

# WHAT WOULD WE MEAN BY REALISM?

AMANDA BEECH

This paper asks how speculative realisms may be in fact proposed by the image and explores what conception of the social this operation of the image produces now. If the causal ties between artwork and world are no longer connected or guaranteed, then what conception of the artwork and the social is now drawn? What is this world of images without us?

Technological power as the work of reason, its aestheticization and conceptualization in art and philosophy has been the site of an exploration of what it means to think past the human condition, to face the unknown and to reason out the unfathomable world, cosmos and universe that we inhabit – to avoid the problems of subjective perception and to think the science of objectivity. However, the consequence of this is that any attempt to speak of this non-human orientated world has problematically found itself as the primary correlate to human finitude, unable to surpass the binary formulation of human/nonhuman, subject/object that it claimed did not exist in the first place. By now we know and understand this dualism as a well-worn cliché, especially if we read or watch any sci-fi. The image of ‘technology beyond our control’ has situated our self-understanding of our power, our potentiality *and* our finitude. But what this tells us is that ironically, discussion on anything that we seem unable to control instead becomes quickly refigured as the ideal description of the human in crisis. Therefore, it is human life and human death that are primed as the thing that matters, despite these claims to think past the human condition towards matter itself.

Ernst Jünger’s work in particular plays out the paradox of untying the human from both the image and power and could be said to prefigure these problems. Jünger’s, antimodern fantasies from the 1930’s focus on images of industrial technology as the ultimately non-human. Jünger’s work pictures a totalitarian nightmare or sci-fi horror of an absolute techno-culture, where faceless mechanistic power controls right the way down from the alarm clock that wakes us to the camera lens whose ability to replace and produce reality brings violence ever closer. He writes: “In our technical era the individual appears to be evermore dependent, ‘unfree’ and endangered but the nature of these bonds are less visible than those of the feudal era. Hence they are even more absolute than the absolute monarchies.” [1] For Jünger, the only way to live with this metaphysical force is to embrace it in the form of a romantic nihilistic self-sacrifice. Here the body must become technological so as to “unravel the logic of violence.” [2]

Jünger’s theory seeks to overcome the problems of a representationalist metaphysics as well as the problems of Marxian dialectics by refusing to revolt against techno-Capital as a form of bad dominance. Jünger seeks to think past a tragic definition of human life in the face of a Big Other, but paradoxically does so *for the human* where the image of techno violence becomes site and condition for, and therefore is directly correlative to gauging the success of human power. The formalism encountered here now appears as a form of kitsch and likewise we can say the same for a variety of artistic practices and in particular those most familiar to the body art and performance arts generation around the 1960’s onwards. Here we see that both the body and psyche act as a prime site for a testing of ‘the beyond’ through technology. These practices take an easy place within the history of the subject, a history that often settles in the same schlock mysticism that we see in Jünger’s work. As such, despite its many

claims to be speaking of a world beyond human control, we refer back to a binary formula of that mingles biology and techno-power in an aesthetics of mechanistic cool and abundant excess. Both the body and individual identity remain as the site for this figuration.

What we see emerging here is a central problem; the de-ontologised real of our reality, namely a conception of a post-metaphysical world, is correlated to the forces in our lives that we identify as dominant and pervasive, and beyond our mastery – effectively a matching up of empiricism with transcendence. In other arts practices, and in particular those that share the dialectical methods of Critical Theory, we have seen the identification with language itself as the place of the non-human, where language as our essential technology is understood as alienating and beyond our control, despite it being made by us. This paradox lays the heart of Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, where we see core connections between the image, its ability to manifest power and its (albeit) negatively construed correlation to reality. Adorno and Horkheimer's work looks to how this dimension of language-power figures a crude, barbaric and miasmatic nature in a kind of post political reality that desublimates individual identities to the equivalence of an animalistic totality. The base of the operation is Hollywood, and as we know this highlights a deeper irony where these the two sides have shared a mutual popularization. Crucially, for Adorno and Horkheimer, a knowledge that knows the dialectic is capable of transcending the horrors of similitude, but it is here where this knowledge is expressed where we encounter a key problem. This is centrally because this knowledge is married to a form of mysticism, and significantly this is most evident when it comes to an understanding of art. Here arts re-politicized form is correlated to what is considered to be its essential nature, that is, arts politics is conditioned upon the natural ambiguity of the image.

