that event, in the sense that there are certain empirical regularities, expressed by the laws L1, L2 ..., Lr, which imply that whenever conditions of the kind indicated by C1, C2 ..., Ck occur, an event of the kind described in E will take place. Statements such as L1, L2, ..., Lr, which assert

general and unexceptional connections between specified characteristics of events, are customarily called causal, or deterministic laws. They are to be distinguished from the so-called statistical laws which assert that in the long run, an explicitly stated percentage of all cases satisfying a given set of conditions are accompanied by an event of a certain specified kind. Certain cases of scientific explanation involve 'subsumption' of the explanandum under a set of laws of which at least some are statistical in character. (Hempel, 1970: 13)

The so called 'laws of nature' are no longer *merely* empirical constant conjunctions based in human psychology and/or sociology, but instead become thick epistemological and ontological postulates allowing for the possibility of *prediction* and *deduction* insofar as given the presence of C1, C2 ..., Ck we can infer or deduce event E. Here, following Kant, rather than Hume, a regularity is thought of as universal analytic necessity operating in every instance, albeit with the possibility of a *ceteris paribus* clause in particular situations. This account represents the particular behaviour of objects in the natural world as acting according to external precepts (expressed in propositional forms reflecting natural laws), which result in the appearance of the constant conjunction form. However, a question arises as to the ontological status of these laws. Are the laws of nature substances with independent existences? Would these laws exist without substance or matter? Or are they only generalisations? While the notion of a law of nature is readily invoked and given a particular ontological weight, we are rarely given a clear and credible account of the nature of such laws *aside from* their constant conjunction form and empirical content. However, a constant conjunction of events is not, and was never considered to be, a sufficient condition for a causal law even in this account. One must be able to distinguish between necessary and accidental sequences as well as account for counter-factuals, *ceteris paribus* and *ad hoc* clauses which do not bear out in either the constant conjunctions form or in statistical analysis. The constant conjunction form expressed in a law-like

proposition is a description and not an explanation, but it is a description with ontological commitments to particular forms of regularity nonetheless. This task rests in providing an account of the ‘surplus element’, the element over and above the constant conjunction which will show how and the conditions under which a distinction between necessary and accidental sequences is possible, and the conditions under which counter-factuals *ceteris paribus* clauses can be rationally justified rather than appearing as *ad hoc* modifications to save the generalisation (Bhaskar, 2008: 148f). As Bhaskar suggests, these laws cannot be basic; that is, the real basis of causal laws cannot be a sequence of events, but must reside in something which explains the necessity of particular events or laws.

For Bhaskar the fatal argument against this view of ontology rests on a simple recognition of the role of human agency in the scientific process and the artificial nature of constant conjunctions. Leaving aside macro-disciplines such as astronomy or historical disciplines such as evolutionary biology, science proceeds experimentally by artificially producing a controlled closure in which the creation of a constant conjunction of events is possible for the purpose of analysing the operation of a particular thing in relative isolation (ibid: 33). However, outside the controlled environment of the laboratory these same conjunctions are not forthcoming in the same manner as the world is not generally under laboratory-controlled conditions. The question for both the realist and the empiricist then is how to reconcile this ‘paradox’ between the world encountered in the laboratory and in everyday life (in which constant conjunctions are less forthcoming or of a different type). Unless causal laws persist outside the context of their closure and their artificial creation in the laboratory science cannot be considered useful for either the explanation or prediction of the phenomena we encounter in everyday life (ibid: 65). But on an empiricist account how such conjunctions would be possible remains something of a mystery as scientific practice has meticulously created a different environment in which

different empirical relations appear. Indeed, the problem raised by the empiricist account is properly the problem concerning the status of our knowledge and the status of laws when we leave the laboratory. Either one must embrace a radical empiricism in which both are affirmed (and accept the contradictions this entails), or be forced to embrace one and denigrate the other (and thus fall into romanticism or scientism).

Moreover, the constant conjunction form secretes another distinctly insidious implication. Given the widespread or at least tacit adoption of the ubiquity of the constant conjunction form in nature under empirical realism, the uniformity and regularity of closed events in closed systems necessarily entails a Laplacean view of science as the discovery of the mechanical iron laws which determine the motions of the universe. Once these laws are discovered “nothing would be uncertain and the future, as the past, would be present to its eyes” (Laplace cited in Bhaskar, 2008: 68). Such a fantasy is of course only plausible because many results are *defacto* predictable given sufficient experience and familiarity with their forms and many regularities are present before us. Indeed, without an *element* of regularity (and on account of regularity, memory) the world would be unthinkable. However, given the active practice of scientists in generating ‘closures’ within nature to conduct experimental activity, we return to the problem for an empirical realism which must account for the identity and non-identity or continuity and discontinuity of phenomena in closed and open systems. On Bhaskar’s interpretation, we must instead understand closure, and the constant conjunction form, as a limited, and largely artificial phenomenon which is not basic to the ways things are, but arises from particular and determinate circumstances including, but not limited to, human activity or interference. While the natural arrangement of components occasionally provides a setting for a constant conjunction to occur, more often they are the product of what Nancy Cartwright calls nomological machines. A nomological machine “is a fixed arrangement of components, or



factors, with stable (enough) capacities that in the right sort of stable (enough) environment will, with repeated operation, give rise to the kind of regular behaviour that we represent in our scientific laws” (Cartwright, 1999: 50)<sup>195</sup>. These machines have a very specific structure which requires the conditions to be just right for a system to exercise itself in a repeatable way, but these are not necessarily normal situations<sup>196</sup> (ibid: 73). With these in mind, the empiricist account of causal law appears not only unsophisticated but tenuous at best.

## **6.5 Towards a new ontology**

According to the actualism of empirical realism laws are considered as basic, and things happen on account of them. Bhaskar rejects this for an account of things and their powers as basic<sup>197</sup>. The ‘laws of nature’ hold only to the extent that they rest on a stable repetition of those powers in fortuitous circumstances (closure). On this account, while certain operations of laws may be true, they simply give an abstract name and form to the operation of powers, and then only the operation of powers under specific conditions. Natural necessity is not inherently a sequential relationship framed as a law-like statement, but an expressive capacity of powers and their relations, albeit ones capable of being represented in law-like propositions under certain controlled conditions. In short, Bhaskar argues for a contingent necessity based on the property of things and their relations, and not laws, let alone laws in the form of logical propositions.

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<sup>195</sup> One should bear in mind the resonance this has with the Deleuzian conception of differentiating machines.

<sup>196</sup> In addition to this, Bhaskar distinguishes between ‘universal’ and ‘local’ closures, as well as ‘artificial’ (produced by human activity) and ‘spontaneous’ (naturally arising) closures (Bhaskar, 2008: 91). The qualification of closure suggests closure is a relative term encompassing a spectrum of different environmental conditions and intensities made possible by different environments and the differing quality of nomological machines and practices, ranging from the extremely controlled conditions inside the CERN large hadron collider to the chaotic conditions of an eighth grade science classroom.

<sup>197</sup> In addition to the work of Bhaskar, the Humean legacy has become subject to increasing critique: Rom Harré and Karl Madden (1975), Nancy Cartwright (1983, 1999), Brian Ellis (2001), George Molnar (2003), Stephen Mumford (2004), Ruth Groff (2008, 2012).

As the world is primarily populated with active things, science is concerned with the investigation of these things and their powers, rather than the investigation of laws, events or facts (Bhaskar, 2008: 47). This emphasis allows the positing of a non-anthropocentric ontology concerned with structures and generative ‘mechanisms’ rather than the observations and correlations of the finite subject (ibid: 45). As the powers and properties of things, these structures and mechanisms interrelate and combine together in complex ways to generate the (overdetermined) ‘flux’ of phenomena that constitute the actual states, happenings and events in the world (ibid: 47) i.e. these mechanisms are individuating in the Deleuzian sense. Moreover, these mechanisms can, and often do, exist unperceived and inactive. This is to say they are not necessarily or readily empirically identifiable. But neither are these mechanisms ideal types, artificial constructs, generalisations or Platonic Forms. These mechanisms can become manifest to us, albeit indirectly, in our experience. The mechanism is present in its effects, but does not appear in its effects i.e. the mechanism is never self-present but always presupposed. Mechanisms are real, although it is rare that they are actually manifest, and rarer still that they are empirically and immediately identifiable (only under controlled conditions is anything like this possible). They are not unknowable, although knowledge of them depends upon a blending of intellectual, practico-technical and perceptual skill (ibid: 47). Because of this we are not doomed to ignorance nor are we “imprisoned in caves either of our own or nature’s making” (ibid: 47). But neither are we spontaneously free with immediate access to knowledge. Science is an arduous task consisting in disclosing these continuously active and dynamic mechanisms which produce the complex phenomena of our world. Against ontological actualism, these mechanisms are transfactual, that is, they are present in both open and closed systems, but manifest differently under these different conditions. Indeed, mechanisms act outside closed conditions which enables us experimentally to identify them by restricting and closing open systems, and the chaotic multiplicity open systems represent, to

view their activities without interference from other mechanisms (i.e. the closed system represents a particular individuation of these mechanisms). By positing natural necessity as based in the causal power of things, Bhaskar offers an ontological rather than pragmatic, idealist or phenomenal basis for causation which is relatively independent of the pattern of events and the action, activities and experience of human beings. Structures and mechanism are thus real and distinct from the events and patterns they generate, just as these events are real and distinct from the experience in which they are apprehended (ibid: 56). For Bhaskar, reality must be understood as stratified along these lines into the domains of the real, the actual and the empirical<sup>198</sup> (see Table 6.1).

Table 6.1 The stratification of reality (Bhaskar, 2008: 56)

	Domain of the Real	Domain of the Actual	Domain of the Empirical
Mechanisms	X		
Events	X	X	
Experiences	X	X	X

Far from a neat distinction, not only do mechanisms, events and experiences constitute three *overlapping* domains of reality (ibid: 56), these levels are not naturally or normally in phase (ibid: 57). Indeed reality is profoundly out of joint. Yet, each of these strata are *sui generis*, and are, in general, irreducible. Accordingly, the experience and perspective of a subject is neither logically entailed by, nor exhausted by, the occurrences which take place in the domain of the actual. But neither does experience exhaust the actual. A person's experience is not solely

<sup>198</sup> This vertical scheme does not however imply a hierarchy of value.

conditioned by the event they experience<sup>199</sup>. This is to say, the experience of a subject is always under-determined by an event. Given this, there are an infinite number of different perspectives, reactions and interventions which could occur, and cannot be predicted or explained by recourse to the occurrence of the event itself. Experience or interpretation is conditional upon but exceeds the event. Neither, however, does experience exhaust the possibilities (both past and future) of practical or theoretical engagement with an event. Experience always defers and differs from events. Likewise, the actual does not exhaust the real as mechanisms and structures remain present and unexercised, absent, or yet to come into being, and therefore exist apart from their realisation in events as the ‘structural’ and intensive reserve.

Moreover, Bhaskar also introduces a stratification of depth based in the nested relations of mechanisms operating in the domain of the real i.e. the domain of the real is itself stratified. Science in setting out to describe the causal mechanisms responsible for the overt behaviour of things operates by a continual dialectic of discovery which characteristically proceeds by going deeper to more latent layers and relations of constitution. Upon identifying the mechanisms, powers, relations and processes which are responsible for the production of phenomena, the scientist proceeds to account for the mechanisms etc. are responsible for the generation of these mechanisms etc. and so on (ibid: 168). The stratification of the real provides a level of invariance in which it becomes possible to discern and distinguish different domains of generative mechanisms and different ontological characteristics of these domains. Thus, for example, the historical development and indeed the ontological stratification of chemistry may be represented as a stratification of mechanisms and relations (Bhaskar, 2008: 169):

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<sup>199</sup> Notably, in this formulation an event operates as a generative mechanism for experience.

