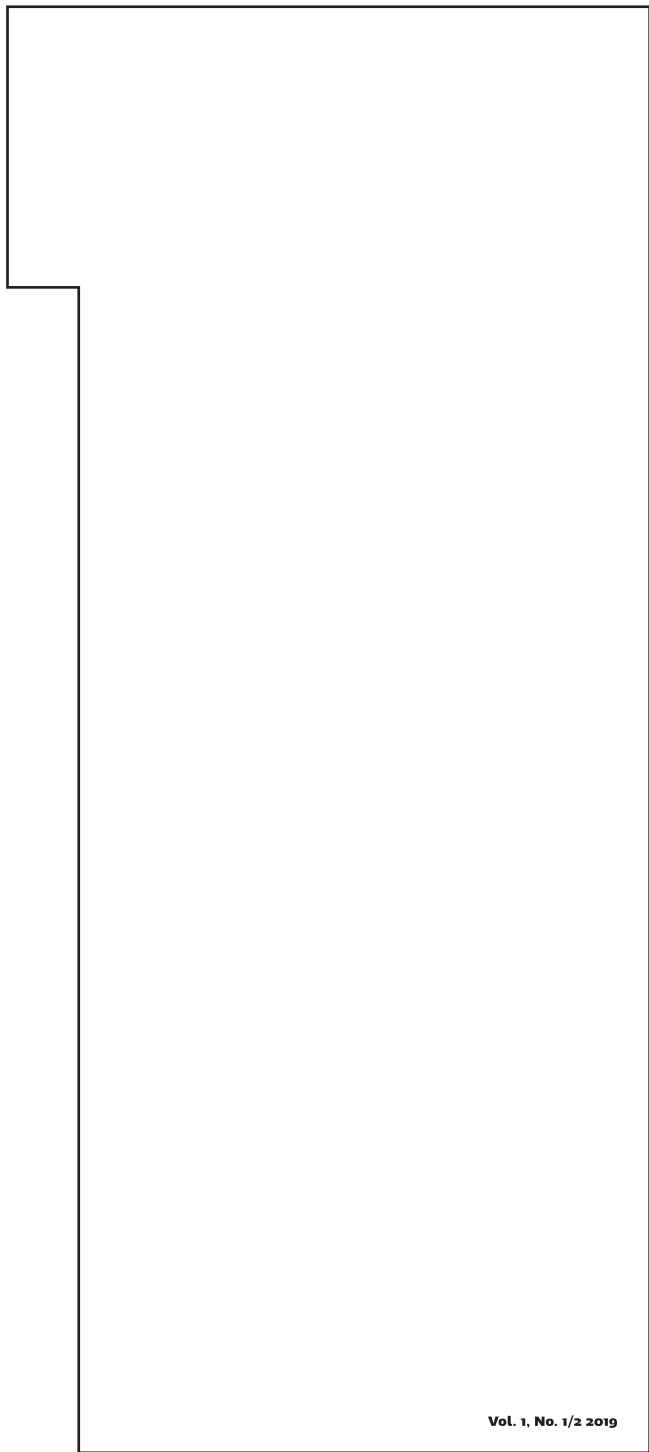# Cross Cultural Studies Review

A journal for comparative studies
of culture, literature, and the arts

Speculating worlds

Readability Thresholds Xenography and Speculative Fiction

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Abstract

The unreadable and the illegible tend to be treated as the ʾotherˮ of writing. Playing on one of the meanings of *xenography* – writing in a language unknown to the writer – this paper explores the possibility that the metaphorical ʾgravity assistˮ of literature, rather than engaging the resources of content and imagination, actually resides in the cognitively inaccessible layers of writing as a material phenomenon. If we accept Harman's definition of realism as something that can't be *translated into human knowledge without energy loss,* regions of unintelligibility in literary writing take on a completely different meaning, and appear as zones coinciding with the asemic material exteriority, equally unavailable to thought and mimesis. Writings of Thomas Ligotti *(The Red Tower),* Reza Negarestani *(Cyclonopedia)* and Mark Z. Danielewski *(The Familiar)* are examined in the light of various atypical formal devices they use to convey a certain ʾotherness,ˮ introducing varying degrees of unreadability as a response to the ʾinscrutability of the Real itselfˮ (Fisher) and enforcing new types of non-hierarchical distribution of agency between writer, reader and text.

Keywords: xenography, the unreadable, the illegible, materialism, speculative fiction, Ligotti, Negarestani, Danielewski

1. The Other of Writing

I will begin with a quote[1] that will probably sound very familiar:

> We must abolish [man] in literature and replace him once and for all with matter. . . . Be careful not to assign human sentiments to matter, but instead to divine its different governing impulses, its forces of compression, dilation, cohesion, disintegration, its heaps of molecules massed together or its electrons whirling like turbines. There is no point in creating a drama of matter that has been humanized.

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1   This is an adapted version of the keynote address given at *Gravity Assist: Speculative Change in Literature, Film and Art* conference (Split, September 14th 2018).

Its source is embarrassing in many ways (Marinetti 122), and one can only hope that we'll never see the resurgence of its historical context, but its overall tone makes it vaguely contemporaneous, apparently placing it among some recent tendencies in philosophy and their attempts at bypassing the human moment in the process of addressing reality. Of course, it would be a simplification – if not an outright forgery – to claim that the literal removal of humans from the realm of art (or even the true 'destruction of I' in literature", as Marinetti would have it) is the primary concern of contemporary materialisms, but the question remains: if art can't help being thoroughly immersed in correlation and always inevitably conditioned by a certain frame of culture, type of economy, level of technological development, even a specific sensorium or a nervous system, how does one liquidate man once and for all precisely?

Within this frame of reference, literature might seem less engaging than mathematics (which many regard as the privileged access point to reality), but only if one thinks of it as an imaginative endeavour, conscious striving to develop new narratives and new ideas. I would like to explore, at least tentatively, the possibility that its royal road to alterity, exteriority or future, doesn't lead through thinking at all, but through the materiality of artworks, precisely at the points where we seem to fail to comprehend them.