Furthermore, it is important to dwell for a moment on the contradiction that this twofold status of the image produces. On the one hand the image is considered as the site of a constructed reality that takes the form of nature, and on the other hand it is considered as the means to transcending it. It is the prime symbolic referent to dominance and it has the ability to access a deeper unconditioned reality. To achieve this double operation the image is compelled to become the primary figure for a politics that it claimed it had no access to in the first place. It is asked to be both the guarantee and cause for political transformation. In thinking these asymmetrical demands together the image is mystified further towards a concept of a deeper concept –less nature. Problematically such a conception of the image can only serve to set of the limitations both for itself and politics.

But this problem of how an antihumanist realism can be thought in terms of the image can be does not end here. We see it in the problems of manufacturing the relativity of chaos in the world of the given where reality is represented to us very often in an aesthetics of dissonance, arrhythmic atonal music, base materialism, punk and other visions of excess. These images are first problematic because they are understood easily as genres, their dialectic form simultaneously figures the object of our constraint whilst being the key to our freedom: a nexus that figures the image as the space of torsion. This is opposite to the freedom its authors had hoped to access. But in addition to this, the image becomes an illustration of our relation to it. In aspiring to point to an unmeasured nature beyond us, a world that we cannot master, this image ends up as a weird reflection; the mirror of our nature. It finds its form in a Kantian-style psychosis of mimetic compulsive gestures that resides in the pleasure of a twisted and masochistic anthropocentricism. This image of world beyond us, in fact is a story that narrates our relationship to ourselves. The image can only be for us and by us. Here the big error is easy to spot: an ontological relativity is produced despite claiming its empirical impossibility.

To make some early conclusions:

1) These approaches to meaning is that they assume too quickly that the work of producing meaning is tied to a theory of causation.

2) At the same time and in direct contradiction to this, they assume that the image is naturally free.

If we take these two points together, the image can only be understood as mutually weak and special or evil and banal, a tool for power, but at the same time the figure for freedom. In this schema the last stop for the image is unreason. Ironically it is such a statement that has defined the conditions of arts politics for generations.

3) What is common and also worth focusing on when we look across these materialisms that try to think through the conditions of the world without us, is that they all are subtended by an impoverished theory of meaning. Here we begin to see in much sharper distinction between an image of knowledge that illustrates our relation to language as a form of knowledge and the intended but failed aim to think contingent reality.

Therefore, crucial to this paper is that we think past this problem and more urgently that we re-think the operations of the image that can get past this poor mode of illustration.

Our task therefore is neither to annihilate the image in the name of a true reality nor to assume the image has privileged access to it. To do this I want to draw upon some of the work of Quentin Meillassoux with attention to his arguments in the book, *After Finitude*. Of course if we mention the term politics, then a question of how we comprehend reality has at its center the question of causation, namely, how an understanding of reality might condition and refigure the world that we act within. Having established the landscape of representationalist and causal problems in the past few examples I have discussed, my central aim is to understand how meaning takes place, how words and language can be taken seriously without mapping a version of reality back onto the political or by mapping empirical claims to a transcendental reality. Rather, my aim is to understand how this has consequence for the political and to do this is to commit to a thinking of action through the unbinding of the relations of image, power, and reality.