(Stratum I)	$2\text{Na} + 2\text{HCl} = 2\text{NaCl} + \text{H}_2$	(The Actual)
	explained by	
Stratum II	theory of atomic number and valence	Mechanism 1
	explained by	
Stratum III	theory of electrons and atomic structure	Mechanism 2
	explained by	
Stratum IV	[competing theories of sub-atomic structure]	[Mechanism 3]

This ontological stratification of explanation and of reality also grounds the stratification of the sciences based in the relations of dependency exhibited by the mechanisms, providing each science with its own inductive warrant (Bhaskar, 2011: 40). Additionally, this quality of ontological depth appears as the condition of the development of the sciences such that knowledge grows and changes as new and deeper layers of reality are identified, described and explained (ibid: 40).

These stratifications now allow us to clearly identify and critique the various reductionist and irrealist projects, most especially empirical realism. Through this ontological account of stratification we can see clearly the very problematical approach of empirical realism while being able to situate its component parts. On Bhaskar's account experiences, and the facts they ground, are necessarily social or anthropological products arising from our perspectival encounter with events and the mechanisms which produce those events. Likewise, the constant conjunction form, which provides the empirical ground for causal laws (in nomological situations), can be understood as a limited expression of a deeper aspect of reality: the domain of the real and the mechanisms and relations of things. By 'separating' these domains we can observe that the underlying and necessary condition for empirical realism consists in a double collapse of the domain of the real to the domain of the actual (things to events), and the domain

of the actual to the domain of the empirical (events to experiences) and, thus, the world is always viewed from an inextricably anthropocentric perspective which marries object with subject. In collapsing the domains empirical realism ensures the immediacy and spontaneity of knowledge, an ontology of closed systems, the identity of subject and object, the self-presence of truth and a monistic account of scientific development. Yet in spite of this continued critique of empiricism, none of this is to suggest that the domain of the empirical is less real or significant than the other domains. It is only to suggest that this domain does not exhaust reality, and that there may be things which are unknowable, unperceivable, which remain unmanifest or invisible to experience.

## **6.6 Symptomatology**

The reading of the world presented by Bhaskar might well be called symptomatic insofar as it is concerned with divulging what is undivulged in an event, that is, what is in a situation but is not directly present i.e. is absent, hidden beneath or masked behind the very appearance of a phenomenon or a particular visibility (c.f. Deleuze, 1983a: 3ff; Althusser, 1997: 26ff). The domain of the real is not an essence or a structure existing outside the phenomena which alters their aspects, forms and relations, but is closer to the structuralist conception of metonymic or structural causation. It is the complex relations between the interiority and exteriority of the thing immanent through its effects and yet 'absent' in presentation (Althusser, 1997: 208-209). The usage of the term symptom, or symptomatology, here is consistent with the proper clinical sense of the word. As Canguilhem<sup>200</sup> suggested in his own work on medicine: “[i]s it not obvious that if we want to work out a scientific pathology we must consider real causes and not apparent effects, functional mechanisms and not their symptomatic expressions?”

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<sup>200</sup> Himself a trained physician.

(Canguilhem, 1989: 79). While we might additionally draw on Freud to illustrate this relationship (Collier 1994), this particular approach to phenomena appears in Heidegger's *Being and Time*, by way of an original reflection on the nature of phenomenon as other than appearance:

This is what one is talking about when one speaks of the 'symptoms of a disease' (*"Krankheitserscheinungen"*). Here one has in mind certain occurrences in the body which show themselves and which, in showing themselves as thus showing themselves, 'indicate' (*"indizieren"*) something which does not show itself. The emergence (*Auftreten*) of such occurrences, their showing themselves, goes together with ... disturbances which do not show themselves. Thus appearance, as the appearance 'of something', does not mean showing itself; it means rather the announcing-itself by [*von*] something which does not show itself. Appearing is a not-showing-itself. But the 'not' we find here is by no means to be confused with the privative "not" ... What appears does not show itself; and anything which thus fails to show itself, is also something which can never seem. All indications, presentations, symptoms, and symbols have their basic formal structure of appearing, even though they differ among themselves. (Heidegger, 1962: 52)

Phenomena are never simply appearances, but entail an announcing, unveiling or manifestation, which takes place through an observable event in which something 'presents' itself without showing itself, as a symptom of a disease might manifest in particular ways, and yet not appear as such. Indeed, the real nature of the thing may never be observed, but only appear in the symptoms, concealed within and by its appearance. Its visible aspect, its face or even its theatrical mask, reveals as much as it hides (c.f. Derrida, 2004: 205). Such an approach to phenomena is predicated on the rejection of any possibility of simple 'origins', naïve empiricism, correspondence or mimesis. The multiplicitous mechanisms through which events

are produced cannot directly be experienced, and are known only through their effects and the residual trace they leave in the events which take place at their behest. Furthermore, as with a disease, the influence of the mechanisms can remain constant even when their visible effects remain displaced, dislocated or latent, making identification difficult. Indeed, symptomology is a requirement of a science which is concerned with considering dynamic and relational mechanisms which often find expression in decentred and interrelated structures (i.e. open systems).

The interrelations of the mechanisms in the domain of the real, and the interrelation between the three stratified domains in Bhaskar could be understood with reference to *différance* in Derrida, and the complex play between presence and absence this represents, or the virtual and the actual within Deleuze. The combination and interconnection of the generative mechanisms which form events at the level of the actual is such that any event must be accounted for by not only what is present (which would be to fall into empiricism) but by the various displaced and dislocated, differing and deferring, ‘absences’ which are contained in and constitute the present in a tangled web of relations including, but not limited to, the powers, capabilities and affordances of those mechanisms. The present or the actual appears as a tiny ripple on a great ocean of absence and difference (c.f. Bhaskar 1995). As such, Bhaskar proceeds by not taking for granted the empirical world, without thereby disparaging it, but instead, reconstitutes it on the ground of an intensive and *différential* web of relationships (the domain of the real). This approach works with and through the empirical and actual to identify precisely what is not presented in the ‘fullness’ of presence and therefore to highlight the difference, heteronomy,



multiplicity and over-all complexity of the present as co-constituted by absences<sup>201</sup> (non-presences) and difference (non-identities). It proceeds by identifying the gaps, lacunae, absences and relations which constitute the present but remain characteristically hidden, or obscured, leaving behind only a residue or trace of their activity. Indeed, the domain of the real can be said almost to haunt the present, realising itself only as a symptom appearing intermittently in the actual and even more rarely in the empirical. Accordingly, the domain of the real functions quite synonymously with Derridean *différance* or Deleuzian virtuality as the reserve of dynamic mechanisms, their capabilities, relations and processes<sup>202</sup>.

### **6.7 Towards local rationalities**

The ontological account given by Bhaskar suggests we live in a complex world. In many respects this is an inane truth which nevertheless carries important consequences. This is a world rich in different things, with different natures, behaving in different ways and makes any science a difficult endeavour. To use Cartwright's imagery once again, nature is a patchwork not a system in which happenings are less a logical or rational consequence of a system than an outcome of negotiation between domains (Cartwright 1999). Both the order and disorder of nature is apparent such that if nature is chaotic this is not to say it is disordered, and if it is ordered, this is not to say this order is systematic. Rather, the complex 'order' of nature arises on account of the world being populated with different powers and different things which are stratified and differentiated in complex ways. Following this, we must conceive of science not in a systemic way, but as a series of various, sometimes interrelated, branches which work in pockets to produce models which are dependable but also revisable and often context

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<sup>201</sup> The term absence becomes central in Bhaskar's latter work as the definitive form of non-identity. However, this conception of absence is abstracted from the relationship with presence and is not how I understand or invoke the term here.

<sup>202</sup> While the domain of the actual remains more or less the same between Deleuze and Bhaskar, the domain of the empirical for Deleuze is incorporated into the virtual as affect.

dependent. The truths produced by science are not universal in the strict sense of the term. They are not logical or deducible. The abstract laws of science apply only where the repeated successful operations of nomological machines, most likely introduced in the form of human intervention, are able to generate closures and conjunctions, and therefore apply in only a very limited range of circumstances. In systems where such interventions are unable to generate closure the effectiveness of the models of science are more doubtful. Nevertheless, on this account scientists are still able to make certain precise predictions and engineer outcomes which gives support to a realist approach, i.e. that there must be something right about the claims and practices scientists employ (ibid: 9). Science is not devoid of knowledge about the world, and this knowledge is not purely instrumental but is given credit by instrumentalist outcomes and realisations. However, science is not primarily concerned with law-like knowledge but with knowledge of the nature of things, in particular their active and relational powers, which become apparent in closed conditions and their instrumental applications.

On the surface Bhaskar's transcendental realism provides solutions comparable, compatible and parallel to the concerns of Lyotard, Derrida and Deleuze. Against what I have called the 'metaphysics of closure' in Lyotard, Bhaskar outlines an explanation and critique of the fetishism of closed systems while providing a contingent and historical scientific approach concerned with accounting for the complex interaction of generative mechanisms which operate in open systems to create pockets of stability. Against the 'metaphysics of presence' Bhaskar's distinguishes between transitive and intransitive dimensions and reconstitutes an ontology founded on the rejection of immediacy (positivism). Instead it is concerned with providing a symptomatic analysis of events and dislocating the privileged relation of subject and object preventing any mechanical or automatic conceptions of knowledge. Finally, against the 'metaphysics of identity' the stratification of ontology and the emphasis upon non-identity

parallels the Deleuzian account of the virtual and the dynamic mechanisms of individuation, emphasising difference and processes. Nevertheless, in spite of these important similarities, there are a few critical departures: Bhaskar tends towards providing an account of science grounded in systematicity and essentialism which is secured by privileged moments of closure, presence and identity<sup>203</sup>. To be consistent with itself, and with ‘realism’ generally, I want to suggest the necessity of coming to terms with an anarchic but realist account of science defined by an emphasis upon its anti-systematic, anti-essentialist and anti-methodological character. In short, we might suggest, Bhaskar’s realism is not postmodern enough.

### **6.8 Against systems**

The ‘system’ is a profoundly misleading metaphor in science. The laws and concepts of scientific domains are not reducible to those of a more fundamental domain forming a neat hierarchy with hard disciplines such as physics and chemistry at the top, and with softer sciences such as biology or sociology further down. Rather, there is no system, and no fixed relation between different disciplines. While there may be relationships of dependency<sup>204</sup>, insofar as life is dependent on chemical processes or chemical processes dependent upon various physical forces, this does not translate into a disciplinary ordering. Instead, the sciences are characterised by local rationalities based on local ontologies of the things they are studying, in which different disciplines can be tied together to co-operate in different ways to solve different problems (ibid: 6). These disciplines undoubtedly have boundaries, but these boundaries are flexible with overlapping constituencies which can be expanded or contracted as needed. They resemble “obscure and distinct” territories with fuzzy boundaries rather than

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<sup>203</sup> The systematicity of Bhaskar becomes increasingly prevalent with his turn towards the dialectic (Bhaskar 1995) and metaReality (Bhaskar 2012).