I will try to approach this subject in a very limited and possibly old-fashioned way, looking for 'the location of nonsense within sense" (2) and posing the question: what if the true alterity to be contacted through writing is not something external after all, something pre-existing (even as a figment or a fictional object), but something non-narrative, something unrecountable, the alterity of writing itself? What if the metaphorical 'gravity assist" of literature, its capital power, the capability of propelling us into a certain unknown or previously unthought *elsewhere,* is simply a forced cognitive development in the wake of its material, non-semantic aspects?

I'll try to explore that unreadability in certain texts that belong to broadly defined speculative fiction, the way they employ it as a strategy of representing the unimaginable, and the way that varying degrees of this unreadability open up new pathways of writing and reading. This is where the most abstruse term from the title of this paper comes into play: *xenography,* which seems like a particularly useful compound word in this context, in all of its possible meanings: strange writing, foreign writing, alien writing. I'll try to appropriate it, with all of its definitions: a) writing (about) the alien; b) writing in an alien or foreign language (some dictionaries define it simply as 'knowledge of a foreign language"); c) the ability to write in a language which the individual has not learned, or even more pointedly: writing in a language unknown to the writer.

Connotations of the last definition threaten to lead us astray towards

spiritualism or automatic writing, but on another level, this might be read as a condensed description of literature as such, at least within the horizon of modernity: *writing in a language unknown to the writer.*[2] This definition inevitably points to asemic writing as the essence of inscription: "Let there be writing, not *about* the body, but the body itself. Not signs, images, or ciphers of the body, but still the body" (Nancy 9). If to write – in a narrow sense of the word – is "to touch upon the body, rather than signify it or make it signify" (9), then writing itself is a particular type of corporeality (rather than something that "happens" on a material substratum), coinciding with the body precisely in its non-semantic areas: "What in a writing, and properly so, is not to be read – that's what a body is" (87).

There is, of course, a very strong tradition of evaluating the unreadable, the illegible, the material as the "other" of writing, but what if this is not a remote, borderline zone of writing's repertoire, but its very basis, its prime and irreducible quality? What if the "natural" condition of writing is not being a representation of something through symbols (even a representation of unreadability), but being unreadability itself?

Naturally, *content* behind the narrative still seems to be the focal point for the large majority of writing on speculative fiction (and for SF writers themselves), but if the only way to adequately represent, engender, embody alterity or the alien in a non-reductive, non-anthropomorphic, non-metaphorical way leads through a channel that bypasses the weakest link of the entire materialistic endeavour – which is ourselves, the mind, causality, story, maybe even temporality – then the results will have to be at least partially unclear, incomprehensible, unreadable, illegible.

This would force us to consider writing as an irreducible exteriority: *writing is space,* opposed to the inevitable linearity of thought and storytelling.[3] It is not "space" represented, described or narrated; the book is a spatial (non-dialectical) object in itself. Such privileging of inscription

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2   Contrary to habitual equations of deconstruction with postmodernism, the most radically "modernist" reading of literature as a highly paradoxical institution, working from a place of "subversive juridicity", is proposed by Derrida: "is it not necessary for all literature to exceed literature? . . . What would be a literature that would be only what it is, literature? It would no longer be itself if it were itself" ("Before the Law" 215). Literature (if there is any) therefore ceases to work as a preexisting category and becomes a perpetual self-generation through singular acts of writing that come to inaugurate or transform a certain universality, instead of "belonging" to it as mere contingencies, perfectly readable and readily subsumable to its law. "The work, the opus, does not belong to the field, it is the transformer of the field" (ibid.), placing us in a position of writing where "we know neither *who* nor *what* is the law, *das Gesetz.* This, perhaps, is where literature begins" (207).

3   The material nature of inscription poses fundamental problems for all idealist definitions of "literature" (in the widest scope of its meaning, including all scientific statements; see Husserl 160), and provides an axis for Derrida's early of attempts at dis-

in its purely visual or graphic aspects, without considering its information-bearing capacities, might seem like an extreme proposition – writing as a material, spatial artefact that is *entangled* with meaning, concepts and thought, but distinctly *separate* from thought, maybe even prior to thought, untranslatable matter that severely tests the subject's capability of understanding, at the same time generating something that was previously unthought – but it actually ties in very well with Harman's claim that *"realism is not realism if the reality it describes can be translated without energy loss into human knowledge,* or indeed into any sort of relation at all" (*Bells and Whistles* 12). This is rephrased in *Weird Realism* in order to define artwork as 'a real' object in the sense that it cannot be exhausted by any sum total of specific experiences or linguistic propositions, but to some extent resists all perception and all analysis" (237), always leaving behind a remainder of the 'too real". This resistance to representation and summarizing is an index of the fundamental irreducibility of things to concepts: 'The meaning of being might even be defined as *untranslatability*" (16).

If materiality is really the opposite of knowledge, and spatiality the opposite of thought, then the crucial tendency of every text, fictional or not, might be 'becoming-haptical of the optical". This phrase is taken from Derrida's *On Touching* (123), but it concerns the final chapter of Deleuze's and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus,* 'The Smooth and the Striated", and the basic profile of (literary) writing could be examined through the 'opposition" of smooth and striated spaces. The *ideality* of striated space is opposed to the *realism* of smooth space, which is linked to the 'tactile', or rather 'haptic' space, as distinguished from optical space. 'Haptic' is a better word than 'tactile' since it does not establish an opposition between two sense organs but rather invites the assumption that the eye itself may fulfill this nonoptical function" (Deleuze and Guattari 543).

