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Editorial Introduction

Facing Precarity

Chris Rudge
University of Sydney

But what was interesting was that we all dispersed before the final announcement was made, because we didn't want to hear it, and we didn't want to see it. We all knew it was coming, but we didn't want to see the fanfare, we didn't want to see the ceremony, we certainly, I think, didn’t… want to see Trump’s face, quite frankly.

Also sprach Judith Butler in an interview with David Runciman on Talking Politics, a podcast recorded at the University of Cambridge in the immediate wake of Donald J. Trump’s election to President-elect.¹ Among her myriad incisive remarks, the final line in the passage above is illuminating—although not because it is incisive. It offers no cool-headed explanation for Trump’s ascension (that is something Butler does elsewhere in the interview). Instead, it conveys Butler’s desire to avoid facing Trump, an admission as candid as it is non-intellectualised (in the Freudian sense of “intellectualisation”). And it is illuminating precisely because it so straightforward, and acknowledges so openly perhaps what is power’s most frightening and
abject dimension: its visual dimension, and particularly the visual image of its “face.”

It is not the first time Butler has emphasised the affective power of faces. Previously Butler has called on Emmanuel Levinas (often said to be “everything to everyone”) to underscore the importance of the human face. And although Butler recognises that the Levinisian face is “not precisely or exclusively a human face,” this face presents itself in her essay collection of 2004, Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence, a book written in response to 9/11. The volume undertakes to enact a “cultural transposition” of Levinas’s philosophy of the face so as to bring into focus “a conception of ethics that rests upon an apprehension of the precariousness of life, one that begins with the precarious life of the Other.” In the book’s preface (a word with uncanny valences here), Butler argues that to apprehend or to “view” another’s face—or, better, the Other’s face—is to perform a civic duty. It is to act charitably and empathically, to afford a measure of recognition to those who live precarious lives: the marginalised, the destitute, the poverty-stricken. “Certain faces must be admitted into public view,” she writes, “for some keener sense of the value of life, all life, to take hold.” The face then functions as a guarantor—maybe the guarantor—of one’s dignity. To “show one’s face” is to petition for care, to ask for empathy. In turn, to apprehend and account for the petitioner’s face is to relent to their supplication. It is to be reminded of the value of “all life.” In such interlocutions as these, the face is foundational.

Alas, many faces are invisible—or, perhaps worse, visible only ever as monstrous. It is a situation with thick ramifications. “Those who remain faceless or whose faces are presented to us as so many symbols of evil,” Butler points out, “authorize us to become senseless before those lives we have eradicated, and whose grievability is indefinitely postponed.” Subject to the familiar systems of racial and class profiling under mediations, faces have been reduced to immutable signs. Devoid of potential meanings, their denotations hyperstatic, faces are knowable only by means of a “senseless” optics. They are detectable only as so many synecdoches for other concepts:
race, religion, ethnicity—anything that mitigates the “value” of that human life. A “senseless” reading of faces would thus be one that is “authorized” to dismiss that affective experience, that aleatory flight of feeling, that comes with gazing at a face. It is one that would sooner repudiate all that the Romantics valorised about visualising, about seeing and feeling with nature, than attempt to redevelop such senses and sensibilities. Such a senseless reading would also establish itself with the certitude of positivism, and impose the strictures—“build the walls”—of criteriological, taxonomic thought around a face and its meaning. These are practices of “dysrecognition.” However, to bring this notion into consonance with Butler’s idiom, these dysrecognitions are not just cognitive but performative. Informed as we are by mediatisation, one does not just (or even) think “This face is forgettable, that face worth remembering; this face dangerous, that face benign.” Instead, one performs these operations: by averting one’s eyes, dispersing from a scene (as Butler’s candid narrative illustrates), moving from one community or neighbourhood to another, and so on.

In the Australian context, there persists an obvious absence from the mediascape of many kinds of other faces. Rarely seen are the faces of those who have sought asylum in Australia, many of them children; they remain stranded in the immigration detention centres of Nauru, Christmas Island, the Kimberley, Villawood, and elsewhere. Most of the Indigenous peoples who live in parlous conditions in the north of the continent, in a region twice the size of France, where shortages of water persist, such as in the ironically named Utopia (the Urapuntja communities), remain similarly invisible. And the same applies to the many thousands of victims of domestic and family violence across the country (an exception is 2015 Australian of the Year Rosie Batty). The sheer imperceptibility of these faces, of these marginalised groups and the phenomena that torment them, not only allows their “senseless” social exclusion to continue; it also enables their various forms of precarity to amplify and metastasise. That which remains unseen, Michel Foucault attested in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, remains unchallenged and unchanged. And throughout all of his writing, Foucault variously reasserted the view. Only a
disciplinary *optics*, one that would subvert the *sine qua non* of the closed institution by entering it, gazing back at it, and enacting a form of “counterveillance,” could establish the kind of force necessary to bring about meaningful changes in our political and institutional structures.\(^8\) No doubt this is why, as Deleuze observed, *Discipline and Punish* (for one) employs all kinds of “optics and color” to vividly illustrate and supplement Foucault’s many insightful “theatrical analyses” of power and punishment in prisons. For if “speaking is not seeing” (as Deleuze, again, observes, this time quoting from Blanchot), then it falls to the speaker, the writer, to make up for this lack, to compensate for this imagistic void intrinsic in writing. And it falls to them to do so with an intensive form of pictorial adumbration. To cite only one example from Deleuze’s reading, when Foucault prompts the reader to picture the “red on red of the tortured inmates,” the illustration begins to make up for the prisoners’ invisibility. The optics are a counterresponse to the prisoners’ absence, an attempt to repair and redress the prisoners’ textual effacement.\(^9\)

Only months ago, the power of prison optics became conspicuous in Australia. The source, some disturbing footage of an Indigenous minor, Dylan Voller, who had been detained in two juvenile detention centres in Darwin and Alice Springs, appeared in the investigatory documentary “Australia’s Shame,” aired by *Four Corners*.\(^10\) The victim of a series of brutal, abusive beatings by detention centre guards, Voller, then fourteen years old, was stripped naked and assaulted, his trauma writ large on his face and his abuse captured in many long minutes of security recordings. Later, in a different series of visions, photographs captured a different, but equally disturbing scene. Now seventeen years old, Voller was sat in a restraint chair, his arms tied down to the chair’s arms, a black hood covering his face. It was a striking cloak, not just because it both obscured Voller’s head and impaired his vision, but because it also recalled those cloaks that prisoners once wore in the electric chair, or while being publicly hanged, in jurisdictions outside Australia.

And yet, Voller’s face was not the only one to be obscured in the report. Also hidden were the faces of the prison guards who
abused Voller. Yet they were masked differently: not by a cloak, but by a blurred form of digital pixelation, presumably to protect their legal innocence. (They had not, after all, been convicted of any wrongdoing.) And although the pixelation might be thought to have formed a neutral mask for them, what it tends to realise, as Paul Virilio has argued, is another kind of effacement. Here it inscribed in the guards’ faces and bodies a new “visibility.” This was a salience not mitigated or erased by pixelation, but made even more marked by it, a salience not to be ignored as meaningless but to be more attentively registered. It was a salience “defined by its unreadability.” Pixelation, in this case and more generally, fails to retain or protect the humanity of those it purports to obscure. Instead, it brings into even sharper focus the uncanny performances of these faceless bodies. It highlights not just their actions but what are perhaps the most typical effects of effacement: alienation and dehumanisation.

But perhaps equally as disturbing as Voller’s mistreatment by these faceless men—and just as unsettling as his own effacement by hood—was Voller’s and his fellow detainees’ more general absence from the news media before this episode’s airing. When images of Voller and the other abuse victims finally appeared, it was “shocking,” and repulsive enough to prompt immediate executive intervention. A mere twelve hours after the broadcast, the Prime Minister announced the government’s intention to issue a Royal Commission, its task to inquire into and report on the abuses at these prisons.

These events and these considerations are likely to call to memory the sixteenth-century proverb “Out of sight, out of mind.” The phrase has long summarised how the absence of visual images not only conditions but constitutes our responses to ideas and events. The corollary, which Butler’s critique implies, is that when certain faces appear before us—those of victims of war, of violence, or exclusion—the visual impressions are inspiring, even catalytic. Moved by a great pathos, we can do no other than mourn their traumas or losses in overtures of pity, grief, and anger. A notable illustration of the point is the case of Omran Daqneesh, a five-year-old Syrian boy injured in an Aleppo airstrike, whose face appeared before the world, to be
seen by millions the globe over, on the front pages of the *New York Times*, the *London Times*, and online. Sat at an orange chair, his face covered in blood, his body layered with soot and dust, Daqneesh was promptly described in many accounts as the paradigmatic “symbol of Syrian suffering.”14 Another example is that of Ayaln Kurdi, the drowned Syrian boy whose body washed ashore on a Turkish beach in late 2015, his death widely commiserated on social media with the hashtag “#KiyiyaVuranInsanlik,” or “humanity washed up ashore.”15 Multiple images of Kurdi’s lifeless body appeared on the front pages of newspapers and online media, leading one student journalist to attest to such images’ democratic service: “The power to shock is a vital instrument of journalism, and therefore democracy.” They engendered a similar response from Douglas Brinkley, professor of history at Rice University: “once in a while, an image breaks through the noisy, cluttered global culture and hits people in the heart and not the head.”16 Like the human face, images of suffering sing out, cry out, for our notice, lying before us as like so many forewarnings.

And yet many have placed less faith in the power of photographs, just as many have been sceptical of such images as these, which urge us to reflect on precarious life. Christopher Dickey, for one, sees something of a fetishistic, even erotic, element in the reproduction of catastrophe, that there is “something obscene” in the production of these pictures. “Shall we call it disaster porn?” he asks, before dismissing the idea. That would be “too easy,” he concludes, because classifying these photos as a kind of pornography, even ironically, “lets us compartmentalize the horror, and lets us do what we really want to do with it: forget it about it.”17 But Dickey’s question is cogent—and his suggestion nothing new. The phrase “disaster porn,” for instance, is usually credited to the novelist Pat Cadigan, who recorded it in his 1991 cyberpunk novel, *Synners*. There, a hacker named Valjean describes her bedroom setup. Her wall, which features a different “screen for every porn channel,” is a glossary of porn categories, ranging from “disaster porn,” through “food porn,” to “tech-fantasy porn.”18 Porn, we should know by now, is not simply about sex. Inevitably it is also a metonym for masturbation, and, as such, its
associations cut across a wide spectrum. As often as porn is consumed by the modern, independent, sex-positive subject, it is characterised as an unhealthy indulgence, in critical theory, addiction studies, or theology. Perhaps this is why “porn,” when used as a modifying noun, connotes both *jouissance* and paraphilic obsession: its valences remain both positive and negative. The Indigenous journalist Amy McQuire adopted the idiom when she recently criticised the SBS television series *First Contact*, a program in which celebrities make “first contact” with Indigenous Australian culture. McQuire cited the program as an example of “poverty porn and trauma TV.” But if porn can be as varied—and as freighted—as this, and if there is such a thing as precarity porn, what does it mean to consume it?

Theorists of pornography have lately begun to grapple with the genre’s increasing heterogeneity. Porn’s contemporary definitions, we learn, are “explosively expansionary,” its criteria having come “unmoored from artistic basics with stunning alacrity.” But reader response theory might allow us to see how these images of people caught in disasters, those who face precarity whom we call the precariat, might elicit the same affectivities as pornography. Both imageries, one could say, compel viewers to gaze at a rare, taboo, and loaded subject. And yet, being human, or humans, the subject is also intimately familiar. In states of pain, danger, and traumatic injury, the human face is strikingly expressive, perhaps no less so than when it bends in the rapture of sexual excitement. Both faces, we can say, might stimulate the one who apprehends them. And in both kinds of scenes one sees a projection of a subject’s face, one that calls out for special examination, inviting a study of its “face-work.” Projected before us, the face compels us to scrutinise its “micro-movements,” as Deleuze calls them. It asks us to detect its semiotic function, its indexicality, before too long either it or its viewer has nurtured a pathic, erotic, or some other response into being.

These reflections on the faces of precarity and pornography are doubtless provocative, perhaps even scandalous. But they only barely suggest the photographer’s collusion in the portrayal of disaster, and only allude to the way in which a photographer might aid and abet the
exhibition of tragedy. It is a role that Susan Sontag criticised in her *On Photography*, some three decades ago:

... the act of photographing is more than passive observing. Like sexual voyeurism, it is a way of at least tacitly, often explicitly, encouraging whatever is going on to keep happening. To take a picture is to have an interest in things as they are, in the status quo remaining unchanged... to be in complicity with whatever makes a subject interesting, worth photographing.²³

Sontag’s view, as widely noted, shares something with that of Roland Barthes. In the essay “Shock-Photos,” Barthes remarks that “photographs exhibited to shock us have no effect at all.” The problem for Barthes is that the photographer of the shocking photograph “has too generously substituted himself for us,” where “too generously,” of course, means too selfishly. The photographer has stolen from us the privilege of determining the photograph’s meaning by ourselves.²⁴ In this way the work is more prescription than description, its meaning (for there can be only one, so narrow is its creator’s motive) too fixed, in fact overdetermined, to begin with. But if the photograph exhibited to shock is to be dismissed—for its voyeurism, its complicity in the subject’s suffering, or for its overdetermination—what is there to condemn in the case of the unmediated sensory image? What can be criticised about the real-life image, about the face that presents itself directly before our eyes, a living thing, the subject of our vision?

Central to Sontag’s and Barthes’s criticisms of photography is that photographers exert an excessive degree of control over what their viewers see, as well as what their subject can say. This is why, for Barthes, news media photographs are so much more shocking than artistic ones. The former’s “naturalness,” he writes, compels “the spectator to a violent interrogation,” one that is unencumbered by the imposing, “demiurgric presence” of the photographer.²⁵ But what could be any less encumbered than real life, than our minds and bodies, the oldest technologies we have under our control, as they directly encounter the face of precarious life? With this question we are
compelled to draw a distinction between the photographed face and that of a real-life human in our midst, between the mediatized face and that which we see “on the ground.” It is also to evoke a Cartesian formulation of optics, focused on different ways of seeing—embodied versus non-corporeal, mental versus organic.

So what does it mean, in this context, to shun a face—to avert one’s eyes as a new face appears, but to meet the face of another? What does it mean to become the master of one’s own “facial recognition” apparatus, to acknowledge the value of one face while ignoring that of another? And what does it mean to lose control of this same apparatus, to discover that our cognitive bearings have become so disoriented that we “forget” a face that we know—or should know?

Of course, forgetting and repressing are not the same, just as looking and overlooking (which is to say selectively ignoring, choosing to “not see”) are different. Different degrees of consciousness contour and constitute each category. But is the impulse or trieb that leads one, such as Butler, to ignore or avoid the abject image of power, to avoid seeing the face of someone like Trump, the same as that which leads one to avoid encountering the face of a war-injured infant, to overlook this face of utter powerlessness?

Butler suggests that to avoid a face is to deny to its owner the palliation of one’s grief. In averting our eyes, we “indefinitely postpone” the other’s “grievability.” The claim is unsurprising if one understands the function of grief as political resistance, as Butler herself understands it in Antigone’s Claim (2000), her book-length study of Antigone, the daughter of Oedipus and Oedipus’s mother, Jocasta. Recalling Eve Kosovsky Sedgwick’s description of “reparative reading,” Butler’s study of Antigone reveals how this figure’s grief is really a means of restitution and reparation. To mourn an “unspeakable” loss, we discover, is to challenge the structures that both organise and authorise public grief itself. Antigone’s grief for her brother Polyneices is proscribed under her uncle Creon’s law—it is “explicitly prohibited by edict.” So, in grieving and burying her brother, Antigone directly and willfully arrogates the laws and norms of Thebes. To be sure, it is in an act of political defiance, but it is so much more than this too, especially
when one accounts for the dubious genealogical and kinship lineages that structure the authority of that polis. And though yet she grieves for Polyneices, Antigone does not grieve for her other brothers, one of whom is also her father, Oedipus. Rather, Antigone’s grief for them, as Butler notes, “remains unspoken,” just as silent as her grief for her fiancé, Haemon (Creon’s son), who suicides at the end of Sophocles’s drama, following Antigone’s own suicide. Selectively distributed, Antigone’s grief thus allows her to reassert authority in circumstances where the “violent forgetting of primary kin” would ordinarily signal, in Butler’s words, the “inauguration of symbolic masculine authority.” For if Antigone’s quiet sequestration into domesticity would signify her acquiescence to the patrilineal order, then her outpouring of grief, her admission of her brother into the class of the “grievable,” and her willingness to defy Creon by asserting her family’s burial rights, constitutes a seditious rejection of this patriarchal state, a sedition driven not only by Antigone’s vehement defence of kinship relations, but by her mission to reconfigure the alliances and coalitions one is able to forge within the polis. What is more, we could also view Antigone’s grief process in terms of different ways of facing precarity. Using my rough schema, Antigone’s selective grieving amounts to a selective encounter with a ranges of faces, her insistence on grieving for and burying Polyneices another way of viewing his face.

Of course, only a very blurry line could distinguish what has been forgotten from what has been repressed. Has Antigone forgotten her other brothers, or has she repressed them? Butler proposes that Antigone’s grief for Polyneices might be a condensation of her grief for all her kin. Her grief for one is her grief for all, a singular, cathetic way of expressing the sweep of kinship feelings she has otherwise resisted. Antigone has not forgotten about those other brothers, has not mislaid their faces; nor has she discharged the emotional energy associated with their deaths. She has channeled all of it into the “singularity of her brother,” producing what is for Butler a “suspect” conflation. But perhaps even more suspect than this transposition are its oedipal elements, as Patricia J. Johnson points out. In an essay titled “Women’s Third Face,” she writes that Antigone is “unable
or unwilling to make the socially-requisite transition away from her oedipal attachment [first to her father, and then to her brother] through exogamic marriage.”

Having already lost her father, her first love object, Antigone grieves instead for Polyneices, transferring what is quite literally her oedipal desire for her father to her brother, and thence mourning his loss as if it were that of her father, which is to say that of a lover.

This reading has broader implications for the processes of empathy. It suggests that one’s ability to recognize another’s suffering—or, as I am describing it (following Butler), to apprehend a face—may require one to be moved by some erotic or libidinal **trieb**. It is an implication already suggested by the voyeuristic and narcissistic drives which Sontag and Barthes impute to the shock photographer. Empathy, notably, has often been regarded as foundationally narcissistic, as something that is always already invested with what Freud called “sexual overvaluation.” And as Hilary Davis writes, “We may think that when we empathize we see and feel through the eyes of the other, but in fact what we are doing is reducing the Otherness to what can be misrecognized as their sameness to our imagined Selves.”

And so empathy has always been a metaphoric leap, one that seems hardly possible. The prefix “em,” from the Greek for “in,” has always required us to think of empathy as a process through which we put another’s suffering—their pathos—“in” to our own bodies and minds. But then again, even Freud offers a qualification to the proposition that empathy requires narcissism, identifying nothing less than love as the balancing rule between selfish desire and selflessness. “When someone is completely in love,” Freud writes, “altruism converges with [the] libidinal object cathexis.” Love, then, can allow for the harmonious and sustainable confluence of sexual desire and empathy.

But the opposite might also be true for the resolution of what might be called pathic conflicts, such as oedipal conflicts. To be brought to an end, such attachments may call for a denial of love. They may need us to forget, that is, both the altrustic and sexual impulses that converge to form what we call love. While putatively a “bad female,” Antigone’s grief for Polyneices ironically affords her the wherewithal
to do precisely this. By burying her brother, she can express her altruism while also forgetting her oedipal (read incestuous) love for him. Ironically, it is precisely this kind of resolution that Creon’s edict, although implicitly, also seeks to bring about. Unlike the many examples of “normal” women in the play (many feminist critics have identified Ismene, Antigone’s sister, or Argia, Polynice’s wife, as the normative foils to Antigone), Antigone is not bound by the exogamous mores of the State, regulated as they are by sanction or taboo (or, as in this case, an edict). Instead, she nurtures what Isabelle Torrance calls this “at least obsessive, if not incestuous” relationship with Polynice, an affiliation characterised by that confluence of altruistic and libidinal forces just mentioned. If Antigone cannot bear to show obedience before Creon’s symbolic edict, it is because the laws of the polis cannot substitute for, and thus cannot themselves resolve, her proscribed desires for Polynice. Only her mode of grieving, her sprinkling of a light veil of dust over her brother’s cadaver—an act that is at once a burial and not a burial, at once a recognition of Polynice’s face and an effacement of the same—can substitute for and thus resolve her taboo feelings. It is a ritual that all at once allows Antigone to forget her unconscious desire to revive her brother—and to forget him—but also to embrace this loss. It is, in Derrida’s words, the final “dissociation that causes [and allows] the organic to return to the inorganic.” To forget, then, is to dissociate. It is to cause or to allow what lives now to wither.

But the causes of forgetting are ampler still. In some cases, face forgetting is a pathological problem, its symptoms grouped under the nosological category prosopagnosia. This is a disorder marked enough to repudiate and exhaust even the most determined of psychoanalytic interpretations. Those who find themselves diagnosed with prosopagnosia, often called face blindness, exhibit an impaired ability to recognise all human faces, detecting neither their closest friends’ faces nor their own face in a mirror. More frequently, face forgetting, as with Freudian slips, is conceived of not as a pathological but a normative feature of the human predicament, where to make cognitive errors (“to err”) is constitutive.
In his 1898 essay “The Psychical Mechanism of Forgetfulness,” Freud reported an episode in which he mislaid not the face but the name of the famous Italian artist Luca Signorelli. Indeed, Freud remembered both the artist’s paintings and his face vividly. Volunteering his analysis some years later, in his twelfth seminar of 1965, Jacques Lacan suggested that Freud had identified himself with Signorelli. Thus, the “sudden illumination” of Signorelli’s face—an illumination “given to the very image of the one whose name is lost”—signified “that which in language can only be expressed by the lack.” If we now imagine transposing this episode’s elements to our everyday experience of perceiving a face, it becomes possible to propose an experimental psychic process. The assumption is that to truly behold and recognise a face, to imbue its image with a “sudden illumination,” is to temporarily forget the owner’s proper name, and to forget all those associations that occur as we perceive the face. The reasoning is analogical: just as Freud’s temporary forgetfulness coincides with a rich memory of the artist’s works and face, throwing focus on their humanness, so might focusing on a person’s face allow us to briefly forget their name, and instead to throw focus on their work and humanness. We might look upon that person whose name we forget as if seeing their face for the first time. In this moment, all of the corresponding “proper” features coincident with their name disappear, suddenly absent from our minds. The theory is that having become so disoriented, our senses newly deprived both of the subject’s name and its associations, we might find ourselves better able to register only that subject’s humanness.

To remember or forget, of course, requires us to have learnt something in the first place, a memory which we may retrieve or mislay. The same is true of repression, which, as Adrian Johnston observes, “requires some minimal, concrete experiential content which it can exclude from consciousness.” But this amnesia or forgetfulness associated with repression, this excluding of content from consciousness, must surely be triggered by a protective or defensive mechanism. It reflects our unconscious or subconscious yearning to fend off threats, a trait that is as hard-wired in humans as any other.
But since threats are often predictable, and may be made subject to cognitive and metacognitive analysis, they might also be *consciously* avoided, resisted even before they are immediate apprehended. A concrete example is this: before a threatening image may even come into one’s view, one may take the pre-emptive, conscious decision to avert one’s eyes. In this way, the subject can sidestep any coming to realisation of the “imagined” or “predicted” vision, altogether circumventing the threat. Cognitive psychologists have confirmed the principle in gaze avoiders. Gaze avoidance, they agree, may “function as an attempt to avoid signs of social threat.” And it is precisely this kind of conscious response that we encounter when Butler takes the decision to disperse before the all but inevitable announcement of Trump’s ascension to President-elect, a decision to exclude certain yet-to-be realised content from the mind.

But what exactly causes one to avoid retrieving memories, and whether we agree with Freud’s repressive hypothesis, seem less important questions now, in this era of machine learning and automation, than they were in the heyday of psychoanalysis. Facebook uses applied machine learning to teach computers sophisticated object detection, for instance. The capability is impressively demonstrated when one uploads a photo to the website and discovers that Facebook has correctly and automatically identified, or “tagged,” those whose faces appear in the photos. We do not wonder why Facebook (or the machine that processes Facebook’s code) proceeds to recognise or “recall” the names of the people who appear in the images. That would be silly. And questions along the lines of “Could Facebook elect not to tag the photo?” are hardly worth posing. For we know the answers. All that really matters in this equation is that Facebook’s code is permitted to run without any interruption—that the program is not derailed or corrupted. But in this example, we also see one way in which facial recognition can be a cold and unfeeling procedure. Facial recognition is often less a virtue borne of empathy or social sensitivity (much less a hermeneutical deduction) than it is the effect of sheer catalepsis, a product of the programming and the data-processing power of the modern computer.
Similarly nonhuman procedures have arisen in the case of reading and lexicography. For instance, the grammarian Bryan Garner recently extolled the virtues Google Books’s Ngram viewer, an automated online application that allows linguists and scholars to better understand the history and morphological evolution of a given word or phrase. Enter a word and specify a time period in the web application’s text fields, and it will crawl for hits within Google Books's prolific corpus, producing a line graph that charts the word’s publication frequency. Scanning a wealth of “data” derived from a massive repository of more than five million digitised books, the tool searches over 360 billion English words to find its results, scouring a database that Google Books began amassing in 2004. In 2011, one study found that Google’s collection of books had become so gargantuan that it could not actually be “read by a human.” And if one were hubristic enough to attempt reading only the database’s English-language entries, this task alone would take some 80 years (provided one neither ate nor slept, and had selected only about eleven years’ worth of the database’s books).

Broken down into its parts, the Ngram viewer, like Facebook’s automated face detection software, is a combinatorial of digitisation, optical technology, fast computer processing power, and big data. Taken in sum, the Ngram viewer constitutes something of a superhuman reader—a strict machine that deploys an analytical mode of reading far exceeding human potential. And yet, it cannot be denied that the apparent “reader” of these works remains utterly nonhuman. Offering little more than a quantitative analysis of the words, it is no more alive (and perhaps even less so) than “Number Five,” the speed-reading robot in John Badham’s schlocky science fiction film, Short Circuit. (The film is a precursor to Steven Spielberg’s A.I. and an obvious antecedent of older stories of the cyborg genre, such as Pinnochio and Frankenstein.)