<sup>204</sup> Or affordance.

a static and ordered citadel (Deleuze, 1994: 213). This is an effect of not only the sociology of human knowledge and the contingent and uneven progression of science historically, but the ontology of the things themselves.

The open system of systems which is the world is not consistent or coherent but operates as a patchwork of more local operations. As such, our knowledge of particular things cannot be treated systematically. The idea of meta-theory or metanarrative able to explain all relationships and connections can only do violence to the particularity of things and the openness of the system. Likewise, the idea of anything resembling a deductive-nomological account of science on the one hand or a sceptical resignation before such high standards of knowledge on the other is to miss the point. Real 'systems' in nature are not deductive, approximately deductive, deductive with correction, deductive with exceptions, nor plausibly approaching closer and closer to deductive certainty (Cartwright, 1999: 9). Indeed, once we accept scientific knowledge as concerned with generative mechanisms and not law-like propositions, regularities or constant conjunctions, both the deductive-nomological model and its sceptical counterpart cease to be meaningful, let alone adequate as a basis for scientific explanation. Indeed, if such logics hold, they hold only under very specific and specified conditions; even then, the question arises whether this account is not profoundly misleading. More often than not, the sciences work locally. But this is not to say science is purely idiographic or micro-cosmic. As scientific objects are not laws but powers, relations and processes, these 'structures' are found in other contexts *mutatis mutandis* across many different local situations, albeit exhibiting different behaviours on account of their different contextual location. This is to say, the objects of science are relational assemblages and are defined in part by their exteriority.

The order that we encounter in the open system is different to the order encountered in closed systems even if we are in dealing with the same things across different contexts. In the closed system the order largely appears as nomological, following the creation of regularities under controlled conditions. The irregular and chaotic order of the open system, however, is not a nomological order, but, on account of the ontological nature of things, will nevertheless appear to lead to law-like regularities under certain conditions of closure generated by particular individuations. However, expressing these behaviours as law-like regularities will always introduce confusion into the equation as we are fundamentally not dealing with laws. This is to say, the law-like quality is an abstraction which profoundly distorts the nature of things. While it might be contended that the use of the word law is (of course) ‘purely metaphorical’, it is clear that law is not only a forgotten metaphor, it is the wrong metaphor (Mumford: 2004, 202) going hand in hand with a Humean or Kantian ontology which not only views matter as passive, but characterises laws as operating with the force of logical necessity (affirmed by Kant, and negated by Hume). While holding true under certain conditions the metaphor of law (like the metaphor of system) is profoundly mystifying, positing a unity and identity where there is none. Rather, on the account I have been developing, the order we encounter in the world arises from the complex interconnection and relation of properties and powers arising from the interaction between assemblages and their environment, not from extrinsic or transcendent laws (i.e. identity)<sup>205</sup>.

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<sup>205</sup> To follow an *ab absurdum*, if one were to progressively remove all things from the world, we would not be left with a remainder or ‘surplus element’ of laws which govern the interactions of things. Laws are only ever a distorted expression of powers, not powers an expression of laws.

## 6.9 Against essentialism

If not extrinsic (law-based), neither is the order purely intrinsic (essence-based). While powers and capabilities tend to be understood in Bhaskar as the dispositional properties of structures or essences, I want to suggest structures and properties should be understood, following Deleuze, as assemblages of mechanisms, powers and relations, and following Derrida as relations of *différance*. For Bhaskar, scientific explanation is concerned with ascribing a power (or liability) of x to N, i.e. to do (or suffer) y, this is to say, that x does y in virtue of its nature N, that is, in virtue of having a certain constitution or intrinsic structure, e.g. genetic constitution, atomic structure or electrical charge. Here, powers are understood tendentially in relation to essence, such that ‘power’ always refers to a power which may be exercised unrealised or normically qualified on account of the open system. It is clear on such an account that power is a natural action of a thing in virtue of being the kind of thing it is i.e. a thing possesses particular powers in virtue of being a natural kind, structure or essence. To say a thing, x, has a power is to say x has a tendency to do something, y, on account of its intrinsic structure N (nature), i.e. (nature) N entails (thing) x expressed as y (power). Accordingly:

- I. x has the power (or liability) to do y tendentially on account of N;
- II. x is in a condition to do y, i.e. it is predisposed or oriented towards doing y;
- III. x will do y given an appropriate set of circumstances, in virtue of its predisposition, in the absence of intervening or countervailing causes.

On this account, science attempts to discover what kinds of things there are, as well as how the things there are behave, i.e. science attempts to capture the essence of things in real definitions and to describe the ways they act subject to tendencies and, *ceteris paribus*, clauses most notably ‘the open system’. The real essence of things is their intrinsic structures which constitute the basis of their natural tendencies and causal powers which are expressed as appearances. These become necessary truths about the things to which they refer without which

they would not be an individual of that kind. Science therefore comes to analytical truth (*synthetic a priori*) about objects as natural kinds or essences. However, aside from a certain plausibility, is there any warrant for suggesting that ‘things’ have ontological priority? Or that powers, processes and things are not inextricably intertwined? Or even that powers or processes are basic?

In Bhaskar the ontological basis of powers are the properties that account for them, i.e. the natures in virtue of which they are ascribed (Bhaskar, 2008: 178). However, this account leaves unresolved the question of what we mean by properties, intrinsic structures, natures, essences and constitutions. Here, we are presented with two options. One, that there is a nature which is the bearer of causal powers (Figure 6.3); the other, that the nature of the thing is just its causal powers, i.e. what we call nature is not basic but an individuation or assemblage of powers (Figure 6.4). Where one account manages with only powers, the other requires nature, properties and powers, each with a seemingly distinct existence (c.f. Mumford, 2008: 146). Where Figure 6.4 posits a *de re* necessity between power and manifestation, Figure 6.3 requires additional *de re* connections, effectively recreating the hierarchical binaries of essence and appearance, depth and surface, identity and difference. While Bhaskar leaves open both possibilities (Bhaskar, 2008: 180), textually it is consistently resolved in favour of the former:

In general to classify a group of things together in science, to call them by the same name, presupposes that they possess a real essence or nature in common, though it does not presuppose that the real essence or nature is known ... To classify a thing in a particular way in science is to commit oneself to a certain line of inquiry. Ex ante there will be as many possible lines of inquiry as manifest properties of a thing, but not all will be equally promising ... Not all general terms stand for natural kinds or taxa;

because not all general features of the world have a common explanation. Carbon and dog constitute natural kinds; but tables and chairs, red things and blue, chunks of graphite and fuzzy dogs do not. The justification of our systems of taxonomy, of the ways we classify things, of the nominal essences of things in science thus lies in our belief in the fruitfulness in leading us to explanations in terms of their generative mechanisms contained in their real essences. Not all ways of classifying things are equally promising; because not all sets of properties individuate just one and only one kind of thing ... Real definitions, in science, are fallible attempts to capture in words the real essences of things ... (Bhaskar, 2008: 210-211)

Accordingly, while multiple or different individuations or accounts of systems is always possible, science progresses by proceeding to real essences distinct from properties and mechanisms which stops the slippage of signification. Things are grouped together based on their common constitution “despite their manifest sensible differences” (ibid: 210). This is however to reproduce the privileged situation of identity effectively critiqued by Deleuze in which everything relies on a form of necessarily presupposed identities to ground the objectivity and intelligibility of thought (Deleuze 1994).

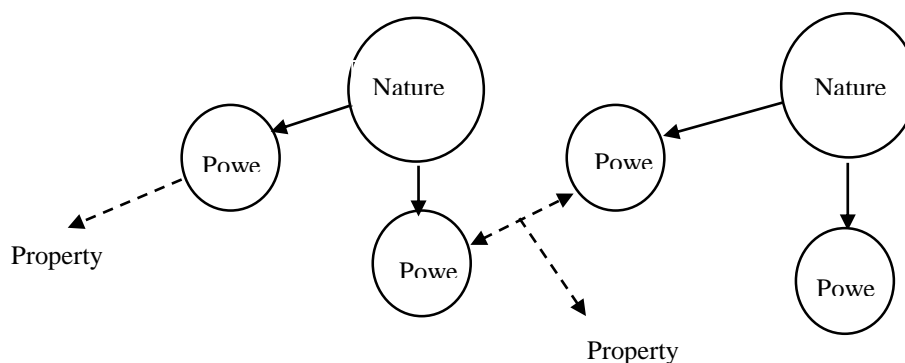


Figure 6.3 Powers as disposition of ‘Nature’



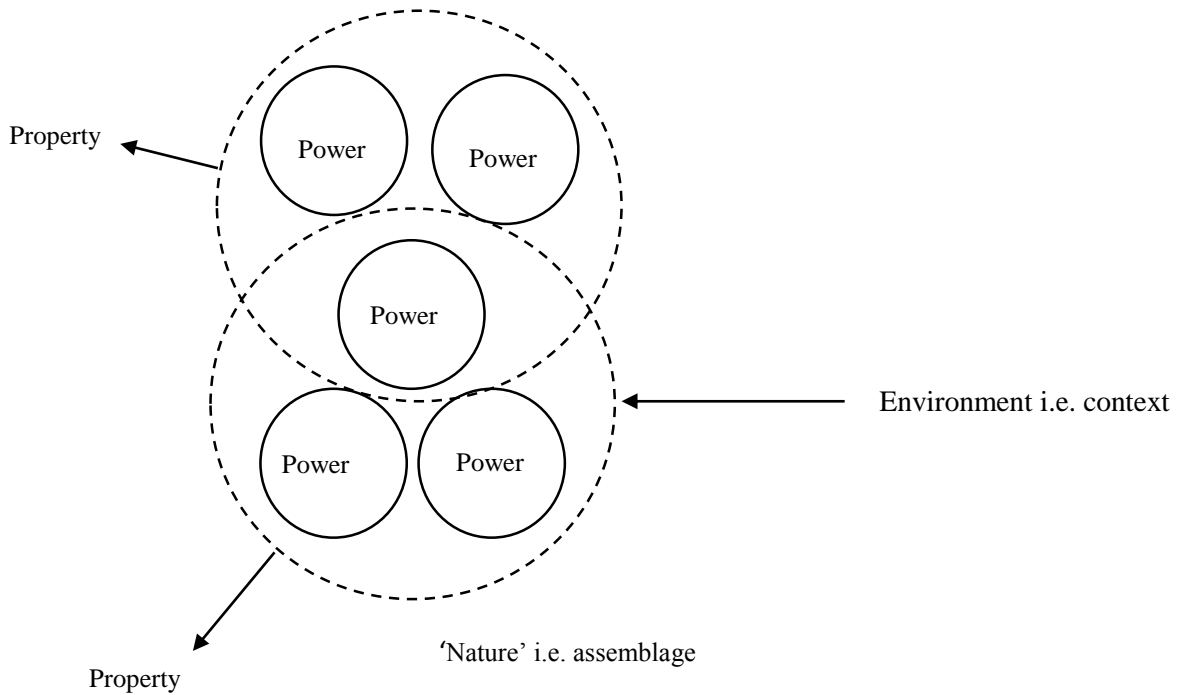


Figure 6.4 'Nature' as a disposition of powers

Following Deleuze, I want to argue the stronger thesis that nature, properties or structures are simply the relatively enduring (dispositional) assemblages of powers and relations, and do not have any existence apart from their contingent individuation (Figure 6.4). Things are what they are by virtue of their powers and the ongoing processes of their formation, and not a separate structure. Alternatively, we might suggest the intrinsic structure (i.e. essence) is what it is simply because of ongoing operations of powers including dynamic processes of individuation, generative mechanisms and relations of exteriority, functioning as a (loosely) nomological machine presenting a uniformity of effects which we take to be a nature. It is the operation of powers and processes which allow us to understand structures as particular individuations and not structures which allow us to understand powers (effects, appearances) as particular appearances. On this account the thing appears as a wavering presence constituted by its spectral relations of *différance* such that the essence of a thing i.e. the present or centre, is less

stable, and less self-sufficient than it often appears and we would do well not to count on its identity, stability, density or solidity. Far from grounding flux and providing an unchanging basis of explanation, structures, essences and natures are only so many appearances. This position advocates a relativistic and immanent but nevertheless realist account of nature and properties such that no property has an essence independent of the relations it bears to other properties and its various interactions. In short, it rejects essence as a misleading concept or a bad metaphor and turns towards a relational ontology of processes and powers.