The main point of interest here would be a type of deterritorialization of the striated realm, its collapse into the smooth space: text, perceived as a completely transparent vessel for meaning, connected to temporal and largely linear processes of cognition, retracting into its materiality, into its non-conceptual regions, turning into a picture, but not metaphorically, in the way of *ekphrasis*: this would be a completely autonomous graphic *tableau,* without depicting anything in particular or corresponding to

mantling the logocentric superstructures of traditional approaches to writing. His notion of *espacement,* 'spacing" described as 'becoming-space of time" (*devenir-espace du temps*) (*Of Grammatology* 68), plays a crucial role in his early works and his attempts to portray intelligibility as an *a posteriori* of writing. If 'the space of pure reading is always already *intelligible,* that of pure writing always still *sensible*" (289), 'radical illegibility" becomes a nonchronological antecedent of every work of literature, 'the very possibility of the book" (*Writing and Difference* 95).

the semantic level of writing at all; it would be a text-as-an-asemic-mark, text as an abstract drawing.[4]

This framework would be directly opposed to hermeneutics or phenomenology: the essence of a literary work of art wouldn't reside in the region farthest from its spatial and material support – in the strata of represented objects or schematized aspects (as suggested by Ingarden, for example) – but in its very base, on the purely sensory level of graphisms and sounds. Coming back to Deleuze, if we can describe representation as the smooth space of writing being territorialized and striated by conventions of anthropocentric perspective, processing materiality into communication, thing into thought, we could say that writing that fights this impulse automatically works against its own grounding in Platonic mimesis, subverting the linearity of time and affirming its own material foundation.[5]

There is a microscopic example of this non-dialectical type of writing in weird fiction: Lovecraft's celebrated story "The Call of Cthulhu". In this context, I would like to accentuate the xenographic element contained in the very title: the *word* "Cthulhu", devoid of obvious meaning as it is, works precisely as an asemic index of the alien, of the *inconceivable.* We know the reason Lovecraft built it that way:

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4   The notion of haptic space was developed more thoroughly in Deleuze's study on Francis Bacon, where painting is examined as something that *removes* the figuration from the image, liberating the matter from the reign of optical organization, "making marks that no longer depend on either our will or our sight", "guided by other forces", attesting to the "intrusion of another world into the visual world of figuration" (71). This engagement with a certain "beyond" of the image is announced on the very last page as "the formation of a third eye, a haptic eye", offering a "new clarity": "It is as if the duality of the tactile and the optical were surpassed visually in this haptic function born of the diagram" (113). The *diagram* itself is defined very specifically as "the operative set of asignifying and nonrepresentative lines and zones, line-strokes and color-patches" (71): owing more to the tactile ground than to the optical horizon, "imposed upon the eye as an absolutely foreign power" (75), allowing for a "direct action upon the nervous system" (76), the diagram is the site of chance and accident, irrationality and insubordination, finally of catastrophe and chaos. The *pictorial fact,* fundamentally shaped by those asignifying traits, is ultimately defined as "a zone of objective indiscernibility or indeterminability" (110), an apophenic space where "several forms may actually be included in one and the same Figure, indissolubly, caught up in a kind of serpentine" (112), a whirling movement that "gives them a single body' or unites them in a single fact,' apart from any figurative or narrative connection" (90-91). Of course, it's highly unadvisable to conflate different arts and their material supports, their histories and technologies, but – since we are trying to locate thresholds of readability in writing – all of this seems highly pertinent to research into the liminal areas of literature as well.

5   Deleuze and Guattari pose the question: "What is the body without organs of a book?" (4), indirectly answering within a later passage on Hjelmslev: "He used the term *matter* for the plane of consistency or Body without Organs, in other words, the unformed, unorganized, nonstratified, or destratified body and all its flows: subatomic and submolecular particles, pure intensities, prevital and prephysical free singularities" (48-49).

> the word is supposed to represent a fumbling human attempt to catch the phonetics of an *absolutely non-human* word. . . . The syllables were determined by a physiological equipment wholly unlike ours, *hence could never be uttered perfectly by human throats.* . . . The actual sound – as nearly as human organs could imitate it or human letters record it – may be taken as something like *Khlûl'-hloo* (Lovecraft 395).

The final rendition of this sound is still a legible graphism, but it is nearer to its ʹmeaning", to its unthinkable *signified,* the closer it gets to unpronounceability and incomprehensibility.

We could append a long psychoanalytical footnote here, linking this blank spot explicitly to the Unconscious, the Real, *jouissance, lalangue, khōra, géno-texte,* the crypt etc., but maybe we should remain on the surface and focus on the pure sound or graphic shape, the unreadable and unpronouncable as the birthplace of the ʹalien", as effective as it is precisely because there is no conceptual background, no meaning to concretize, no idea to participate in. It's a closed object, a foreign body barely adapted to print within a human story told in English, and that's why it works.

I would provisionally define the unreadable as ʹthat which I cannot reproduce" – in understanding (rendering it intelligible) or in ʹperformance" (literally, in pronounciation). Encountering the unreadable implies coming to terms with a ʹthing" (rather than an *object*) that will never become an idea or a concept, detachable from matter, corporeality, the particular, the body; if there is a way of engaging with it, it will probably derive from what is particular, corporeal, non-generalizable in us. To some extent, this invites the comparison with Bryant's ʹdark objects" which are completely non-interactive with their environment, or are – at best – producing a certain ʹblack hole effect": forcibly interacting with their surroundings, creating disruptions, but remaining inaccessible (cf. Willems 16). This is how Harman describes this hiatus: ʹno *direct* contact with the real object is possible", while ʹindirect access is achieved by allowing the hidden object to deform the sensual world, just as the existence of a black hole might be inferred from the swirl of light and gases orbiting its core" (*Weird Realism* 238).

This idea of linking black holes and literature has already appeared in the 1990s in a different context: several writers, most notably J. Hillis

Miller and Marian Hobson, wrote about black holes[6] and strange attractors[7] respectively, attempting to explain what Derrida called *singularity* – a material core of unintelligibility within the literary text, inaccessible as such, withdrawn from the possibility of representation, but still detectable by its peripheral effects. Retracing Derrida's steps from his early analyses of Husserl to his later writings on Celan or Artaud, it's hard to overlook a unifying thread, conspicuous in many recent readings: deconstruction as a radically materialistic theory of text; the notion of ideality emerging exclusively through matter; dissemination as an aftereffect of this irreducibly sensible character of inscription; finally, material properties of texts (their graphic, acoustic, 'corporeal" profile), tending towards this non-dialectical 'singularity", as their decisive point of resistance to metaphysics. On many points, this seems to harmonize – superficially at least – with descriptions of 'the real as an indecipherable *noumenon* at the margins of the intelligible, conveying an incompressible amount of information as encrypted by the random numbers of Chaitin" (Brassier). Hobson, incidentally, also invokes Chaitin, but in order to assert that this type of irreducible complexity exists elsewhere: 'Such types of binary series suggest that the much more variegated strings of signifiers in natural language may likewise not be summarized without loss, by imposition of law-like program or summary equation one to another of different scales of detail and signification" (194), their singularity remaining unavailable to 'thematization" or further reduction.