Of course, the posthuman or cyborgian thematic, with its tertiary fixation on the humanness of many automation processes, probably reached its height through the 1980s to early 2000s, when Donna Haraway’s influential essay, “A Cyborg Manifesto” and, later, such
critical monographs as N. Katherine Hayles’s *My Mother Was a Computer* (2005) were published.\(^{47}\) For the title of the latter work, Hayles borrowed this striking phrase from the scholar Anne Balsamo. It served not only to remind readers of a time in the early twentieth century when women working as data processors had been known as “computers,” but illustrated “the panoply of issues raised by the relation of Homo Sapiens to Robo sapiens, humans to intelligent machines.”\(^{48}\) In the decade or so between Hayles’s book and the present, this panoply of issues has only deepened and intensified. Now, an ever increasing number of automated machines seems to ricochet only as so many prognostications about the demise of manual, which is to say human, labour. Hence the familiar caution in the opening line of Peter Frase’s 2015 book, *Four Futures*: “Two specters are haunting Earth in the twenty-first century: the specters of ecological catastrophe and automation.”\(^{49}\) And for humanist academics in the twenty-first century (as well as for scientists), the precarious future of knowledge work—and of knowledge itself—is particularly spectral.\(^{50}\) Writes Michael Burawoy:

> Information technology has transformed the labour process so as to make the sale of labour power ever more precarious... [but] at the same time, knowledge is itself subject to commodification, as its production and dissemination is increasingly organized for the needs of those who can buy it, notwithstanding its open dissemination.\(^{51}\)

Moves toward open access (OA) models of publishing notwithstanding, indications of growing concern for authorship rights in the precarious academic and higher education contexts—environments increasingly threatened by privatisation and casualisation—appear all around us.\(^{52}\) In the last two years, petitions requesting better author rights and fairer copyright terms were lodged by editorial staff at two prestigious journals, *Cognition* and *Lingua*, both published by Elsevier.\(^{53}\) One need not undertake a formal political-economic analysis to perceive the for-profit basis of the contemporary publishing model. With a view to
monetise research publications through exorbitant subscription fees, and to limit rates of compensation to authors, the model is clearly the product of so many business-minded CEOs.

But if Google Books distinguishes itself from such publishing companies as Elsevier—perhaps because, as is often said, it does something to help “democratise knowledge”—it could still be criticised for different reasons. For instance, the advent of Google Books has led to the automation of reading, helping to valorise, particularly through its Ngram Viewer, the *quantification* of words and phrases, but doing little to enhance any serious assessment of their quality. Still, the ways in which the Ngram viewer has begun and has yet to reshape our work in the humanities may be seen in more positive lights too. Google Books is a tool that may be readily assimilated into our scholarly modes, and in that way be humanised. It is worth remembering, after all, that humans, not machines, must always be recruited to interpret the data; for as Derrida indicated, it is not the pharmakon that in fact kills or cures, but the talisman's misuse by the user.54

Only last month, Jennifer Howard made a similar point when she warned of the pitfalls of automation paranoia and instead argued for refocused attention on the ways in which humans more commonly use data for their own ill-begotten gains. “It would be a disaster to let this decade spiral into a tech-enriched replay of the 1930s,” she wrote. “Fear technology if you must, but fear the people who control it more.”55 But at the same time as we fear these malevolents who exploit technology for selfish reasons, we should recall the many who put technology to its best public uses, should remember in particular the many social scientists, anthropologists, evolutionary theorists, linguists, and psychologists who have already used Google's Ngram viewer to invent and advance a nuanced modality involving the quantitative analysis of culture, or, as they have called it, the study of “culturomics.”56 Seen in this light, the Ngram viewer is not just an apt allegory for the “precarity” of our humanistic mode of reading, but a useful tool for gauging the linguistic development of cultural ideas.

Ironies aside, one such cultural idea the Ngram viewer allows us to explore is that of “precarity” itself. If I enter that word into the
Ngram viewer’s text fields, along with, say, the years 1800 and 2016, then the application will produce a graph revealing a 0.0000011019 percent increase in the published usages of that word between 1954 (the year of the first recorded usage) and 2008 (the current last available year). As infinitesimal as this figure appears, the graph also indicates a notable upswing from 1960 onward, and another even more dramatic upswing from 2000 and onward. These results, of course, are unsurprising. Like many coinages in the grammar of sociology, the word “precarity” caught on amid a post-World War II explosion in the social sciences more generally. As modern technocratic societies advanced, and education levels increased, so grew the scale and conspicuousness of economic inequality. By 2012, Rob Horning would note the word’s most popular usage—as a shorthand for capitalism’s unwanted side-effects:

The word precarity is becoming increasingly fashionable as a way of describing the effects of neoliberal policy. The concept expresses the sense that the state has broken its ideological promise (what Polanyi posited in *The Great Transformation*) to ameliorate the misery capitalism necessarily generates.\(^{57}\)

Coemergent with the idea of precarity in the latter half of the twentieth century, Horning reminds us, was neoliberalism. The latter is a term that describes both the plans hatched by America’s “ruling circles” to avoid severe recessions in the late 1970s, and the continuation of those policies in various forms in the subsequent years to the present.\(^{58}\) Sometimes regarded as an “overblown notion,” or a “‘mythical enemy’ conjured up by the left,” neoliberalism—like precarity—is a nebulous, sometimes faceless, phenomenon, pervasive and yet difficult to recognise.\(^{59}\)

As well as identifying neoliberalism as a central cause of precarity, scholars have variously defined neoliberal policy by its obverse. Neoliberalism stands against “Keynsian macroeconomic management and the welfare state and the associated social domain,” writes Mitchell Dean.\(^{60}\) These remarks suggest the overarching neoliberal
fantasy not to regulate the economy as a whole but to manage the market narrowly—and, even then, only where extremes or crises appear. Neoliberalism, of course, is not quite so “neo” as its name suggests—and not only because it is now some forty years old. As long ago as the 1970s, in his lectures on biopolitics, Foucault suggested the ways in which neoliberalism was, even then, “no more than the reactivation of old, second-hand economic theories,” and its axioms “just a way of establishing strictly market relations in society.” What was new, however, was the facelessness of this revived attempt to bring about an all-encompassing market economy. As Foucault wrote, this project was now “all the more profound for being insidious and hidden beneath the appearances of neo-liberalism.” Yet despite the senility of its broadest aims, neoliberalism brought new mechanisms to the task of achieving its goals. It involved an unprecedented unbridling of credit loans to Americans, and it inaugurated a systematic dismantling of labour power. This in turn enabled the rise of globalisation and capital migration to China, dramatically increased financialisation, and reified fiscal imbalances between global states during the mid-1970s. That all of this led to instability and increased inequities is not, at least in hindsight, a big surprise. Free of such “countervailing pressures” as wars or disasters, capitalist economies, as Martin Jacques recently observed (citing Thomas Piketty), “naturally gravitate towards increasing inequality.”

But if we explain precarity only as an effect of neoliberalism, we produce only an incomplete definition, one that will never face up to precarity’s moral challenges, its ethical complexities. And if the Ngram viewer has turned us to this oversimple direction, it is perhaps because it is, as I have already suggested, a defective reading tool. It is worth noting, for instance, that my earlier search for “precarity” returned at least one “false positive”: an apparent and curious early use of the word “precarity” indicated in 1954. This datum, however, is not verified or accompanied by any source at all. What is this bump in the graph, then? we ask. The anomaly is perhaps explained by an early English usage of the word in 1952, which is verified elsewhere as almost certainly the first usage in English. It appeared in an article
published in the *Catholic Worker* in which the writer Dorothy Day quotes from a letter written by “saintly priest” Léonce Crenier. In the excerpt, Crenier makes clear his view that precarity is a virtue. Indeed, he seems to lament the *loss* of precarity in modern society:

> Nowadays communities are good, I am sure, but they are mistaken about poverty. They accept, admit on principle, poverty, but everything must be good and strong. Buildings must be fireproof. Here in our monastery we want precarity in everything except the church. These last days our refectory was near collapsing. We have put several supplementary beams in place and thus it will last maybe two or three years more. Someday it will fall on our heads and that will be funny. Precarity enables us better to help the poor."\(^{66}\)

A differently styled valorisation of precarity appears in Levinas’s *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority*, a book first published in French in 1961, then in an English translation in 1969. (As further evidence of its unreliability, the Ngram viewer indicates that the word precarity did not appear in the English translation of Levinas’s volume until 1979, some ten years after its original English appearance.) In the 1969 translation, Levinas’s words are rendered as follows:

> In affirming that the human will is not heroic we have not declared for human cowardice, but have indicated the precarity of courage, always on the verge of its own failure by reason of the essential mortality of the will, which in its exercise betrays itself."\(^{67}\)

For Levinas, the human will is always already in a precarious state, ever teetering on an unsteady edge, “on this moving limit between inviolability and degeneration.”\(^{68}\) And, after all, is precarity not best defined by this state of “dis-courage”—this condition of limbo between peak optimism and failure, between trauma and relief, which one no less than assures when they risk loss and defy hopelessness?
A fine allegory for this point recently appeared on Facebook, when Sydney poet Toby Fitch shared the following composition:

being a precariat sitting outside at a table not a desk at sydney uni piggybacking the wifi to mark papers for western sydney uni editing such and such emailing peopling invoicing kind of keeping an eye on poetry tweets and the news neither of which are news wishing i was writing a poem watching the cops roll by on mountain bikes writing all my clauses as passively as possible

Fitch’s self-identification as “a precariat” is amply explained: he performs casual academic labour in a temporary space, and, luckily, he has found himself able to “piggyback” a wi-fi connection to assist him; and yet—and this is the crux—none of these amenities, including his work, is available to him as a rule. Similarly, as he reads poetry and news reports, Fitch detects that neither of these texts is fresh and, in the case of the news that is “not news,” that it may be “fake news.” Not without irony, then, Fitch’s implication is that one must possess a degree of courage to flourish in these circumstances—or, in a more moderate reading, that such circumstances, in their informality, their unsettling transitoriness, reveal to one the very “precarity of courage.” And yet, it is in a response to Fitch’s composition—in a line uttered by one of his Facebook friends—that we can see further still one of the contemporary paradoxes of precarity. “The sad thing is,” the respondent wrote, “[the] non precariats are envious of your precarity.” As ludic as it is wry, the quip captures something of the pervasiveness of precarity in contemporary society. If, as I have argued, precarity is a term from the sociological grammar, one that denotes the insecure state of the poor and low-wage population, then precarity also now alludes to an instability of the spirit, one that may no more infect those who embrace an avocation—the teacher, nurse, or poet—than it haunts the “non precariat”—the manager, administrator, the executive.

This issue of Philament, our twenty-second, embraces a range of poets, as well as writers, essayists, and reviewers. Adam Hulbert’s
study of Joan Lindsay’s *Picnic at Hanging Rock* draws attention to the many sonic figurations in Lindsay’s novel, offering a fresh reading of the precarious fates of the protagonists in this “preeminent antipodean weird tale.” Blythe Worthy’s study of Rachel Kushner’s 2013 novel *The Flamethrowers* offers a timely problematisation of contemporary identity politics, illuminating new ways in which the novel “exposes feminism’s distinctive markings of precarity.” And Aleksandr Andreas Wansbrough’s essay on Lars von Trier’s *Melancholia* allows us to see the film’s prologue as an example of avant-garde video art. Critics will have already perceived the way in which *Melancholia* allegorises Earth’s cosmic precarity, revealing this planet’s vulnerability in a universe filled with other celestial bodies, all of them potential collision threats. However, Wansbrough’s essay also shows us how von Trier’s film makes genre and aesthetic categories equally precarious—elements ever threatening to collide.

The issue’s short stories—Angelina Koseva’s “The Red Room” and Sian Pain’s “Wildcat”—offer intensive glimpses at precarious milieux in the contemporary cityscape, while varied works of poetry, by Philip Porter, Mona Zahra Attamimi, and Dimitra Harvey, chart their slightly more abstract courses toward this issue’s theme. As always, it is hoped that this issue encourages more scholarship on its theme, and prompts postgraduates in particular to submit to *Philament*’s future issues.

**Notes**


4. It was perhaps science fiction writer Philip K. Dick who coined the term “dysrecognition” in his 1981 essay “My Definition of Science Fiction,” a short paper in which he described science fiction’s role as shocking its readers out of their everyday preconceptions. Catherine S. Ramírez has seen in Dick’s formulation a connection with Freud: “conventions of dysrecognition and estrangement resemble the Freudian

5. At the time of writing, 22 December, 2016, there are nine immigration detention centres listed on the relevant government webpage. (This does not include offshore centres.) See “Detention Facilities Locations,” https://www.border.gov.au/about/immigration-detention-in-australia/locations.

6. Although on the surprisingly resilient health of the 700-strong population in this community, and a set of proposed reasons for this surprising discovery, see Heather Anderson and Emma Kowal, “Culture, History, and Health in an Australian Aboriginal Community: The Case of Utopia,” Medical Anthropology: Cross-Cultural Studies in Health and Illness 31, no. 5 (2012): 438–57.


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25. Ibid., 73.


29. Ibid., 80.


41. On ways in which technology has already reformulated the “hard problem” of consciousness, see, for example, Michael Graziano, “Build-a-Brain,” *Aeon*, 10 July, 2015, https://aeon.co/essays/can-we-make-consciousness-into-an-engineering-problem.


46. Ibid.


com/science/archive/2016/01/elsevier-academic-publishing-petition/427059/.


59. Ibid., 151.

60. Ibid.


62. Ibid.

63. This historical summary is based on Tony Smith’s more detailed overview, which appears in his essay “A Category Mistake in Piketty” (previously cited), 407.


68. Ibid., 237.
The Precarity of the Inarticulate:
Two Kinds of Silence in Joan Lindsay’s *Picnic at Hanging Rock*¹

Adam Hulbert
University of New South Wales

“Miranda…!" There was no answering voice. The awful silence closed in and Edith began, quite loudly now, to scream. If her terrified cries had been heard by anyone but a wallaby squatting in a clump of bracken a few feet away, the picnic at Hanging Rock might yet have been just another picnic on a summer’s day. Nobody *did* hear them. The wallaby sprang up in alarm and bounded away, as Edith turned back, plunged blindly into the scrub and ran, stumbling and screaming, towards the plain.

This early moment of Joan Lindsay’s *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (1967)² is at the centre of a tragedy that ripples outward, spreading beyond the cloistered community of an all-girls boarding school and into the wider society of 1900s Victoria. The fate of a teacher, and of the three girls who wandered off during a school picnic, deep into the Australian bushland of Mount Macedon, remains unknown to the reader. The only clue is the parting scream of a fourth girl: she who is spared the silence inflicted on the others.³

This event is interwoven with two types of silence. Miranda’s silence is that of the rock, which looms precariously over the commu-
nity until its moment of collapse. It is both an absolute silence and a productive force: it produces noise without making its own articulation; it inspires a scream and a landslide, but never projects its own voice. It is this occult silence that makes *Picnic at Hanging Rock* a preeminent antipodean weird tale, one that generates an inexplicable narrative force outside conventional genre categories. The inexplicable mystery was translated to film in 1975 under the direction of Peter Weir, and the tale seems to have lost little of its cultural relevance, having been slated for return as a television miniseries in the near future.

There is a second kind of silence, which envelops the fleeing girl: if Miranda has become the silence of the rock, Edith has become the marginalised voice of the wild. A threat to the institution, Edith can no longer speak with the College’s voice; instead, her scream is the articulation of an elsewhere that cannot be overheard. This second silence is desire; it is the silence that screams, the voice that exhausts itself into nothingness as it runs towards the words of the institution.

In many ways, the novel evokes a soundscape that is rich with silences that are both generative and destructive. Its literary soundscapes create and sustain various listening subjects in a field of plural relations. In this paper I examine these dual approaches to silence in *Picnic* and the precarious subjectivity that these quietudes both allow for and destroy. I also propose strategies for listening to these silences in new ways, reading them as phenomena defined by something other than the absence of sound.

**Silence is Golden: Desire in the Soundscape**

Readers first encounter silence in *Picnic* as biopolitical and European. Silence is a force that implies the domination of written literacy over the spoken word: “At Appleyard College silence was golden, written up in the corridors and often imposed” (15). Silencing in Appleyard acts not only to subjugate the students, but also to control and police the soundscape. The disciplinary apparatus follows the same technics of suppression that allowed for the political silencing of the indigenous population with the doctrine of *terra nullius* (“no one’s land”), which
had been applied by Europeans a little over a century prior—even if not in name—to justify the British colonisation of Australia’s East coast and to silence the land rights and other claims of the country’s indigenous populations.

Although Lindsay downplayed criticism of English colonisation in *Picnic*, she was able to beautifully articulate the seeming contradictions in the soundscapes of European education institutions within the context of the Australian bush in the twentieth century. In her autobiographical *Time Without Clocks* (1962), Lindsay opens the description of “Our School” with a redolent recollection of the schoolyard soundscape as transected by the acoustic traces of varied forces and incursions:

> The busy hum of children’s voices from the little ginger school-house floating out over our paddocks had soon become as much a part of our life at Mulberry Hill as the clucking and cackling from the fowlyard and the continuous bellowing of Fulton’s Bull. Although the main ingredient in the school’s symphony was the basic hum—like the murmur of our own bees under the roof—there were the recurrent overtones, pauses, and changes of tempo with the jangle of the school bell that evoked the clatter of boots on the hard clav of the yard, the staccato shrilling of the teacher’s disciplinary whistle, the burst of throaty warbling of magpies in the school pines. The scholars recited *The Inchcape Rock*, shouted and sang, saluted the flag at the gate with suitable patriotic sentiments every morning at nine o’clock, droned out the multiplications table—even now the triumphant singsong ‘ten tens a hundred’ calls up a drowsy summer afternoon at Mulberry Hill and the shuffle of children’s feet on bare boards.

The technologies in this soundscape include those commonly used to structure the experience of time through sound. In particular, the school bell, an extension of the monastic regulation of time and space through bells, operates to produce a radiant territoriality that reconfigures time around institutional imperatives. However, Lind-
say situates the institution in a wider ecology, problematising any straightforward opposition between nature and technology. The bell, for example, is described as part of a wider “symphony” and, in Picnic, the natural world and the innovations of human settlement follow a similar environmental logic. Mrs Appleyard’s College for Young Ladies is described as having “sprung up” alongside other houses “like exotic fungi following the finding of gold” (8), suggesting that the human desires of the gold rush share the same impulses as those that shape mycelial ecology.

At the close of the above passage in Time Without Clocks, when “the triumphant singsong ‘ten tens a hundred’ calls up a drowsy summer afternoon,” the collapsing of the repetitive multiplication tables into a rhythmic drone is hypnogogic rather than didactic, evoking a journey through differing modes of consciousness. In light of Lindsay’s attention to the relations of sound, repetition, and mental transition, it is unsurprising that the mathematics teacher in Picnic, Greta McGraw, disappears with the girls into atemporality. Through her discipline, McGraw becomes capable of identifying possibilities for new rhythms of relation. On the way to Mount Macedon, for instance, McGraw determines that there is time enough for the picnic by adjusting the timing of the return journey, using the Pythagorean theorem to do so (18). Of course, Pythagoras famously identified a rock as “frozen music,” and by attributing all movement in the universe to sounds that could be heard by the initiate, the Pythagoreans seemingly erased the possibility of objective silence altogether, localising it instead within the uninitiated as the deafening inability to listen to what is always already present.13

The opening passage of Picnic introduces another ever-present droning, this time from cicadas and bees:

Everyone agreed that the day was just right for the picnic to Hanging Rock—a shimmering summer morning warm and still, with cicadas shrilling all through breakfast from the loquat trees outside the dining-room windows and bees murmuring above the pansies bordering the drive. (7)
In this first sentence, the significant relation between sound, stillness, and movement is established. The day is “warm and still,” although haunted with the auguries of motion in its “shimmering” quality. The window, a technology often deployed to silence the soundscape and showcase the landscape, is left open, allowing sound to travel from inside to outside and vice versa. This augurs a kind of erasure of institutional silence as frozen into architecture: with the window closed, only functional sounds—those of the dining hall and the students having breakfast—govern the acoustic space; with the window open, however, this activity is exposed to the unpredictability of the soundscape outside.

The cicadas introduce into the sonic field a kind of droning quality that remains a ubiquitous and multidirectional constant, undergirding the other sounds of the novel, such as the activity surrounding Saint Valentine’s Day and the preparation for the picnic. The auditory expression of the emergence of the insects, which appear en masse after a period of years underground, suggests both the cyclicity of time and the transformative nature of the event. In tracing the role of insect sound in early musical practices, David Rothenburg notes the specific emphasis placed on the cicada in the anthropological research of Marina Roseman. For the Temiar people of the Malaysian Rainforest, the cicada’s sound is of far greater importance than the more tuneful birdsong, because the droning rhythms entrain the listener to enter a threshold consciousness leading to a trancelike loss of self. He draws attention to the song “The Way of Old Woman Cicada”:

Dancing in a slow step
The green tinge of sunset and
The late hour cicada sound
Laaw Laaw marks the time
Of dizziness, whirling and change.

In Picnic, a similar dervish-like trance state is enacted in the final dance of Irma, who in the twilight “got up off the rock where she was lying and began to dance. Or rather to float away, over the warm
smooth stones” (33). During the course of her dance, Irma experiences what composer Marc Couroux has termed a “chronoportation”: a “time travel by amnestic recall, triggered by a given stimulus.”\(^{17}\) In fact, as the novel suggests, Irma is transported to “Covent Garden where she had been taken by her Grandmother at age six, blowing kisses to admirers in the wings, tossing flowers from her bouquet into the stalls” (34).

The narration of this transportive experience relates to Lindsay’s self-reported understanding of the relation between time and consciousness: “I’ve always felt that time is all around one, not just in a long line in a calendar,” she wrote. “I feel that one’s in the middle of time: the past, present and future is really all around and I’m in the middle of it.”\(^{18}\) The dance is the expression of this centre, this middle space, in which being a six-year-old is no less real than being one’s present age. The motif of flowers connects Irma’s experience to Lindsay’s own multimodal sensation of time in the region of Hanging Rock. In *Picnic*’s opening sentence, Lindsay is careful to note that pansies line the drive that leads out of the College and to Hanging Rock. In her own recollections, Lindsay recounts how at age three she uttered her first word while visiting Mount Macedon:

> I was standing in the middle of a bed of pansies—really I’ve got an extraordinary memory for my youth, I really was only three—and I can remember standing up and I suddenly said “beautiful”; looking at the pansies, and they were smelling so wonderful, and I can still remember. And my mother said that was the first time Joan ever opened her mouth.\(^{19}\)

There is a sense that, in her first contribution to the soundscape, Lindsay’s experience is wholly affective: the articulation of this word—“beautiful”—is as much a product of the landscape speaking through her as it is an effect of Lindsay’s own cognition.

The affective responses experienced both by Lindsay and other characters in *Picnic* is related to an involution of the ground and figure, the two categories of perceptual organisation proposed by the Gestalt
psychologists of the early twentieth century. Lindsay studied as a painter prior to beginning a career in professional writing, and later married Daryl Lindsay, another painter, on Saint Valentine’s Day in 1922. Throughout this period, Lindsay had spent time thinking about the landscape in terms of her characters’ relation to the Australian bush. She stated that her impulse to write developed partly from her inability to paint people, and that she switched from painting to writing because she yearned to portray them: “I could draw trees, not badly I think, but that wasn’t enough for me: I wanted to draw people. I was terribly interested in people.” Despite switching mediums, Lindsay retained her keen artistic interest in the relation between character and environment. And it is likely that some of the inspiration for the title Picnic At Hanging Rock came from William Ford’s 1875 painting At the Hanging Rock (1875), which is mentioned in the novel, and has hung at the National Gallery of Victoria, where Lindsay studied, since the Gallery purchased it in 1950.

In response to Stephen Downes’s question in a 1975 interview, “What are the most important things people should get from Picnic at Hanging Rock? What is the novel saying?”, Lindsay replied, “I think the main thing is the effect of the environment on character and vice versa. It’s so tied up with, well, the background, presumably, although I would almost call it the foreground.” Lindsay’s comments reflect her artistic, painterly vision. However, they also help to explain the unusual prominence of soundscape in the novel. Her refusal to fully separate the characters from their environment—to combine them with both the “foreground” and “background”—is part of the imagined horror of the text: namely, the recognised identity that has been transformed through an encounter into the unknown. Gilles Deleuze has described a similar process of human–environment synthesis: “When the ground rises to the surface, the human face decomposes in this mirror... It is a poor recipe for producing monsters to accumulate heteroclite determinations or to over-determine the animal. It is better to raise up the ground and dissolve the form.” Lindsay explicitly evokes the figure/ground involution in the final chapter of Picnic, published separately and posthumously as The Secret of Hanging Rock,
when Miranda describes her relationship to the presence of a stone: “The monolith. Pulling, like a tide. It’s just about pulling me inside out.”

**Silence is Golden**, written in capitals, shouts of an institutionally-articulated subject as the foreground, and expects that this subject pre-exist as separate to a background of institutional time that structures a similarly silenced soundscape. However, silence as an imperative sublimates rather than erases desire, and *Picnic* shows the great strain of maintaining silence in the aftermath of the disappearance. Edith’s scream makes audible the horror that occurs when it is no longer possible for the institutional subject. By contrast, the silence of the rock is generative: those caught up in its tide are pulled inside out, until they listen to and articulate the dance of everything, to become a monstrous threat to institutional silence.

**The Stillness inside the Whorling: Time in* Picnic at Hanging Rock **

If one silence is in *Picnic* is an ordering of subjectivity into stillness, a second silence is produced through movement: the rock as a destination draws the party in increasing spirals as they weave higher and higher around the rock, until they are dancing and whirling silently on the plateau. This is the silence that Edith is unable to comprehend, and which leads her to run, screaming.

The transition between the two kinds of silence is not without violence, and perhaps for this reason the representatives of these two silences are both associated with evil at various points in the novel. Mrs Appleyard is recognised for her sadistic disciplining of Sarah, in particular; while the mysterious Hanging Rock maintains a dark presence on the visual horizon, jagged and foreboding. However, when Lindsay was questioned about the book as a “celebration of evil” in 1975, she responded definitively, dismissing the notion:

I’m afraid I don’t agree with that. I objected rather strongly—and it wasn’t until too late to say anything—when the film was widely
publicised as a “recollected evil.” Well, I think that there is as much good as evil in that book... I think it’s a demonstration in many ways of love and humanity alongside its very sinister aspects. It’s so interwoven.”

Although it is tempting to view the novel’s encounter with the ineffable as a kind of Lovecraftian “weird realism,” the narrative’s characters are distinct from those of Lovecraft in that they are integrated within, rather than excluded by, larger cosmic interests (albeit unknowingly). Much of what is terrifying or sinister in Picnic can be attributed to individual responses to the unknown, and this drives much of the characterisation in the novel, making the human reactions to the tragedy far more recognisably evil than the mystery of the disappearance.

One way to examine the operation of evil in Picnic is to return to the passage in Time Without Clocks in which Lindsay describes the soundscape of the school. Here, as she writes, “the scholars recited The Inchcape Rock.” As a reference to Robert Southey’s 1802 supernatural ballad, the allusion is a curious one; however, the poem foretells some of the novel’s themes. In the original ballad, the Abbott of Aberbrothok places a bell on top of a dangerous sandstone reef near the coast of Scotland to serve as an acoustic warning to sailors during times of low visibility. When the waves hide the reef, the bell sounds in response as an alarm. At the opening of the ballad, the Scottish environment is still:

Without either sign or sound of their shock,  
The waves flow’d over the Inchcape Rock;  
So little they rose, so little they fell,  
They did not move the Inchcape Bell.