Because of this relational nature of powers, properties must be understood holistically. If the identity of property A is relative to the causal powers B, C and D, then unless causal power B is 'present' and enduring, we cannot speak of A such that it is not possible to conceive of a world which contains A without containing B. This presents assemblages as a series of interrelated properties which are understood as a consequence of interrelated and contextualised powers and processes. In this context, causation is explicable in terms of the movement and association of powers i.e. the processes by which these powers are individuated as assemblages, the balance of powers within the assemblage, the relations of the assemblage to its context and the affordances, effects, affects and individuations these assemblages in turn create. For example, object *a* may have the property *p* when in context *c* that, when appropriately stimulated, can cause object *b* to have property *p*<sub>2</sub>, and so on. Such an account of causation loses the burden of metaphysical necessity associated with laws of nature for a contingent or aleatory necessity of association based in encounter or conjunction (which should not be confused with constant conjunction) (c.f. Althusser 2006). Laws are thus replaced with an ontological conception of relationality of assemblages. Following this, the depth of structures, or the emergence of structures, can be understood as the sedimentation, embedding or nesting of powers within powers or relations within relations, generating and affording

relative, but contingent, stability based on the continued expression of those powers. This moves us from a reified hierarchical conception of structures as internal or external essences or laws to a complex morphogenetic model. The properties of things are thus identical with the multiplicity of powers which come and are held together by dynamic mechanisms, the expression of which is always conditional, tendential and relational<sup>206</sup>. Moreover, this aspect of assemblages operates as a critical rectification of Bhaskar's conception of ontological stratification and scientific development. The stratification of ontology consists equally in affordances and relations of dependency which are not necessarily hierarchical in nature or predicated on depth. Such horizontal relations, resembling rhizomes rather than roots, present an account of stratification as contextually and environmentally driven. While science may proceed by going deeper, it equally progresses horizontally by exploring different connections between powers, bringing things together, removing relations, placing things in new contexts or new environments, constructing new assemblages, new individuations and new nomological machines, in short, by exploratory even playful experimentation.

This requires us to revise the privilege of closed systems in scientific experimentation. Notably, under the closed conditions generated by nomological machines (i.e. other assemblages), the ontological relationality of powers are jerry-rigged (i.e. individuated) to perform in a particular and artificial way, i.e. a relatively consistent and regular fashion, by closing off extrinsic, and where possible intrinsic, relations which generates a relative consistency which allows us to observe particular powers or processes in relative isolation, that is under particular constraints (with a minimal difference of differentiation). This isolation inevitably produces isolated results which, when reintroduced to the contextuality of ontologically relationality, performs

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<sup>206</sup> Here I take conditional to mean contingent on the operation of other powers and properties possessed by an object and its local environmental conditions.

differently subject to interference in the open system. This is to say, the nomological form is never properly nomological, and the attempt to subsume empirical data under a set of laws is either doomed to outright failure or the ongoing attempt to patch the leaky nomological form by introducing *ad hoc* and *ceteris paribus* clauses to account for the difference in behaviour and thus save the sinking law-form. On this account, it also becomes clear that Bhaskar's philosophical reconstruction of science based in experimentation and confirmation of mechanisms in closed systems also suffers from the artificial nature of the nomological machine. Indeed, Bhaskar can be said to provide an overly idealistic and optimistic account of scientific discovery in which a constant conjunction form is produced in the closure of the laboratory in such a way that the scientist is given direct (self-present) access to the phenomenon which allows the scientist to identify the operation of the causal or generative mechanisms relatively unproblematically. While for the most part rejecting the metaphysics of presence, this moment returns to the importance of a clear presence in guaranteeing and sustaining the privileged account of classical experimental scientific activity<sup>207</sup>. To this end, Bhaskar's account of closure is ultimately inadequate. Firstly, Bhaskar assumes the constant conjunction form is still possible and desirable for the identification of causal mechanisms i.e. that positivism is correct but applicable only under conditions of closure. However, under the conditions of closure generated by nomological machines a distinction in the line between natural operation and artificial operation is blurred. Avoiding this however, may be as simple as replacing 'closure' with 'the reduction in complexity or interference' as more terminologically adequate explanation for what is taking place (c.f. Lyotard, 1984: 54f). However, this leads into the second and more important point; Bhaskar retains a latent positivism which assumes that the constant conjunction form is a natural expression of a mechanism i.e. nature is comprehended according to the metaphysics of identity. This rests in

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<sup>207</sup> Which is notably unavailable to social science (Bhaskar 1998).

retaining a reasonably linear account of mechanistic causation which takes place only under closed conditions and conforms to the schema essence-appearance<sup>208</sup>. Complex phenomena in closed systems which resist any possibility of actualisation in regular or constant conjunction forms even under such conditions remain unaccounted for i.e. it is assumed that without interference mechanisms would operate as a constant conjunction and it is only the interference from other mechanisms in the open system which moves us away from a completely positivist account of science<sup>209</sup>. In short, mechanisms are considered to be relatively simple or natural in the final analysis and in no way heterogeneous, intensive or even contradictory ensembles of relations. Finally, because of this Bhaskar fails to account for the possible effects generating closures has upon the production of phenomenon in the laboratory and it is assumed that the apparatus or techniques used to generate closure remain unrelated to the operations of the mechanisms in question and simply reduces rather than introduces interference or that, in allowing for a particular vision, it is thereby blocking other possible visions. Closure is taken to be unequivocal insofar as the idea of multiple and even contradictory closures is not entertained as science proceeds to and stops at the essence of things preventing any slippage. None of this is to say that the generation of 'closure' (i.e. the reduction in complexity and interference) is not beneficial in the identification of mechanisms. It certainly is. However, the account of closure Bhaskar provides is not without substantial problems on account of a latent positivism retained in the relation of essence-appearance. Nevertheless it must be acknowledged that Bhaskar identifies and opens up an important aspect of scientific explanation even if his account is, overly simplistic.

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<sup>208</sup> The linear causation or schema of essence-appearance is a risk internal to the metaphor 'mechanism'.

<sup>209</sup> Notably, this includes radioactive decay and quantum uncertainty.

By placing emphasis upon powers and processes we are also to depart from the belief that becoming or difference (divergence) pertains to phenomena while intelligibility pertains to the identical, immutable and unchanging structure of things. Instead of unproblematically holding onto essences as the basis for powers, assemblages direct us towards the forces of individuation which construct intensive pockets of relative temporal and spatial stability while internalising difference and change. Here Bhaskar's description of science as changing knowledge of unchanging things must be taken with more than a grain of salt if not discarded as being misleading. Change (and for that matter difference) cannot be understood according to invariant or immutable natures or laws of becoming (including essences) or restricted to phenomena or knowledge. The powers and processes approach developed here releases us from the duality of order and chaos towards a complex and perhaps indeterminate relation of the two. It is through a turn towards powers, processes and relations as the manifold ground of being and becoming (i.e. the virtual beyond the actual) that we are able to affirm, against the Platonic dislocation of order and chaos, that the chaos is not only intelligible but is also ordered in its own right. It is a chaotic order, or equally, an ordered chaos. A chaosmos.

This account allows us to escape from under the metaphysics of closure, presence, identity and irrealism, bringing us closer to a realist understanding of the work of Lyotard, Derrida and Deleuze, but also closer to the latter work of Bhaskar on dialectical totalities:

To grasp totality is to break with our ordinary notions of identity, causality, space and time ... It is to see things existentially constituted, and permeated, by their relations with others; and to see our ordinary notion of identity as an abstraction not only from their existentially constitutive processes of formation (geo-histories), but also from their existentially constitutive inter-activity (internal relatedness). It is to see the causality of

a upon b affected by the causality of c upon d. Emergent totalities generate emergent spatio-temporalities. Not only do we get overlapping spatio-temporalities (whether or not the [non-]entities concerned are of the same or different kinds) but as the intrinsic is not co-extensive with the internal we also have real problems of identity and individuation. When is a thing no longer a thing but something else? When has the nature, and so the explanation for the behaviour, of a (relative) continuant changed? This may be due to either diachronic change (transition points), synchronic boundaries (borders), and/or changing constitutive intra-activity. *Aporiai* for philosophy, but real problems of individuation, definition, scope and articulation for science ... in the domain of totality we need to conceptualise *entity relationism*. (Bhaskar, 1995: 125)

Here, objects are understood primarily, if not exclusively by means of their relations, both intrinsic and extrinsic, through motifs such as contingency and openness. Indeed, totalities are conceived as changing, embedded, multiply-conditioned ensembles constituted by their context (Bhaskar, 1995: 126). They are open, disjointed, subject to multiple perspectival shifts and in open-systemic flux which enables us to appreciate the chameleon-like appearance of being and the reason why narratives must be continually rewritten and landscapes remapped (ibid: 126). This is a picture of totalities as anarchic assemblages and the sciences as anti-essentialist and anti-systematic; decentred structures characterised by relations of *différance*, as well as intensive and divergent difference.

### **6.10 Against method**

Accordingly, an anarchic order requires an anarchic 'science'. As Feyerabend famously suggested "there is only *one* principle that can be defended under all circumstances and in all stages of human development. It is the principle: *anything goes*" (Feyerabend, 1975: 19).

Following Feyerabend's lead I want to suggest our intention should be not to replace one set of general rules (positivism induction, nomological deduction) by another such set of rules (a critical realist methodology). Critical realism is not a metanarrative or metatheory. Rather, critical realism entails an anti-methodological position which suggests all methodologies, even the most obvious ones, have their conditions, purposes and limitations (ibid: 23). Indeed, there is no metatheory or methodology which is guaranteed to capture the real, not simply because of historical, sociological or linguistic limitations, but because of ontological limitations imposed by an inherently complex order. Accordingly, while deploying Feyerabend against Bhaskar, I equally want to deploy Bhaskar against Feyerabend in an effort to stand them both on their feet<sup>210</sup>. Thus, while Feyerabend pursues his epistemological anarchy on political, epistemic and historical grounds, I want to do so from ontological and metaphysical ground while remaining committed to realism.