In this perspective, *all* text is asemic writing on one level; all writing is xenography. But we are still faced with the question: how does the illegible acquire its place within the fantastic and its quest for the new?

The idea that a revolution in language must precede every other

6 'In reading both *Ayala's Angel* and *A la recherche du temps perdu* I have encountered, in a different way in each case, a core of incomprehensibility. I have named this, figuratively, a black hole. The effect of such an encounter is to dispossess my self of its seemingly secure self-possession" (Miller 491). 'A black hole does not, strictly speaking, exist, if existence depends on being observable and measurable. . . Nevertheless, though it cannot be verified directly, a black hole may be inferred from matter's violent perturbation in its vicinity and the consequent emission of signals at various frequencies. Like black holes, the wholly others never manifest themselves directly. They give evidence of themselves in a variety of perturbations that can be registered" (167).

7 Hobson's strange attractors are 'entities which are outside of the web of traces, which are unintuitable and unpresentable" (201): the term designates a 'value" which remains unknown, but which determines the overall tendency of visible elements within a given field. Nevertheless, this is not a variation on the dislocated center of structuralist metaphysics, but rather another figuration of incomprehensibility: 'it allows for more than, or other than, what we can say, or write. But at the same time, we cannot access it, only receive its irruptive force" (189). Standing in for French *singularités* (121), strange attractors remain transitory, offering no chance of eventual stabilization of the system.

revolution is somewhat of a cliché, and it is not specific to avant-garde movements or poststructuralist theories, but it does imply a position of *ingénieur,* a certain *a priori:* first the complete language, then everything else, including the use of that language in this or that work. Thought first, and writing afterwards. Nevertheless, as a rule, we are acquainted only with situations where – to paraphrase Beckett – writers dance first and think later, as this is the natural order.

Therefore, instead of attempting to formulate a comprehensive theory of writerly engagement with the unutterable real, or at least a taxonomy of all possible (past and future) literary 'solutions" for this impasse, I will stay within the vague and frustrating zone of what actually exists. I would like to proceed by commenting on several works that inhabit different margins of speculative fiction, first and foremost in the way they employ various types of xenography, different ratios of the readable and the unreadable in producing the 'black hole effect". None of them complies ideally with the task of representing the alien by way of absolute unreadability, but this is not meant to be a list of the most extreme cases; there have been far more radical works throughout the history of literature. Furthermore, there is a certain paradox involved in this idea of the illegible as the quintessence of literature (the idea which is anything but new, cultivated for a hundred years at least, since the heyday of Russian Formalism): the power of the unreadable actually diminishes as it reaches its pure state; something like absolutely asemic writing would be terminally unintelligible and would simply fail to produce any effects in the world available to us. It's not surprising that Deleuze uses the non-figure of a black hole to describe a complete failure of forced 'absolute deterritorialization" (Deleuze and Guattari 147), the dead end of a failed line of flight, promising something that 'may be necessary for the release of innovative processes" (368), but threatening to catastrophically dissipate into the void, the complete closure of death and destruction.

Within the literary sphere, pure sensibility (inaccessible to any type of comprehension) would be as alien to us as pure intelligibility (freedom from any type of material support). It would simply stay outside of the scope of what we can perceive as literary writing (at least today). Everything that happens in writing happens in between these extremes, around the midpoint of the sensible/intelligible spectrum. Every thing we actually have at our disposal can't help but be a denizen of a grey zone, a compromise formation or a transitional object, a crossfade between the old and new languages.

2. The Thing-Power of Text

The most easily approachable type of conveying the unthinkable would be writing the alien by almost entirely human means – in fact, employing all of the mimetic correlationist devices, the vocabulary of an anthropo-centric pseudo-realism, to produce an effect of estrangement. Thomas Ligotti's short story 'The Red Tower" (1996) would be a good example of this, particularly since it features an almost archetypal materialist image: an object out of time, disconnected from any human influence.

Coincidentally or not, 'The Red Tower" is also the name of a 1913 painting by Giorgio de Chirico, quite typical of this phase in his work, depicting empty streets and squares in the failing afternoon sunlight. 'The Red Tower" is another enigmatic structure lacking inhabitants or any im-mediate function, perhaps echoing the inscrutability of faceless man-nequins that people other paintings of the same period. The scene itself is deceptively simple, divested even of emblematic human silhouettes or passing trains in the distance (used as indices of scale rather than habitation); nevertheless, seemingly insignificant conflicting details of perspective, as well as disorienting positions of objects and their shad-ows, point to a deeper structure of representation: we are faced with an abstraction, an artificial geometry that is 'all wrong", assembled from impossible spatial relations between surfaces. This is something only superficially resembling our 'lived experience" of spatiality, but actually offering an 'impossible space", even more disturbing because of its ap-parent irreducibility to geometry.

In a roundabout way, all of this is pertinent to Ligotti's 'Red Tower". One of the first things readers are struck by is its apparent lack of any plot, which is quite unusual for his work. For all intents and purposes, this short prose is a description of a building – a red tower in a grey desert, three stories high and reaching three levels below the earth, serving as a certain type of factory: a factory of 'novelties" (trite and cheap products, horror props delivered to remote and unlikely locations by unclear meth-ods) that might be out of commission, but is definitely out of workers or personnel of any kind. Furthermore, it is described as 'a mere accent upon a desolate horizon" (Ligotti, *Teatro Grottesco* 72), subject to fading, and then finally as a product of hearsay: 'I am only repeating what I have heard. I myself have never seen the Red Tower – no one ever has, and possibly no one ever will. And yet wherever I go, people are talking about it" (84).

The final 'twist", a metalepsis into complete unreliability, cancelling out the entire factory as a *figment,* does nothing to compromise its horror or efficiency, to the contrary: the fact of something not yet, or not com-pletely existing – something seeking its form or a way through – only enhances its capacity of threat. The erasure of all certainties regarding

the tower, relegating it to a spectre, created by (possibly hallucinatory) voices, somehow seems as a second-rate shock compared to the basic, matter-of-factly described properties of the building itself: there are no doors or any opening below the second floor; there are no access roads or any other ways of approaching the factory; there are no people (certainly no *characters,* apart from the narrator) whose presence would give some sort of easily recognizable purpose to the factory's work.