To besmirch the reputation of the Abbott, Sir Ralph the Rover rows out into this stillness and, exploiting the cover of silence, removes the bell. Many years later, Ralph returns, laden with plundered wealth and, during a sudden storm, without the bell to guide him, crashes
into the reef. The sound of ringing accompanies his drowning. It is the peel of a bell rung by the devil to guide him into hell:

But even in his dying fear,
One dreadful sound could the Rover hear;
A sound as if with the Inchcape Bell,
The Devil below was ringing his knell.

Although received as a cautionary tale, the ballad also recounts the impacts of two human actions in relation to the submerged sandstone. The presence of evil is not constituted by the reef itself but by the seafarer’s response to it through both listening and silencing. In this context, the sound of the bell comes to symbolise the rippling of the sea’s consequences.

Lindsay explicitly intended the narrative structure of *Picnic* to resemble a disturbance that has, like an object hitting the sea, radiating consequences:

I wrote that book as a sort of atmosphere of a place. And it was like dropping a stone into the water, I felt... that story, if you call it a story, that the thing that happened on St Valentines day kept on spreading, out and out and out in circles.29

The emanative structure of the novel is evident as early as the first chapter, when Miranda proposes a toast:

Miranda had risen to her feet, a mug of lemonade raised high above her head. “To Saint Valentine!” “Saint Valentine!” Everyone including Mr Hussey raised their mugs and sent the lovely name ringing down the dusty road. (16)

The bell-like “ringing” of the toast radiates through the soundscape, as waves of sound transect the linear road. Indeed, the journey of the girls to Hanging Rock can be seen as a series of significant turns, each of which accompanies a correlative shift in visual and acoustic
perspective. The straight flat road to Mount Macedon, the crossing of
the stream to the base of Hanging Rock, the series of aborted turns
through the dense undergrowth, the circular ascension, and the
whirling dance on the plateau: each of these movements have their
corresponding soundscapes and specific modes of consciousness. At
the same time, throughout this journey Saint Valentine, the subject of
the toast, takes on a variety of characteristic forms.

Arguably the temporal setting of Saint Valentine’s Day was a prac-
tical choice for Lindsay: it was one of the three dates that she cared to
remember, as the anniversary of her first meeting with, and also of her
marriage to, her husband, Daryl Lindsay. However, in the narrative,
Saint Valentine arguably serves several important functions beyond
just sentimental or symbolic ones. Little is known about this Catholic
Saint, aside from his martyrdom, and the historical record variously
attributes his deeds to three different people with the same name. In
fact, so little is known of him that, in 1969, only two years after the
publication of Picnic, Valentine’s name was removed from the general
Roman calendar. Nevertheless, as the patron saint of (among other
things) engaged couples, young people, bee keepers, travellers, epi-
lepsy, and fainting, the invocation of his name, similar to the Abbott’s
bell in The Inchcape Rock, operates to signal the force of love as a guide
through a turbulent dreamscape. It is the absence or silencing of love
following the disappearances of the College students and teacher that
tolls the funeral bell for, among others, the headmistress of the Col-
lege, who suicides by throwing herself from Hanging Rock.

Lindsay’s close friend, Philip Adams, wrote of Lindsay that “St
Valentine’s Day is her magic day, when the commonplace is over-
whelmed by the extraordinary.” At the turn of the twentieth century
Lindsay’s family would all regularly receive anonymous Valentine’s
Day missives, which they kept and pored over. In a 1975 interview,
Lindsay recalled their effects: “we never knew who sent them, [but]
we thought they were from a mysterious man who appeared on Saint
Valentine’s Day and sent us these cards.” In Picnic, this mysterious
man becomes the personification of a natural force: “Saint Valentine
is impartial in his favours, and not only the young and beautiful were
kept busy opening their cards that morning” (9). In its impartiality and anonymity, love is, like the rock in Picnic, a silence that produces movement: partiality is not a quality of love but an effect of the relations and dreams it facilitates.

In the events prior to the eponymous picnic at Hanging Rock, the narrative moves between the principal characters, following their responses to their individual messages of love. It does so in a vicarious way, as though tracing the individual branches of a tree by the movement of wind passing through them. The picnic at Hanging Rock then moves away from these individual encounters and toward the silent forces that connect them. The flowing movement is stimulated by the excitement of the journey and the magnetic pull of the destination, which slows down the picnickers when they reach the site of their gathering. Here, even the surroundings seem symbolically attuned to this dissipation of movement. The flowing of the nearby creek, for instance, “ran sluggishly through the long, dry grass, now and then almost disappearing to re-appear as a shallow pool” (20). Slowness is evoked not only literally, but in the narrator’s long vowel sounds. This languid slowing down of time carries on to a deadening cessation: at one point, the group discover that, of the two watches possessed by members of the party, both had stopped working at twelve o’clock. The apparent freezing of time suggests that, somewhere along the journey to the grounds, the group had crossed a kind of threshold, after which linear time could no longer describe or record their experience. Acoustically, this shift finds its expression in the gradual cessation of speech and the emergence of silence: “the Frenchwoman, seldom at a loss for a word, even in English, found herself embarrassingly tongue tied” (23). This silence, which subordinates the noise of the College, allows the soundscape to foreground perception in the novel.

The Frenchwoman, a teacher named Mademoiselle de Poitiers, describes the impact of the pervasive languor of the scene on the existing regimes of activity and value:

Impossible to explain or even think clearly on a summer afternoon of things that mattered. Love for instance, when only a few
minutes ago the thought of Louis’s hand expertly turning the key of the little Sèvres clock had made her feel almost ready to faint. It was unnecessary to consult a watch. The exquisite languor of the afternoon told her that this was the hour when people weary of humdrum activities tend to doze and dream as she was doing now. (24)

The experience of this new rhythm challenges de Poitiers’s conception of love, inaugurating a narratological shift that reflects the beginning of a new movement. Whereas previously her thoughts had focused entirely on the object of her amorous feelings—her “beau” (he is incidentally a skilled watchmaker, and so a master craftsman of the technologies of institutional routine)—this stretching and slowing down of time into drowsiness makes her love seem distant, of diminished importance. This disorienting process foreshadows a transition from the proliferation of metonymic meaning in the novel, expressed as individual loves that are reflected in different lovers, to synecdochic meaning, signified by the universal, transpersonal love that Irma later expresses at Hanging Rock.35

The metonymy of the leaving party is not lost on the observers, who take note of each girl individually. Michael and Albert notice the girls from a distance, and it is clear that Albert pays special attention to Irma, “that little beaut with the black curls” (28). Equally apparent later in the text is that Michael is fascinated by Miranda’s grace; while Edith lags behind and crosses the stream clumsily. The moment in which the party crosses the creek exposes the individualities of the girls, each of whom crosses according to a particular mode of grace and balance. Albert’s low whistle follows the party across the stream and, echoing the ringing of Miranda’s toast in the previous section, foreshadows the shift from metonymy to synecdoche. Although it is intended for one girl in particular, the sound is indiscriminate, and it follows the whole party toward the base of Hanging Rock.

Crossing the creek brings the party directly into the presence of the proverbial Hanging Rock, a process of disorientation again marked by silence: “The immediate impact of its soaring peaks induced a silence
so impregnated with its powerful presence that even Edith was struck dumb” (29). Here again silence is encountered as a presence in its own right; and now it even has the power to “impregnate.” This moment of awe is the mute apprehension of the possibility of a whole, of something greater than what the contrasts and comparisons of metonymy can account for. It is a total image that collects together all the individual details of perception. The narrator herself seems to step back from the narrative to ask a riddling question: “Who can say how many or how few of its unfolding marvels are actually seen by the four pairs of eyes now fixed in staring wonder at the Hanging Rock?” (29)

The party’s apprehension of Hanging Rock inaugurates a revelation about their place within the dimension of time. The Hanging Rock exists in a different temporal order to that described by their biological clocks, or by the routine chronologies of their timepieces: the rock is at least a million years old. For Edith, this fact is an affront to her sense of orientation in the world: “at fourteen, millions of years can be almost indecent” (30). The very concept of “millions” threatens to subsume Edith’s individuality, the number insinuating that she herself is comprised of something beyond her comprehension, imagination, and control. This realisation makes her long for the previous silence of the novel—a soundscape in which the world was reduced to a solipsism consisting only of her individual phenomenological perceptions—and she puts her hands over her ears in a symbolic return to this space.

In the moving stillness there is the possibility of finding a rhythm that might connect the picnickers to the wider ecology. Any hope of this connection, however, is soon impeded by the party’s collective mode of habitual listening:

So they walk silently towards the lower slopes, in single file, each locked in the private world of her own perceptions, unconscious of the strains and tensions of the molten mass that hold it anchored to the groaning earth: of the creakings and shudderings, the wandering airs and currents known only to the wise little bats, hanging upside down in its clammy caves. None of
them see or hear the snake dragging its copper coils over the stones ahead. (30)

Silence carries the potential for hearing, if only one can pay attention to the wider ecology outside the “private world of [one’s] own perceptions.” That the girls carry around their own silence has been noted previously in the novel—at the picnic, where “the sunny slopes and shadowed forest, to Edith so still and silent, were actually teeming with unheard rustlings and twitterings, scufflings, scratchings, the light brush of unseen wings” (20–21). This occluded soundscape suggests the possibility for new and unnamed experiences as unarticulated relationships and the promise of knowledge outside of the language that composes the meaningful world.

The resonance of the figure of the snake with *gnosis* or knowledge in the Western mythic and mystic traditions suggests that what the girls miss here—what they *do not see*—is not simply the figure of the snake, but a spectre, one that will always remain beyond organised perception. In *The Secret of Hanging Rock*, a little brown snake leads the party to a crack through which the group eventually disappears. This crack is an empty space—it is literally a portal—through which the party vanishes. In her commentary on the final chapter, Yvonne Rousseau refers to Lindsay’s description of the “bruised, heart-shaped leaves” of Hanging Rock as an example of the author’s “Freudian symbolism, as if the birth canal was being entered to allow another birth to enter into the world.”

Rousseau ties the party’s disappearance to a transition narrative of the Dreamtime (Tjukurrpa), describing a story that transpires in atemporal rather than mundane time, and that derives from an occult tradition:

A human being’s body may lie tranced or dreaming while the consciousness moves about in astral form, invisible to others. In the same way, we may suppose that the Australian landscape has an astral body for use in its Dreaming, and that the people and the Ancestors who appear in Dreaming legends are mov-
ing about in the landscape’s astral consciousness, having been removed from its physical awareness.\textsuperscript{37}

In this context, one aspect of the snake worth considering is its compulsion to shed the skin that it outgrows. An exemplar of this process is the Common Brown Snake. Living in a wide range of terrain throughout Victoria, it is likely to be the species of snake to which the text implicitly refers. Rousseau’s explanation for the party’s disappearance situates the girls’ discarded bodies in a cave that was buried by the falling boulder described in the final chapter:

The boulder crashes down over the hole; that is, the landscape’s consciousness has surfaced again in the waking physical world… True to the image produced later by hysterical girls at the College, the lost people now “lie rotting in a filthy cave”—a cave which they could never have entered except in the Dreaming state of the landscape.\textsuperscript{38}

The teacher and girls who do not return have crawled into this hole in mimicry of the snake.\textsuperscript{39} As an initiation into silence, this disappearance into soundlessness recalls that, by shedding its skin, the Common Brown Snake reveals a soft underbelly, which allows it to move even more quietly across surfaces. The snake, as a symbol of gnosis, is revered in the hermetic tradition, while conversely reviled in Christian theology as the tempter of Eve. Similarly, the events that surround the party’s disappearance may be seen either as involving a tragic death or a transformation; as with the the value of clocks, evil is a matter of perspective.

\textbf{Silence and Time: Creating a Plothole to Swallow the Soundscape}

If silence is at the heart of \textit{Picnic}, Lindsay remains faithful to that silence throughout the novel, refusing to disclose the mystery of the girls’ potentially horrifying disappearance. The text itself is ambigu-
ous as to whether it is based on true events. Famously, her dedication in the book reads as follows:

Whether *Picnic at Hanging Rock* is fact or fiction, my readers must decide for themselves. As the fateful picnic took place in the year nineteen hundred, and all the characters who appear in this book are long since dead, it hardly seems important. (6)

Lindsay’s and the novel’s abstruseness meant that, prior to the publication of the final chapter, a range of hypotheses presented themselves. Rousseau’s *The Murders at Hanging Rock* (1980) presented some of the most extensive research in this area, and suggests a number of different hypotheses for the novel’s events, including brutal murders, UFO abductions, and supernatural events. All of these hypotheses find some purchase on the ambiguity of the text. In his preface to *The Secret of Hanging Rock*, John Taylor sees Lindsay’s editorial decision to exclude the final chapter, and to thereby create ambiguity between fact and fiction, as crucial for drawing readers to the book and audiences to the film. He goes so far as to present the chapter as “the invisible foundation stone on whose absence the Australian film industry built itself.”

By her own admission, Lindsay imagined much of the story in a kind of hypnogogic state. She would watch it unfold throughout the course of the night, and then write it down in the light of the following day:

The characters just appeared before me… I didn’t have to think about what they would say… they just said it. I didn’t have to invent much consciously at all. I used to do much of my thinking at night, lying in bed, and I knew exactly what was going to happen next day and I would write it down.

In distancing herself from a method of consciously constructing the novel’s characters (in her own account the characters came to her already fully formed and with names), Lindsay suggests how their
motives and most of the novel’s symbolism had been inaccessible even to her. She describes her experience of writing the story as unfolding “almost as if it was before me in a kind of... almost like a film, when I wrote it.” In her account, Lindsay takes a pragmatic approach to writing the novel, responding to her creation as if it were a real experience, and implicitly denying any conscious process of symbolisation. Nevertheless, Lindsay’s eschewal of method and her impatience for analysis do not devalue symbolic interpretations of the book. Rather, her method seems to compel any and all textual analysis to follow its own dreamlike logic—a logic in which fact and fiction become strangely fluid.

Rousseau’s identification that the fourteenth of February, 1900, was a Wednesday, rather than a Saturday as in the novel, was one of the first cracks in the novel-as-truth edifice. Admittedly, this is the kind of historical detail that Lindsay cared least about. In Time Without Clocks, Lindsay opens with her father dressing down her mother: “Excuse me my dear but surely it was Thursday and not Friday you lunched with Aunt Lizzie.” In the following line she notes, “My mother was no more interested in dates than I am” (1). The dates themselves exist in terms of a relation to the world that is, for Lindsay, irrelevant, and has little to do with truth. When Lindsay was asked directly, “Is Picnic Fact or Fiction?,” she responded emphatically:

It’s all so true to me. Fact and fiction in my mind are almost indistinguishable. The older I get things that some people call facts I don’t...

I think you will find in 1000 years hence or in some other state of time that what we call fiction today may be fact. I’m being quite truthful about that. A great deal of the book is based on things that I’ve done and seen and know but they are fused into a thing, which I hope is a thing of beauty on the whole, and I suppose you would call that fiction. But it is an impossible thing to answer. Fact and fiction are so closely intertwined.
Here, Lindsay presents an immanent process wherein the seemingly solid edifices of fact and signification prove to be porous, flowing, and malleable. At any point in time, certain perspectives on fact and fiction will seem unassailable; but for each moment in time this is also liable to change. To experience “some other state of time” than the chronological, then, is to recognise the foundational contingency of measurable time or temporality.

This recourse to “some other state of time” was ever present throughout Lindsay’s life as a practical consideration. In several interviews, Lindsay notes her inability to wear watches or to be around people wearing them. In one filmed interview she confessed a special talent:

I have an extraordinary gift—you might call it—or a very sinister one, of being able to stop people’s watches just by sitting beside them. I don’t know if I’ve stopped anybody who’s helped making this film. Quite often people say to me, “Oh my watch has never stopped before,” and I say, “I’m very sorry, but that’s probably my fault.” So I tell you that for what it’s worth. Perhaps there are other watch stoppers listening to me now, who will know what I’m talking about. I can’t tell you the reason, but it’s true.

Interestingly, although few studies had been conducted on time freezing at the time of this 1974 interview, the phenomenon of “watch stopping” is widely reported today. It has even recently been identified as particularly prominent among people who had approached the liminal threshold of a near death experience (NDE). The recurrence of this anomaly for Lindsay meant that time was an ongoing preoccupation, a fact evidenced in the title of her autobiography, *Time Without Clocks*, in which she recalls the clocks in her house, *Mulberry Hill*: “The Sévres and ormolu clock… had ceased to function the moment it arrived and ever after, perched on the drawing room mantelpiece, looking as out of place as a person in fancy dress at a board meeting.”

Lindsay’s response to a question about time from Stephen Downes further clarifies her particular understanding of temporality, which
lies outside reason and disregards the importance of mechanistic measurement:

S. D. What is your preoccupation with clocks and time? Is there any reason for it?

J. L. Well, I don’t know what you call a reason, it’s just that I’ve always had strange views about time, possibly. Preoccupation with clocks? I’m just not interested in them. I can’t wear a watch.$^{51}$

It is not surprising that Phillip Adams, who as a close friend of Lindsay’s was familiar with her uniquely indifferent relationship to time, identified the suspension or manipulation of time as central to Picnic’s mystery:

Re-reading the text I had in mind Joan Lindsay’s obsession with time… Long before Einstein revealed his relativity theory, in which time ceases to be something solid and dependable and becomes elastic, Joan believed that it was somehow dreamlike, that yesterday is still with us while tomorrow is already here.$^{52}$

By his own admission, John Taylor, the Promotions Manager for Lindsay’s publisher in Melbourne, Cheshire, was the first reader of Picnic to present a hypothesis about time to Lindsay herself. Lindsay rewarded Taylor for his insight by entrusting him with the manuscript of the missing chapter 18, which outlined the events of the last moments on the rock, although she ordered him to publish the chapter only after her death.$^{53}$

Both Taylor and Adams refer to a particular moment in chapter 3 of Picnic as pivotal since it confirms the importance of time in the novel. This was a moment in which a perceptual anomaly occurs after Irma’s whirling dance and subsequent chronoportation on the plateau. Her dance finishes just at the limit of the rock face; but she seems to have remained in a kind of reverie, responding to Edith’s insistent
complaints with a laugh. This is a threshold moment, one in which the cliff holds “the last light of the sun,” and when the transition into night seems imminent. Although night approaches, the rock shelf seems to exist in a kind of timeless twilight, without shadows or change, so that “clumps of rubbery ferns motionless in the pale light cast no shadows upon the carpet of dull, grey moss” (34). In a dreamlike consciousness, Irma notices the ant-like activity of a number of people below, seeing them as though through a mist. In her last connection with the events she sees below, she registers an acoustic event: “The ants and their business were dismissed without any further comment. Although Irma was aware, for a little while, of a rather curious sound coming up from the plain. Like the beating of far off drums” (34).

Irma’s perception is one of radical temporal disjuncture. Taylor and Adams both connect this event to one that occurs many hours later in the narrative, when the mass of searchers spread out and bang rhythmically on sheets of tin. This makeshift drumbeat not only offers a riddle but seems to reflect a rhythmic transition in the narrative sequence. The old order from the plains pulses through Irma like a heartbeat until it gradually slows, and then she and the other girls are entrained by a rhythm into unconscious rest:

Suddenly overcome by an overpowering lassitude, all four girls flung themselves down on the gently sloping rock in the shelter of the monolith, and there fell into a sleep so deep that a horned lizard emerged from a crack to lie without fear in the hollow of Marion’s arm. (35)

The trust of the lizard expresses a gentleness that comes from being in complete rhythmic synchronicity with the surroundings. This deep sleep marks a change from the motion of the plains to a stillness that reflects the silence of the monolith. They no longer simply journey towards the rock, but begin to take on some of its qualities, as if preparing for a new kind of tempo.

This temporal jump is, from the perspective of linear narration, a plot hole. Nevertheless, it is a plot hole that finds form as the organis-
ing fabric of the completed story. The initially-excluded final chapter is more explicit than the original publication, although still quite oblique, when it describes the missing girls’ encounter with an enigmatic presence on the final plateau. Once again pulling the ground through the figure, Lindsay allows this plot hole to become a central presence in the story:

It wasn’t a hole in the rocks, nor a hole in the ground. It was a hole in space. About the size of a fully rounded summer moon, coming and going. She saw it as painters and sculptors saw a hole, as a thing in itself, giving shape and significance to other shapes. As a presence, not an absence—a concrete affirmation of truth. She felt that she could go on looking at it forever in wonder and delight, from above, from below, from the other side.\(^5^4\)

The asignifying properties of this presence undermine any possibility for meaning, although its presence acts as a guarantor for meaningful relations, “giving shape and significance to other shapes.” When a plot hole or a silence organises a narrative around it, each moment will be an articulation that has its own weird, but complete, logic: this resonates with Miranda’s adage in Peter Weir’s filmic adaptation of the novel, that “everything begins and ends at exactly the right time and place.”\(^5^5\) In one sense, this hole is to the narrative something akin to the “blind spot” that is always occluded by the perceptual apparatus of cybernetic systems. No organism is able to perceive the architecture of their own perceptual system, but each has a blind spot that is necessary for the perception of the world as a complete whole. In second-order cybernetics, the observing system is, through relation, able to articulate the limits of perception in other systems.\(^5^6\)

According to the final chapter, in the space surrounding the hole, time ceases to function entirely, and the girls’ discarded corsets remain suspended in the air. By suspending time, the hole reveals that time itself is a creative, perceptual, and discursive solution to a problem rather than just an inevitability. For most of the girls, this exception acts as an attraction to a transpersonal subjectivity; for Edith, however,
it is pure negation, bringing about profound loss and “awful silence,” and the act of trying to hold on to a voice that cannot articulate the experience plunges her into temporary insanity (36). These different experiences identify the nature of this encounter as the recognition of asignification, which can be terrifying or liberating—not simply evil per se. Linsday’s description of the time-frozen hole could equally be one of time itself: it is “not necessarily an evil force... it’s a primitive force.”

Encountering Silence: Asignifying Listening

Whereas the perspective from the rock shelf onto the plain had been “vague and distant” (34), the party had awoken into a new clarity, the confusion and fuzziness of sleep shaken off. This new understanding of reality is present even to the girls’ senses: it is a “colourless twilight” where “every detail stood out defined and separate” (35). Here all the parts of the girls’ movements express an order that was previously occluded, and the frozen music of Hanging Rock becomes defined as a pattern of awakening:

Everything if only you can see it clearly enough, is beautiful and complete—the ragged nest, Marion’s torn muslin skirts fluted like a nautilus shell, Irma’s ringlets framing her face in exquisite wiry spirals—even Edith, flushed and tirelessly vulnerable in sleep. (35)

This is the emergence of synecdoche: an order that is drawn from the movement and entrainment of the girls, rather than imposed on them through institutional learning. The narrative dwells on a nearby nest; it is untidy, “its every twig and feather intricately laced and woven by tireless beak and claw” (35). The turning and weaving movement that creates the nest echoes the previous movements of the party, including the “wiry spirals” of Irma’s ringlets and the fluted skirts like a “nautilus shell” (35), which reflect the journey’s “endless loops and turns of the wayward creek” (25). All these shapes are perfect because
they have emerged, even in their apparent incompleteness, as a result of the interaction between figure and ground. The spiral forms are the morphological traces of vortices—the balanced integration of experience and environment around a powerful but empty centre.

Hanging Rock achieves its fullest expression by drawing the party in to and above it, leading them to a place where a new foundation for signification awaits. Weathered and “pock marked” by experience, the monolithic rock is likened to “a monstrous egg perched above a precipitous drop to the plain” (35). It is shaped by the shearing of wind and time and ready to engender a new order. This is the stone that Lindsay throws into the world of her narrative. If it is to fall and crush the plain, and even the girls themselves in their existing forms, it is because the old description of reality can no longer be sustained by the founding metaphor. Through their journey, the girls weave a nest to create and nourish the conditions for emergence, but the nature of that emergence, when it occurs like a birth, is a mystery even to them.

At this point in the narrative, the turns of the other girls are lost on readers, and remain forever so. Even when Irma is discovered, alive and relatively unharmed, she has no memory of the events that have transpired on Hanging Rock. Edith, into whose ontology we are now thrust, asks, “when are we going home?” (35) For her, home is not the new nest but the familiar locus of the plain, the zone into which she flees, running in a straight line, screaming. Within the narrative, Edith is treated with little compassion, which adds to her sense of aloneness. If she were able to recognise her place in weaving the nest for this new mode of signification, then our sense of distance and unfamiliarity would be less threatening; but as it is, we feel her abandonment deeply. Indeed, Edith’s disaffection is profound; not only does she lose sight of the girls, but contact with the sensory or perceptual world of sound, and consequently with her sense of embodiment, so much so that “the breathless silence her voice seemed to belong to somebody else, a long way off, a harsh little croak fading out amongst the rocky walls” (35). Unable to identify patterns of connectedness, or to discern audial relationships or agencies, she is prevented from locating her own sense of self.
Edith’s “breathless silence” is not a lack of sound, but a lack of communication, as her loud screams fail to produce the connectedness for which she yearns. The wallaby stands in as an agent for, or as an inhabitant of, the primordial bed of complexity, and runs away in alarm from what is Edith's shocking articulation of her desire for order of the plains. The difference between the two orders engendered by the novel does not arise, however, because one is natural and the other unnatural. Rather, we find ourselves led beyond that distinction as the novel’s cosmology introduces events that have a patterned significance, mandating that, like all perceptions, listening itself needs to be experienced in new ways. Unable to connect with this new sensory logic, Edith is flung between two silences: she moves from the silence of the plains back to the College, where, following the tragic disappearance of the party at Hanging Rock, institutional soundlessness is the political imperative—there must be “absolute silence until further notice” (70).

Lindsay’s novel offers a way out of silence, but the escape method screams and is monstrous. Escaping silence involves journeying into the wilderness and listening to sounds without signification to connect with them in profoundly new and weird ways. Part of the terror of this form of listening is its virtuality, and the force with which it collapses what is known or knowable. For this reason, Picnic offers the possibility of love and connection as a guiding bell.

Naturally, asignifying listening forces us to turn fact into fiction when we seek to rearticulate this new soundscape; although, since all the sounds we have heard have long since fallen silent, it hardly seems important.

Notes

1. This paper uses and extends on material from an unpublished dissertation chapter titled “Implosive Listening in Picnic at Hanging Rock,” in Adam Hulbert, Turning and Returning: Composition in the Streaming Soundscape, PhD diss. (University of Western Sydney, 2010).

2. Joan Lindsay, Picnic at Hanging Rock (1967; repr. Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1986), 36. All subsequent page references are to this edition, and made in the body of this article in parentheses.
3. A fourth, Irma, is found later in the wilderness under a rock, although she is unable to recall any of the events. Clearly, some unspeakable trauma has occurred here; although, in a 1977 interview with The Age, Lindsay suggested that, in the film adaptation, “the horror was just slightly downplayed in parts,” especially when compared to the novel, which offered “a rather horrible description of the way the poor child looked.” See Stephen Downes, “Rock keeps its Secret,” The Age March 22, 1977, 16.