Epistemic anarchism for Feyerabend is suggested as an "excellent medicine for epistemology, and for the philosophy of science" (ibid: 9). Here we might suggest that epistemic anarchism is in fact the result of ontological problems and is not simply a thought experiment or political project. Following, and because of, this, the events, procedures, methodologies and attitudes that constitute the sciences have no common structure, i.e. there are no elements that occur in every scientific investigation; rather, there are elements which may appear here and there, but are missing elsewhere (ibid: 1). Both science and the world it attempts to represent are a

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<sup>210</sup> Quite simply, I am not inclined to view Feyerabend as simply a fashionable super-idealist or voluntarist (c.f. Bhaskar 2011; Collier, 1993: 94). The basis for Bhaskar's critique of Feyerabend rests in distinguishing between the transitive and the intransitive on the one hand and the domains of the actual and real on the other. For Bhaskar, Feyerabend's voluntarism and scepticism is discharged by a non-empiricist ontology that pitches invariance in nature at the level of structure, not event (and distinguish clearly between structure, event and experience), such that it becomes possible to discern a certain characteristic pattern or dialectical rationality of discovery which concerns moving to deeper layers of reality which are progressively identified and explained (Bhaskar, 2011: 40). While this may be the case, this does not seem to actually invalidate Feyerabend anti-methodological stance, particularly when Bhaskar's overly optimistic account of science is brought into question.



“patchwork of partly incomplete, partly incompatible laws, models, theories, heuristic guesses and experiments” (ibid: 266). Successful research does not obey general standards. ‘Science’ is not *one* tradition; it is legion, consisting of many, sometimes overlapping, sometimes different, sometimes contradictory and often incomplete standards and methodologies with different languages and different rules (ibid: 249). The question ‘what is science?’ has not one answer but many answers (ibid: 256). Accordingly, the idea that there is a methodology of a single systematic discipline that contains firm, unchanging and absolutely binding principles for conducting the endeavour of science meets considerable difficulty when confronted with both the history of science and the complex ontology of the world (ibid: 14). In such a context, as Feyerabend suggests, anything goes. It relies now on one trick, now on another; it moves and advance in ways with a chaotic methodology whose features are not always known to the movers (ibid: 1) but we can add, this does not mean science is not in contact with the real, wrestling to resolve ontological problems and experimenting with the things and processes of the world. Against naïve or simple-minded rules and formulae the progression of knowledge, much like the world it seeks to know, is a maze of interactions and relationships, embedded, tied together, overlapping, occasionally dependent and above all dynamic (ibid: 10). Indeed, the standards and methodologies we use only make sense in a situation that has a certain structure and, as Feyerabend suggests, these standards and methodologies become inapplicable, unworkable or “start running idle” in domains which do not exhibit this structure (ibid: 251). This is to say, methodology is not something which can be prescribed and the standard of application often remains fuzzy and pragmatic at best (ibid: 251). Rather, methodology proceeds from an anarchic engagement with certain particular, concrete conditions and determinate problems. Methodology, like conceptuality for Deleuze, is always a response and resolution of particular ontological problematics encountered in the world.

The anarchic nature of the world, and the paralleled anarchic nature of ‘science’, is not to suggest that science is naïve or that it abandons all forms of rigour and logic. Indeed, Feyerabend makes a Lakatosian distinction between naïve and sophisticated anarchism. A naïve anarchist recognises 1) that there are no absolute rules and, moreover, recognises that even context-dependent rules have their limits, but draws from this the conclusions that 2) all rules and standards are worthless and should be given up (ibid: 249). While Feyerabend “agrees” with the former (ibid: 249), he does not subscribe to the latter. Instead, a sophisticated anarchism holds that all ‘rules’ have their limits such that there is no comprehensive ‘rationality’ (i.e. no scientific metanarrative or guarantee). But this is not to say that we should proceed “without rules and standards” (ibid: 249). It is possible to evaluate standards of rationality, theories and concepts in particular contexts, and even to improve them. However, this is a complex process without a simple answer or an easy methodological or mechanical formula and is reliant on engagement with local contexts. Instead, “[t]he principles of improvement is neither above tradition nor beyond change and it is impossible to nail them down” (ibid: 248).

The theories of science which devise and authorise standards and structural elements for scientific theory and activity are far too crude and simplistic for scientists facing concrete research problems (ibid: 1). The principles of critical rationalism *à la* Popper (to take falsifications seriously; avoid *ad hoc* hypotheses; etc.) and the principles of logical empiricism (be precise; base your theories on empirical measurements; etc.) both give an inadequate account of the past development of science, and are liable to hinder scientific activity in the future - they are overly Apollonian (ibid: 163). Science is much more ‘sloppy’ and Dionysian than its pristine and noble image would have us believe. We must not make scientific practice

more rational, more precise, or simpler than it is and wipe out the remainder as unscientific. As Feyerabend suggests:

... what appears as 'sloppiness', 'chaos' or 'opportunism' ... has a most important function in the development of those very theories which we today regard as essential parts of our knowledge of nature. *These 'deviations', these 'errors', are preconditions of progress.* ... Without 'chaos', no knowledge. Without a frequent dismissal of reason, no progress. Ideas which today form the very basis of science exist only because there were such things as prejudice, conceit, passion; because these things *opposed reason*; and because they *were permitted to have their way*. We have to conclude then, that *even within* science reason cannot and should not be allowed to be comprehensive and that it must often be overruled, or eliminated, in favour of other agencies. There is not a single rule that remains valid under all circumstances and not a single agency to which appeal can always be made. (ibid: 163-164)

Again, while Feyerabend draws these lessons through historical and epistemic surveys the conclusions drawn apply equally to the chaotic and sloppy ontology of things. The progress of knowledge cannot be conceived as a series of coherent theories that gradually approach the truth. The world is simply not ordered in this way. Rather, given the nature of things as assemblages of power relations and processes, the progress of science must be understood as an ever increasing ocean of often incompatible and uneven moments, which can on occasion be patched together. Through this, different parts of the collection may force the other moments into greater articulation as the fuzzy seams are on occasion draw together, or on other occasions torn apart (both of these are realist moments). One consequence of the patchwork nature of both science and the world is that scientific discovery, success or progression cannot be explained in a simple way. We cannot simply say: 'the structure of X was found because people did A, B, C ...' where A, B and C are procedures which can be understood independently of

their use in a particular context. Methodology emerges from engagement with local ontology and local problems. Again, this is simply to say with Lyotard, there is no meta-language which guarantees truth; all rationalities are local, but are not necessarily irrational or irrealist as a result. The world is not directly given to us in the same way in different times and places. Rather, we have to catch it unevenly through the medium of traditions, perspectives, local engagements and historical moments (ibid: 251). The image Feyerabend uses to represent the complexity of this engagement, is one of cartography:

Originally maps were constructed as images of and guides to reality and so, presumably, was reason. But maps like reason contain idealisations ... The wanderer uses the map to find his way but he also corrects it as he proceeds, removing old idealisations and introducing new ones. Using the map no matter what will soon get him into trouble. But it is better to have maps than to proceed without them. In the same way, the example says, reason without the guidance of a practice will lead us astray while a practice is vastly improved by the addition of reason. This account, though better than naturalism and idealism and much more realistic is still not entirely satisfactory. It replaces a one-sided action (of reason upon practice or practice upon reason) by an interaction but it retains (certain aspects of) the old views of the interacting agencies: reason and practice are still regarded as entities of different kinds. They are both needed but reason can exist without a practice and practice can exist without reason. Shall we accept this account of the matter? (ibid: 241)

Accordingly, the difficulty we face in our account of scientific methodology is that both reason and practice are abstracted and isolated aspects of the same moment. Reason requires practice, just as practice requires reason. Scientific anarchism refuses to proscribe their relationship but leaves it properly undecidable. The idea of a fixed methodology, a fixed rationality and its corollary, a fixed order, relies on a simplistic and naïve view the world. But those who do away

with all standards to embrace pure chaos or fluidity are simply and naively reacting against this image. One side craves for security in the form of clarity, precision, objectivity and truth, as Bertrand Russell suggests, and for such people the world is made “unchangeable, rigid, exact, delightful to the mathematician, the logician, the builder of metaphysical systems, and all who love perfection more than life” (Russell, 1976: 31). For the other, “the world of existence is fleeting, vague, without sharp boundaries, without any clear plan or arrangement” (ibid: 31-32). The juxtaposition of these two moments will mean whichever is not preferred will probably seem “a pale shadow of the other”, and hardly worthy to be regarded as in any sense real” (ibid: 32). The problem we face is that both are real, and both are equally false abstractions. But this does not lead us to abandon the project of realism, only to be more realistic about what realism entails by drawing the two together. This is the precarious balance of Apollo and Dionysus which must be maintained; postmodernism and realism. An anti-essentialist, anti-methodological, anti-hierarchical realism based in the rejection of the metaphysics of closure, presence, identity and irrealism. Such an approach, and indeed the peculiar quality of an anarchic realism in general, is, to rephrase Canguilhem: realism as a demand rather than a method, a morality more than a theory (cited in Foucault, 1989c: 18).

# Chapter 7: Doing Realism or Doing Justice

## 7.1 Conclusion or opening remarks II

This thesis has attempted to outline a new approach to both (critical) realism and postmodernism by integrating the insights of one into the other and arguing for the fragile union of Dionysus and Apollo. As a critical underlabouring process it has suggested, sometimes reading against the grain, that i) postmodernism, its authors and its problematics are often not what they are purported to be and are in fact compatible with a sufficiently complex realism, and that likewise, ii) realism, or rather the work of Bhaskar, expresses numerous and important parallels with postmodern positions able to mediate between realism and postmodernism in the form of an anarchic realism. In both cases there is an equivocality to be exploited, even an undecidability which draws these seemingly divergent threads closer together under the broad concern, even exasperation of ‘how can we represent reality?’ or, to give this its full weight, ‘how can we represent such a complex, dynamic and differentiated reality?’. This answer to such a question requires a complex blend of ontology, epistemology, sociology, ethics and aesthetics and the maintenance of a delicate balance.

In response to this problem field, chapter 1 provided an overview of postmodernism through an analysis of the temporality and spatiality of presence. It was argued that under the conditions of the modern and the postmodern space and time become increasingly intensive, fluidic and fragmented (Bauman, 2000; Foucault, 1997; Habermas 1987; Jameson, 1984a, 1984b). In this context, the problem of representation rests in the possibility of understanding our historicity operating alongside our attempts to come to terms with the complexity of the present. Against

the solutions of modernity which sought to escape from our finitude into solidity and universality, postmodernism represents a coming to terms with our finitude, above all our contextuality. Here there is, and can be, no unifying or universal narrative we are able to seize hold of guaranteeing the possibility of grasping hold of the real, only a diversity of particular contexts expressed through different language games in an increasingly contested and fragmented space. The turn towards the present in the postmodern represents a release from the anxious and austere terror of modernity represented by its incessant desire for certainty and solidity, its pursuit of the unified universal, its nihilism towards the past and its millenarianism towards the future. In our present context, realism must do without the solace of good forms, the comforts of solidity and the guarantees of metanarratives, and instead preserve difference, heteronomy and fluidity from closing and totalising gestures (Lyotard, 1984). In rejecting the metaphysics of closure, Lyotard represents a coming to terms with this contextual and contested nature of thought expressed as an incredulity towards metanarratives and a turning towards the *différend* (the sublime). Under the conditions of postmodernism realism must be characterised by a recognition of irreducible differences and language games, each competing and striving for local legitimacy in pursuit of the real. In the name of justice, the attempt must be made to contest closures and totalising gestures in order to preserve the heteronomy of language games and prevent the collapse of the *différend* (ibid: xxiv). But we are not simply left with language games. In pursuit of the real, paralogy becomes an important gesture and prevents the withdrawal into a conventionalist pluralism which simply upholds the status quo. Realism is less found in the moments which generate consensus than in the moments which break with consensus allowing us to recognise and bear witness to that which cannot currently be presented. Contained within this moment is the attempt to rebirth the creativity of modernity and modernism by effecting an eternal return to the site of the modern itself, including its possibilities and promises for the present (ibid: 79). Postmodernism becomes a return to the

nascent state of the modern in which its stillbirths are replaced by a dynamic fluidity which never truly finds solid form but instead continually pursues new languages and perspectives on the real. Against the easy drift into relativism I have argued that the crisis of contingency this represents should not lead us to withdraw into historicism or despair before representation. The *proper* postmodern response to the conditions of postmodernity is not found in an irreverent vandalism or a nostalgic desire for unity or solidity. Postmodernism should not be characterised by a careless reaction to modernity, but the ongoing attempt to find new languages in which to pursue the difficult engagement with a contested, heteronomous, differentiated and fluidic reality. To be postmodern means doing away with the shadows cast by modernity, including a naïve antimodernism. Here we might suggest that under postmodern conditions there are two possibilities which need to be avoided. The first is the attempt to find or found a new solidity (millenarianism). The second is to embrace fluidity and heteronomy as the death of thought (inverted millenarianism or romanticism). Both of these gestures simply represent the bad consciousness and bad conscience of a failed modernity which equates representation or realism with fixed, solid and universal forms, once again setting Apollo against Dionysus and Dionysus against Apollo. To be properly postmodern entails remaining in touch with reality by pursuing a difficult and contested realism which seeks to avoid closure and the return to nostalgic unities, presences and identities while accounting for the differentiation, heteronomy and fluidity of reality.