All of this forces us to adjust our perspective of reading. What is the *real* story here? Things like the graveyard at level -2 and the *novelties* produced by the factory seem to be mere *sideshows* to a greater terror; elements of conventional horror actually serve as places of *rest,* a *heimlich* element of traditional storytelling, probably still managing to provide a safe, regulated and recognizably coded 'fright" to some readers, but making the entire vocabulary of genre a mere toy, a silly and hackneyed sub-element to much larger, incomprehensible and *bland* workings of a genuinely new and unrecognizable mechanism. The real horror lies not in the fact of a cemetery, the fact of a disembodied hand etc., but in the machines that produce and distribute them and the absolute unknowing surrounding their operations. The visible products of the factory (what we *can* read and readily understand) are designed to *conceal* what is behind them, offering *comprehensible* horror, given to figuration. This could prove to be a general matrix of Ligotti's fiction, which I hope to examine elsewhere: everything that is manifest, the better part of both the content and the style of the story, actually works as a screen withholding the Real which remains beyond understanding.[8]

Both Chirico's and Ligotti's red towers are 'entry level" unreadabilities, offered in a 'plain language" (verbal or visual), seemingly easily accessible, apparently affecting the observer through their 'content" above all, manifesting structural oddities and problems only upon close analysis, tending to represent the alien *through* the familiar, along the lines of the familiar, near-replicating the familiar (the horror, of course, lies in the hiatus, however minuscule, of that *near-* prefix). This is precisely where the force of these works lies: establishing 'normal" visibility, a cognitive *plein air* coupled with a complete *lack* of real understanding (or 'readability") of what is clearly legible.

This metaphorical 'horror in broad daylight" seems like a good example of Mark Fisher's definition of the eerie: this is a description, rather than a story, focusing on a landscape, rather than an event, containing a double short-circuiting of presence. Fisher described the eerie as a failure of

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8   In that sense, we might read one of Dregler's notes in 'The Medusa" (1991) as an oblique rationale of Ligotti's negative poetics: 'We may hide from horror only in the heart of horror" (*Noctuary* 3).

presence or absence, and I think that the red tower actually manages to convey both, being situated in the middle of a desert, as a disturbance of absence, but at the same time failing to appear properly and completely (since all of its machinery has evaporated).[9] The tower is perfectly visible, then, but – as Fisher writes – 'the symbolic structures which made sense of the monuments have rotted away, and in a sense what we witness here is the unintelligibility and inscrutability of the Real itself" (63).

<p style="text-align:center">* * *</p>

Fisher's book provides us with a starting point for examining a different type of unreadability, since he points out that the eerie is closely tied up with the 'broader question of the agency of the immaterial and the inanimate: . . . the way that we' ourselves' are caught up in the rhythms, pulsions and patternings of non-human forces" (11), the forces that are 'not fully available to our sensory apprehension" (64). The fiction of Reza Negarestani revolves precisely around this cluster of themes. Negarestani is, of course, an extremely interesting author in this context in many ways, but we could have disregarded his theoretical background in new materialisms had he written a novel that bears no traces of that work. *Cyclonopedia* (2008) is, on the contrary, thoroughly informed by theory – not only as subject matter or a philosophical 'backdrop" of a certain story, but as the most prominent *literary* device and narrative strategy – to the extent that this book might be categorized as 'theoretical fiction". This is a very elusive genre-label, but here it could mean at least two things: 1) the excessive hypertrophy of theoretical lexicon on all levels of narration, with intensive use of deleuzean neologisms, vocabularies of palaeontology, military science, demonology, etc.; 2) repetition of what we saw Ligotti do, but on a much grander scale: complete suspension of linear narrative development in favour of description, explanation, analysis and classification.

The specificum of *Cyclonopedia* is the fact that it doesn't describe an alien object within our world; our world itself is presented as an alien object, and what dominates this object is not human race, nature or 'life" as we perceive it. It is oil, conceived as a sentient non-human entity: the only real subject of History, capable of mobilising global geopolitical

9 Commenting on his miniature 'The Eternal Mirage" (1989, collected in *Noctuary* 189-190), Ligotti delivers a succinct autopoetic statement that would perfectly fit 'The Red Tower" as well: 'With that piece I wanted to convey my sense of the universe as something thin and unstable, something that barely has the quivering and illusory quality of a mirage and yet, alas, refuses to dissolve completely into nothingness" (Schweitzer 56).

processes it requires for its propagation. This world exists in a time perspective which is so alien to ours, and so incommensurable with it, that it can only be perceived as repetition, stasis or the absence of time – at least the absence of ˈhistory" or ˈchronology" as understood by our civilisations. This insight slowly changes the initial impression of overbearing theoretical onslaught in the first pages of the novel to the conclusion that this approach is not a question of poor style but probably the only appropriate narrative response to the challenge of an unthinkable and atemporal ˈbeyond" without access points for humans.[10]

Cyclonopedia could have been written as a ˈconceptual" work of fiction, consciously devising a routine and stereotypical plot only to let it be violently traversed by an incongruous, hyperbolic jargon of Philosophy, ending up as a latter-day *Batrachomyomachia* placed within the confines of horror genre. Nevertheless, what saves the fabular level of this book from an immediate backslide into tired scenarios of global catastrophes, regarded from the focal points of their human antagonists, is precisely the decision to present this content through a non-human point of view. It is not provided by ˈpsychologizing" oil, of course, but by composing the book as a series of extensively recounted scientific articles, rejecting more or less every traditional tool of narrative development, such as story or characters.[11]

Negarestani had to find a new vocabulary for at least two of his inventions: a) different timescales, since ˈevents" or ˈobjects" to be narrated exist in ˈa forsaken perpetuity, or the Ancient Without Tradition'" (Negarestani 15) – a temporality as difficult to describe as the one suggested by Meillassoux's arche-fossils, ˈmaterials indicating the existence of an ancestral reality or event; one that is anterior to terrestrial life" (Meillassoux 10); b) inverse evolution or counterintuitive processes of generation; the well-worn idea of the reanimated dead evolves into something much more complex in *Cyclonopedia*: decomposition is not a simple falling into disrepair of a whole, a gradual decline of a recognizable

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10 In *Cyclonopedia*, a fictional scholar reproaches Parsani's recent writings for the lack of their former style and erudition: it is ˈas if he has been struck by something he cannot digest, some stupefying discovery he is unable to dramatize" (10-11), but another one retors: ˈwhat my other colleagues identify as defective prose or an unscholarly approach is more than anything a quite logical and predictable development of his initial writings into something appropriate to these theories and discoveries" (11).