4. This is a weird tale insofar as it shares an enigmatic narrative, apparently outside any specific genre, with speculative “weird fiction,” a genre that emerged at the turn of the twentieth century. Malcolm Crick, in his overview of the reception of Picnic, notes that its genre was contested at the time of its publication. One reviewer claimed it was “too sunlit to be gothic”; another likened it to a “faded watercolour”; a third suggested it would become a “classic of the macabre”; and a fourth identified it as “mythopoeic.” See Malcolm Crick, “Corsets, Culture and Contingency: Reflections on Joan Lindsay’s Picnic at Hanging Rock,” Mankind 15, no. 3 (December, 1985): 232.


8. In an interview, Lindsay was asked, “Is Picnic a story about the way in which English and all things English have trouble in settling into the Australian landscape?” In answer, Lindsay said, “No. I never thought of that at all… the book has no underlying digs at England at all.” See Downes, “Rock keeps its Secret,” 16.


10. Lindsay attended Clyde Girls Grammar in nearby East St. Kilda.

11. Lindsay, Time Without Clocks, 94.

12. Interestingly, R. Murray Schafer has written of the importance of the bell’s audibility: “circling is quite literally true of the church bell, which defines the parish by its acoustic profile… those who could hear the bells were in the parish; those who could not were in the wilderness.” R. Murray Schafer, Voices of Tryanny, Temples of Silence (Ontario: Arcan Editions, 1993), 32.

13. Of course, Pythagoras’s authorship of this theorem is contested. See the discussion, for example, in Alexander Bogomolny, “Pythagorean Theorem” (1996), http://www.cut-the-knot.org/pythagoras/.

14. Schafer has suggested that the glass window often acts a tool of dislocation, “framing external events in an unnatural phantom-like ‘silence.’” See Schafer, Voices of Tyranny, 71.

15. David Rothenberg, Bug Music: How Insects Gave Us Rhythm and Noise (New


19. Lindsay, “The Writers” (emphasis in original).


21. Ibid.


23. Ibid.


30. Lindsay, “The Writers.”


36. The movement of the party as a whole, from the College to their disappearance, could be mapped using Vico's tetradic topology, as outlined in James M. Mellard, *Doing Tropology: Analysis of Narrative Discourse* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press,

37. Yvonne Rousseau, “Commentary,” in Joan Lindsay *The Secret of Hanging Rock* (North Ryde: Angus and Robertson, 1987), 52. Local historian Allan Maxwell’s unpublished study of the region recounts the likely importance of Mount Macedon as a central place for various bordering tribes, and “the beginning of many Dreamings,” such as “Fertility Dreaming, which includes the procreation and proliferation of all the native species of flora and fauna known to this area.” Quoted in Stephens, “Hanging out for a Mystery,” 11.


39. Ibid., 52.

40. It is worth noting that Rousseau’s provocative commentary suggests that each of the women who were able to enter the hole could be associated with totemic spirit animals, arguably as reincarnated spirits from the indigenous inhabitants: see “Commentary,” 49. This is reflected, for example, in the description of Mrs McGraw’s transformation, where her arms “became the pincers of a giant crab that inhabits mud-caked billabongs”: Lindsay, *The Secret of Hanging Rock*, 32. Yvonne Rousseau, *The Murders at Hanging Rock* (Fitzroy: Scribe Publications, 1980).


43. Ibid.

44. Lindsay, “The Writers.”

45. Lindsay categorically denies the existence of any deliberate symbolism in the text, suggesting they “are unconscious symbols… I don’t analyse it… I write just as it comes and then clean it up as well as I can as a professional writer.” See Downes, “Rock keeps its Secret,” 16.

46. Ibid.

47. See Lindsay, “The Writers,” and O’Neill, “Joan Lindsay.”

48. Lindsay, “The Writers.”


50. Lindsay, *Time Without Clocks*, 59.


53. Taylor, “The Invisible Foundation Stone,” 10–11. The chapter was initially excluded through consultation between Lindsay and the editors for literary reasons.


55. Peter Weir (dir.), *Picnic at Hanging Rock* (Victoria and South Australia: Picnic


58. In Lindsay’s *The Secret of Hanging Rock*, Irma is described as patiently waiting for an audible signal to come from the hole in order to go further: “How long had she been staring at the lip of the cave, staring and listening for Miranda to tap on the rock? Listening and staring, staring and listening” (33). Eventually, the rock’s fall excludes her entirely from the others.
The Problem with Identity Politics: Dialogical Interrelation in Rachel Kushner’s *The Flamethrowers* (2013)

Blythe Worthy
University of Sydney

If forging identities from the long dead of the past can be perilous, it can also enable explorations into the nature of social revolt. Like hagiography, fictions that seek to retell history can reconfigure the past, overcoming its transient, ephemeral nature. But these stories can also draw legitimate attention to the struggles faced by historically oppressed political movements, and redress the anonymity of their principal agents. Rachel Kushner’s 2013 novel *The Flamethrowers* approaches the history of 1970s feminist art in precisely this way, unearthing a range of forgotten feminist artists of the period, assuaging and even correcting their historical dispossession.

But the novel does more than this by enmeshing this group of imagined artists, which are associated with feminism’s second wave, with the overt masculinities of the Futurists of the 1920s and ’30s. It gathers together these young Italian Fascists and New York feminists and ensonsces them in an abstract bubble of time. To be sure, Kushner places these two movements in counterposition; but she also shows
us the way in which the ugly violence of war served to silence the primary figureheads of both groups. The novel thus suspends artists of both periods in the same precarious bubble of speed and time that F. T. Marinetti described in “The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism.” It attempts to catapult these varied figures into our present day, utilising a prose that moves at warp-drive speed and expresses all of the immediacy and urgency of both movements.

Darting back and forth between the fascistic tendencies of the Futurists and the radicality of the feminists, Kushner’s novel traps both movements somewhere between their fictive world and ours, merging these two histories—the one fictional, the other “real”—to produce a conduit to the past. The time-preserving aims of the novel are not simply communicated to us by the story’s characters, however, but understood by them, perhaps most perceptively by the macho minimalist artist Sandro, who considers young women to be nothing more than treacherous “conduits” through which older men can revisit their youthfulness. Using a double-edged fictocritical method, Kushner’s novel deploys imagined characters as political emblems, creating a novel that functions something like an echo chamber of political revolt. That is, the novel makes sounds in places that were previously silent, and gives form to what Roland Barthes once called the “dead spots of affective space,” using fiction to reengineer the “bad concert hall” of history, where the sonic pattern of feminism normally “fails to circulate.”

But *The Flamethrowers* also extends on the galvanising political and theoretical revisionism of Kushner’s non-fiction work, disinterring the still largely voiceless history of second-wave feminism and its actors, highlighting the precarity of their lives and influence. The novel produces creative women from readymade moulds, formulating characters that, once silent in the worlds of film and art history, now stand out from their time and enter into our own. Among the many ways in which the novel realises these feats is the remarkable manner in which it distinguishes its characters’ voices, giving them unmatched salience. In view of the centrality of these hitherto unheard voices in *The Flamethrowers*, this paper will use Clare Hemmings’s innovative
theory of “political grammar” to examine the range and quality of the voices that Kushner’s novel articulates.4

*The Flamethrowers* uses women with stifled voices to parallel many feminist works of the 1970s, including the critically dismissed films of Barbara Loden, the secretive performances of Lee Lozano, the censored pornography of Marilyn Chambers, and an anonymously performed Italian documentary film titled *Anna*. In comparing characters with varied texts, the novel exposes feminism’s distinctive markings of precarity. Bereft of champions or cheerleaders, 1970s feminism appears to be full of frustration and failure. And while Kushner’s novel is supplemented by a range of the author’s non-fiction articles and interviews (published variously in *Artforum*, the *New Yorker*, *BOMB*, and the *New York Times*, among others), *The Flamethrowers* also references film—with its veiling, layering and fragmentation—producing a compendium of texts traversing the 1970s to 2013. With this array of cinematic intertexts, the novel establishes a continuum of feminist film, becoming a kind of collaborative work borne of variant subjectivities. The novel also allows the reader to interact with the voiceless women of the period, offering the histories of these particular feminist artists.

*The Flamethrowers* features not only these narratives about women but Kushner’s criticism of her own work, which transforms her fiction into fictocriticism and turns the world of the novel into a twofold reality. In her criticism, Kushner examines the oppressive forces emanating from the institutional structures of the 1970s art world, particularly what the critic Linda Nochlin called, in a groundbreaking article, written in 1971, “the view of reality which they impose on the human beings who are part of them.”5 Institutional criticism is of particular significance to contemporary feminism, despite second-wave feminists’ criticism of its shortcomings and exclusions. What Kushner’s novel does is investigate how artists, those perhaps aptly described as quiet revolutionaries, not recognised as particularly valuable or legitimate during their lifetimes, have been crucial to feminism’s history.

Though sympathetic to the precarious and intersectional struggle of rebellion, Kushner models her novel’s eponymous flamethrowers
on the lives of mainly white, straight, middle-class female artists. When it was published in 2013, during what might be called late postmodernism, and amid what has been provisionally called feminism’s fourth wave, Kushner’s characterisation of these women seemed to assume that intersectional discrimination had ended, or that it would resolve itself, seemingly imposing a limit on the development of feminism’s political identity. In this way the novel could be understood as a work of anti-feminism; its rearticulation of a range of once-marginalised voices less acknowledges their importance than reinscribes their exclusion. The novel affords only narrow scope to marginalised characters in its passages, amplifying the silence of those who have been subject to gender, class, and racial discrimination, and relegating them to insignificant, anonymous roles. One such figure is an anonymous Amazonian rubber worker who receives fewer than seven pages’ attention.

In the discursive contexts of early women’s collectives of the 1970s, American feminists adopted a range of activist practices that collapsed the critical distances, and transgressed the disciplinary boundaries, that had previously limited the potential for feminist critique.\(^6\) The women’s movement became more stable as higher numbers of “safe” environments, such as women’s collectives, emerged.\(^7\) These environments permitted feminist coteries to spring up throughout the United States, as well as in Australia, where many second wavers gained footing and security. Established in 1974, the Sydney Women’s Art Movement (WAM) was one such collective which allowed for a more vibrant and secure exploration of political issues.\(^8\) Women’s Liberation (WL) in Australia had started some years before WAM, and had already inaugurated the fight for recognition of women’s rights through newsletters and women’s movement networks.\(^9\) In some ways, the histories of Australia’s and America’s second-wave feminist movements are interchangeable: both are Anglocentric (or at least ethnocentric), focus on heteronormative radical activism, and arose through congregations of women’s collectives in metropolitan centres.\(^10\) And while feminist cultural criticism illuminated the historical neglect of women’s contributions to society, women’s art of the 1970s
functioned as art activism by virtue of its origins in feminist criticism. As the Australian feminist artist Jude Adams writes of her own work, “my various practices were underpinned by feminism and its critique of patriarchy and hence qualified as art activism.”\textsuperscript{11}

Yet, despite the successes of WAM in the 1970s, Australia’s contemporary art community has little to show for the efforts of Adams and her colleagues. For example, Elvis Richardson’s \textit{CoUNTess Report}—a study devoted to reporting on gender representation in Australian contemporary visual arts—recently noted that men continue to outnumber female artists in Australia’s art galleries. Men, the report also found, received higher proportions of art prize money than women in 2016, despite the fact that higher numbers of women artists practice in Australia in 2016, and even higher numbers of Australian art prize winners have been women.\textsuperscript{12} Indeed, \textit{CoUNTess’s} report indicates the glacial pace at which changes in gender representation in the Australian arts community have transpired, highlighting the structural mechanisms that make gender bias so tenacious and enduring in this context.

\textit{The Flamethrowers} rarely considers women’s identity as it exists, or might exist, outside the tripartite model of gender/class/race, approaching the feminine subject in a way that seems largely outmoded, constrains the novel’s ability to transform political norms, and ultimately reproduces what Hemmings describes as “‘earlier feminist’ racist and heterosexist exclusions.”\textsuperscript{13} Intersectionality is paramount, Hemmings argues, to the stability of all social movements. To familiarise oneself with an inclusive and associative feminism, however, requires that we learn to use a new “political grammar,” one that is capable of transforming the way in which feminists use narratives as a means of empowerment. “If Western feminists can be attentive to the political grammar of our storytelling,” she writes, “if we can highlight reasons why that attention might be important, then we can also intervene to change the way we tell stories.”\textsuperscript{14}

In seeking to recognise the marginalisation of various feminist subjects, contemporary stories such as \textit{The Flamethrowers} face a difficult challenge. They must encounter “forgotten feminists” but
not simply superimpose on their stories a “fantasy feminism” that is actually collusive with the heterosexist norms of the West. As I will go on to suggest, Kushner’s novel arguably fails on this count, rendering its feminist characters as “blank women”—inert tabula rasa whose actions the novel does not criticise. But before making this argument, it is worth noting the way in which bell hooks has recently dismissed one such example of “fantasy feminism” in the case of the singer Beyoncé and her 2016 album *Lemonade*. For hooks, Lemonade is “affirming” insofar as it asserts the importance of such notions as “honoring the self” and “loving our bodies.” However, the album also fails, she writes, to reconstitute the category positions that undergird existing systems of patriarchal oppression. Beyoncé thus presents, writes hooks, a “simplified worldview” that extends on the “world of fantasy feminism,” wherein “there are no class, sex, and race hierarchies that breakdown [sic] simplified categories of women and men, no call to challenge and change systems of domination, no emphasis on intersectionality.” In *Why Stories Matter*, Hemmings advocates precisely for the self-reflexive criticism that hooks offers in her critique of *Lemonade*’s putative feminist failures. It is also the type of criticism that Hemmings herself directs to contemporary storytelling. As she writes in her monograph, Hemmings seeks to give “invested attention to silences in the history of feminist theory,” and, in her words, to “suggest several ways of making the stories we tell both more ethically accountable and potentially more politically transformative.” Her work indicates that both hooks and Kushner, two very different critics of Western culture, might have a common moral obligation, a “reflexive Western accountability”: to tell stories in subversive, politically resistant ways.

Of course, hooks herself indicates the importance of a feminist political grammar when she scrutinises an *ELLE* magazine interview with Beyoncé in which the singer identifies herself as a “feminist.” For hooks, the epithet “feminist” functions differently in Beyoncé’s idiom. As a kind of honorarium, the pop artist uses the term not to denote an ideal or idea about women’s rights, but to promote *Lemonade* itself. And while, for different women both hooks and Beyoncé may be femi-
nists, they might also subscribe to different, even antithetical, political grammars. Like hooks, the singer Annie Lennox criticised Beyoncé’s invocation of feminism as a “tokenistic” gesture—the expression of a “feminism-lite.” However, theorists of celebrity culture such as Nathalie Weidhouse have argued differently, suggesting that these dismissals of Beyoncé’s feminism both constitute and reaffirm existing systems of bodily and monetary control, exhibiting the same “lack of intersectional thinking” that hooks attributes to Beyoncé herself.

Another way of conceptualising Beyoncé’s feminism may be to understand it as a materialisation of the fourth wave’s alleged obsession with the media and the internet. After all, Beyoncé is an artist whose work, productions, and publicity are distributed and circulated online. As Jennifer Baumgardner suggests, tensions between some feminists have arisen because of fundamental differences in communication methods. For those born near the end of the twentieth century, the “online universe was just a part of life,” she writes, whereas for older feminists, the internet “landed in [the] world like an alien spaceship,” probably “when they were twenty or fifty.” In general terms, internet-adapted feminists (or, those whose activism has primarily been facilitated by the internet since 2008) may be identified as fourth-wave feminists. Those whose feminist activities preceded the internet, by contrast, such as those feminists of generation X, have been generally identified as part of the third wave. One of the ironies of this conceptualisation that Baumgardner highlights, however, is the fact that many third-wave feminists reject the notion of waves altogether, thereby disavowing—or even disallowing—the possibility of differences between themselves and other feminists, so consigning feminism to a set of frozen principles, a kind of hypostasis.

Considering how the legitimacy of different feminisms has been opened up to evaluation today, it is interesting to note that one critic, Alyssa Rosenberg, called The Flamethrowers the “most feminist novel you’ll read all year” when it was published in 2013. Rosenberg’s adulation for Kushner’s novel’s superlative feminism is striking, particularly considering how unlikely it is to qualify as an “ethically accountable” or “politically transformative” story with reference to
Hemmings’s formulation.²⁶ Whereas Hemmings imagines a new “Western feminist accountability that shuttles back and forth between past and present in order to imagine a future that is not already known,” Kushner’s novel seems instead to nostalgically linger on the immaturities, frailties, and failures of feminism’s second wave, and to romanticise rather than problematise its characters’ naïve attempts to enhance their whiteness, such as when narrator and protagonist Reno dusts herself in “rice powder” to give her skin “a kind of moon glow” (82). These kinds of episodes tend to delimit what ability The Flamethrowers may have, or might have had, to strike at the persistent systems of oppression that buttress patriarchal dominance and prop up white supremacy in the twenty-first-century West.

In her short personal history of 1970s art activism, Adams shows how collaborative art can be understood as intrinsically antithetical to patriarchal modes of production. Collaboration, she writes, constitutes “a feminine way of working as opposed to [one that promotes] male individualism.”²⁷ However, Adams criticises collaboration too, which, inasmuch as it has made positive effects on women’s artmaking, can also “be laborious, time-consuming and conflictual.” Within many feminist art collectives of the 1970s, Adams observes, collaborative practices became difficult to sustain, turning many locuses of creativity into precarious sites of social and political insecurity.²⁸

Over time, these kinds of contexts can give women a sense of what is distinctly feminine about their artmaking practices. Faced with the threat of obscurity, even in their own time, women work to counteract feelings of precarity, as Diana Meyers writes, by “cordonning off a social sphere of mutually attuned, mutually concerned women,” acutely aware that “separatism in all its forms turns down the racket of patriarchy.”²⁹ Feminine collaborations amid hostile, insecure, male-dominated social contexts thus create spaces in which women’s voices can be heard both clearly and safely, without the intrusion of patriarchal “noises” or influences. And while, as I have already observed, many women may have different notions of feminism, it is their “Otherness,” Meyers notes—which is to say their distinctiveness from men—that connects them. In this way, “feminist collective projects that place
value on conversation, connectivity, and women-to-women relationships,” she writes, can “provide a foundation for the relational self and ‘relieve women of the burden of [their] Otherness.’”

Kushner’s *The Flamethrowers*

Most of *The Flamethrowers’s* characters are straight, white, middle-class women who orbit the patriarchal art world, where evaluations of artworks and of culture rest on traditional notions of privilege and the norm of the male gaze. The narrator, Reno, makes numerous references to the vocal artist and woman of colour Nina Simone, whose voice was “so low that it sounded like a female voice artificially slowed” (46). In a seemingly fictional incident, Simone is said to have once shot a university friend of Reno’s after he had appeared at Simone’s holiday home door in the South of France (27). Reno also makes oblique references to Clarice Lispector, a queer feminist author from Brazil whom Kushner has praised in her essays. Yet these references to non-white, non-straight women are few and far between, divulged only in fragmented, immaterial, and inconsequential asides. Reno’s story is thus a problematic one for accounts of feminism that embrace the lessons of the twenty-first century, such as intersectional inclusion.

However, the novel’s apparent erasure of racial and sexual difference might also be regarded as partly defrayed or mitigated by its diegetic setting—the 1970s—when the lessons of intersectionalism were yet to be realised, much less imparted and adopted. Conscious of the permutations in feminist history and ideology, Hemmings accepts that the feminism of the twenty-first century would appear different today were it not for the “intersectional decades” of the “1990s and onwards,” which moved us partly “beyond the ‘white, western, heterosexual middle-class’ past.” However, as Hemmings also makes clear, this shift, of course, has not mean that all—or even many—storytellers have treated these matters with the same sense of accountability.

In *The Flamethrowers*, Reno’s narrative voice functions as a kind of double index: it ostensibly signifies the voice of the fictional personage,
Reno, but it also partly embodies Kushner’s voice. Kushner writes both fiction and criticism (she has penned articles in *Artforum, Bookforum*, the *New Yorker*, and the *New York Times*), and perhaps it is this that makes her authorial voice so self-reflexive. Kushner often explicitly probes the meaning and content of her novels in her essays, but she also seems to adopt an analytical register in her fiction, conveying the impression that her novels are also critical works. Kushner’s fiction in general, and *The Flamethrowers* in particular, seem to be located at the interstice of fiction and present-day reality. This admixture of the real and imaginary might arise, as she suggested herself in a 2013 article in the *Guardian*, because, when writing *The Flamethrowers*, Kushner imagined herself as her protagonist Reno. As she explains: “through the eyes of a very young woman encountering the world of downtown New York in 1975, I looked, and then looked again, to see with freshness, what my narrator might have seen.”

*The Flamethrowers* is a historical novel predominantly set in the mid-1970s New York art scene. However, the setting oscillates between the 1920s, with the emergence of Futurism, and a brief period in Rome during the city’s 1970 revolutions. Nicknamed after her hometown of Reno, the novel’s narrator and protagonist is peripherally interested in art, although her chief concerns are speed and motorcycles, which tethers her to the Futurists, for whom speed *was* art. The narrative follows Reno’s navigation of the New York art world, but it also fluctuates between disparate monologues and vignettes, anecdotes that detail Reno’s history with machines, men (including her significant relationship with the son of the founder of Futurism), and the rise and fall of 1920s Fascism in Italy. Upon returning from Italy, Reno remains in New York, pondering whether her experiences have changed her.

*The Flamethrowers’s* form relies on a relatively orthodox plot construct: Reno tells her story in generally linear sequences, although they are interspersed with myriad temporal jumps—psychological flashbacks in which Reno reflects on her relationships with those she meets in New York and Rome. And while most of Reno’s associates are fictional, many of these characters are based on real-life feminist
figures, and many of her stories drawn from the biographies of identifiable influential artists active in mid-1970s New York. This is unsurprising given that, in her 2013 Guardian article, Kushner compared her “favourite books”—a collection of artist biographies—to “a miniature city” that was piled across her desk. For Kushner, it seems, the city of New York and the lives of these artists—these women—are fused, interrelated. Many artists, including Lee Lozano, inspired Kushner’s novel. Lozano, she recalled in the Guardian article, had “stopped speaking to women as a minor art project that ended up lasting the rest of her life.” For Kushner, this—Lozano’s brutal attitude—typified the period, and Kushner had hoped that The Flamethrowers could document this mode of brutal experimentalism, imbuing it with a new and authoritative “freshness.”

It is Kushner’s uniquely narrow focus on the feminism of the 1970s that makes all of her work—and not just her novels—so valuable to contemporary feminist theory. Of particular interest is an essay titled “Curated by Rachel Kushner,” which she wrote for the Paris Review in 2012. Throughout her essay, Kushner touches on many relatively unknown artists who, as she writes, formed the personae of The Flamethrowers, as well as images and anecdotes of their work. To explore the lives of these artists in an in-depth way, one has only to access any of the many other writings Kushner devotes to them, including her writings on Anna and Clarice Lispector in Bookforum and Artforum respectively. Read as a whole, Kushner’s fictional and critical work, along with the works and lives of the artists she documents, constitutes a project to unsilence and undo the exclusion and misrepresentation faced by early feminist artists in their variously subordinated and precarious groups. Indeed, Kushner’s honed lens—her specialist knowledge—allows her to identify the artists’ experiences more authentically, legitimising these women’s experiences, albeit within the rubric of a largely straight, white, middle-class narrative.

In her 1968 article about the women’s liberation movement for the New York Times Sunday Magazine, Martha Lear coined the phrase “second feminist wave” for those 1960s and ’70s women who did not identify with the 1848 Seneca-Falls-Convention suffragettes. It is
this political landscape—tense, binary, oppositional—in which Reno finds herself embroiled. Reflecting on the way in which the various “waves” of feminism have been classified, Baumgardner argues that “If you think too hard about the criteria for each label, the integrity of the waves disintegrates rapidly and they eddy into one another.” In some ways, _The Flamethrowers_, far from thinking “too hard” about the criteria for the second wave, thinks almost _not at all_ about what constitutes the aims of these different period of feminism, instead embracing the second-wave ethos as a timeless truth, an unalloyed good. What is of interest about the novel, however, is the way in which it brings the avant-garde artists of the second wave into our current milieu, engendering both a collision and a continuum across feminist history.

Futurism, for all its flaws, was in some ways analogous to the first stirrings of 1930s feminism: both were reactionary, organised movements, railing against the values of the past. Moreover, the futurists, like many feminists, were fascinated with the problems of representing the oppression of modern experience, and both were engaged in varied modes of artistic production. However, in almost every other way, the futurists were antithetical to the contemporaneous feminist movement. Glorifying victory and technology, the futurists immediately joined the war effort when the Great War broke out in Europe. And, of course, Italian Futurism also maintained ties to fascism—and, ultimately, it was this, and the movement’s tendency to extreme violence, that contributed to its short life, with most of its founders killed during the War. Despite its fatalistic politics, Futurism’s aesthetic style clearly paved the way for modern art—not only for Dadaism and Duchamp, but also for the work of such vorticists as Christopher R. W. Nevinson in England, and the Russian futurists. Moreover, the movement’s grotesque use of shock tactics for publicity could be seen as presaging the very first mode of political performance art—even as an augury of the kinds of performance art described in _The Flamethrowers_.

The feminist art scene chronicled by _The Flamethrowers_ is incredibly fragmented—and incredibly unfriendly. For Reno, there is no
collective, no solidarity: most of the art featured in the novel amounts to haphazard performance works produced by busy, desperate artists in their daily lives. When Giddle, one of Reno’s closest friends, enacts what she insists is a “performance,” it completely undermines those around her, destabilising the already tenuous support base among and between the artistic women (89). Other more established female performance artists known to Reno, such as the charismatic and influential Gloria, hold short exhibitions in which people are encouraged to reach behind a curtain and feel the artist’s “naked pelvis” (299). Kushner herself understands the period as crass and tongue-in-cheek, but equally intellectual: it was full of “freewheeling ideas,” she writes, “but also conceptual rigour.” Its artists were not limited to their canvases, but made “art outside the studio, in the form of a dance, a dare, a gesture, a practical joke.”

Collecting together a pastiche of these artistic forms—advertisements, performance art, paracinema, and other ephemeral images—Kushner’s novel offers a sort of snapshot of the time, one that folds itself comfortably around the many hyperreal artist-characters Reno meets. This panoply of art enhances the metonymic nature of the novel’s language: that is, the words and descriptions seem to fabricate the works in a new textual space, representing them in ultra-realist manner, and distorting the original stories from which they were produced. The images become disconnected from their creators, and, as the narrative moves rapidly across temporal space, bombarding the plot with so many varied artworks, it forms a highly textured counterreality, one that combines the aesthetic speed of Futurism with the political urgency of feminism.