Meillassoux's work describes a world of super-contingency where any concept of the world being 'for us' is denied and any conception of practical reason is undone. This is a world without guarantees; it means that we have a radical denial of perspective, relations, and consistency. It becomes impossible to subordinate means to ends and therefore threatens any investment in practical means. Instead Meillassoux proposes a truth that is correspondent with our reality, in as much as it guarantees the inability to produce a theory of meaning. "There is nothing beneath or beyond the manifest gratuitousness of the given – nothing but the limitless and lawless power of its destruction, emergence or persistence." [3] Here we enter the realm of hyper chaos where disorder no longer stands as the prime reality of existence, instead contingency is so radical that disorder can be destroyed by order in an equal contingency of order and disorder.

Meillassoux's work refuses to condition another form of access or connectivity, for he asks to us to remember that contingency is banal, since not only does knowing contingency not transcend contingency but for chaos "...to remain chaos, [it] cannot actually bring forth the unthinkable." [4]

So how does this mind independent reality, this description of a contingency that is absolute, have any connection to or place within the formation of politics? The question here then is how this thought of a time without us can be understood without handing back the statement itself to the primacy of the thought that thinks that time without us? On the other hand, what form of knowledge can recognize the primacy of contingency as a fact, without reducing absolute contingency to an object of knowledge? [5] The task now is to understand how Meillassoux's work has consequences for understanding both reason and the image.

### ***Language without correlationalism***

A question of the politics of absolute contingency demands that we untie the question about what absolute contingency bears out in the political, from the question of what absolute contingency means 'for us'. We must then take this question from an antihumanist perspective. Reviewing Meillassoux's approach to language it is clear that whilst the representational faculty of the image is understood as inadequate to its object, the work of reason is capable of this adequation. Meillassoux contends, "a reality separate from the subject can be thought by the subject." [6]

Here Meillassoux takes us to the limits of meaning that are proven by scientific reason.

"The fact that I can't imagine the non-existence of subjectivity, since to imagine is to exist as a subject, does not prove it is impossible: I can't imagine what it is like to be dead, since to imagine it means we are still alive, but, unfortunately, this fact does not prove that death is impossible. The limits of my imagination are not the index of my immortality." [7]

These limits are not defined in tragic terms. This 'death as a fact' statement is not reflective of a mortality, or finitude, instead it situates a new potentiality for the work of reason. However, Meillassoux's dedication to scientific thought over a thinking of the image demonstrated in his clear distinction between reason and the imagination sets up a problem since it describes a return to the kind of idealism that he seeks to escape. This is where the thought of the fact of death acts as the fact of non-relationality – a transposition to the primacy of thought it. This idealism is underscored by his rejection of any analysis of how 'the world of the given' is conditioned through such statements, or how such statements emerge within it. Duly, this work creates urgency for a renewed attention to language, specifically this form of rational language and its operations, as well as how this connects to the manifest image. By looking to how meaning works in relation to facticity I hope to overcome the problems of idealism of a particular form of scientific thought as well as the censorship of the imagination that seems core to Meillassoux's argument. I'm not going to go into this in any great detail but in this final section, I'll sketch out a few points that move towards this. The first ties reason to cause, the second looks to absolute contingency as metaphor and the third identifies a heteronomy of reason and imagination.

First of all, the methods that Meillassoux's puts into practice point us to a divergent reading of the operations of reason. Meillassoux's logic is built on a literal approach to language, where facts are facts. Facts are taken seriously to the point that they exceed the subject who claims it. This literalism allows us to identify another form of adequation where reason operates as a form of action and force. Here, language succeeds in transcending the limits of the human and is not refigured back onto it. The work of Donald Davidson lubricates this observation, specifically his assertion that "reasons are as much causes of, as they are explanations for action." [8] Therefore, the make-up of this factual claim is action and reason, and these now appear unbound from a general principle of cause, because cause is simply the non-linguistic physical relation of these objects.