11 Negarestani recently spoke about the writing of *Cyclonopedia,* insisting that his priority was ˈconstructing a sense of syncretism and paranoia", but through emulation rather than simulation, abandoning the literary resources of ˈgood fiction" in favour of inventing new mechanisms as an engineer, not a craftsman. ˈI treated it not exactly as a novel or a work of philosophy, but as system endowed with abstract tendencies, trajectories which evolve over time, unpredictable behaviours, multiple scales of information content, etc." (Gironi).

object, but an emergence of a new form;[12] this emergence is, to be clear, reversed in time (or indifferent to time), shaped by a dynamic completely foreign to the narrative arc of birth, growth, decay and death, therefore indescribable in a language built on causality and linear chronology.

If all knowledge is necessarily conceptual, any experience of the truly Other will be constrained to arrive indirectly, not ʾas such", immediately recognizable and classifiable. There is a principal difficulty in *inventing* the new: we can't force the hand of chance, we can't press the unknowable future to come forth; perhaps we can only strive to *make way* for something new, allowing it to pass through materials presently available to us. In that case, the only ʾwork" a writer can actively take up is a non-systematic dismantling of an existing language. The Other will have to manifest through various *lapses* of concept, through a spectrum of errors, outplaying our consciousness in order to open up new types of sense-articulation. That is why a large part of *Cyclonopedia* investigates what Negarestani calls, after Deleuze and Guattari, ʿ( )holey spaces": what happens to a solid, such as Earth or a traditional narrative sequence, when it is gradually riddled with an ever-increasing multitude of holes. In this context, gaps in narration or understanding, *plot holes* in a continuous narrative, are not ʾthe missing links" or ʾthe places of indeterminacy" to be eventually pacified and filled in by the readers' cognitive intervention: they are the space of becoming, emergence of the non-human, seeking its first contact with us precisely *through* that unknowing, through our *lack* of understanding. Plot holes are ʾchannels for trafficking data . . . from the other side" (Negarestani 68).

This is a different type of narrative steganography than the one we witnessed in ʾThe Red Tower": ʾhiding" new knowledge in plain sight as an ʾunreadable" portion of a perfectly attainable message.[13] Yet the idea of

12 *Cyclonopedia* was initially announced as the first part of a trilogy entitled *The Blackening* (to be followed by *The Mortiloquist,* ʾa barbaric interpretation of the life and problems of Western philosophy"). This is a common English rendering of alchemical *nigredo,* a stage of putrefaction or decomposition engendering new values or objects on the way to *lapis philosophorum.*

13 We could roughly divide unreadabilities into two categories: 1) unreadable but purely legible inscriptions, manifesting as radical cryptography that withholds its key, nevertheless remaining *theoretically* available to thought and completely transparent in their structure (consisting, in fact, of nothing but that paradox – pure inaccessible readability, shaped by an alien code, openly providing evidence of information while concealing all content); the Voynich manuscript would belong to this type, along with its artistic parodies (Seraphini's *Codex Seraphinianus,* for example); 2) inscriptions that – on top of being unreadable – also verge on illegibility, to the extent that their very status as inscriptions (as opposed to random blots, shades, scratches etc.) becomes problematic, crossing over into visual arts in general, or even into raw sensory input, a *hyle* of writing; it is more difficult to provide a good ʾexample" of this literary *informel*, as the elusive microzone where the articulation crumbles into

worshipping the glitch, so to speak, deliberately introducing interference into messages yet to be decrypted, doesn't belong only to the arcane backwaters of chaos magic or to the domain of contemporary digital ruinism (most noticeable in music, but widespread in visual arts and literature as well). Adding noise to a message in order to sharpen the overall signal through stochastic resonance ultimately has the same effect: seeking harmony with the ʹinaudible" and the ʹinvisible" as the ʹnonexistent", it accentuates a hidden structure which may otherwise remain obscured. If ʹidentities are the plot holes of someone else's curriculum vitae", as Kristen Alvanson claims (allegedly quoting Negarestani) in *Incognitum Hactenus,* a highly charged narrative preamble to *Cyclonopedia* (xiii), then acquisition of a truly *new* story, a truly *new* (category of) identity, can only arise by truncating of the old plot, to the extent that the very notion of a story is suspended, and the emergent agency can only be divined from patterns of noise.

That is one of the reasons why *Cyclonopedia* is a fiction, but probably is *not* a story: ʹEvents are configured by the superconductivity of oil and global petrodynamic currents to such an extent that the progression and emergence of events may be influenced more by petroleum than by time" (26). Any received form of communication must fail in depicting this type of existence, and Negarestani hints that the best chance of approaching it is offered by numerology or economy as an encrypted ʹlanguage", since ʹin the wake of oil as an autonomous terrestrial conspirator, capitalism is not a human symptom but rather a planetary inevitability. In other words, Capitalism was here even before human existence, waiting for a host" (27). But one could argue that writing seems to be eminently human, chained to thought and intention, only from the vantage point of (crypto) phenomenological theories of language, assigning it the duty of representing mental content, thought processes, or at least their underlying logical structures.