In a New Yorker review of the novel titled “Youth in Revolt,” James Woods suggested the importance of Kushner integration of artistic hyperrealism into The Flamethrowers’s fictional world. He praised aspects the novel’s characters and their characterisation, noting that even those who seem insignificant to the central plot are “both solid and curiously spectral.” The plot features various thematic interruptions, he observed, each of which redirects the flow of the narrative to new ends, sometimes seemingly desultorily. Crafted from an array of
feminist narratives, the plot ripples “with stories, anecdotes, set-piece monologues, crafty egotistical tall tales, and hapless adventures.” Multimodal, then, *The Flamethrowers* is an example of postmodern heteroglossia; it produces an array of dense political and human portraits, all of them so complexly interwoven with reality that, through their chaos, they become, as Woods suggests, all the more authentic as “real-life fictional characters.” The novel, of course, features many true-life characters, many of them feminist artists of the period: the anonymous star of Italian revolutionary film *Anna*, appears oftentimes throughout the text, while the performance artist Lee Lozano could easily be identified as the inspiration for the character Giddle. By incorporating these identities into the novel’s diegetic world, Kushner’s text weaves a “third present,” one in which both fictional and real characters begin to coexist. Temporally uncertain, the fictional landscape thus also becomes a site in which shifting perceptions about intersectionality can be exhibited; and in this way Kushner’s approach to feminist storytelling attains a chaotic lucidity that borders on the realer than real, or the larger than life: a feminist “hyperrealism.”

**Giddle as Lee Lozano: Reading *The Flamethrowers* as Woman a Clef**

Reno’s confidante, Giddle, actively avoids success in the art world, shunning all recognition and placing herself outside of art history. In this respect, she imitates Lee Lozano, who similarly rejected the art world, “dropping out” of and disavowing its disciplinary strictures. In the real world of the ’60s and ’70s, artists such as Lozano were crucial for fomenting the claims asserted by many public feminists, and especially for advancing the specific objects of the second wave. But their influence is not just a matter of the historical record; it is also underlined by Kushner’s inclusion of a work by Lee Lozano in the selection of images she curated for the *Paris Review* in 2012—a telling indication of Kushner’s admiration for the artist. In *The Flamethrowers*, the text and conceptual language of Lozano’s work is transcoded through the work of the character Giddle. Indeed, Giddle’s work
concentrates on language, and specifically the question of its veracity, just as Lozano’s many performances explore language’s truth. But Lozano’s work is also unique in the history of art: she interwove her lived experience—her participation in the social world—with her “performances” in so close a way as to makes it almost impossible to disentangle or untether those categories. In the late 1960s, Lozano began rendering a succession of life-related actions (she rarely defined her work as “performance”) that were in most ways indistinguishable from the habits and choices of her daily life. Part of a series of “strike works” that began with her “General Strike Piece” of 1969, and continued with her “Dropout Piece” of 1971, these real-life performances sought to experiment with stamina, and to interrogate the ways in which women commune and speak. Difficult to exhibit, her performances were recorded as scribbles in journals; however, what soon become well known was Lozano’s refusal to work with, or even to communicate with, other women. Her 1971 work “boycott of women” involved the artist’s unflinching avoidance of all contact with female friends and associates. Originally planned to continue for only six months, Lozano later admitted that the performance affected her relations with women for the rest of her life: even after the scheduled six months had passed, Lozano would go on to acknowledge the presence of women only when utterly compelled to do so, ignoring most women, including many waitresses, for some 28 years after her “boycott” began.

Unsurprisingly, Lozano’s performance prompted her, as an artist and feminist, to question the social construction of gender, allowing her to develop an acute, rare insight into the structure of gender exclusion. One-time friend of the artist Roberta Smith recalled how “Lozano was more attuned to the problematics, limitations, and systematized nature of gender and patriarchy than most people on most days.” Speaking about “boycott” in an interview, Kushner remarked that Lozano’s “gesture [was] so specific” that she “didn’t want to import it into the book” exactly as it occurred. Disavowing any real connections between Lozano and Giddle, Kushner insists “there are no romans a clef” in the novel, but “only characters that inhabit the
fictional space.” And yet the novel’s inclusion of so many curious allusions to real life, and of so many apparently real characters, suggests that, if the novel is not strictly roman a clef, then it is perhaps something like a composite picture of many half-facts and half-truths about the position of women in the 1970s: less roman a clef than woman a clef.

Lozano withdrew from the New York art world, rejecting both this community and the broader “community of women,” and abandoning whatever celebrity she had attained in those spheres. Disposing of much of her work before her death, Lozano seemed to allow voicelessness and absence to define her art-historical legacy. However, by highlighting Lozano’s career through the refracted, fictional character of Giddle, Kushner’s novel seems to aim to “repair” Lozano’s silence, at the same time as it transforms Lozano’s life choices into different ones. Of course, interest in Lozano’s work had been “experiencing something of a small renaissance” since the early 2000s, although not because critics wished to celebrate her “rigorous abandonment” of women and the art world, but because, as Helen Molesworth writes, the sought to “valorize her paintings, and to commend the prescience of her conceptual pieces.” Yet the most intriguing link between The Flamethrowers and Lozano’s life follows from Catherine Wagly’s description of Lozano’s passivity:

she’s highly aware of the injustice of the situation and she is, at least in retrospect, angry. In a move that emphasises that, in art, Lozano never let herself be passive. She simply erased the boundaries between artist and observer.

By showcasing Lozano’s work in the Paris Review, and immortalising her mannerisms in the character Giddle, Kushner’s novel asks one to be retrospectively aware of the injustices Lozano faced in the male-dominated art world. Reno narrates a complicated relationship of intimacy and betrayal between two female friends who refuse to compromise their frustrations or temper their defiance. By basing Giddle on a real-life person, Kushner’s novel becomes a work of fic-
tocriticism, one that evaluates the work of an exemplar of the many disregarded female artists of the 1970s—albeit that Lozano, like Giddle, was a middle-class, heterosexual, white woman.

Anna

Anna is the name given to the fragile teen girl who exists only in a 1975 documentary directed by Alberto Griffi and Massimo Sarchielli. After Lozano, she is another true-to-life character whose existence might have been completely forgotten had not Kushner included her in The Flamethrowers. Anna’s femininity, her mental illness, and her transience all seem to signify the transnational nature of the revolutionary movements of 1970s Rome and New York—although she herself is rather inert, rather powerless, in the context of these groundswells, less a proactive participant than a coincidental bystander. Anna’s male film crew record the eponymous figure’s muted movements, which are discussed by a range of people, including an aging, middle-class lawyer, a young, fiery feminist, and other members of the crew. These conversations occur mostly in Anna’s absence, and this crew, mostly consisting of men “author” her in a language that seems to proffer the final, authoritative word on her situation.57

Kushner acknowledged what she characterised as these men’s exploitation of Anna in Artforum in 2015, writing that “To observe is to contaminate, and in this case, Grifi and Sarchielli were not merely observers. They presented themselves as their subject’s saviors.”58 In her essay on intersectionality, Sirma Bilge homes in on a similar distinction in her discussion of contemporary women’s self-determination, arguing that, despite their “best intentions,” many who tell stories about women have neglected “intersectional reflexivity and accountability, and [have thus] prompted their own kinds of silencing, exclusion or misrepresentation of subordinated groups.”59 In view of their stories about women, Grifi, Sarchielli, and even Kushner, make apt subjects of Bilge’s critique.

In The Flamethrowers, however, “Anna” is not a film, but a real-life person who lives in the apartment below Reno during the the
Red Brigade Revolution. Anna, “the biondina,” emerges in the novel during a dreamlike, almost Flaubertian series of moments; she is “the pregnant girl” who weaves through the crowd wearing a “guileless smile, which said ‘I have nothing to protest. I’m here to be here (277).’” By transmuting Anna into a person, the novel gives Anna the voice she can never have in the film that bears her name, as if *The Flamethrowers* might have been an ode to her and women like her. In the documentary film, every interview seems to add another layer of frustration and anxiety to the mix; and although many of those who appear in the film offer their thoughts about Anna’s situation, Anna never comments on it herself. The many admonishing voices that surround Anna—one of which calls her an “untamable bitch” who needs her “head smashed in”—seem to channel, as Kushner suggested in her essay on the film, the unforgiving, exclusionary spirit of the times: “Through these voices,” Kushner writes, “Italy’s ferment is heard.”

Kushner transmutes her cultural criticism of the documentary into a range of episodes in *The Flamethrowers*, where Anna is similarly voiceless. The documentary that bears Anna’s name is incredibly difficult to source, its existence fragmented and tenuous; but Kushner’s text might be understood to recover the documentary, granting fresh access to Anna’s story. Though Kushner argues that a revolutionary spirit can be heard in the various monologues in the film, including from the “layabouts, loudmouths, capelloni (longhairs), and all manner of Roman lumpen,” it is Anna who lacks such a voice of revolution. Without an identity, she becomes “only a first name,” and even a walking question mark. In fact, one might suggest that even Kushner’s novel struggles to lend Anna the voice and identity she deserves, so laboured are the novel’s attempts to interpret her mute expressions:

She smiled at me, but in a way that let me know yes, she was pregnant, and that she didn’t much appreciate being stared at. (273)

And elsewhere:
She wove through the crowd in her poncho, her same guileless smile, which said, “I have nothing to protest. I’m here to be here.” (277)

Reno describes the women who star in the films that she watches in the same terms in which she describes Giddle and herself: “I wanted to be looked at. I hadn’t realized until now. I wanted to be looked at. By men. By strangers. Giddle must have known” (83). The narration seems to nod at the work of Laura Mulvey (among others), who writes of women’s subordination go further than much of the scholarship on the subject. In her Paris Review article, Kushner described the vision that inspired Reno: “The first image I pinned up to spark inspiration for what would eventually be my novel The Flamethrowers was of a woman with tape over her mouth.”

Reno’s desire to be looked at is her own attempt to respond to historical characterisations of women as merely the bearers of meaning, rather than as the makers of meaning. The tape over Reno’s mouth is a symbol not simply of her enforced silence, but of her refusal to bear meanings in a language system always already “pregnant” with heterosexist encodings. And yet, as mute signifier like all of The Flamethrowers’s women, Reno is also conduit through which the patriarchy can impose its linguistic order, thwarting autonomous communication among women. In any case, the symbolism of the tape was not of great critical or theoretical interest to Kushner: “I didn’t think much about the tape over her mouth,” she wrote, “which is actually Band-Aids over the photograph, and not over her lips themselves.” Nevertheless, by grouping these women together—all silent, all defiant—Kushner’s text engenders the heteroglossia—or, as Mikhail Bakhtin’s described—a “double-voiced discourse.” Her novel is an attempt to use “another’s speech in another’s language” and to conduct a conversation between a collective of female artists, fictional characters, and real women in “our world.” The two voices—that of the author and that of the character—become dialogically interrelated, their conversation an attempt to collectivise.
Kushner acknowledges that while those who appear in Anna speak “A confusing and borderline incoherent language,” it is, “within its specific and dire context, logical.”67 These people “talk about revolution, violence, [and] despair,” she observes, highlighting the antagonistic language that surrounds the silent female protagonist. However, even in The Flamethrowers, Anna never divulges her own thoughts on her situation, and soon disappears, not long after the birth of her baby. As I have suggested, one could argue that Kushner fails to endow Anna with a voice of her own, even while evincing an intention to redress her silence. In this way, the novel may ultimately be destined to reinscribe the authorship and authority that Grifi and Sarchielli exercise over Anna. However, it is also Anna’s vacant space—her blankness—that links the women of The Flamethrowers together: they are the chimeras of celluloid, there and then gone.

China Girls

One of the most important roles Reno plays is that of a China girl. As Kushner explains in her Paris Review piece, “China girls” were those women whose faces were used to adjust colour densities in film processing.” In the early 1970s, she writes, these girls “were mostly secretaries who worked in the film labs—regular women who appeared on leader that was distributed all over the world.”68 A China girl’s official duty was to pose on “colour-timing control strips”; however, their identities were almost never known. In an interview with the New Yorker, Kushner directly addressed how a fair complexion determined one’s eligibility to be on film. Filmmakers, Kushner explains, wanted a particular colour of skin: “white skin, that is—flesh calibrations in the movie industry have always been aimed at Caucasian skin.”69 During her time working as a China girl at a film lab in New York, Reno lives an unsubstantial and ephemeral existence. Relegated to the border of the cinematic frame, she is quite literally marginalised. Yet, as the central Caucasian figure in the novel, her story perpetuates rather than challenges racial stereotypes. Her relationship with those who view the films in which she appears is fleeting and meaningless:
“If they did see me, my face strobed past too quickly, leaving only an afterimage... Me then gone, me then gone” (86). However, it is notable that she, a Caucasian woman who seemingly imitates the diction of a Chinese English-speaker (“me then gone”), is in the privileged position of having been selected to do this work.

China girls defy the commercialisation of women’s identities on film, as the subjects play no character and perform no diegetic role. The China girl “performs” as herself—or, as her skin colour—but she is deprived of identity, and wedged between reality and fantasy. While working as a China girl, Reno notices, of the other China girl she sees, that “their ordinariness was part of their appeal: real but unreachable women who left no sense of who they were. No clue but a Kodak color bar, which was no clue at all” (87). A 2005 short film titled Girls on Film, directed and written by Julie Buck and Karin Segal, two visual artists then working at the Harvard Museum, explores the objectification of China girls, producing many restored images of these girls from the archives. “They’ve been trapped all these years,” Buck remarked in an interview at the times of the film’s release. “[But] now the show has freed them.”

_Behind the Green Door_

1972 spawned the Mitchell brothers’ feature-length erotic film _Behind the Green Door_, a classic of the genre and an icon of the “Golden Age of Porn.” It is a film that Reno watches in a red-light cinema before a major blackout interrupts the session (5-6). The film’s narrative features a wealthy San Franciscan woman, Gloria Saunders, who is kidnapped and taken to an elite sex club, where she engages in sex with multiple men and women. Played by Marilyn Chambers, Saunders remains in complete silence throughout the film. In an interview with _BOMB Magazine_, Kushner described the way in which _The Flamethrowers_ attempted to channel Chambers’s elusive objectification:

She’s an object, to be sure—but she cannot be fixed as such, she’s ungraspable on account of a seditious streak... It’s a form
of interior contemplation that I am trying to honestly render in fiction.\textsuperscript{74}

In many ways, Chambers’s character represents another of Kushner’s “blank,” inert women. One might imagine Chambers to have been cast as a sophisticated yet forgettable China girl if it were not for her sudden career change from laundry products model to porn actress. Clasping a baby on the front of an Ivory Snow soap flakes box, Chambers is open faced and wholesome—but, most of all, she is memorable. Perhaps it is this that prevented her becoming a China girl. Engaged in orgies and multiple hard-core sex scenes—the first of their kind in wide release cinema—Chambers, as Gloria Saunders, remains just as silent as she had been in her print commercials. Several cunnilingus scenes take place in the film, along with a psychedelic seven-minute-long ejaculation scene in which semen flies through the air and covers men and women alike. But through it all, Saunders’s character is silent.\textsuperscript{75}

While watching \textit{Behind the Green Door}, for instance, Reno begins to think critically about her New York friends:

This woman, I thought, was what Giddle impersonated. It somehow did not occur to me that the waitress in the film was even more of an actress than Giddle was. She was acting in a movie. (345)

\textit{Behind The Green Door} prompts Reno’s curiosity and leads to self-discovery. It provides her with inspiration for her own artistic productions and allows her to formulate her female identity. She searches for her own “green door”—her own entry point into the New York art scene—but can find only these scattered and heterogeneous ideas about sex and femininity. While she watches the film, New York plunges into the second blackout of the novel, prematurely ending the showing. It is a “power failure” in at least two senses: if energy is temporarily unavailable to the city, it is also drained from Reno. However, Reno’s inner turmoil and frustration also reflect her
Worthy Dialogical Interrelation in *The Flamethrowers*

emerging sexual curiosity, and, as the city’s populace create anarchy, Reno, while maneuvering her Valera motorcycle through the chaos, witnesses “A black woman whose body melted into the darkness, her short shorts hip-height and bodyless, the leg openings stretched wide like rigatoni” (348). Reno’s desirous gaze, and her striking description of the black woman’s dark skin, her legs enveloped in shorts that resemble pasta-shaped tubes, indicates her own way of looking, one that has developed as she has travelled across the Atlantic Ocean and entered the New York art world. It is also one of the few points in the novel when Reno identifies a person of colour (another is the brief vignette on Nina Simone discussed earlier). Here the black woman appears as a synecdoche for the blackout, her skin consubstantial with the enshrouded cityscape. But the black woman also seems to haunt the white, middle-class protagonist, appearing—and then disappearing—like a ghostly spectre: “I felt but didn’t see her, a body moving past, and when I looked again I saw only white short shorts” (347). If Reno objectifies the black body, then, it is both as sexual and gothic object, a body at once seductive and uncanny.

Barbara Loden’s *Wanda*

Written and directed by Barbara Loden, the almost-silent film *Wanda* (1971) follows the life of a woman who, having granted her husband a divorce and relinquished to him the right to her children, commits a violent bank robbery with a man she meets while travelling. A stirring film about a quiet female revolution, *Wanda*, as Kushner describes it, is the story of “a young woman who isn’t afraid to throw her life away” (399). Loden, who also stars in the film as the wild, eponymous protagonist, acknowledges her relationship to the character, as well as to the feminist movement of the time: “I tried to be independent and to create my own way, otherwise, I would have become like Wanda, all my life just floating around.” Loden’s work never received much attention, possibly because the popularity of Hollywood B-grade films had already begun to wane by the 1970s, as had the popularity of pulp cinema and other genres resonant with *Wanda’s* style, characterised
as it was by cinema-verité sequences captured on grainy 16mm film. Other obstacles to Wanda’s success might have included the film’s reluctance to glamourise the life of its outsider protagonist—it instead roughens the violence and poverty she faces—and its failure to offer a neat resolution. Indeed, Wanda’s intense realism can be confronting: the film features almost no professional actors, and many sequences contain no dialogue at all. Like the many women Kushner’s The Flamethrowers assembles together, Wanda is a blank, almost peripheral figure, emotionally present for some of the film, but affectively “gone” for the most part.

Wanda’s realism and sparse, vérété-inspired dialogue, most of it improvised, was the result of what Loden drew from those around her, from the same world through which many of Kushner’s characters move. Loden told the Los Angeles Times in 1971 that she had become a blank woman, a tabula rasa: “I had no identity of my own. I just became whatever I thought people wanted me to become.”77 There is an urgency in Loden’s character, a desperation both for direction and a sense of selfhood. Like the other women in Kushner’s novel, Wanda wants an identity, but cannot avoid becoming another “creature of language, silenced” (385). Nevertheless, Loden’s art is self-reflexive; it is the language of art that she deploys to reclaim agency, a strategy enacted by many women artists of the time. Adams summarises the phenomenon succinctly: “Given that women had traditionally been the object rather than the subject of visual representation, it was not surprising that emerging women artists and historians demonstrated an interest in self representation and female identity.”78

Wanda leaves “respectable” society to follow a criminal; but instead of becoming an empowered rebel in control of her decisions, she falls mute, erasing herself and her agency. At one point, Michael Higgins, her villainous boyfriend, screams for her to fall into line with convention: “Follow the script!” he yells, before dragging Wanda through the ill-fated bank heist he had planned. Wanda, as we come to know her, remains voiceless throughout the film. In a 2002 essay book chapter, Bérénice Reynaud explained the director’s intentions: “Loden wanted to suggest, from the vantage point of her own experi-
Worthy Dialogical Interrelation in *The Flamethrowers*

ence, what it meant to be a damaged, alienated woman—not to fashion a ‘new woman’ or positive heroine.” Far from an inspiration to empowered feminists, Wanda’s story is that of the twentieth-century feminist precariat.

This being so, Loden’s voice remains always already doomed to historical erasure. Having been seldom cited in feminist criticism, and reissued only once in Europe, *Wanda*, as Reynaud suggests, may simply have been “too authentic” for audiences to embrace. In fact, according to Reynaud, Loden had herself been silenced and exploited in her life, used like a conduit by her husband, the famous director Elia Kazan:

[Kazan], a successful man of 44, happily married, suffers a mid-life crisis and draws inspiration from a younger woman... Again, one has the eerie feeling of a life being slowly erased under the ornate carving of official history.

While Loden may not have sought to produce a “positive heroine,” Wanda’s silence—like that of *The Flamethrowers’s* female characters—may be regarded as a cognitive ability rather than as a weakness. In an interview before her death, Loden compared her own experiences to those of Wanda, describing her protagonist’s “apathy” as a mechanism she uses to conceal her inner agitation. In a world where, in Lacan’s words, “women is symptom to man,” Wanda’s ability to transform her pain and anger into indifference may be seen a form of resilience. It exemplifies a woman’s way of working through and addressing her precarious circumstances in the face of a diagnostic, patriarchal gaze—and perhaps, as Reynaud implies, in the face of the hostility encountered both by Wanda and Loden from their husbands.

By acknowledging the unpredictable and perilous lives of a range of radical second-wave women, Kushner’s novel pays fitting attention to a group of women often omitted from history—including from many feminist histories. However, the novel’s political grammar is also dubious, posing a particularly difficult problem for intersectional
feminists intent on charting a coherent teleological history of women’s emancipation. In many ways, Kushner’s stories do not subvert the dominant masculinist narratives of the 1970s but inexorably re-inscribe them, albeit through the eyes of Reno, a woman protagonist.

Nevertheless, the women whom Reno meets in The Flamethrowers—analogue but subtly distinct—seem to recognise the urgency of the evolving women’s identity crisis. As Reno says of one romantic rival, Talia Valera, who punches herself having been asked to do so by a man, “she was not afraid, she was undamaged, still beautiful. But she was damaged; they all were” (324). The paradoxical description—she is “undamaged” and yet “damaged”—reflects the same paradox of self-representation expressed by the works of many such female artists and activists. Of course, Kushner’s fictionalisation of a 1970s feminist art world does not (and cannot) eclipse the advances of feminist scholarship in art history and theory from the 1980s to the present. Instead, the novel explores what might be salvaged from the feminist art of the second wave, a movement sometimes dismissed for its Anglocentric, heteronormative prepossessions. In many ways, then, the novel thus reflects the open-minded attitude that Hemmings adopts when she acknowledges the problems of “relativism and political incapacity” concomitant with “postmodern feminism.” “Perhaps earlier feminist theories,” she writes, “might still have something to teach us about what we have in common as women, despite the valuable critiques of essentialism that have come since.”

Notes
2. Rachel Kushner, The Flamethrowers (New York: Scribner, 2013), 69. All subsequent page citations refer to this edition and are given parenthetically in the text.
5. See Linda Nochlin, “Why Have There Been no Great Women Artists?” ART-


16. Ibid.

17. Ibid.


19. bell hooks, “Moving Beyond Pain.”


24. Ibid., 244.


28. Ibid.

29. Cynthia Willett, Ellie Anderson and Diana Meyers “Feminist Perspectives on

30. Ibid.


32. Hemmings, Why Stories Matter, 144.


35. For a fascinating summary of Futurism’s relationship with women, speed, and war, see Lucia Re, “Maria Ginanni vs. F. T. Marinetti: Women, Speed, and War in Futurist Italy,” Annali d’Italianistica 27 (2009): 103–124.


38. Ibid.


42. As Lucia Re notes, for “most Futurists… the war represented… a historic opportunity for revolutionary action in and for Italy.” See Re, “Maria Ginanni vs. F. T. Marinetti,” 109.


44. Ibid.

45. See Kushner, “Rachel Kushner’s Top 10 Books about 1970s Art.”


47. Ibid.

48. Ibid.


50. Ibid.


52. Ibid.

ner-the-flamethrowers-interview.

55. Ibid., 65.
58. Kushner, “Woman in Revolt.”
60. Kushner, “Woman in Revolt.”
61. Ibid.
63. Kushner, “Curated by Rachel Kushner.”
64. Ibid.
66. Ibid.
68. Kushner, “Curated by Rachel Kushner.”
70. *Girls on Film*, directed and written by Julie Buck and Karin Segal (Harvard Film Archive, 2005).
72. J. W. Pennington, *The History of Sex in American Film* (Santa Barbara: Greenwood Publishing Group, 2007), 56.
73. Woods, “Youth in Revolt.”
75. *Behind the Green Door*, directed and written by Jim Mitchell and Artie Mitchell (Mitchell Brothers Film Group, 1972).
78. Adams, “Looking from with/in.”
79. Reynauld, “For Wanda.”
80. Ibid.
81. Ibid.
82. Ibid.
Beautiful and Sublime Kitsch:
Framing the Prologue of Lars von Trier’s *Melancholia* as Avant-Garde Video Art

Aleksandr Andreas Wansbrough
University of Sydney

*Lars von Trier’s* film *Melancholia* (2011) begins with a memorable and enigmatic prologue.¹ Distinct from the film’s diegesis and played before the title credits, the prologue seems out of sync with the rest of the film’s trajectory, and even indicates the narrative’s key features before the story commences. Yet, while *Melancholia’s* narrative is representationally presented in this prologue, the film’s scenes are allegorical rather than literal; they possess a premonitory, dreamlike quality, which is enhanced by slow motion. For the viewer, these slow-motion effects engender a kind of hypnosis, a feeling that is itself enriched by the film’s imagery, which recalls the imagery, poetry and paintings of German romanticism. However, the prologue also evokes a precarious ambivalence concerning the film’s aesthetic features.

The power of visual images to evoke both pleasure and disdain has long been documented within the sensual and violent—and
indeed the carnal—realms. However, many of *Melancholia*’s viewers may also find the film’s grandiose imagery lacking in aesthetic credibility, and the digital perfection attained by the film to be uncomfortable or disaffecting. The prologue induces a range of experiences with imagery that is both sublime and beautiful, but also kitsch. By reading the prologue to *Melancholia* as a work of video art, one can see how the film’s concerns cross over with those of avant-garde video and digital installations, as well as how it moves beyond these concerns. This article will argue that von Trier preserves something of the avant-garde approach in the very way that he both supplements and challenges traditionalist notions of the sublime and the beautiful.

The film’s prologue has much in common with the features of video and new media art. Both make overt uses of intertextuality, both offer nonliteral representations of the world, and both use music to beguile their viewers and heighten their affective states. The prologue consists of slow-motion sequences that both summarise and mythically veil the narrative of the film. *Melancholia*’s narrative is disclosed allegorically; as we learn, Justine (Kirsten Dunst) has come to feel trapped by the idea of her imminent marriage. In one of the prologue’s sequences, Justine, dressed in her wedding gown, wanders alone through an empty garden. While this sequence does not itself appear in the film’s narrative proper, it foregrounds the broader story, helping to situate Justine’s experience of melancholia—as does another sequence in which Justine drifts down a river, again dressed as a bride. In the film’s primary diegesis, Justine’s sister, Claire (Charlotte Gainsbourg), attempts to help Justine overcome her depression—a fact omitted from the prologue. Claire is married, has a child, and seems better adjusted to the world than Justine. However, when it becomes clear that a planet called Melancholia is headed toward the earth, these characters’ positions are reversed: Justine becomes cool and collected, Claire terrified and distraught.