Chapter 2 sought to situate the Derridean account of language within the context of realism, on the one hand, and the Nietzschean analysis of identity and language, on the other. Drawing on the work of Christopher Norris (1982, etc.) it argued that *différance* is a properly transcendently realist approach concerned with comprehending a linguistic framework based in relationality which rejects the immediacy of meaning and dislocates subject and object.



Central to this is the analysis and rejection of the metaphysics of presence. Against the tendencies of Western philosophy, meaning for Derrida is rejected as being in any sense self-present or grounded by a transcendental signified. Instead, through the analysis of *différance*, language is understood as an open, heteronomous and decentred system of meaning and representation. Important to this is the recognition that the deferral of presence in *différance* constituted by its decentred relations provides the condition of possibility for any meaningful conception of language or realism. In this context language is 'presented' as an ambivalent and equivocal tool which always strains to represent the world.

Chapter 3 moved to the possibility of a positive deconstructive project in which language and metaphor are able to play a constructive role in articulating the world. The basis for this was Derrida's essay 'White Mythology' (1982) which functioned as an exploration on the nature of writing and conceptuality in philosophy and science. Here language was presented as intrinsically marked through and through by complex referential and mimetic (*différential*) assumptions which cannot but raise philosophical questions. The metaphoric nature of language inescapably raises problems about how the world is represented while also inevitably raising the question of *mimesis*. One is left with no choice but to speak about reality. Here it was argued the retreat into language or constructivism championed by Rorty and characteristic of certain 'postmodernisms' can find no rest from or basis in deconstruction. We cannot casually step outside of history or announce the end of thought. Instead, we must work in our historical junction, with the terms we have, through a difficult process of critical rectification to refine and purify our inherited conceptual material while in pursuit of the real. While this pursuit may frequently resemble a cat-and-mouse-game of contrived captures and escapes, progress is nevertheless made. It was stressed that far from being inescapably sceptical, the deconstruction of Derrida aligns with cherished positions within the philosophy of science

including Bachelard (1938, 1964), Canguilhem (1969, 1989) and even Bhaskar (2008, 2009, 2011) in which metaphor finds an important place within conceptuality and scientific thought. Above all, it was argued that this position entails that there can be no possibility of any sure or certain methodologies, including simple theories of mimesis, correspondence or coherence. There can be no self-present meaning or transcendental signification which grounds knowledge. Instead, knowledge is inextricably historical, local and linguistic, meaning that we can only grasp the real through particular determinations. But this does not mean that there is not a grasping after the real which draws us beyond our present formulations, a grasping which, in a complex manner, can even succeed in doing considerable justice to reality.

Chapter 4 moved us from *différance* and metaphor to violence in considering the relationship of language to its other. Through his engagement with Levinas, Derrida rejects the other of language as in any meaningful sense totally Other. Where the ethical approach of Levinas is based on the rejection of violence and rationality for an infinitely open gesture, Derrida suggests that this sentimental ethics is doomed to failure as it must inevitably rely on the 'violence' inherent to language and all such determinations. Against the Levinasian stance of non-violence Derrida argues that deconstruction offers the best form of liberation from violence through a certain putting into question which makes the possibility of totalisations, and the erection of an immutable order, impossible. One cannot avoid using language and the violence it entails any more than one can avoid being philosophical while attempting to reject philosophy, but the recognition of *différance* and the deconstruction of presence allows for a conception of determination in which the economy of violence is internally diffused. Here deconstructionism presents itself as an anti-philosophy which recognises the need to be philosophical in order to prevent the collapse of *différance*. Moreover, deconstruction moves to replace the metaphysics of presence with a metaphysics of *différance* characterised by

linguistic and material spectrality. The other of deconstruction is not an indeterminate unity which must be protected from the determinations of language. Instead, Derrida presents an hauntology which rejects the self-sufficiency and solidity of the material present for a spectrality and a mixed ontology of hybrid phenomena (c.f. Jameson, 1999: 38). Here our notion of the real as the other of language is deconstructed. As spectral, reality takes on the quality of being other without being infinitely Other. It is neither properly present nor absent, neither dead nor alive, but present and absent, dead and alive at once (Derrida, 1994: 192). Reality is 'out of joint'. While this presents certain temptations to withdraw back into a Levinasian sentimentality (Caputo), I nevertheless argued that this offers a complex and difficult account of realism based in the rejection of realism in the present and akin to a form a realism that is to come. While this does not necessarily entail irrealism or a rejection of realism, it always requires a deconstruction of realism in the present. This is less an incessant scepticism than it is a restless realism perpetually uncomfortable under the burden of realism - a realism which refuses to rest satisfied. And yet, because it focuses on deconstruction it is without resources for the construction of the concept and operates as a negative dialectic which can only critique and not create.

Chapter 5 moved towards the properly metaphysical in postmodernism in the figure of Deleuze. Where Lyotard concerns himself with closure, and Derrida with presence, Deleuze moves to investigate the metaphysical ground of identity and difference. It was argued that Deleuze presents a realism concerned with giving a transcendental account of processes and powers. This new realism was presented as turning on the distinction between difference as intensity and difference as diversity, in which diversity is taken as a given, and difference that by which the given is given as diverse (Deleuze, 1994a: 222). Importantly, it was suggested that this resituated the problematical logic of essence and appearance towards a complex relation of the

virtual and the actual in which intensity of difference in the virtual becomes the diversity of difference in the actual by way of dynamic mechanisms of individuation. This is an ontology defined by the peculiar paradox of the obscure but distinct in which assemblages or territories are continually in a process of formation, deformation, reformation and transformation (or equally construction, deconstruction, reconstruction). The nature of realism in such a context is of an active subject comprehending an active world.

Finally, chapter 6 turned towards the transcendental realism of Bhaskar and his investigation into the possibility of an ignoble realism which takes place in the middle regions of science where knowledge is less deductive, and much more dependent on complex processes and external conditions. This reading of Bhaskar's realism turned on an attempt to dislocate subject and object through a rejection of irrealism and its illusions; the epistemic fallacy and ontological actualism. Rather, through the use of a historically situated transcendental argumentation i.e. one removed from the idealist framework of Kantian idealism, Bhaskar is able to argue for the necessity of a stratified and differentiated ontology based in the distinction between open and closed systems. While this offers a powerful approach to explanation, it was also suggested that was also an idealistic and overly optimistic account of science. Against Bhaskar's systematic attempt to outline a scientific approach based in changing knowledge about unchanging things, I argued for an anarchic and anti-systematic account of the sciences concerned with local rationalities and the construction of nomological machines within an ontology of relations (*différance*). Against the privileged role of essences, and the identification of mechanisms under conditions of closure, I have argued for an ontology of entity relationism and experimentation based in assemblages, powers and individuations, drawing on Cartwright (1983, 1999), Deleuze (1994a), Mumford (2004, 2008) and the equivocal moments in Bhaskar (1995) himself. This reading positions Bhaskar much closer to Lyotard, Derrida and Deleuze

and a notion of realism resonant with *différend*, *différance* and difference based in a rejection of system, essence and method. This account of realism stresses the difficulty and contingency of an approach concerned to move beneath the representation of immediate surface phenomena.

## **7.2 What does it mean to be a realist today?**

Following from this it becomes clear that certain strains of postmodernism, even what are taken to be arch-representatives of postmodernism, are not unconcerned or incompatible with the problematics of realism but can instead be understood as complements to any realist approach. Under the conditions of postmodernism realism must come to terms with the decentring and intensity of presence and not retreat into utopian ideals or more sophisticated positivisms. Equally however, any postmodern approach which replaces depth with uncritical multiple perspectives and surfaces, and strong social constructionism or historicist accounts, can be understood as representing a bad consciousness and bad conscience of modernity which attempts to overturn the values of modernity by embracing its opposite. In so doing it is unable to conceptualise postmodernism except as a complete abandoning of thought, the embrace of historical thrownness, vandalism against closed forms, the end of philosophy and the everlasting reign of poetry and ‘writing’. Such a reactive gesture certainly represents the unproductive and uncritical end of any postmodern project. Indeed, it fails to be properly postmodern; remaining as a simplistic reactive gesture against the modern. We might even say, somewhat ironically, that what often passes for postmodernism is in fact not properly postmodern and the problem of realism in the present is less that ‘we have never been modern’ (Latour, 1993) than that we have never truly been postmodern<sup>211</sup>.

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<sup>211</sup> Keeping in mind Lyotard’s inversion of the relation between modernity and postmodernity; i.e. postmodernity always precedes modernity.

The difficulty encountered in any attempt to think under the conditions of postmodernism is at once to recognise the historical context of thought, the plurality of language and perspective, and the fluidity, intensity and heterogeneity of reality, departing from the metaphysics of closure, presence and identity without thereby abandoning realism. It is clear that any account of realism under such conditions will need to be suitably mobile and yet sufficiently robust with a delicate balance operating between ontological realism and epistemic relativism. In such a context there can only ever be a difficult and contested realism, a realism of the *kampfplatz* and *différend*, which recognises that what we require is not a (Laplacean) unchanging knowledge of unchanging things, or even a (Bhaskarian) changing knowledge of unchanging things, but a changing and heteronomous knowledge of changing and heteronomous things. This is realism as an infinite demand rather than a method; a morality or an ethic more than a theory (Foucault, 1989c: 18). Here, there is an ambiguity in the word realism which needs to be recognised. Not only is realism the assertion that objects of discourse exist relatively independently of our discourse about them, but a realist is a person who understands what is realistic and possible in a particular situation and is able to deal with this in an effective way. It is this ambiguity realism needs to seize hold of. Realism must be sufficiently realist. To capture something of what this entails let us return to the three pillars of critical realism: ontological realism, epistemic relativism and judgmental rationality.