Secondly, it is here where we could say that the work of Meillassoux's absolutism resides within the world of metaphor. According to Davidson, "metaphors mean what the words, in their most literal interpretation, mean, and nothing more." [9] And I think the same goes for Meillassoux – whether he likes it or not – since the thought of the absolute in Meillassoux relies upon the referential qualities of language, both to justify the fact of absolute contingency and equally to cause the unbinding that speculation requires. The reason that thinks the absolute nature of contingency makes absolute contingency the metaphor par excellence, and this metaphor in its absolute nature has to be understood literally. Therefore, whilst representationalism as a mode of producing meaning is limited in Meillassoux's argument, the meaning in its metaphoric operation is alive and well. This opens a vista of new possibilities, just as for Davidson, taking metaphors literally allows for new practices, understandings and meanings to be produced. It is through this metaphoric condition where I'd identify another kind of realism; a realism that produces a mix of the speculative (the might be) and the specific (the matter that is that speculation itself). "This is indeed a speculative thesis, (says Meillassoux) since we are not thinking an absolute, but it is not metaphysical, since we are not thinking any thing (entity) would be absolute." [10]

Thirdly, we must also remember that by Meillassoux's lights we would have to split reason and the imagination as categories that do not and will not meet. However, in thinking reason as cause, or the force of naming facticity we must not only consider the language operations of scientific statements in empirical terms but we must also how the site of the imagination names and produces these facts. Here we can think through how the thought that thinks fact operates in a new heteronomy that complicates any distinction between reason and the imagination, where this force has no will or essential direction, no referent or map, only terminus.

Any reconnection between reason and cause, and reason and the imagination might seem to replicate all of the problems I reviewed at the beginning of this paper. The former might fall back into a some form of instrumentalism and the latter might suggest a renewed focus on the subject, moving us from the problem of idealism of thought in Meillassoux, to another idealism: the subject that thinks thought. However, since there is no principle of cause at work here, there is also no ontology or objectifying concept that would ground these relations, and because we cannot tie this indistinction between reason and the imagination back to a coherent subjectivity that thinks it, since facts are unrelated to human will, we do not idealize either the subject as a thinking being, nor the thinking that is thought by it. There is no longer an image of reason that would operate as the delineation of our knowledge or our finitude and we can avoid the mistake that is to graft some image of our knowledge, as technological reason, at the center of our internal psychological fears or towards some externalizing force of secret dominance that this image may hold.

Taking this to artistic culture, we now can think about a radical untying of what we understand to be the necessary and the instrumental. Whilst Meillassoux's speculative materialism guarantees the unbinding of instrumental reason, the understanding of the condition of meaning and in particular not just what the image can mean but also what a conception of our reality without us means within the reality that we reside. This is a question of meaning without us, and the reconditioning of an understanding of language interpretation as being always already tied to our mind and body – this is an escape from the circle of referents where art is understood as a personal message to us and a general message about us.

Rethinking art as a factually non-relational entity that is also capable of meaning shatters these habits and sets out to evacuate the genres that confuse themselves for a deeper and meaningful experience of a truth. It overcomes the kinds of banal mythologies and nostalgic horrors that recount that which exceeds us, and returns us to a face a different and truly alien world.

## **References and Notes:**

1. Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism. Technology, Culture and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich*, (Cambridge University Press, 1996), 88, "Fortschritt, Freiheit und Notwendigkeit," *Arminius* 8 (1926): 8–10.
2. Marcus Paul Bullock, *The Violent Eye, Ernst Jünger's Visions and Revisions on the European Right* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1992), 155.
3. Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude* (Continuum, 2008), 63.
4. *Ibid.*, 67.
5. This point has particular relevance to Bruno Latour's critique of designated categories of culture, politics, science in *We Have Never Been Modern*, since Meillassoux's critique rests upon a facticity that only a particular form of science can produce.
6. Quentin Meillassoux "Time Without Becoming," (Paper presented at The Centre for Research in Modern European Philosophy Research Seminar, London: Middlesex University, 8 May 2008).
7. *Ibid.*
8. Donald Davidson, "Actions, Reasons and Causes," *Essays On Actions and Events* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 10.
9. Donald Davidson, *Inquires into Truth and Interpretation* (Oxford University Press, 1984), 245.
10. Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 60.