The prologue represents Claire’s psychic entrapment, allegorising her feelings in a scene in which she carries her son through a golf course, her feet sinking into the green. And later in the film, we learn that Claire believes in the importance of life, whereas Justine feels
that life on Earth, and in this universe, can only be evil. At the conclusion of the prologue, we witness the planet Melancholia beautifully destroy Earth (figure 1).

The prologue’s aesthetic goes beyond preparing the audience to engage with the main narrative. Set against Wagner’s prelude to *Tristan and Isolde*, it uses the score to both involve and distance the audience, rendering the strange affective state of being fully awake, while also permitting us to witness dream imagery and to be well aware of that imagery’s derivative qualities. Far from simply marrying and heightening the power of the image, the music abrades and competes with the vision; Justine appears in foreground and stares into the camera as birds fall slowly from the sky. At all times we are conscious of both image and music; it is a dual awareness that might distance some viewers from the film. However, as I will suggest in this article, it is this heightened awareness, this strange viewing experience, that also enhances the film’s slow unveiling.

*Melancholia*’s slow unveiling is not unlike the mode of disclosure deployed in Bill Viola’s video installations. In Viola’s 2004 video series *The Tristan Project*, for instance, the American video artist uses slow motion and allegorical imagery to illustrate the themes of Wagner’s *Tristan and Isolde*, just as von Trier does in *Melancholia*’s initial sequences. But a more general similarity connects *Melancholia*’s prologue and Viola’s installation: in both works, the images are
slowed down, almost frozen, so as to appear as static tableaux. This near-frozen state creates a sense in which both the objects and people in the frame seem to float, as in one shot in *Melancholia* where butterflies hover around Justine. David Haines and Joyce Hinterding similarly use slow motion to simulate the appearance of levitation in their four-channel video installation *The Levitation Grounds* (2000). In this work, trees detach from the earth and begin to rise, seemingly suspended in air. *Melancholia*’s prologue features a similar sequence, showing Justine crossing through the woods, perhaps fleeing from something, and then becoming encumbered by roots from trees, which coil around her threateningly. Both in the feature film and in these examples of video art, then, slow motion creates a sense of magic and mystery. But the effects of slow motion are particularly sublime in *Melancholia*, made so by the film’s special emphasis on nature and the elemental.

The beautiful and the sublime frequently feature in the writings of Edmund Burke and Immanuel Kant, two important theorists in the history of aesthetics. For Burke, beauty is associated with smoothness, delicacy, pleasure and love; while for Kant, beauty comes from the pleasure derived from form, from contemplation, from the lack of usefulness, and the visceral. Beauty in both theorists’ conceptions creates a sense of union with nature—or, at least, an intimation of being “at home” in the natural environment. The sublime, by contrast, involves a disjuncture between the human and the natural. Where Burke asserts that the sublime emanates from terror and threats of annihilation, Kant recasts Burke’s conception of the sublime as the “dynamically sublime”—an instant experience of being overcome with awe. As I will argue, the Burkean sublime is almost completely absent from *Melancholia*. Indeed, its absence prompted Steven Shaviro, in a 2012 essay on *Melancholia*, to assert that the film’s beauty constitutes a type of “anti-sublime” aesthetic, a visual idiom that exhibits none of the spectacular violence usually on display in disaster and end-of-the-world films. But it also remains difficult to maintain that *Melancholia* is completely bereft of sublime elements. For instance, Kant also writes of a “mathematical” sublime, which is constituted by the sense
of awe we experience when our minds comprehend or encounter the limits of reason. *Melancholia’s* images of cosmic expanses reflect this “mathematical” sublime, which pushes reason to its limits, sketching the boundaries of our powers to comprehend “the real” through representational images. The cosmic shots in *Melancholia* are also carefully composed and beautiful—just as in the scenes that Burke and Kant describe—and it is in this way, too, that the expansive and overpowering presence of nature in the film’s prologue gently intimates these senses of the sublime. Finally, the film’s various images of the universe, including the striking scene in which the planet Melancholia and Earth collide, invite a contemplation of the temporality and transience of life—one that is itself sublime.

But *Melancholia* permits not only an experience of the beautiful and sublime, but suffuses many works of contemporary art, especially those classified variously as video and new media art. Indeed, both contemporary video art and *Melancholia’s* prologue attest to what Jacques Rancière describes, in *The Future of the Image* (*Le Destin des Images*), as an important shift in contemporary art. This was a move from what he terms “the dialectical sentence-image,” which is didactic and immediate, to “the symbolist sentence-image,” which has led to a “great fraternity or community of metaphors.” As Rancière observes, “the immateriality of the electronic image has quite naturally rekindled the enthusiasm of the Symbolist era for immaterial states of matter.”

Here, by the expression “sentence-image,” Rancière means that which founds, contains, or measures the gap between what is visual and sensual, on the one hand, and what is non-visual and linguistic, on the other. Sentences, which are linguistic and non-visual, imply order and control—indeed, they suggest communality and consent—since a listener or reader is usually expected to understand what they mean in the social contexts of their utterance. The modernist image, by contrast, is disruptive and chaotic; it disavows social and communal meanings in favour of sensual enjoyment and explosive power. Thus the “sentence-image” creates, even forces, a relation between registers of communication and expression in the social world, whereas modernism celebrates what Rancière calls “the great parataxis”: a move-
ment that dissolves an object’s meanings and relations, abolishes its “systems of rationales,” and evacuates its social meanings—the “emotions and actions” associated with it.7

Rancière, of course, is conscious of how these gaps in meaning can attenuate art’s significance, particularly by reducing its powers of signification.8 He notes that the sentence-image “reins in the power of the great parataxis and stands in the way of its vanishing into schizophrenia or consent.”9 Thus, if the sentence-image continues to suspend the great parataxis, it does so in a precarious way, reducing its power but also rescuing it from abject meaninglessness. The sentence-image can thus serve as a point of political formation or creation. By establishing a paratactic uneasiness, the sentence-image creates a range of political meanings to engender a new type of humanism. The sentence-image discloses an apolitical or anti-political fascination with the spiritual, transcendent, and hidden qualities of the human being and its psyche, nurturing a new enchantment with humanity and its environs. As Rancière goes on to suggest, in this context, the digital screen reflects a sense of experience beyond the “flesh” of paint, and outside the grainy, “degraded” materiality of the projected filmic surface. Indeed, the digital screen, far from inviting a posthumanist aesthetic, implies the potential for a humanist, even mystical, reimagining of cinema. In this way, examples of contemporary video art on digital screens can be understood as works of neo-humanism—that is, as works in which the human can find a shared place in an enchanted world.10

Rancière’s neo-symbolist vision may be readily applied to Melancholia’s prologue. However, it is notable that the film does not share in the neo-humanist tendencies of contemporary video art. Melancholia’s primary message, as Justine herself says in the film, is that “the Earth is evil; life on Earth is evil; no one will miss us because we are alone.” While Justine utters nothing like this in the prologue, what is striking about the prologue’s conclusion is the image we see of the universe purified of all human contamination. The prologue imitates those traits associated with the beautiful and the sublime, envisioning a kind of distance more extreme, more cosmological, than the aesthetic distance engendered by “Kantian disinterest.” The themes of
Melancholia’s prologue seem too theatrical to be entirely sincere. The grandiosity of the subject matter—the end of the world—juxtaposed with its various melodramatic images of Justine, Claire, and Claire’s son, seem to deride as much as to reflect a “neo-symbolist” tendency. In this respect, the prologue does not share in all of the sensitivities expressed by the aforementioned digital media artists. Ann Finegan, for instance, detects intimations of the occult and the mysterious in the works of Hinterding and Haines. And similar intimations may be found in Viola’s works (which often explore supernatural themes) and even in Gary Hill’s works, such as the twelve-channel Tall Ships (1992), which depicts the ghostly, lingering traces of the human.

Turning, then, to Melancholia’s prologue, we may note how it suggests that Justine possesses some sort of supernatural power: in one image, for instance, energy emerges from her fingertips (figure 2). The allusion to Justine’s unique abilities suggests a link between the planet named Melancholia and Justine herself. However, the allusion does not intimate human continuance, as in the images of Viola or Hill; and neither does it depict nature surviving in an unnatural technological state, as in Hinterding and Haine’s The Levitation Grounds. Indeed, such contrasts are even more apparent as between von Trier’s prologue and Hinterding and Haine’s more recent work, The Outlands (2011), an interactive videogame in which players explore mysterious worlds, at once natural and otherworldly. Unlike Melancholia’s pro-
logue, where nature appears to suffer as it approaches death, The Outlands shows us how nature can be enriched by digital technology; in the world of the game, even the human subject is able to transcend the body in order to explore digital world of wonder. As Haines remarked about his and Hinterding’s work, “what’s different to the typical idea of a game [in The Outlands], I suppose, is that the death has somehow been pushed away.”12 By contrast, Melancholia’s prologue does not push death away but embraces it, conceiving life’s end as the ultimate purity.

Another distinct feature of Melancholia’s prologue is its sublime and beautiful sequences. However, the hyperreality of many of these sequences also renders them kitsch, which in turn suggests the death or impossibility of the sublime in a contemporary context. At times, the hyperbeautiful and hypersublime visuals seem to yearn for a return to romanticism; and yet this visual nostalgia also establishes a critical distance from the past, reworking those bygone signifiers into a hyperreal parody. Melancholia is thus aesthetically uncertain, and an apt reflection of von Trier’s own ambivalence about the film: “I’ve worked on the film for two years [and] with great pleasure,” he stated in his Director’s Statement of 2011. “But perhaps I’ve deceived [that] myself.”13 On first seeing the film’s trailer and stills, von Trier was aghast: “This is cream on cream,” he exhorted. As he confirmed, his aim was not to render a specific visual image, but to capture the mental state brought about by the void or “abyss” in German romanticism:

But what was it I wanted? With a state of mind as my starting point, I desired to dive headlong into the abyss of German romanticism. Wagner in spades.14

And yet, Melancholia problematises the very credibility of the German romantic aesthetic, experimenting with the mode in ways that few video or new media artists have attempted. To borrow an expression from Walter Benjamin, the prologue offers an example of “dream kitsch,” bringing to life a fantasy world in which the sublimity of imagination and of dreaming is not enhanced but dulled by the com-
mmonplace nature of artifice. As Benjamin writes, “The dream has grown grey,” and is now little more than “a shortcut to banality.” But as others have attested, it is this same commonplaceness—this same banality—that is central to kitsch and its powers of attraction. In his essay 1939 essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch,” Clement Greenberg observed how kitsch had become “a universal culture,” even “the first universal culture ever beheld.” Greenberg’s schema of art points to two divergent cultural phenomena: the one is avant-garde, which challenges mimetic identification, and the other is kitsch, which, like a parasite, affirms both extant and extinct modes of representation. Greenberg proposes that any figurative, non-abstract approach to art risks becoming kitsch. By returning to the figuration and theatricality of Wagner and romanticism, then, von Trier plunges less into the void of abstraction—and less still into the abyss of romanticism—than lands in the figurative world of kitsch. Von Trier, like Greenberg, realises that “Romance is abused in all sorts of endlessly dull ways in mainstream products.” Hence his conclusion: that romanticism itself is in danger of losing its grand power.

However much von Trier’s film becomes a work of kitsch, though, the director hopes that “there may be a bone splinter amid all the cream,” so “that [it] may, after all, crack a fragile tooth.” Indeed, von Trier seems to favour a “tough kitsch” over Benjamin’s soulful but confectionary kitsch. Perhaps where von Trier succeeds in his aim to go beyond the “cream” of romanticism and humanism, then, is in embracing the very anti-humanism of parody, by which we see beauty overcome by beauty. The splinter amid the cream turns out to be only another kind of cream—except that the latter cream, in the form of kitsch, has ossified and hardened into a splinter. Unlike the understated works of Viola and Hill, then, which allow the audience to enter into the art itself, the hypervisual, hypersensory experience of *Melancholia’s* prologue erases the substance of beauty and sublimity through simulation. As Burke observed regarding the sublime, sometimes the most “dark, confused, [and] uncertain images have a greater power on the fancy to form the grander passions than those which are more clear and determinate.” In a sense, the visual clarity *Melancho-
lia’s images erase any of the attachments felt and any of the meanings understood by the film’s audience—only to replace them with the “hard” power of uncertainty. No longer immersed in beauty and sublimity, the audience senses only the film’s empty aestheticisation, its high definition (together with prologue’s aestheticised displacements, such as its beautiful scenes shot against golf courses), suggesting only the loss of the real, the severity of the postmodernist’s mockery.

But the film’s grandiose kitschness eviscerates not only beauty; it also does away with the saccharine-sweet nostalgia commonly associated with kitsch. Melancholia’s prologue no longer expresses a sentimental and loving regard for the past, as does Benjamin’s kitsch, but instead recodes privileged historical meanings as hollow ones. For Burke, beauty evokes love; but in the universe of Melancholia, there is no humanity and there is no love—nothing to arouse the softness of the sentimental kitsch. The prologue thus attests to an emptying of meaning, allowing the ideal to become its own disfigurement. Here beauty takes on all of the characteristics, referents, and cyphers of the beautiful, so much so that beauty no longer seems beautiful, nor reflects a nostalgia for the beautiful, but instead is emptied out and stripped of its value.

Greenberg disparages the easily identifiable as kitsch, arguing that our consciousness is pushed back when we falsely return to the recognisable past. But in the case of Melancholia’s prologue, the imagery is at once overpowering and distancing. The image of Justine walking past a sundial is reminiscent of Last Year in Marienbad (1961)—a film about sensory and temporal disorientation; and the image of her sinking down the river is a clear reference to John Everett Millais’s painting, Ophelia (1851). The film’s many self-conscious allusions go further than this, however. When von Trier cuts to Brueghel’s Hunters in Snow (1565), in reference to a largely unsuccessful hunt, and then later alludes to two of Tarkovsky’s films, Solaris (1972) and The Mirror (1975)—the latter of which features Brueghel’s painting—these references detach the signifier from the diegetic signified, disrupting any “pure” mimetic experience of the narrative. One may either experience these sequences emotionally, or one may instead think
“that was a reference to this or that melancholic work,” so as to think and to recall rather than to feel and to inhabit. In another shot, we see a horse fall to the ground at twilight. The image is so associated with romanticism as to be no longer credible, its authenticity all but eroded. Indeed, von Trier’s soulless aestheticisation seems almost to mock these images, employing what von Trier himself has called a “Nazi” aesthetic to effect a grandiose, even a monumentally uncaring, kitsch.  

Yet, there is also a double-movement at work here, both in *Melancholia*’s prologue and in the film more generally. Beauty is retained, but only as an enemy of humanity; and humanity is retained, but only as a contamination of the beautiful. As aesthetic spectacle, the prologue makes an enemy of itself, and yet continues to function as aesthetic spectacle, becoming, for some audience members, more involving, and even more moving. As von Trier observes, “German romance… leaves you breathless. But in Visconti, there was always something to elevate matters beyond the trivial… [to] elevate it to masterpieces!”  

This is surely Shaviro’s experience of *Melancholia* too, since for him “*Melancholia* offers at least one possibility for a new aesthetics of the 21st century.” The film’s artistic and aesthetic contaminations of kitsch, baroque, and romanticism allow us to escape one shallow spectacle through another shallow spectacle. But in so contaminating these traditions, the prologue preserves a truly aesthetic experience in a gesture towards humanism. But what is human or humanistic amid this turmoil also brings us back to the softness of kitsch, which Benjamin detects. The abyss and the chasm move us to new heights of emotion. The horse falling at twilight—spectacular, meaningless, and evocative—touches the viewer profoundly. And the same could be said of Claire as she tramples through the green of the golf course, carrying her son across the plane, or of Justine being carried by the currents of the river.

The innovative approach von Trier takes to contaminating beauty allows the prologue to serve an avant-garde function. The sheer meaninglessness of the spectacle creates an uneasiness that is overcome by meaning. This critique allows us to be engorged by the same cream that
we might otherwise ourselves unknowingly engorge in contemporary popular culture. The shallowness of the merely aesthetic, of the simply beautiful, opens up a sublime sense of wonder, establishing a chasm between our tragic destiny and its meaningless beautification. In his analysis of the postmodern, Jean-François Lyotard claims that what constitutes the postmodern sublime is a gulf between signifier and the signified. Like the “postmodern world” that Lyotard describes, von Trier’s prologue offers us “new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable.” Of course, pleasure may be derived from the images, but their power also lies in their ability to unsettle, to reformulate the rules of pleasure, and even to cause pain.

Lyotard identifies postmodernism with the experimental “avant-gardes.” The gulf between signifier and the signified engenders what Lyotard describes as a kind of “jubilation,” one that is the result of “the invention of new rules of the game.” New identifications are made possible by discarding the old, accepted forms. In a Kantian manner, Lyotard asserts that the “real sublime sentiment” of the postmodern involves a commingling of pain and pleasure as regimes of aesthetic knowledge are opposed. Here, form is dissolved through the experiment of forms so that “reason should exceed all presentation,” doing away with realist and romantic modes of figuration. What Lyotard is arguing for is the dissolution of representation, of known modes, where reason goes beyond established visual parameters. However, in von Trier’s film, formal “presentation” in fact exceeds reason; we discover an excess of beautiful, identifiable imagery—an excess of acceptable forms. Lyotard argues that such defined forms conjure a nostalgic longing, preventing a truly sublime experience and presenting to us instead a contaminated, modernist sublime. However, in Melancholia’s first sequences, the beautiful pushes back against the conceptual in a self-conscious way, both adhering to and challenging the constraints and regimes of aesthetic knowledge.

Thus, in Melancholia’s prologue, form overcomes form, preserving meaning through its seeming effacement, and yet taking us beyond identification. The sequences place respondents in an unsettling
position: we become uneasy participants somehow involved in the sublimely unthinkable destruction of the planet, facing all the precarity of the Earth’s demise. The cold, indifferent aesthetic of von Trier’s beautiful and kitsch prologue contrasts with humanity’s vulnerable position on Earth—a vulnerability that invites some reflection about whether mercy must be administered mercilessly. Thus this part of the film marshals our sympathies against the cold, galactic viewpoint that these slow-moving images produce.

The prologue’s division between art and humanity—control and artifice on the one hand, and life on the other—may captivate us, and create a sense of beauty that engages our sympathies. But the prologue also allows for a return to representation, as well as gestures to that which is still unrepresentable: the ultimate destruction of thought. Given the innovations of Melancholia’s prologue, we may concur with Greenberg that the avant-garde’s “true and most important function was not to ‘experiment,’ but to find a path along which it would be possible to keep culture moving...”31 While von Trier’s film returns to a past aesthetic, it is reconfigured through Rancière’s “immateriality of the electronic image,” and so nonetheless reflects the avant-gardist’s disdain for the past, together with their desire to go beyond the sheen of artifice. The aesthetic of the film’s prologue achieves this through a process of self-overcoming, using artifice to conjure a new aesthetic experience, one that not only critiques itself but goes beyond its own critique. If we can understand Melancholia’s prologue as a form of video art, then, we can see how it not only continues but supplements and transcends the category itself—so much so that the “cream” of the film’s first sequences become as deep as they are rich.

Notes
3. See Edmund Burke, A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Immanuel Kant, Critique of
100 Philament 22: Precarity


6. Ibid., 65.
7. Ibid., 43.
8. Ibid.
9. Ibid., 46.
10. Ibid., 64–67.


14. Ibid.


16. Ibid.


18. Trier, “Director’s Statement.”

19. Ibid.


22. For more on von Trier’s artistic allusions, see ibid., 26–27.

23. The Telegraph, “Lars Von Trier’s ‘Nazi’ gaffe at Cannes Film Festival as he jokes about Adolf Hitler,” https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LayW8aq4GLw.

24. Trier, “Director’s statement.”


27. Ibid., 81.
28. Ibid., 75–82.
29. Ibid., 79.
30. Ibid., 81.

I was on a night bus home from Brixton at about four o’clock in the morning when I got talking to Dan. He had long, dirty hair and dried spit in the corners of his mouth, but I immediately felt safer, as if the other vaguely threatening anonymous men on the bus stopped considering me prey now that I had been picked off.

A few months prior, a man had followed me from my bus, jumped me with a knife, and wrestled me to the ground, scampering when someone shouted from a passing car’s window. I still travelled that same route and at that same time, alone, because I didn’t see why I should have to pay for my attempted rape, and I couldn’t afford to anyway. I was an hourly-paid lecturer, and had only been given one module that term. Being perceived as a woman becomes more precarious the less money you have.

I don’t remember what Dan and I spoke about that night on our journey, or later. He doesn’t really take up any space or have any shapes in my memory. I just remember the dried white in the corners of his mouth. We got off at the same stop, outside the bingo hall in Tooting Broadway, where there was a man asleep in a wheelchair.
I had been at home that morning, nursing a hangover. In the afternoon, a friend came over with two bottles of wine. I was adamant that I would stay in that night, but Bottle Number One weakened my resolve, and by the end of Bottle Number Two I was made up and wearing a dress. By this time I presented as, and considered myself, female.

My friend and I headed into Mayfair, to mill and swill with the kinds of people we hated, and buy drinks we couldn’t afford. My friend’s dad had died, and we were drinking the few grand that he left her.

We had cocktails at the Ice Bar, a few quarts of whiskey at a bus stop, and a bottle of wine somewhere else. Out the front of “somewhere else” we met a homeless man called Toby, as he came round asking people for change. We gave Toby a glass of wine and he told us about his dog and his life. Childhood abuse, poverty and a broken heart had driven him to the streets, and his dog was sick and all he wanted was to get back the girl his best friend stole, but he couldn’t do it from under a bridge. My friend grabbed Toby by his shoulders, and told him firmly that he could do it. He could get everything back. That it was a fine line between sickness and health. He didn’t have to lose, like her dad did, her dad was a warning to Toby. Toby reminded her of her dad, but Toby had a chance.

We both believed her.

Hugging Toby goodbye, we headed to Brixton, talking about Toby, the way the whole foul system was stacked against him. That Toby would probably die, like her dad died, like Capote and Fitzgerald died. No one would care, but we would. We would drink to them and we would try not to die too soon so that someone would care. We then laughed in frenzy, miming the bombing of Mayfair.

In Brixton we drank and danced for a little while more, then I left and got on the bus where I met Dan, and saw the man in a wheelchair outside the bingo hall at Tooting Broadway.

The man in the wheelchair was immensely obese, spilling over the sides of his seat. He had a shiny bald head and small pointy features.
He wore stained brown corduroy trousers and a cracked leather jacket. Thinking that it wouldn’t be in his best interests to remain there, sleeping in the middle of the pavement outside the bingo hall in Tooting Broadway, I prodded him awake and asked if he needed assistance. “Change... ? Beer... ?” he mumbled.

I gave him some change and told him that he should get off the main road. He grunted and moaned. Dan stood and watched, happy to let me do my bidding. After some vague attempt to grab at my hips, the man in the wheelchair revealed that he lived in a flat by Sainsbury’s, but was too drunk and incapable to get there. I decided that I would take him safely home.

I started pushing the wheelchair, but it was very heavy. I was almost parallel to the pavement as I heaved and grunted, putting all of my weight into every step. Dan and I took turns to push.

We had gone about one hundred metres and were outside a glasses shop when the man in the wheelchair dug his feet into the ground and shouted, ‘No!’ I was pushing.

I tried to persuade him that we were close, but his feet were firmly planted. He began screaming, “I’M A WILDCAT, A WILDCAT, I’M A WIIIIILDCAAAAAT!”

We left him there, howling at the moon, and sat on a bench outside the market, drinking Dragon Stout and talking. It started to drizzle. Eventually, I noticed the grey was getting lighter; it was too cloudy for the sun to rise.

Dan asked me to come to his flat and I thought about it, but, eyeing up the dried spit in the corners of his mouth, I decided against it. I told him I’d see him around and wandered down Garratt Lane, towards home.

I didn’t see him around. I wouldn’t have recognised him if I did. But I did see the Wildcat again. One summer weekday, on my way to the station, I heard a shout and was almost run over on the pavement by a hurtling mass of sour denim and shining metal. He was in a brand-new, souped-up electric wheelchair, and he had people jumping out of his way like he was a runaway train.
1. The first time I went to the red room was on a Sunday night in August last year—the first time I met Darrell. I was wearing a navy T-shirt, a black turtleneck, a black corduroy skirt, brown riding boots, and a long camel coat. By the time we got to the red room, I was walking up to strangers and saying, “Hey kid, you wanna see a dead body?” at which point I would open up my long camel coat to reveal my own, undead body. No one thought it was particularly funny. Or maybe Darrell did; I don’t remember it very clearly.

Earlier that night we had been to the Agincourt Hotel for something called “Synth Sundae,” in which someone called “Dom” was playing. Darrell knew Dom and so we could get in without paying. Most of the acts weren’t that interesting, and I hadn’t yet started asking kids if they wanted to see a dead body, so Darrell and I spoke about marriage instead. We all went to Bar Broadway afterwards: Darrell, Dom, one of the other acts from the night, a schizophrenic, and me. The schizophrenic man lit cigarette after cigarette, indoors, and so we all did. When he left, Darrell, Dom, and I piled into an Uber and went to the house in Stanmore that housed the red room.
In the red room I took off my long camel coat and my brown riding boots. We drank Passion Pop in the living room while watching *Peep Show*. When the third episode finished I stood up and walked back to the red room, where my long camel coat and brown riding boots were waiting, bringing Darrell with me. I took off my black turtleneck and my black corduroy skirt. Throughout the night, if one of us needed water or to piss or whatever, the other would wrap around them when they returned to warm them up again. I liked how the red walls didn’t dull or fade when the light outside changed.

2. The eighteenth time I met Darrell was in Melbourne. I had gone to see The Jesus and Mary Chain play their seminal album *Psychocandy*, live in a dreary Melbourne setting. Darrell was there just because he had gotten cheap flights. We met on a Sunday night in March this year. I was wearing a high-waisted black leather skirt that reached my knees, a navy gingham children’s paint shirt, and single-strap black Birkenstock sandals.

I met Darrell at The Grace Darling Hotel, where our friend Michel Rowland was playing. Because we both knew Michel Rowland we could get in without paying. Darrell and I were both wide-eyed and frenzied because we had been cooped up in Sydney for so long. That we could have a drink or get into any bar or club we wanted to without a time restriction was overwhelming; we drank excessively in celebration.

Darrell saw a third person he knew—a man who looked like me—and began to tell a story in which he had attempted to call the man who looked like me out for drinks last night, but it wasn’t the right phone number. He was laughing hysterically and kept saying, “The last interaction I had with you was not with you.”

No one thought it was particularly funny, and I wrote it down for later.

When Michel Rowland finished playing we all walked from Collingwood to Fitzroy to eat ramen. Darrell and I left to get to the house he was staying in; there, I took off my black single-strap Birken-
stocks and my black leather skirt. Throughout the night, if one of us needed to drink water or piss or have a cigarette or whatever, the other would wrap around them when they returned to warm them up again.

3. The fifth time I went to the red room was a Friday night in March of this year. I was wearing a white linen shirt, grey cotton shorts, and black Teva sandals. Darrell and I met at Tandoori Hut in Enmore at ten that night. Darrell was reading Michel Rowland’s self-published novel. I don’t know if he had paid for it.