### **7.3 Broadening ontological realism**

What does it mean to be a realist about ontology today? One theme which continues to re-emerge is the relations of presence and difference. A consistent approach has been to stress the lack of immediacy and solidity of the material present. Presence is decentred and displaced,

identity is dispersed and reality is conceived of as out of joint. For Lyotard, this is largely a result of the irreducibility of different language games and the metasyntax of language (set theory) creating various *différends*. For Derrida this is due to the linguistic relations of *différance* on the one hand and a relational, spectral and mixed ontology on the other. For Deleuze, it is due to the intensity of difference, the constitutive processes of individuation and the decentred nature of assemblages and rhizomes. For Bhaskar, it is due to the stratification of ontology, the plurality of generative mechanisms and the separation of transitive and intransitive. In each of these accounts ontology is constituted by a rejection of identity, presence and immediacy for an emphasis upon particularity, non-identity, difference and heterogeneity. Reality is not self-present but is constituted by its relations and processes which are taken up in language and are the focus of our investigations. The effect is a radical decentring of the real as a contested open system; a patchwork rich with different things, with different natures, behaving in different ways with erratic overlaps and ragged edges. In Lyotard, Deleuze and Bhaskar in particular, this decentring of the open system is supplemented with circumstances in which closures, consistencies and reductions are possible, but these are, by and large, rare and artificial situations. Heteronomy, heterogeneity and change are the states we should expect to encounter in the world. As a result of this, reality is understood as complex, ambiguous and sometimes undecidable. Above all it resists inscription into language; this is a world which does not sit still for long enough, is not clear enough, and is not nearly present enough for us to take a snapshot of it and present this snapshot as any kind of final or definitive truth (DeLanda, 2002: 7). In many ways, reality can be said to be perpetually out of focus or only ever presented through different perspectives or frames in the present which inevitably fail to do it justice, and this problem must be understood ontologically as much as, if not more than, epistemic. But this is far from saying that reality cannot be represented or that our representations do not capture something of reality. It is only to say that the problem of

representation is more than simply a problem of language. It is a profoundly ontological problem. In this context realism entails moving beyond closure, actualism, presence and identity towards a contested metaphysics characterised by openness, *différend*, difference, *différance*, differentiation, differentiation and stratification. Ontological realism entails recognising the lack of closure, presence and identity in reality. As other, it is not infinitely Other but constituted by complex assemblages, processes, relations, temporalities, fragmentations and differentiations which may provide it with a spectral and decentred existence but also the possibility of its comprehension under particular conditions by turning towards the explanation of generative mechanisms, powers, relations, capabilities, affordances, and processes.

#### **7.4 Expanding epistemic relativism**

While emphasising ontological realism, in many respects this thesis has been concerned to give epistemic relativism its due by highlighting the necessarily precarious and delicate balance of realism i.e. ontological realism does not entail epistemic realism any more than epistemic relativism entails ontological relativism. Epistemic relativism simply suggests that beliefs are socially, historically and linguistically constructed, so that all knowledge must be considered transient, and in which no truth-values or criteria of rationality can be said to exist outside of historical time, meaning that “there is no way of knowing the world except under particular more or less historically transient descriptions” (Bhaskar, 2009: 99). If ontological realism concerns the ontological conditions of possibility and limitations of coming to knowledge, epistemic relativism reflects this by understanding the temporal and contextual conditions of possibility and limitation of our thought. All our representations are particular perspectives, individuations and determinations replete with the limitations this entails. Under the conditions of postmodernism this above all means understanding the fractured and differentiated nature



of our historical situatedness and the intrinsic historicity of our thinking particularly in this light of the rich and differentiated patchwork of ontology. Our thought is contingent and fabricated, structuring our understanding of the space in which phenomena appear and are understood and in which certain forms of knowledge become possible. This means that our historical rationalities and representations may have no lasting purchase on reality and may be formed only, perhaps, to vanish into history but nevertheless may still be said to, with some accuracy, represent or capture something of the world.

In short, epistemic relativism entails coming to terms with, rather than attempting to escape our finitude. This means acknowledging the nature of different language games and tolerating the contested nature of the world while still seeking to give an account of it. The different language games express themselves as a complex heteronomy of competing and particular elements rather than any coherent unity able to find consensus. As such they are not necessarily stable or communicable or commensurable across different contexts. More importantly, this means that there is no stable language or form of judgment with which to articulate, mediate or assess different language games. Rather, the heteronomy of irreducible language games moves us towards local determinations, viewing our attempts at realism within the context of a patchwork of regional dialects and local rationalities while attempting to find suitable languages of realism in such a context. Here Lyotard's notion of the *différend* as a contested site of language is important in characterising and sustaining the multiplicitous events of reality as beyond the possibility of full comprehension while not abandoning justice by pursuing new addressees, new addressors, new significations, new referents, new rules, new languages and new phrases in order to find an expression and context in which it becomes possible to speak. This is to say, we are less abandoned to relativism than released to pursue the difficult project of finding new phrases, new determinations and new individuations with which to articulate the real. This

undermines and abandons the conventional possibility of meaning as determined by a fixed reference for one which introduces a complex heteronomy of meaning and sense within reference, making space for competing and even incommensurable interpretations and perspectives, but which is still sufficiently concerned with justice and the presentation of the unrepresentable. While this may be viewed as a pessimistic or tragic account of reference it is a necessary context in which ontological realism coupled with epistemic relativism must speak. Any break with our specific local context, and the possibility of speaking about the world, must recognise these limits of language. Against simplistic appeals to reference against signifier and signified, realism must encompass a notion of sense and particularity, in which different language games ground different senses and referents in different ways, even to the point at which the distinction between referent and reference becomes difficult to maintain. This is not to suggest that meaning becomes purely relative, only that realism must preserve the different meanings of different language games, especially while trying to say something about the world without instituting a privileged judicial access. Epistemic relativism entails upholding the difference in language games against totalising gestures while pursuing the real.

This leads us into the necessity of deconstruction as a process within epistemic relativism in pursuit of ontological realism. Deconstruction prevents the worst excesses of violence by placing things in question and foregrounding the equivocality of language. In rejecting the unity between language, conceptuality and the subject, Derrida clears the ground for a proper delineation of the relationship between language and its other, based upon the relation of *différance* rather than presence or self-presence. In so doing, language is concerned with a relationality of meaning, which prevents the possibility of mastery or closure, and is constructed through a complex web of differing and deferring, preventing any conception of self-present meaning or justification in the transcendental signified. Constituted by metaphors,

metonymies and *différance*, the deconstructive account of language provides a means of rejecting any attempts to represent ‘the real’ unambiguously in language. Such an unambiguous manoeuvre inevitably effects a closure and a reduction of the real to the (or a particular) present. In contrast, for Derrida, the alterity of the real cannot be reduced to what is present, represented or made present in language. While deconstruction prevents the collapse of the real into presence, it is equally concerned with pursuing the real as the other of language. The value of truth and realism is never properly contested or destroyed in Derrida’s writings. Instead, they are reinscribed in more powerful, more stratified and more mediated contexts. Derrida provides a rigorous account of the strength and weakness of language as mediation against its historical abuses (the metaphysics of presence) while providing a means of combatting particular abuses by placing into question and suspending (*epoché*) a system, including the relation between reference and referent, which attempts to effect closure<sup>212</sup>.

Nevertheless, in spite of the complexity of language we find that our rationalities and representations may indeed find purchase on the world, and become more than fleeting ephemera. Our metaphors and conceptual schemas are not necessarily “simple idealisations which take off like rockets only to display their insignificance on bursting in the sky” (Bachelard, 1964: 80, cited in Derrida, 1982: 265). While it is true that no representation can be considered necessary and language always strains to represent the world, nevertheless knowledge is still able to progress. We must express ourselves in language, but this does not mean that knowledge is impossible, only that it is frustrated by language just as it is frustrated by the world. We are condemned to be free insofar as there are no general criteria which can

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<sup>212</sup> Against the Apollonian ‘aesthetic of realism’ we must find a place for the necessity of ambiguity within realism, and the need for self-effacement which draws our attention to these relations and prevents its own closure.

be laid down which methodologically secure our access to the world or the certitude of our representations. Our concepts and practices are only ever contingent and particular responses to resolve problems we encounter in the world. There are no metanarratives able to guarantee the unity or necessity of knowledge and there is no simple logic of correspondence or coherence, only a more general conception of resonance and struggle. Here our attempts to mimetically represent the world must come to terms with the conditions of impossibility for such representation and the general relativity and contested nature of our knowledge. This is not simply a linguistic, psychological or social limitation, but one which is equally caught up in the ontological constitution of reality. The nature of ontological realism and the structures of reality entail epistemic relativism as a correlate and a consequence not as an addendum or a qualification. Anti-essentialist, anti-systematic and anti-methodological, realism always takes flight under particular conditions as much ontological as epistemic.

### **7.5 Deconstructing judgmental rationality**

What then does this delicate balance of ontological realism and epistemic relativism mean for judgmental rationality? Judgmental rationality is a peculiar term predicated on the faint assurance that epistemic relativism does not entail judgemental relativism but that there exist better and worse reasons for choosing between different accounts and a basis for choice (Hartwig, 2007: 240-241). Indeed, judgmental rationality is by and large simply the third term which emerges from and expresses the combination of ontological realism and epistemic relativism, preventing the collapse of one into the other. Certainly in Bhaskar, judgmental rationality is tied to transcendental argumentation. Indeed, transcendental argumentation can also be understood as the basis for ontological realism and epistemic relativism. Insofar as it is concerned with accounting for the conditions of possibility, i.e. what the world must be like

for experience and practice to be possible<sup>213</sup> transcendental argumentation grounds the possibility of ontological realism. In separating transcendental argumentation from Kantian idealism, thought must face its own contingency and relativism as a historical, corrigible, contested, conditional and hypothetical theoretical practice which serves as no guarantee of truth, but is nevertheless the basis of the difficult practice of realism. This relativity of transcendental argumentation is not however to suggest there are unlimited possibilities of explanation. Bhaskar always maintains that we must constrain the number of possible explanations by testing not only for plausibility but for truth, although precisely what this entails is never properly spelled out (Bhaskar, 2008: 155-156). Of all three terms, judgmental rationality is perhaps the most contested, the most underdeveloped and the most problematic. By way of conclusion I want to suggest that for a properly postmodern realism judgmental rationality becomes a critical gesture, but must be embedded within a broader concern for justice within the context of intensity, heterogeneity and heteronomy. Justice positions itself between and above ontological realism and epistemic relativism as a juridico-ethico-political category concerned with preserving the delicate balance and harmony of ontological realism and epistemic relativism. Accordingly, it encompasses judgmental rationality while exceeding it. This repositions realism as concerned with doing justice to the real, while placing emphasis firmly upon epistemic relativism in pursuit of ontological realism.

As such, justice is concerned to validly represent and let the other speak from their own vantage point i.e. allowing a space for the other through a recognition of irreducible difference which avoids the excesses of violence and terrorism in the name of 'the real'. It is incumbent on realism not to short-circuit different language games by failing to recognise the different nature

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<sup>213</sup> i.e. the generative mechanisms, processes of individuation and relation of exteriority.

of different claims. This idea of justice is not linked to establishing a false consensus or contract but to preserving the different syntaxes, along with the separation and irreducibility of different language games. In other words, it acts to preserve epistemic relativism by renouncing terror and acknowledging that all argumentation or rationality is limited and to a large degree local. This is to suggest that all language games have their limits and there is no comprehensive 'rationality' able to effectively decide what constitutes as real. Reality is *différend*; it is contested, but this is not to say that we proceed without rules and standards. All rationalities may be local and act as particular determinations, but they are not necessarily irrational as a result, only limited in their function. The world is not directly given to us in the same way in different times and places. Rather, we have to catch it unevenly through the medium of traditions, local engagements, historical moments and different language games. Justice entails ensuring that these different conversations continue and are not shut down prematurely or reduced through the application of a single hegemonic criterion. This conception of justice is political, insofar as it is concerned with preventing the domination and elevation of one language game above all others<sup>214</sup>. Moreover, this conception of justice is ethical insofar as it is concerned with the relation to the other and others and the renunciation of violence through the imposition of language and speech, and sometimes more (Derrida, 1992: 22).