This is one of many moments where Negarestani's writing resonates deeply with the work of William S. Burroughs as a remote relative or a non-linear predecessor, and a different reading could draw multiple parallels between *Cyclonopedia* and the cut-up ʹtrilogy" of his 1960s novels *(The Soft Machine, The Ticket That Exploded* and *Nova Express).* Negarestani

chaos is precisely the issue (probably to be approached through a series of gradients rather than clear demarcations); asemic writings of Mirtha Dermisache, *écritures* of Jean Degottex, Brion Gysin's calligraphies or drawings by Henri Michaux might give an idea of the problems involved in a thoroughly redefined ʹreading" required for such analysis. There is, of course, a cultural *a priori* involved in this, complicating things further: the very fact of a graphic occurence being placed in a certain frame (a book, a gallery etc.) inviting us to ʹread" it in the first place, whereas we would have to remain ignorant of the very existence of a ʹpure" unreadability-as-unreadability.

presents extraction of petroleum as an exhumation of an inorganic demon, a common topos of pulp horror and archaic SF; in Burroughs's mythology, however, writing itself (in its raw state) is an asemic extra-terrestrial parasite, the ultimate ancestral object. The frequently quoted description of language as a ʼvirus from outer space" actually transpires to refer to *writing,* not speech: inscription that originally had no fixed meaning and that slowly developed its parasitic vectors through speech and thought only subsequently. In Burroughs's own apocalyptic key, this is ʼa time bomb left on this planet to be activated by remote control"; language is not a man-made communication tool: it is the final ʼexter-mination program" (Burroughs 12).

<p style="text-align:center">* * *</p>

One of the key questions to be posed in this context – at least since the early 1800s – aims towards what language and literature could *become,* instead of what they simply *are*: beyond the extant categories and me-chanics of determinant judgement, a ʼliterariness" always strives to defeat the cultural or cognitive parameters which threaten to decode it automatically into Literature. If we're trying to focus on literary devic-es that are hindering the easy idealisation of the singular, locking the writing into the physical space of the book instead of making it readily available for comprehension and thought, it's hard to ignore the work of Mark Z. Danielewski. Each of his works uses a distinct and immediately recognizable graphic vocabulary, simultaneously providing sufficient amount of continuity with the others to allow us experiencing his en-tire output as a typographically (rather than thematically) defined cycle.

I would like to take a closer look at *The Familiar* (2015-2017), his series of novels planned as a sequence of 27 volumes (880 pages each), which was cancelled after the fifth book. This is a project that managed to reintro-duce the phrase ʼthe death of the novel" into the 21st century book reviews, but it reads as a perfectly logical next step after his previous novels *(House of Leaves, The Fifty Year Sword* and *Only Revolutions),* themselves feeding on a well documented tradition within the literary modernity. They may seem remote from habitual practices of storytelling (particularly within the genre history of SF), persistently calling for a rethinking of literature's relation to other arts, but they rely on a recognizable lineage of experiments in print: Russian and Italian Futurism, concrete poetry and typewriter art, the works of Raymond Federman, Christine Brooke-Rose, Alasdair Gray etc. (This brief list, of course, doesn't even remotely exhaust the canon of ʼliminal" works that accentuate their graphic disposition above other concerns, neither does it imply a certain frame or limit to this field of exploration.)

The idea of the page as a fundamental unit of literary work (instead of a sentence, an idea, a story, a character) was explored in many ways in all of Danielewski's books, most radically in *Only Revolutions,* but *The Familiar* is the first to introduce a new viewpoint into the proliferation of typographical experiments in narration: does unreadability or illegibility necessarily have to figure as a corrupt or inferior articulation, an index of a lower level of existence, of some romanticized nether regions where the rational thought succumbs to matter, daemons, animality, corporeality, the unconscious etc.? What if a certain layer of text is unreadable or illegible because it is *more* than we can take? What if a minor collapse of narration – like a blank, an error or a glitch – actually keeps a material trace of a complexity too *high?*

One of the most interesting themes of this series, still only hinted at and underdeveloped in the first 4400 pages of the novel, is the idea of interspecies communication, with all of its ontological traps and setbacks, focusing on the importance and difficulty of establishing chains of communication 'vertically". That verticality necessarily implies a moral and intellectual hierarchy, a top-down model covering up a specist ontology, so the main problem remains dismantling the very idea of communicating as transmitting the same message 'upwards" and 'downwards", and introducing a different distribution of the divide between the sensible and the intelligible, bearing in mind that *both* are potentially carrying information which would perhaps remain inaccessible otherwise. This is a question of xenography *par excellence*: transplantation of tissue between different species.

New mapping out of the readable within the printed matter will principally be done by broadening the range of literary devices, accentuating the physical and visual aspects of text and producing a new type of inscription which Danielewski calls signiconic. Throughout its variety of locations, languages and visual codes, the entire series could be read as a narrative describing the slow and disruptive introduction of a new type of intelligence into the world. This can be understood in two different ways: 1) intelligence as a new type of information – new profile of data assembling and articulating, new process of communication, and all of the problems arising from the 'new", if taken seriously: lapses in communication, overloads, complete lack of perception, fatalities, etc.; 2) intelligence as a new type of a living, thinking agency – a *being* or a parasite that enters the world as an alien, producing unforeseen effects that always seem to challenge the boundaries of human hosts and force some type of change or growth on them; this being (new intelligence) might be an animal, it might be a new drug, a new technology – a code, a program, or a piece of hardware ('The Orb"); finally, it might be the ultimate sentient collective ever to arise in this universe, trying to communicate

an SOS message backwards into the past.[14]

Of course, each of these meanings could be a *mise en abyme* for the work the novel is doing on the reader, the process we are exposed to: the story as a whole could be taken for an advanced intelligence narrating its own inception and its advent into the world (to us? or to itself?), which complicates matters further: is the book itself a piece of retrospective narration, or a typographical window in progress?