Darrell had already ordered and I had already eaten. He ate and I watched the cricket playing and we left at eleven, walking through Enmore and the backstreets of Stanmore to get to the suburban house where the red room was housed. I don’t sleep, so I didn’t think that eleven was unwholesome. Darrell doesn’t sleep, so he didn’t think eleven was unwholesome either.

In the red room I took off my black Teva sandals and touched the red wall. I had painted my nails a similar colour, an ode, and I liked watching my nails dull and fade as they slid over the red walls.

I went to the living room, where Darrell served me red wine and scotch finger biscuits. He played *Speaking in Tongues* by Talking Heads on a record player and danced while I read a magazine. I put on his sunglasses and looked so sinister that I had to ask him if he wanted to see a dead body. We both thought it was particularly funny.

We went back to the red room and I took off my white linen shirt and my grey cotton shorts. Throughout the night, neither of us got up to piss or for a drink of water or whatever, not even for a cigarette. We often slept together just like that—you know, for convenience. We held each other anyway—you know, just because it felt more natural than not holding each other. I thought about the sentence I had written down a week ago: “The last interaction I had with you was not with you.” I watched the red on the walls move and strengthen as the light outside changed.
4. One night late in an endless summer, when clothes would no longer dry because of the humidity, and it didn’t matter anyway, because when you put on new clothes your sweat would dampen them immediately, I went to the Carlisle Castle in Newtown to drink beer, eat peanuts, and wait for winter. I went with an old friend named Andy, and, while we sat there, Darrell’s housemate Greg walked in. Greg was a friend of both Darrell and me, but not a mutual friend. Living with someone creates a different bond. I knew him vaguely. Greg told us that Darrell would be arriving shortly. We decided to start a pool game to give our unplanned reunion a sense of purpose.

There were men at the table next to us who would leer at me when I bent over to take a shot. Sometimes they said things to me that I couldn’t hear. Darrell told them that they weren’t funny, that no one was laughing.

I agreed to go and see the red room again, and to see the new chickens that Darrell and Greg had rescued. Someone decided to play Disintegration by The Cure but all I could hear was the beating of a bass drum. I laid down in the red room and was terrified of the walls, saw them close in on me, saw them dance to the drums in a way they shouldn’t have been able to do. I knew they wanted to hurt me; I began to see them only through a mass of my own hair. I let go of everything that was inside my body on the white linen sheets and Darrell called my parents. The next day I asked him to recount everything that had happened, but all he could tell me was that he could not wrap around me or keep me warm. I told the Carlisle about the men at the pool table next to us but they weren’t there any longer. For a long time after that, Darrell and I did not speak.

Sam

1. The first time I met Sam was on a Friday night in December last year. I was at the Bald Faced Stag in Leichhardt, where a friend of Darrell and me hosts live music weekly. Tristan always hosts the events for free, so you don’t have to know him to get in without
paying. I had gone alone, because my friend Ana was in Vietnam, and because I knew I would know enough people there. If you go to enough “underground” music events in any city you will begin to see the same people, and I saw the same people around a pool table.

Tristan asked me if I wanted anything to eat, because every Friday night the Stag allotted a small tab to the band that Tristan booked, but the band this week comprised four very strict vegans. He told me it included beer as well, so I accepted. “Resch’s refreshes,” I smirked. Tristan was competing in a pool game against someone I had seen once but never spoken to. He had had a cleft palette when he was younger and his hair was receding. He always wore polo shirts and never seemed penetrated by his surroundings. A few nights before I watched him guest program the show *Rage* with the rest of his band. There was a huge storm happening and Darrell had come over, drenched to his core, under the pretense of needing shelter. We didn’t notice what time we fell asleep, and we hadn’t noticed when we’d woken up either, but the news featured live coverage of the Paris bombings.

I didn’t tell Sam that I recognised him.

2. The first time I saw Sam was on the last Thursday of November last year. The house that I shared with a friend was at the bottom of a hill and was prone to flooding, and so one of us would usually stay awake during a storm. There was a storm out, and my friend was in Melbourne for the weekend, so the privilege was mine. I was sitting on the couch, eating Nutella with a spoon directly from the jar, when I received a text from Darrell. “How far is your house from Redfern?,” he had asked. I told him it was impossible to walk.

“How far is your house from The Erko?,” he asked thirty minutes later.

“I’m there now,” I said. I told him it was just down the road. Five minutes, tops.

“Gimme shelter,” he had said. I sent him a location and then sent him an address. It took him forty-five minutes to reach me.
“Hello.”
“Hello.”
“Can I come in?”
“Yes,” I said. “What happened?”

Darrell told me the storm had started when he was walking to Redfern Station after going to the pub after work. He had texted me then. I wondered why he didn’t take the train to Stanmore, to the red room, where he lives. I wondered why he felt it was necessary to tell me he had been drinking. I could tell. He told me he could have just taken an Uber, but he felt that once he committed to public transport as his route he had to finish his route on public transport, and then he asked me if I wanted to watch rage. I wondered why he had come over at all. I wondered what he wanted.

The band guest programming Rage comprised friends of Darrell’s. He told me this twice before telling me the episode was a repeat. He asked me if I knew Sam and I told him I did not. I fell asleep during Heaven or Las Vegas by Cocteau Twins and woke up to live coverage of explosions in Paris. Darrell woke up two hours later but did not want to watch the news. We went to get coffee instead.

3. The last time I saw Sam was two weeks ago. He had wanted to meet me before going on a tour of Europe and America for a month. I didn’t want to meet him because all of our meetings up to this point had been about how difficult it was for him to accept that his last relationship had ended. Sam had told me a story about how it’s okay to be vocal about thoughts and feelings—and that I had taught him that. Sam told me that, because I had taught him that, his thoughts and feelings had slowly based themselves on my thoughts and feelings. I didn’t believe it, but agreed to see him anyway.

“Have you thought about the zine idea?” Sam had asked. I told him I had. I told him I had a lot to say, and he laughed for a very long time. When we said goodbye he shook my hand.

Later that night, Sam sent me a link to Pink Orange Red by Cocteau Twins. It made me cry, so I responded with a link to Joan Didion
reading excerpts from *Blue Nights*. For a long time after that Sam and I didn’t talk.

Ana

1. The first time I met Ana was in the last Tuesday of June last year. I had bought four tickets to see Marina Ambramovic deliver her keynote address at the Roslyn Packer Theatre in Walsh Bay, and Ana had come along, as a friend of a friend of mine. Because I couldn’t think of a fourth person to invite, Ana was the one I invited. Ana asked me what I did in my spare time, and whether I had a job. I told Ana I was never specifically employed, or not employed in a proper sense, and she laughed because she never had been either. I told Ana I spent most of my time sitting on a mattress that sat on the floor in a house in Camperdown, reading Nabokov and trying to produce a worthwhile thesis about the use of time and photographs in *Speak, Memory* and *Pale Fire*. Ana told me she spent most of her time sitting on a mattress that sat on the floor in a house in Marrickville, and that she spent most of her time reading a German architecture journal so she would have something to talk about during class.

   Ana and I decided to have a cigarette before the talk began while our mutual friends went inside to be seated.

   I told Ana about how my mentor professor had asked why I don’t dress more professionally, when he himself was only ever seen in novelty T-shirts with old book covers on them: *Lord of the Flies*, or *The Metamorphosis*. I told her how he had asked me why I was always so jovial, why I should not present myself more seriously, and why I had now decided to speak to him in short, abrupt sentences instead of the conventionally long sentences I had used before. I told her that he had asked me why I didn’t perk up, and whether I was actually enjoying writing a thesis.

   Ana told me a similar story in which she had spent the majority of her honours year supervised by a professor who continuously flattered her. And although it was flattery, it was also a kind of malice. She had decided to change her thesis topic, as well as her supervising professor,
three weeks before her due date. She had not regretted it. She had sent her former supervisor a “thank you” letter for the time he had spent with her for the majority of the year, but he had never replied. She had not regretted that either.

At the end of Marina Ambramovic’s keynote address we all went to McDonalds. It was all that was open that late.

2. The fourth time I met Ana was on the last Monday of October last year. We had decided to meet at Lentil as Anything in Newtown. Our mutual friend had just left for a nine-month trip around South America before which both of us had been reliant on her to pass the time. We were both hoping we could now rely on each other to pass the time. Ana asked me what I had been doing in my spare time. I told her I had just been dumped for the first time and that, consequently, I wasn’t doing anything much at all, although sometimes I’d go out with a friend named Darrell, and maybe drink too much. She then asked me why I thought I had been dumped, and I found the question refreshing.

Ana told me she hadn’t been doing much with her time either, and that she didn’t know if she wanted to do anything. She told me a story about a time when she was thirteen years old and had been in a bitter mood all day. She was in the car and her father had asked her if she wanted to get a soft serve from the drive-through at McDonalds; Ana had just shrugged in response. Ana told me that her dad had stopped the car on the side of the road and turned around, telling her, in a voice between a whisper and a yell, that if she wasn’t happy at this exact moment, in this exact situation, then, “well,” she “would never be happy.”

Later on, Ana and I walked to the Dendy to watch *The Lobster*, a dystopia set largely in a hotel on an island where people of a certain age are sent to be coupled, because, in the future of the film, being outside of a relationship has become illegal. The people on the island had either reached a point where it was expected that they should be married, or were recently bereaved or divorced. There was a line in the
movie that struck me; it referred to the protagonist, who had himself just gone through a divorce, and it went something along the lines of “he didn’t burst in to tears the first time someone told him they didn’t love him anymore, and he didn’t consider that would be normal.” A few months later I told Ana that I thought about this line a lot.

3. The last time I met Ana was on the second Friday of May this year. By this point, I had long lost count of how many times we had met before. I was waiting in line at the Bald Faced Stag in Leichhardt for a mini-festival hosted by Tristan. Darrell and I both knew Tristan, but no one that night could get in for free. I was wearing a red turtleneck and a black leather miniskirt with monochrome black low-cut Doc Martens. Ana was wearing a white linen dress she had bought from a factory outlet in Melbourne.

That night I told Ana about Joan Didion’s book *Play It As It Lays*—about how I wanted to get a snake tattoo on my forearm as an ode to the novel, since a snake appeared on the first edition of the book, symbolising danger or men, or danger *and* men. When the headline band played, the crowd pushed both and Ana and me too close to the front and we were separated. The singer of the band took his shirt off, and I noticed one of the men next to me smell my hair. The singer of the band was Sam. On the drive home we went through a McDonalds drive-through and ordered soft serves.

Ana left on a scholarship to Venice the next day. She was exhibiting at the Venice Biennale, on a scholarship she had received through the architecture faculty at university. The Internet in Ana’s apartment was dismal at best. For a long time after that Ana and I did not speak.
Acrocorinth

Dimitra Harvey

*You shall eat the fruit of the labor of your hands; you shall be blessed...*
Psalm 128:2

Time has scalloped and tightly crimped
the hill’s stone—all the troughs

and rifts of its flanks studded
with cypress, laurels. The Acrocorinth

juts into wind above the yellowed vineyards
and timber pig-sheds, the fish

like wands of garnet or black-spotted quartz
carving the shallows at Vrahati beach.

My grandfather’s people
coaxed
clusters of bitter-and-sweet jade fruit
from the vines, while time—like a god’s
hand on the hill—tapped off seams
of limestone with the rain’s pick, or pounded out
trenches with fist-fulls of hail, lightning.
In the village, pines drip
resin in the brush. I walk
dirt tracks where hens pace for seed. In dusty
gardens, in olive groves, the goats swank
oily beards, the hammered scrolls
of horns, gnashing thyme thickets - the Acrocorinth
pale as whey to the south. From here
I make out the old acropolis extruding
from the hill like blunted teeth; I probe,
till my eyes ache, for Aphrodite’s
temple, nesting somewhere in the high
ridges. The Corinthian Gulf flickers
down a north-east road, and I know
this evening the sun swill strut there like a peacock
trailing long feathers across
the water. Soon, I'll walk back
to my great uncle’s house.

He’ll empty wine from a barrel.
He’ll tell me stories of his brother’s fist.
I’ve seen the x-rays—my mother’s
dented wrist, forearm—all the fractured

bones. And I’ll think of those hands,
coaxing, on the vines; and I’ll think of a god
with a fist-full of hail. I’ll drink
the cool, bitter pink liquid, and currents

of sweetness will twist
through each mouthful.
Every summer solstice I play a trick on my mind, I transform the past, I travel back and revamp history, and gazing at granite carvings of Hanuman brings me back to Monkey Forest Road. I imagine a girl standing by the side of a temple with my father eyeing mounds of salaks in rattan baskets. In lilac lace and batik sarong, the street-vendor, on a strip leading down to rice paddies, picks one from the tip of the mound. Shaped like a russet teardrop, primal and Jurassic to touch, she peels the fruit like tearing off the skin of an armadillo, exposing pale nude lobes, the crop of indecency, on her out-stretched palm. She takes no notice of the bare body of the fruit. Instead, her other hand, brown, wiry, cuticles yellowed by turmeric, smelling of cumin and ginger, waves away the flies.

She rubs her waist on my shoulder, the way my mother and aunt would if they wanted to read my dreams. She isn’t so unusual. Someone’s always stealing a dream or being possessed by a spirit and attending the dead in shifting shapes. *Homegrown*, she says.
The word reveals a tobacco-stained mouth. I grab the naked lobe, bite into its flesh, suck and chew its pulp til two black stones are left reminding me of my father’s eyes. At noon, Kuta Beach is almost deserted, except for the coconut and mango trees.

A lone fisherman pulls his boat onto the shore. A few feet away, his aging wife crouches on the sand, pouring oil onto the neck of a tourist. Sweat trickles down her forehead as she massages her client’s lumbar plexus, her elbow rolls flesh into little waves reaching the buttocks, folding and unfolding the tissue wrapped around the femur, and ironing out calf-muscles as if the meat she’s squeezing is weaving itself into human cloth. To learn her skill I must watch closely. But I kick the Venus clam into the salty water when I realise where I’m from. Some nights, when my mind is present and aligned with my heart rhythm, the salak’s tartness, the silence between the trees, the blue of the fishing boat, the black oil and the flaming orange of my father’s barong t-shirt merge into a giant collage. It’s strange to think I can make up stories before I’ve spent years sorting out what was lost during years of sleep and what’s been kept at the end of each day. I thought I knew all there was to know about salvageable memories locked in mental trunks.
Pondlife (a diary of aging)

Philip Porter

After Al Alvarez

It was a kid’s pond,
a laughing, running,
jump-in pond. A pond
to piss in, a pond
to scare the swans in.
It’s changed its colour now, more
sombre—suburban, a wine dark
pond that massages stringy
muscles into life—balms cracks
and breaks from child-hood games
in bones now hardly worthy of the name.
The swans sneer at my decrepitude my
flailing ineptitude at staying afloat.
Their yellow stone-eyes fix on me, their wing-tips send messages in ripples to entice
me out, out to the deep.
“If you don’t
drown, old thing, I’ll hold
you under until you do.
We have a reputation
you know.”
I know, I know you hide behind
the beauty myth, the bent-necked grace
of children’s stories, parables
against ugliness.
I’ll still go in and flap about,
do my twenty metres under
the watch of youthful life-guards,
but keep my eye on the fluttering
white light of stone-eyed swans lassoing
souls in need of renewal
with the thin black rim of an iris.
A Review of *Horse Money* 
[Cavalo Dinheiro], directed by Pedro Costa (Portugal, 2014).

Ivan Cerecina  
University of Sydney

Even among the diverse field of entries at the 2015 Melbourne International Film Festival, *Horse Money* remained a unique proposition. Although director Pedro Costa has made no secret of his key influences over the years, *Horse Money* strikes one as a film that shows the director working through a very personal set of aesthetic and philosophical preoccupations. While those who have followed Costa’s filmography in recent years will note the many continuities between *Horse Money* and the Portuguese director’s previous films (both in terms of casting and the broad subjects his films tackle), *Horse Money* also signals a few key departures from the director’s previous work, testifying to the evolving nature of his artistic vision.

Given *Horse Money*’s inventiveness, it is worth reflecting on Costa’s career in order to better understand what is distinctive about this new work and the fresh challenges it poses to viewers familiar with the director’s oeuvre. Over the years, Costa’s craft has developed into its current, singular form through several incremental shifts in approach,
with each new film seeming to expand on a discovery made in the last. These discoveries have been technological—as when Costa embraced the switch from analogue to digital film in the early 2000s—as well as related to questions of aesthetics, attitude, and the approach subject matter. Often, as in *In Vanda’s Room* (2000), Costa’s technological and aesthetic approaches have been closely interrelated; there, we saw the convergence of a more intimate attitude towards representing others that was made possible by the artisanal, low-budget production model of early digital filmmaking.²

It was before the 2000s, however, that Costa confirmed his cinephile credentials in his first two features, *O Sangue* (1989) and *Casa de Lava* (1995). Both films exhibited the director’s indebtedness to directors Jacques Tourneur, Nicholas Ray, and Robert Bresson.³ Costa’s next three narrative features saw him carve out a unique cinematic voice through his stark depiction of Fontainhas, a poor neighbourhood in Lisbon—and the place from which Costa plucked a handful of residents to star in his productions. Among other things, Costa’s so-called Fontainhas trilogy presents a fascinating array of approaches to representing similar subjects and situations: *Ossos* (*Bones*) (1997) is a bare-bones, though comparatively conventional, social drama; *No Quarto da Vanda* (*In Vanda’s Room*) is a hyperrealist, low-budget blend of documentary and fiction; while *Juventude em Marcha* (*Colossal Youth*) (2006) takes the primacy of the performer and the long take aesthetic of *Vanda* to more poetic ends in its sketch of dislocated peoples. These narrative features, along with Costa’s documentaries—on filmmakers Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, and on French singer Jeanne Balibar—show that, along with cinematic realism, “portraiture”—as Jonathan Rosenbaum has called it—is key to the director’s work.⁴

From his Fontainhas films and onward, Costa has paid keen attention to his leading men and women—both to the way that they speak, and the way they move. The intensity of Costa’s portrayals of his protagonists find few equals in contemporary cinema; as spectators, we are placed in extremely intimate proximity to Costa’s characters. *Horse Money* is primarily a portrait of Ventura, who is also the lead in
Colossal Youth, Costa’s previous narrative feature; although Vitalina Virela, a real-life relative of Ventura, is no less important a presence in the film’s first half. Through the reflections of these characters on their pasts, Horse Money builds a dense, often opaque narrative about Portugal’s colonial history and its effects on the diaspora living in the country’s ex-colonies.\(^5\) But even if some characters are familiar, Costa’s approach to narrative in Horse Money reaches a level of abstraction that is new in his work. Narrative ellipses feature in almost all of Costa’s fiction films, particularly in Colossal Youth; however, in Horse Money, ellipses become so prevalent as to almost entirely muddy up the linkages connecting one scene to the next. It is tempting, then, to treat the film as a series of discrete sequences in which Ventura appears as a unifying factor; our protagonist drifts through the film, encountering people and memories from his past, in a fashion that appears to have little to do with the tides of cause and effect. The film’s visual organisation mimics the looseness of its narrative, blurring the principles that classically structure space and temporality. Characters find themselves in half-built or half-dilapidated institutional spaces—remnants of hospitals, prisons, and factories—whose functional qualities have been stripped away by decay. Establishing shots are rare, with characters often framed in an exquisite, enveloping darkness that shows just a hint of the abandoned rooms and corridors around them.

Throughout Horse Money, time is warped: the film slips between past and present with none of the markers we associate with these shifts.\(^6\) Yet it is above all Ventura’s dialogue and actions that contribute to the film’s vertiginous atemporality. At several moments in the film, Ventura seems to slip into reverie, claiming that he is seventeen years old and explaining to his boss that he is ready to work. In another scene, he wanders through an abandoned factory, picks up a clearly disconnected phone, and tries to resolve a payment dispute with his boss. Vitalina, by contrast, reads out her birth certificate with a feverish intensity. That each of these memories refers to a very concrete, even banal moment in the past (bureaucracy is a surprisingly prevalent theme that connects each of them) makes their
inclusion in the film, in the form of repeated snippets of dialogue, all the more surprising.

*Horse Money*’s apparent fixation on memory and the texture of the past seems to confirm the way in which Ventura and Vitalina, more than any other characters in Costa’s work, figure as conduits for the experiences of others. Without taking away from Costa’s intense focus on characters and what makes them singular, *Horse Money* gives heightened emphasis to the way in which individual subjectivity interacts with the collective experience of memory. Connecting the past and the present, the film’s striking opening hints at this connection; it features a montage of black-and-white photographs by Danish photographer Jacob Riis of early twentieth-century New York tenement buildings and their occupants. This opening scene represents a singular moment in the director’s work in that it uses archival material to render a connection to history through someone else’s representational vision.

What is important, here, is that these photographs come from a time and place that is completely separate to that of the film; although one could easily draw parallels between the abject precarity of the migrants in New York’s poor housing conditions and the conditions portrayed in *Horse Money* (and in the Fontainhas cycle more generally). A similar effect is created when, at the film’s halfway point, the narrative breaks away from its focus on Ventura and Vitalina to present a series of shots of the neighbourhood’s residents. Backed by the film’s only piece of non-diegetic music, the sequence offers a moment to reflect not only on the main characters’ hushed incantations but on a series of portraits depicting *other* migrants in the protagonists’ immediate vicinity. As with the photographs that appear in the film’s opening montage, these sequences remove us from the immediacy of the protagonists’ lives and circumstances for just long enough to allow us to resituate their story within a broader context.

The much talked-about 15-minute elevator sequence just before the film’s close brings many of Costa’s preoccupations about personal and cultural memory into even clearer relief. In this sequence, Ventura stands next to a soldier from the days of the Portuguese
Carnation Revolution. Dressed in full camouflage and with his face painted, the soldier stands as still as a statue. What follows is a kind of abstract dialogue that circles around Ventura’s traumatic memories and the military struggles of Portugal’s past, with the unmoving soldier provoking Ventura and forcing him to recall repressed memories. Sonically, this scene is probably one of the most interesting in all of Costa’s work; it creates a rhythmic, call-and-response interplay that is intermittently interrupted by a blasting organ chord straight out of Messiaen. Moreover, the sequence is genuinely frightening, providing a visceral, affect-laden encapsulation of the film’s fixation on trauma and history.

*Horse Money* demands a lot of its viewer: it asks them to take intellectual leaps and forge emotional connections despite its deliberately loose and open-ended structure. Whether one finds Costa’s opaque abstractions rewarding or inscrutable seems above all to depend on whether one finds the film compelling enough to commit them to the task. However, those who are taken by enigmatic narrative structures, or slippery, mysterious narratives, will probably find that this film, more than any other in Costa’s oeuvre, rewards repeated viewing.

**Notes**


8. In Colossal Youth, there is a similar moment when Ventura listens to a recording of Cape Verdean music; although, rather than being completely outside of it, this scene forms a part of the film's narrative.

Alex Jones
University of Sydney

Roland Barthes’s 1967 proclamation that the author had died aimed to stem a twentieth-century tide of art criticism obsessed with biographical readings of artworks—although it also promised to free the artist from their personal history.¹ Despite this, Dmitri Shostakovich, the focus of Julian Barnes’s *The Noise of Time*, suffers a doubly Barthesian misfortune: not only is his music interpreted in a biographical manner, but he can never escape the nightmare of Soviet history to freely pursue his art. Fittingly, then, *The Noise of Time*’s central focus is on the precarious space between cultural production and state power, or, to put the issue in moral terms, the responsibility of the artist to society.

Shostakovich’s faith in the apolitical and redemptive power of music never quite gels with the demands of Soviet bureaucracy. Similar to Billy Pilgrim in *Slaughterhouse-Five*, a man who comes “unstuck in time,” Shostakovich feels out of step with history, as if “he was always on the wrong metronome setting” (12). Shostakovich is an
anachronistic figure, a gifted musician who combines a romanticised belief in *l'art pour l'art* with a distinctively twentieth-century sense of historical chaos and alienation. Of course, the problem faced by the artist who attempts to segregate themselves from the daily life of society is that their attitude renders art inconsequential, breeding all manner of reprimands directed at the “ivory tower” with its highfalutin pretensions of art. Conversely, the drawback of art willingly or unwillingly co-opted for political purposes is that it soon becomes diluted, compromising the artist’s sacred independence.

Thankfully, Barnes’s contribution to this debate does not suffer from either/or reductiveness. The widespread popularity of Shostakovich’s music in Soviet Russia assuages any possible critiques of its opacity and avant-garde elitism that may arise. And there is an intriguing suggestion in *The Noise of Time* to explain Shostakovich’s popularity: it is paradoxically the oppressive Soviet diktats that bear down on Shostakovich that make his music so experimental and exciting. A decree from above becomes an opportunity for artistic innovation. Of course, the composer is keenly aware that if his music strays too quickly into formalism he will be “swiftly corrected,” and he recalls “a face in a photograph that went missing the next time that photograph was printed” (47)—an allusion to the famous excision of secret police official Nikolai Yezhov from an image with Stalin. Forget the artist, however: Shostakovich himself is mainly concerned with the question of whether his music will survive. It is one of *The Noise of Time*’s greatest achievements that personal obliteration at the hands of power may ironically liberate Shostakovich from his music, sating his belief in art for art’s sake while simultaneously rendering him a victim of Soviet history, a history he so ardently, if at times half-heartedly, tries to escape.

If this yearning for liberation seems familiar to readers of Barnes, it is because the author has juggled such themes—the relationships between art and the artist, history and the individual—since at least his 1984 masterpiece, *Flaubert’s Parrot*. Barnes’s earlier novel’s invocation of Flaubert, however, and of the French author’s insistence that “the artist must manage to make posterity believe that he never
existed,” takes on a slightly darker meaning in *The Noise of Time.* And yet things for Shostakovich are not always as dire as they seem—at least not when rendered in Barnes’s by turns comic and exquisite prose. The best moments in *The Noise of Time* are those that use black humour to expose Shostakovich’s folly; he is more the bumbling bourgeois figure than the faithful Soviet comrade. The scene in which Shostakovich realises he has driven his car home with the handbrake on (hence the profusion of smoke coming from the vehicle) is particularly enjoyable. It recalls the travails of Nabokov’s comic character Pnin, and suggests that Barnes may have been inspired by Pnin when developing his own novel’s protagonist. A Russian émigré, Pnin struggles with the cultural particularities of the West, while Shostakovich is an exile in his own country. It seems reasonable to claim that Barnes is concerned with deconstructing the figure of the artist, contrasting what often amounts to a societal deification of the “genius” with the often absurd and paltry reality of the genius’s life. At one point, on a whim, the composer comes close to marrying a sex worker called Rozochka, except that he had “left his identity documents back at the hotel” (35). Quite skilfully, *The Noise of Time* presents Shostakovich as a Nabokovian character in an Orwellian world.