Secondly, and connected with this, is the idea of deconstruction or realism as justice (ibid: 15). Deconstruction as realism serves justice by defying the imposition by one party of order, taxonomy, individuation, determination, classification and clarity, in refusing to place things together which simply do not belong together<sup>215</sup> (ibid: 3). In particular, this entails refusing easy answers, avoiding forced or false choices, escaping ontological violence and questioning

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<sup>214</sup> This, above all applies to Capitalism, Eurocentrism and Western philosophy (c.f. Hostettler 2012).

<sup>215</sup> Including the violence of reconciling the irreconcilable.

whether what has been marginalised should remain marginalised (Cornel, Rosenfeld, Carlson, 1992: ix - x). Deconstruction is relentless in this pursuit. This conception of deconstruction as justice, starts by destabilising, complicating and bringing out the paradoxes of values and the hierarchical oppositions we use to structure the world in order to challenge authority, conventionalism and the *status quo*. Here *différance* is the term which does the work by effecting the displacement of oppositional logic and the privileging of presence. Yet, it is perhaps this element above all which makes not only its tormenters but deconstruction itself suffer. In deconstruction we encounter an absence of rules, norms and definitive criteria that would allow us to distinguish unequivocally between reference and referent, between representation and reality (Derrida, 1992: 4). It is properly anarchic. The questioning and problematising this represents is neither foundationalist nor anti-foundationalist (ibid: 8). Rather, the logic of deconstruction is concerned with addressing all claims of authority foundationalist, relativist and other. In this context, deconstruction calls not only for justice but for responsibility<sup>216</sup>. Following this:

1. Justice is not simply rule-following. It is not lawful, or rather justice is not law insofar as law is based in the elements of calculation and particular determinations. While it is just that there are such things, they are not equivalent to justice. Instead, there is a difficult and unstable relation between the two. Justice is a relation of *différance*; infinite, incalculable, rebellious to rule and foreign to symmetry, heterogeneous and heterotropic. Law concerns itself with determined forms: legitimacy or legality, stabilisation, and calculation, “a system of regulated and coded prescriptions” (ibid: 22). Law is always internal to language games and specific individuations, while justice is irreducible to both and appears as the sublime real; the great

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<sup>216</sup> Responsibility is defined by Derrida as the very concept that “regulates the justice and appropriateness (*justesse*) of our behaviour, of our theoretical, practical, ethico-political decisions” (Derrida, 1992: 20).

outside. In this context judgement, in order to be just, must not only follow certain rules and laws, but in its act always assume, approve and confirm these values through an act of interpretation which is always simultaneously an act of reinstitution (ibid: 23). Such a ‘fresh judgement’ as a repetition may conform to a pre-existing rule, but always reinstitutes, reinvents and provides interpretation upon it<sup>217</sup>. Responsibility in such a judgement requires not simply a conformity to the rules and laws, i.e. a conservative reproduction or mechanical repetition. Rather, for a decision to be just and responsible, it must be both regulated and without regulation, determined but without determination; it must both conserve the law and also destroy or suspend it in order to be just (ibid: 23). Each judgment is always other, and each decision requires “an absolutely unique interpretation, which no existing, coded rule can or ought to guarantee absolutely” (ibid: 23). To respond in the name of justice, one must reinvent singularly to speak the response (Derrida, 1999: 72). As Caputo suggest, “[j]ustice is never found in the present order, is never present to itself, is never gathered unto itself” (Caputo, 1997: 154).

2. Justice presents us with a crisis of the undecidable. Because of the necessity of interpretation, justice realised as judgment is never exercised without a decision that cuts or divides (Derrida, 1992: 24). Here the decision always passes through undecidability. The undecidable is not the indeterminate oscillation between two contradictory positions, each equally imperative, but the obligation to speak something heterogeneous, something which is foreign to the order of the calculable and the rule (ibid: 24). Here our judgement is never absolutely guaranteed or mechanical precisely because it must break with the reproduction of rules in order to speak into a specific context; i.e., it must be individuated. If this were not the case, such a judgement

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<sup>217</sup> This process bears important resemblance to Bhaskar’s transformative model of social activity.



would in fact be reducible to calculation and cease to be a judgement (ibid: 24). Rather, it is precisely because the undecidable remains caught that it prevents the assurance of presence or any certitude which would guarantee us of the justice of our judgment (ibid: 24-5). However, justice requires embodiment. Accordingly, “justice is not simply outside the law, it is something which transcends the law, but which, at the same time, requires the law” (Derrida, 1999: 72-73).

3. Finally, justice prompts the urgency of intervention that always obstructs the horizon of knowledge. Here horizon is properly understood as the union of Dionysus and Apollo as “both the opening and the limit that defines an infinite progress or a period of waiting” (Derrida, 1992: 26). Justice, however unrepresentable it may be, is impatient. A decision is always required ‘immediately’ in the context of a specific time and place, with certain resources at hand under the limitations of language and knowledge. It cannot furnish itself with infinite information and even if it did have all this at its disposal, the moment of judgement always remains a finite moment of urgency and precipitation, an individuation which must take place and which must speak into a context (ibid: 26). This decision is forced upon us, and entails that we must rend time and space, and defy dialectics in order to present what is unrepresentable (ibid: 26).

It is here that judgmental rationality comes into play. As Derrida suggests, undecidability does not and should not entail indeterminacy (Derrida, 1988: 148). The purpose of judgment is to cut through the undecidability which arises from the intensive and determinate oscillation of possibilities in defined situations in order to articulate the various differential relations and forces which allow for such determinations to take place in the first place. The goal of this is the creation and relative stabilisation of a descriptive or explanatory account, made possible

through an interpretative decision coupled with a transcendental analysis. To decide on the criteria by which such a decision should be made is not a simple matter, nor one that is easy to outline. On the one hand it must include a certain productive correspondence which is willing to at once present and deconstruct both the phenomena of analysis and the guardrails of tradition which are used to present the phenomena (ibid: 148). Such a gesture does not allow for arbitrary creativity or an interpretative reading *ex nihilo* or without using prior rules (ibid: 148). Rather, the resulting interpretation will necessarily be something of a doubling up or the creation of an explanation which attempts to provide the best account under the best possible conditions and with maximal efficacy of a particular phenomenon in order to articulate something irreducible which must be, as it were, brought to light without effacing the openness, *différance* and difference of the object and the structures which allows for its presentation. The norms which guide this process are not absolute or ahistorical; i.e. they are epistemically relative. They rely on socio-institutional and practical conditions and considerations which are mobile and founded upon complex conventional structures and language games which must themselves be deconstructed even as they are necessarily enacted. The reason, however, for choosing one articulation or one language game over another, or one account of reality over another, will always be particular to the context and result from a complex coordination between the discourses being deployed, the nature of the phenomena being analysed, the social context in which this analysis is being conducted and, as always, the necessity of deconstruction. Nevertheless, while certain accounts will be better placed to account for the nature of things, the relation between judgment, words, concepts, language games, discourse, things, truths and referents, in short ‘realism’, is only ever contingently and speculatively established and cannot be guaranteed by some meta-discursive or methodological assurance. Judgment must necessarily employ pre-existing rules and criteria, including the meta-syntax of language (outlined by Lyotard) and the referential and meta-phorical limitations (outlined by

Derrida) in order to ‘present’ its analysis without succumbing to the metaphysics of closure, presence and identity. Here, judgmental rationality takes on the quality of a practical wisdom (phronesis) which attempts to co-ordinate and balance these different and often seemingly contradictory elements. In this context, such an ‘inference to the best possible explanation’ will depend upon the reliability of the background theories and beliefs with respect to which the account is judged while simultaneously attempting to move beyond those theories and beliefs; i.e. it is a dialectical process (Boyd 1989). Accordingly, the reason for accepting one account of things over another rests in a delicate judgement of which account (or accounts) are able to more productively interpret, describe and provide an explanation for the appearance of certain phenomena in a particular context. As such, while differing accounts may have features which are more or less successful, more or less predictive, more or less accurate, features that are liked, features that are abhorred and features which more easily mesh with background theories, this should not lead us to an indeterminate relativism or indecision before the overwhelming complexity of the situation, but neither should it lead to a singular embrace of a particular vision of reality over the alternatives. Rather, the actual manner in which a realist co-ordination and judgement between competing elements takes place (in particular between correspondence, coherence and explanatory power) resembles a mixture of Bhaskarian transcendental argumentation and Bachelardian critical rectification, situated within a Lakatosian account of progressive and degenerating research programmes encompassing the complex relationship between empirical and practical verification or falsification operating within a broader network of concepts and background theories, all coupled with a healthy degree of Feyerabendian epistemological anarchism which refuses to prescribe a single and universal methodology for attaining scientific truth or providing a guarantee for scientific progression. Reality remains an ongoing site of contestation even as we come to deeper knowledge of it. Yet, within this context, the immediate and guiding normativity of any

judgment, that is to say, the ethical impulse driving judgment, remains the desire to do justice to reality which entails accepting within certain limits – that is, not entirely accepting – the givenness of a context, its closure and stubbornness while simultaneously deconstructing and exposing its deconstructibility (Derrida, 1988: 152).

This is a necessarily performative moment, and because of this there is always an excessive haste in interpretation and representation. The incalculable justice requires us to calculate in the present, to speak what is properly unspeakable and present what is un-present-able in a moment. But, because of this, there is always the future of thought, an openness of the ‘to come’, which distinguishes the future from a mechanical repetition of the present. Any postmodern realism finds its movement and motivation in this always unsatisfied appeal. Realism faces this infinite demand of justice, for justice, as both the demand for an intervention in the present, and the deconstruction of the present (ibid: 19). In the name of justice, judgment, realism, representation and mimesis are critical exercises which never quite result in a good conscience because we have never done quite enough to fulfil our obligation. But neither does this leave us with a bad conscience insofar as we do justice and seek to do justice to the world in our representations and judgements. The cycle of judgment, construction and deconstruction always requires further intervention. Accordingly, in order to be consistent with itself, realism should not remain in a purely speculative, theoretical or academic discourse. Instead, it desires to change and transform concepts and materiality through interventions, in “an efficient and responsible, though always, of course, very mediated way” (ibid: 9). This is a perpetual process of deconstruction, formation, reformation, transformation, improvement and perfectibility, i.e. a process in the name of permanent revolution (Derrida, 1999: 72). This notion of justice as entailing judgment, the need to speak of the real but the impossibility of doing so, of doing justice to the other, to different language games and to the other of language itself, is the proper

position, the proper conundrum of a postmodern realist concerned with the pursuit of justice and the pursuit of the real. This is the difficulty task of doing justice to the real while being realistic about what this entails; using something as equivocal as language, discourse and conceptuality to represent something as complex, differentiated and contested as reality.

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