Yet the threat of Big Brother never quite dissipates to the extent that the novel devolves to a comedy of errors starring the eccentric Shostakovich. Although the totalitarian antics of Stalin and Krushchev appear often on the brink of absurdity, power demands Shostakovich act in so docile a way that not even black humour can reduce the severity of his capitulations. Signing a statement against the novelist Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn is a particularly galling low point for the composer. Shostakovich’s coping mechanism for his egregious pragmatism is to take refuge in irony. He may sign a piece of paper here and there, and may read a speech about the virtues of Soviet communism written by someone else, but he never actually means any of it. Shostakovich’s retreat into personal justifications, however, only magnifies the limitations of his ironic attitude, which become clear as his acts begin to ramify, producing material, real-world consequences. It is all well and good to rationalise one’s own sins in the abstract,
but when the upshot is a fellow artist’s exile, or their imprisonment in a gulag, then the rhetorical device starts to wear thin. Shostakovich masks his unpleasant actions and concessions to power within a highly convenient, determinist view of history. Indeed, a careful reader will note that the composer, or at least the narrator, invokes the word “destiny” no fewer than seven times throughout the novel. But perhaps we should be wary of casting a verdict on Shostakovich too quickly, since one of the effects of The Noise of Time is to bring into focus the abruptness of our own ethical judgments. At a textual level, the novel highlights what might be called the ethics of narration: The Noise of Time’s narrator is Flaubertian, detached, and reserves his judgement—“objective” is the rather problematic word that comes to mind. But this narratorial stance seems particularly apt when we remember that the facts of the novel constitute a source of continuing historical debate. For instance, was Shostakovich’s interrogator in 1936 called Zanchevsky, Zakrevsky, or Zakovsky? From Barnes’s perspective, the historian’s frustrations are the novelist’s blessings. The pitfalls of historical slippage can be met by fiction’s capacity to colour the lacunae of Shostakovich’s life. Mischievously, though, Barnes’s reanimation of Shostakovich serves as a reminder of the fictions we tell one another and, more importantly, the fictions we tell ourselves. In this way the novel is quite a feat, especially when we remember that Shostakovich simply wants “to be left alone with music and his family and his friends” (89), and would become a man whom death would liberate from history, art, and that ongoing static—the noise of time.

Notes

Rehabilitating Social Philosophy’s Normative Criteria


Loughlin Gleeson
University of New South Wales

Only recently translated from German into English some ten years after its initial publication, Rahel Jaeggi’s *Alienation* aims to rehabilitate a key normative criterion within the tradition of social philosophy that has long been discredited, or at any rate underutilised. Jaeggi’s aim, to be more precise, is to reestablish the critical concept of “alienation” *[Entfremdung]* in order to diagnose extant “social pathologies”—or, in the terminology of the current issue, various modes of “precarity”—that are either neglected by, or irreducible to, the prevailing Rawlsian account of (in-)justice. At the same time, Jaeggi is adamant that this diagnostic task or function cannot rely on any problematic essentialist claims for justificatory support à la Hegel and Marx.¹ Her approach is therefore neither strictly liberal nor “universalist”, but rather aims to “mediate between these unsatisfying alternatives” (48).
Alienation is divided into three discrete yet thematically linked parts. Part 1 sets out a historico-philosophical reconstruction of the critical concept of alienation. It begins with a preliminary definition of alienation as a “relation of relationlessness [eine Beziehung der Beziehungslosigkeit]” (22). That is to say, alienation does not designate a state or condition marked by the absence of a relation, but rather the presence of a normatively deficient relation—to oneself, others, or the (social) world more generally. Jaeggi traces the origin of the concept of alienation back to the figures of Rousseau and Hegel. Whereas the former, in Jaeggi’s view, identified systemic alienation in the form of the pathological dependence of subjects on false patterns of intersubjective recognition and morally vacuous social norms and institutions, the latter is said to have conceived of alienation in the exact opposite terms; namely, the “cleavage between individual and society rather than in the individual’s loss of self through society” (28). From here, the evolution of the concept of alienation tracks two separate trajectories—the “socio-economic” and “existential”—instigated by Marx and Heidegger respectively. The Marxist trajectory links alienation to economic structures and conditions peculiar to capitalism, which systematically impede the ability of human beings to fully realise their “species-essence” [Gattungwesen] through non-alienated modes of production. By contrast, the Heideggerian trajectory concerns itself with various “inauthentic” phenomena that are, in a specific instance, by the deep-ontological detachment from one’s innermost self.

Leaving these conceptual and methodological differences to one side, Jaeggi devotes the remaining section of part 1 to an assessment of the concept of alienation in the light of the challenges posed by the two nominally unified camps of political liberalism and poststructuralism. To pose the challenges addressed in this section in the form of a question: has the dual descriptive-diagnostic appeal of alienation not been completely exhausted, since it is underpinned by certain objectivist and perfectionist premises that are irreconcilable with the historicist and value-pluralist tendencies of contemporary philosophical thought? While Jaeggi is intent on answering this question, she is also careful to avoid the pitfalls associated with Rawlsian and
Foucauldian approaches (respectively, abstractness and an autonomy-denying conception of “subjectivisation”). For this reason, Jaeggi posits that a modified conception of alienation, which is suitable to a contemporary readership, hinges on the ability of such a proposal to position itself midway between, as she puts it, “ethical subjectivism and objectivism, between espousing from and espousing substantial moral conceptions of the good life, between abandoning the idea of autonomy and holding onto illusory conception of subjectivity” (48). Key to this reconceptualisation is Jaeggi’s establishment of an adequate evaluative criterion against which various alienated relations can be immanently criticised, one that makes no claim as to the fixed or immutable nature of the “human life-form.”  

Jaeggi appeals here to the concept of “appropriation” [Aneignung], arguing that the conceptual inverse of alienation ought to be understood not in terms of freedom from external constraints (Hobbes), and still less in terms of eudaimonia (Aristotle). Appropriation should instead be understood as the positive capacity to establish practical relations to oneself, others, and society, such that one may take them to be “one’s own” [sich zu Eigen zu machen] via a process of reflexive identification. As Jaeggi argues,

> The conception of appropriation refers to a way of establishing relations to oneself and to the world, a way of dealing with oneself and the world and of having oneself and the world at one’s command [über sich verfügen können]. Alienation, as a disturbance in this relation, concerns the way these acts of relating to self and world are carried out, that is, whether processes of appropriation fail or are impeded. (51)

According to this strictly formal definition, alienation implies an ethically deficient mode of praxis whereby subjects are unable not only to be reconciled with, but also actively transform aspects of themselves, others, and the social world. In consequence, indifference, reification, meaninglessness and even precarity are all species of alienation.
In contrast to the historico-philosophical orientation of part 1, part 2 concretely analyses the phenomenon of “self-alienation” [Selbstentfremdung] with reference to four case studies. For Jaeggi, the received view of self-alienation, which hypostatises the existence of a true, inner self that is unable to realise itself, amounts to nothing other than an antiquated, essentialist distortion. The alternative form of self-alienation that Jaeggi attempts to bring into view is defined as “a condition in which one is unable in crucial respects to appropriate the life one is leading and in which one does not have oneself at one’s command in what one does…” (61, emphasis in original). Under this categorial framework, Jaeggi looks first at the example of a young academic who, without directly intending it, settles down into the proverbial middle-class, suburban way of life—a way of life to which he is nevertheless unable to relate to meaningfully—as an instance of powerlessness.

The second and third case studies, which involve an ambitious employee who attempts to affirm his place within his workplace, and a so-called ‘giggling feminist’ whose self-image is belied by her own actions, serve to illuminate the phenomenon of self-alienation from the perspective of social roles and personal division respectively. Finally, indifference is embodied in the character of Perlmann, the protagonist in Pascal Mercier’s novel Perlmann’s Silence, inasmuch as his general mode of comportment as a linguistics professor is so saturated in apathy as to warrant the metaphorical description of him as permanently anesthetised. These examples of powerlessness, prescriptive roles, division, and brute indifference, all of which are instantiations of a broader phenomenon of self-alienation, do much more than simply bring the concept of alienation into sharp relief for the reader. For the light that these case studies shed on the psycho-social problems facing modern subjects is highly engaging and challenging, and evinces the kind of attention to everyday, practical situations too often missing from contemporary philosophy.

In part 3, Jaeggi attempts to systematically explicate the model of subjectivity implied in her previous historico-philosophical and phenomenological analyses of alienation. Partaking of certain elements
of German idealist (Hegelian) and existential philosophies, Jaeggi’s so-called “appropriative” model of the self is distinguishable both from the traditional essentialist view of the subject and the post-modern take on subjectivity. The self, we read, is neither a fixed ontological structure endowed with universally applicable capacities and functions, nor a radically indeterminate entity comprised of a plurality of personality-forms whose realisation hinges on little more than free choice. Eschewing these two extremes, Jaeggi’s conception of the self is “simultaneously given and made” through dynamic appropriative relations with oneself and others that are concretely embedded in the world (158, emphasis in original). The self therefore amounts, on this functionalist-expressivist model, to nothing other than a mode of doing that realises itself through those self-determined deeds or actions externalised within a shared “social space.”

Jaeggi’s monograph concludes with the recognisable Hegelian thesis concerning the fundamentally social nature of human subjectivity. Developing an earlier train of thought, Jaeggi reaffirms that alienation can mean one of two very different things: either alienation from others and the social world (Hegel), or alienation by intersubjective-social conditions (Rousseau). A fierce proponent of the former camp, Jaeggi summarises her argument in these terms: “My reconstruction of the concept of alienation has aimed to show that it is only by relating appropriatively to social practices that determine our lives and not by (to use Hegel’s terms) abstractly negating them that an unalienated relation to self is possible” (202). For Jaeggi, the flight or escape from those “others” by which one is necessarily determined is a mere illusion, as reflected in Hegel’s concept of “abstract freedom” [abstrakte Freiheit]. Positively stated, then, other subjects and social-institutional structures or conditions assume the role of the essential determinants of human subjectivity insofar as both contribute to the actualisation of a non-alienated relation-to-self, itself understood—somewhat inconsistently, it must be said—in terms of the achievements of self-determination and self-realisation (204).

On the whole, there can be little doubt that Alienation successfully realises its stated goal: to resurrect a central normative criterion
within the tradition of social philosophy. The great virtue of the monograph lies, in my view, in Jaeggi’s consistent ability to chart a middle course between the two opposing stances she sets up between Rawlsian liberalism and its abstractness, on the one hand, and Hege-lian and Marxist universalism and its putative ethical overburdening, on the other. With her modified conception of alienation, Jaeggi is therefore able to diagnose various distortions within the social field in a meaningful way, and therewith to maintain the viability of social philosophy as a specific discipline.  

Having said this, questions remain over Alienation’s exegetical and philosophical adequacy. One of the philosophical problems of Jaeggi’s monograph is its failure to afford any systematic attention to the objective component of alienation. From part 2 onwards, the centrality of the subjective aspects of alienation are self-evident. While Jaeggi’s treatment of self-alienation, appropriative subjectivity and other attendant concepts and phenomena are never positioned outside or beyond society, the fact that other subjects and social norms and institutions are addressed only ever passing seems to yield a truncated social-philosophical account, one that is lacking the requisite descriptive and normative depth. In view of Jaeggi’s insistence that an ineliminable structural connection exists between self and society, one might have expected her monograph to say much more about alienated intersubjective and social relations and practices within contemporary societies, or at any rate the embeddedness of self-alienation within such relations and practices. To this end, Alienation would appear to align much more with the Heideggerian, existential camp of alienation theories than with the Marxist, socio-economic camp, and future research would do well to redress this apparent one-sidedness.

One of the exegetical problems with Alienation is its all-too-common misrepresentation of Hegel’s Realphilosophie and of his concept of freedom in particular. As recent scholarship attests, Hegel is increasingly being understood as a normative or evaluative essentialist of a broadly Aristotelian stripe, but not in the way, or for the problematic reasons, that Jaeggi outlines in Alienation. In the Philosophy of Spirit,
Hegel argues that “concrete freedom” [konkrete Freiheit], understood as the relational achievement of “being-with oneself-in-the-other” [bei sich Selbstsein im Anderen], is the formal essence of “spirit” [Geist], or mutatis mutandis, of the “human life-form.” Freedom so conceived applies—not unlike Jaeggi’s own model of appropriated, incidentally—in a highly differentiated manner to all of those relations with “others” upon which human persons are necessarily dependent, including with internal and external nature, other persons, and historically conditioned social norms and institutions. Crucially, this reading is free of the kind of totalisation (unity, in Hegel, is always accompanied with difference), metaphysics (Geist qua God-like “substance” plays no role whatsoever in this reading), and substantialism (the actual content of concrete freedom is always necessarily historically and socially specific) commonly attributed to Hegel by Jaeggi, among others. It therefore arguably satisfies the very same theoretical criteria that Jaeggi seeks to introduce in Alienation; namely, normative or evaluative significance and formality.

Though it will of course require further elaboration and justification, my own recommendation is that Hegelian concrete freedom assume—ideally, alongside Jaeggi’s own proposal of appropriation—the role of an immanent evaluative criterion against which alienated relations in respect to various others can be criticised as “defects” [Mangle]. The appeal to concrete freedom would also have the additional benefit of correcting a perceived flaw in Jaeggi’s terminological-cum-philosophical formulation of the achieved state or condition of non-alienation, which, as I have intimated, seems to vacillate between the concepts of appropriation, self-determination, and self-realisation. If, as I am suggesting, Jaeggi’s Hegel amounts to nothing more than a straw man, and her reluctance to embrace even “weak” versions of essentialism proves to be unfounded, then the Hegel identified above is as good an ally as any for contemporary social philosophers who, like Jaeggi, attempt to make good on their programmatic ambitions to normatively or evaluatively criticise extant social pathologies.
Notes


4. Below I will argue against Jaeggi’s misrepresentation of Hegel’s universalism or “evaluative essentialism”. Most importantly of all, Hegelian essentialism, rather than being merely naturalistic pace Aristotle, is distinctly evaluative; in other words, it does not concern fixed or immutable natural potentials, but rather the ethicality of the distinctly “spiritual” [Gestig] phenomenon attributable to the “human life-form.”

5. So, too, one may well question the conspicuous absence of alienated relations to the natural world (as opposed to social world).


10. See Heikki Ikäheimo, “Ethical Perfectionism in Social Ontology—A Hegelian Alternative” (forthcoming in I That is We, We That is I—Perspectives on Contemporary Hegel).
“All You Need is... ”


Tegan Schetrumpf
University of Sydney

The modern sonnet is a precarious poetic form. It is best recognised by its number of lines—twelve to fourteen—and its sense of being written “to” a person, animal, natural place, or even an abstract idea. It may or may not be conversational. It may or may not rhyme. It might be an argument, a dedication, or even an individual’s expression of intimacy. It either has its Petrachan-style volta pulled up around its midsection, or, more likely, offers a Shakespearean volta—its last couplet comprising a sting in its tail. Upon reading a modern sonnet, you might have to read it back over to check it is not merely a short poem, and then wonder how exactly you were able to tell the difference.

One certainty of the modern sonnet is that, unlike some other traditional forms, it remains publishable. Little appeals more to the editor of a literary magazine than the one-page poem. Yet its small but fierce poetic punch is not the limit of the sonnet’s appeal; the possibilities of sonnet sequences continue to be explored in millennial Australian poetry collections. Jordie Albiston’s poetry, for example, often employs poetic forms and sequences. Her 2009 collection, *the
\textit{sonnet according to ‘m’},\textsuperscript{1} is both skilful and playful with the technical aspects of the form. Likewise, M. T. C. Cronin has exhibited an affinity for sequences, as evident in her 2004 collection \textit{<More or Less than>1–100}.	extsuperscript{2} And she has also played specifically with the sonnet form in such poems as “I Imagine a Love Sonnet with the Wrong Number of Lines.”\textsuperscript{3} Into this space, a zone full of strange tensions between traditional forms and language games, comes Tina Giannoukos’s second poetry collection, \textit{Bull Days}.

This collection seemingly departs from the range of urban and often more externalised personas of Giannoukos’s first book, \textit{In a Bigger City} (2005),\textsuperscript{4} to explore intimacy and ambiguity: a voice or possibly a range of voices, talking about a lover, or a range of lovers. The open-ended nature of Giannoukos’s sonnets leaves the reader eavesdropping; they have to guess who the speaker is and who it is they are addressing. However, in publishing the collection for a wider audience, Giannoukos places the reader in a precarious position: they are both an intended and unintended participant in the conversation. Built into this ambiguity is a critique of the subject-versus-object relationship already established between men and women in classical sonnets, where the man, the active voice, describes the woman, the object of desire, through blazon—the act of “carving up” the woman into her eyes, ruby lips, marbled breasts, and so forth. This rhetorical stratagem has long been considered in feminist critique not only as an act of sexual objectification, but a morbid kind of violence.\textsuperscript{5}

The majority of voices in the collection appear to be women, and many of them are (perhaps too easily) attributable to Giannoukos herself. A Melbourne poet, fiction writer, and reviewer with a PhD in creative writing from the University of Melbourne, Giannoukos has worked in teaching, law, and journalism, careers and industries that perhaps foreground the worldliness and confidence exhibited in her debut collection. She notes in her biography that she is widely travelled throughout Europe, and that she has been to Indonesia, China, and Egypt, all of which makes it tempting to attribute the opening lines of Sonnet VI to Giannoukos’s personal experience: “You’ve been a lover in every port / I’ve been loved in every port.” Indeed,
this temptation coyly reminds us just how easy it is to read women’s poetry as confession.

Although there is genuine intimacy and personal experience in the sonnets, this is not the limit of what the poems offer. The sequence grapples, in a bodily way, with the nature of love and the possibility of spiritual fulfilment that it offers, against the backdrop of a cynical, contemporary, patriarchal world slated against the female participant in either love or sex. There are many tongue-in-cheek psychosexual references. Sonnet I ends with the following lines:

In a singular moment the explosion
that drove all things apart drove us too.
In space I hold the horn of plenty.

The poems afford a veritable orgy of recurring yonic symbolism: mouths, armpits, and ports are “wet with the moisture of the earth.” Such images are humorously juxtaposed with the occasional volcanic eruption, a “huge cobra,” or a pelican with “one deep, dragged eye cocked toward eternity.” The poet offers an earthy embrace to these apparently ecological aspects of sex that is evident in the collection’s title, to which the poet makes explicit reference in Sonnet II: “The tongue of love tastes rough in these bull days.” The poem ends with a foreshadowing couplet: “This is the conspiracy of the figure two / the flowers in the garden grow mottled.” Problematic dualities dominate the sonnet sequence, especially where the poet illustrates the dance of sex and death between the matador and bull, man and woman. In keeping with many feminists’ criticism of Cartesian dualism, where woman is aligned with the body and man with the mind, Giannoukos’s woman is bestial, sensual, lusty, and often ironises the positions and oppositions into which she is thrust. Yet these are not merely playful ironies—some are dark, serious, satirical. In Sonnet VI, the speaker is explicit:

I’m not being ironic when I say
no song’s been written or poem
that can explain why I don’t miss
your touch

Even in the sonnet or lyrical poetic form, which is often presumed exhausted, there remains the potential to explore what is inexplicable in this “final frontier” of millennial feminism; that is, the politics of the heterosexual relationship, constituted here by sex with men, love with men, and the power dynamics that arise with men. The woman, as the bull, is violently “carved up” through blazon:

You slit my throat with your kiss
You split my ear with your tongue
My hand coolly slices through vein
Red is the colour of my humiliation

The contest, of course, is rigged; in a bullfight, the bull will die, even if it wins. External social and patriarchal pressure is figured as the desires of the audience and the actions of matador’s assistants in Sonnet XIV, where bullfighting again comes to the fore:

You must sever my aorta
snap the spinal cord. Be quick.
Make the fans happy.
... This is cowardice,
not tenderness.
...
I’m ready. Your men did their bit.
Now do yours. I hang my head.

In this sonnet, a feminist and animal politics of violence is interwoven with a spiritual longing that is self-deprecating, but not entirely farcical. The poet signals her desire for a metaphysical union that love is supposed to provide. Ritual animal sacrifices are then conflated with the Eucharist and sacrifice of Christ in palpable blood/wine symbolism:
Don’t listen to your critics. Mine are drinking wine in anticipation.
...
My back gleams red. Celebrate
This richness. I’m waiting.
Blood drenches my mouth.

The imperative “Don’t listen to your critics” and the internal rhyme of “mine” and “wine” simultaneously addresses those who enjoy the violence—the tradition of bullfighting—and those who protest it. The lines also suggest the carnality and violence of eating beef and pairing it with red wine. Behind these lines there is a further wry intimation of Giannoukos herself, whose poetic search for love is likewise offered up to the wine-swilling critics. Giannoukos makes use of a more externalised persona, common in her first collection, again in Sonnet VII, and the biblical story of Salome:

It is impossible to say when
or how, but the crude reluctance
of this encounter to out itself
as the fabrication of two people
in love with hate is typical
of how world affairs proceed—let’s say
Salome’s tantalising dance...
My stars say to find the rhythm
of my breath in the lips that I kiss.
Tonight I kiss the lips of a dead man.

Salome represents unbridled lust; she is bestial, irrational and indifferent, especially given that she is convinced to ask for the head of John the Baptist as a reward for her dance for Herod. In its Wildean version, the dance of the seven veils equates to a strip-tease: Salome performs her nakedness, and yet remains inscrutable. Here Giannoukos acknowledges the art of poetic confession, the ability to perform one’s vulnerability and to handle unmentionable subjects. In the
sixties, when confessionalism was in vogue, these “unmentionable subjects” were sex and madness; however, in the cynical twenty-first century, it is love itself and sentimentality that are taboo. Giannoukos is self-referential in Sonnet LVI:

yet in mid-note I turn magpie,
carolling my love, my grubby self
before an audience gagging with laughter.

Songbirds—standing in both for lyrical poetry and the “magic” of romance—appear as motifs throughout the sonnets, but here they are comically reversed. The ugly truth that must face, even by those of us who are professed feminists, is that the desperation to fall “in love,” generated by the fiction of Disney and Hollywood—and indeed most Romantic fiction—chafes against reality. In Sonnet XXV, love is merely “a reflection on screen” and the general temporality of twenty-first century love means “the digital long take seems avant-garde / it is the long duration of my love / that breaks with tradition and is radical.” The promise of meaning through being “in love” and the curse of being defined by one’s relationship status both persist and haunt the contemporary woman. As Giannoukos puts it: “the delirium of love continues in the age of the self-help book.” The spiritual void that arises from this absence of fictionalised love becomes evident in Sonnet XL:

Our bones and ashes carry the words
that holy men, accustomed to love’s cancer
put to music or poetry when in temper.

... I am a keen hearer of the birdsong
... even bland words seduce lovers.

Likewise, in Sonnet XLVI, the speaker admits:
I am a skygazer. I am witness to your
eclipse... In the old temple
love-astrologers hand out business cards.

Giannoukos creates a precarious conception of love that is cynical, visceral, spiritual, and ecological all at once. It is a messy lived experience nested in the messiness of nature and the chaos of existence. Love “bursts like a paint bomb,” inaugurating a violent cycle that “punctures itself at the exact moment of our exhaustion.” Love is the voice and hand of God, but it is also a “shitty-eyed” lover, torn muscles, and lonely travellers sending each other photographs. Love is ownership, from the submission of admitting “I don’t care if I’m yours,” to the more sinister keeping of trophies: “my ear, my tail, my hooves?” Despite her knowledge and cataloguing of love’s undesirable features, the speaker stargazes and strains her ears in order to be a part of it.

In her final poem, Sonnet LVIII, this messy cycle of violence and hope is presented as an accursed mix of faith and addiction:

The wind that blows away the dust of hope
takes night’s loss for a sign—a reformed gambler,
I’m still gambling on signs, as if the gods
might yet sprinkle their blessings and bounty over me.

However, as Giannoukos notes, “the gods are cruel.” Furthermore, they do not exist. In Sonnet L, the poet avows a Beckettian/Lyotardian denial of grand narratives so that spirituality, love, human progress, and meaning must all now be regarded as tenuous:

The sharp relief of winter never arrives.
This journey is long, I’ve made a mistake.
... Tomorrow
I will scoop fallen narratives,
like so many fragments never
again assembled or reglued.
The child peers over the horizon.  
Will it be the same story? The same death?

The doomed cycle of this search for love repeats itself in each act of coitus, in each new partner, in each generation and species, becoming as universal as the cycle of the seasons. Thus these oppositions, or the various cynical and hopeful positions of the speakers, are not paradoxical; they are merely representative of different seasons or distinct moments in the cycle. The philosophical pursuit of love and its associated problems, however, is not particularly soothing to the individual’s lived experience. As Sonnet XVIII exclaims, “Thirty per cent of women live alone. Whoa!” And as is evident in Sonnet LV, uncertainty pervades the individual who is not balmed by companionship and the subsequent comfort, even in the illusion of narrative closure offered by the state of being “in love”:

It’s the unthinkable that berates me. What if,  
what if I were to tell you that it’s the long  
hour of the night ticking away like a dying  
sun that bothers me... what if  
I were to tell you that at the moment it’s the impossibility  
of our being which troubles me more than our love.

Giannoukos’s second work wilfully exposes itself to the gagging critique that typically accompanies traditional forms and love themes. The collection is at its best when the poet blends critical humour with a commanding knowledge of her subject so as to valorise her conviction that love is important, existential, and worthy of continued exploration. The collection’s language play offers many ways into the poems, especially as we look for what “dazes” us and what we might “bulldoze.” But the collection is perhaps at its weakest when abstractions or a lack of particulars create moments of vagueness or generality. These moments allow the contemporary reader’s native scorn for love to creep in, especially scorn towards love as a serious academic subject.
Nevertheless, *Bull Days* is brave work, a collection that is prepared to dodge the labels of sad, desperate, sentimental, and confessional in order to explore the precarious nature of those signs, songs, fictions, and narratives by which we navigate love. Giannoukos’s modern sonnet sequence skilfully exposes visceral truths about what drives us as humans and, moreover, as animals.

**Notes**

Notes on Contributors

Chris Rudge is a manuscript designer and early-career academic, based at the University of Sydney as part of the research team for The Australian Neurolaw Database (see http://www.neurolaw.edu.au). In 2017, Rudge will commence a research fellowship in the ARC Centre of Excellence for the History of Emotions to study the emotional history and literature of neurological pain disorders.

Adam Hulbert is a composer and sound designer, and a lecturer at the University of New South Wales, where he is also convener of the Sonic Arts Stream and Director of the Sound Lab Music Ensemble. Hulbert’s recent writing on Philip K. Dick and radiation has appeared in the Journal of Language, Literature and Culture.

Blythe Worthy is a PhD candidate in the English Department in the University of Sydney. Her doctoral research calls on feminist discourses of space to analyse representations of “criminal” women in film and television. A keen cultural commentator, Worthy has appeared on SBS’s The Feed and Triple J’s Hack.

Aleksandr Andreas Wansbrough received his PhD from the Sydney College of the Arts at the University of Sydney in 2016. He is recently guest editor for the Australian Journal of popular Culture and editorial assistant for the Journal of Asia-Pacific Pop Culture.

More information about the contributors to this issue may be found online. See http://www.philamentiournal.com.