This is what was meant by 'signiconic" – establishing a new type of connection, forcing a new type of engagement between the writer, reader and text, resolutely pushing the boundary in the post-human direction, into the far reaches of what Aarseth called ergodic literature. Danielewski states explicitly: 'that's where I think literature finally has to move; we're very good at giving people a voice but we have not begun, strenuously enough, to give voice to that which will never have a voice: the voice of the waves, the animals, the plants, this world we inhabit" (Interview). His definition of *signiconic* as a combination of 'sign" and 'icon" could be paraphrased as follows: instead of forcing text to represent the pictorial, or visual faculties to work as language, the signiconic simultaneously engages both to achieve a 'third perception" which would be able to surpass or bypass the mind.[15]

All of this still doesn't go as far as it could have in *The Familiar* (maybe this was something to come in the later volumes), but what this means in practical terms is an innovative entwining of the visual and the conceptual: colour-coding and timestamping of the chapters; atypical syntax with extremely creative use of punctuation (often inspired by procedures from symbolic logic, programming languages etc.); different fonts for each character, of course; illustrations of various types, resembling picture-books, CGI or graphic novels; illustrating *by* text, in the concretist tradition; excessively polyglottic passages (using up to a dozen

14 See the 'Astral Omega" sections of all five volumes for a (possible) frame-story of the entire cycle (particularly Danielewski, *Redwood* 13-17). An interesting reading of *The Familiar* could be conducted along the lines explored by Brassier (op. cit.) and Negarestani (in his recent *Intelligence and Spirit*, announced as an attempt to reread the history of philosophy as a program for an atemporal 'artificial general intelligence"): postulating of a deterritorialized intelligence as something impersonal, anonymous, non-human and detachable from its bio-phenomenological founding. 'Liquidate man to liberate intelligence: such is the hyperspeculative program that will destroy all that slowed the dissolution of mammalian stupidity" (Brassier); within the present analysis, of course, the connotations of this 'intelligence of the real", adopting reason 'solely as a provisional skin", 'a series of strategic ploys", actually provides one more foothold for placing *The Familiar* into the horror genre territory.

15 This program obviously has a certain ethical dimension, perhaps in a Derridean key again (*plus d'une langue*); we could also briefly return to the very end of Hobson's book, where she quotes Wittgenstein's description of ethics as 'running up against the limits of language" (235).

languages); playing on the visual and linguistic resources of various apps and social media etc.

Nevertheless, as I have said, many readers have experienced this mixture as bordering on the illegible, and facing illegibility is always a thoroughly anti-immersive moment. As Craig Dworkin notes in *Reading the Illegible* (57), every such instance of radical cognitive arrest is always a point of instantaneous ejection from the mentality of reading (and intuitive self-reflective subjectivity) back into the corporeal: a ʾresetting" of a subject as something embodied and material. What is at stake here, then, is not a questioning of one's taste or cultural competence: illegibility of text, arising from the materiality of a book, engages the materiality of the body.

Paradoxically, that moment of evacuation from the fictional (or broadly speaking ʾideal") environment of the book's content into the ʾreal" situation of one's body holding a printed object, positioned in a certain way, is not perceived as a moment of getting back into oneself, coinciding with oneself, but as a moment of pure alienation. Since this is precisely the point where the idealizing capacity fails and we are faced with the base materiality of an object, the ultimate otherness of our own body is brought to our attention as well.

It's a reminder of the naïveté of the belief that we could remain the same (as a locus of knowledge) throughout and after the contact with the radically other, whereas in the *real* encounter with alien information and its structures, with true xenography, something would necessarily be inscribed into *us*: new relays, new circuits in the brain would be created, as Deleuze would say (*Negotiations* 60), and they would at least fractionally change what we are.

<p style="text-align:center">* * *</p>

This brings us to the threshold of the idea of ʾliterature" as a peculiar relationship between humans and writing, but irreducible to a socially based institution or an embodiment of an aesthetic idea: literature as a type of communication with inorganic matter where the prime agency possibly resides with the material object; literature as ʾan *assemblage*" (Deleuze and Guattari 5). Indeed, one could quote this famous passage from *A Thousand Plateaus* at length, as it could have been the starting point of this paper:

> a book is made of variously formed matters, and very different dates and speeds. To attribute the book to a subject is to overlook this working of matters, and the exteriority of their relations. . . . In a book, as in all things, there are lines of articulation or segmentarity, strata and territories; but also lines of flight, movements of deterritorialization and destratification.

> Comparative rates of flow on these lines produce phenomena of relative slowness and viscosity, or, on the contrary, of acceleration and rupture. All this, lines and measurable speeds, constitutes an *assemblage.* A book is an assemblage of this kind, and as such is unattributable. It is a multiplicity – but we don't know yet what the multiple entails. (4)

Following Deleuze's notion of a ¦nonorganic vitality" of the tactile (*Francis Bacon* 90), Jane Bennett writes about the productive capabilities of inanimate matter, calling it ¦*Thing-Power*: the curious ability of inanimate things to animate, to act, to produce effects" (6). Materiality doesn't lose its dimension of exteriority and imponderability through the exertion of that power, but it does enter into an interaction with humans, even overlapping into them. So perhaps one can speak of a certain *thing-power of text,* beyond the limit of intelligibility: text which is ¦not an object of knowledge", which is ¦detached or radically free from representation", which ¦refuses to dissolve completely" into human contexts (3), but still has ¦the ability to make things happen, to produce effects" (5).

In this model, a life of literature wouldn't be structured as transmission of a message between two privileged contact points, within a phenomenological setup of subject as the core of all meaning-production and text as dead material, ¦scaffolding" for concretisation etc.; it would be a distribution of forces across an ontologically heterogeneous field: an assemblage of body and text (and *its* agency). This would be a genuine attempt at opening a different type of engagement with the unintelligible – an interactivity where human agency couldn't be a prime motivator anymore, where the inanimate, material and nonconceptual would lead, act and provoke. Bodies and materials assembled this way would gain power specifically as a group, horizontal, uneven and unstable as it is. This ¦human-nonhuman" continuum (37) would be ¦a nonlinear, . . . non-subject-centered mode of agency" (33) whose key effect would be produced precisely through that *assemblage-work,* a non-hierarchical entaglement of consciousness and things which could never be entirely programmed and controlled in advance. In literature, and anywhere else, ¦what is manifest would arrive through humans, but not entirely because of them" (17).

This offers some hope of bypassing the metaphysical or correlationist closure in the description of what literature does and what it could theoretically do. There is an acknowledged residue of a certain ¦premodern attitude" in Bennett's conflation of the living and the inanimate within a ¦vital materialism" (opposed to its historical variety), although the outcome of her analyses wouldn't necessarily endow objects with life: perhaps it would simply deprive *us* of our previous confidence in the geography of the life/death divide. Within this purview, namely, we have never been completely distinct from inanimate matter: we were never truly ¦alive".

In conclusion, we are facing the challenge of accepting text as something that will never become a pure intelligibility (readability) free from its material ˈsupport” (in fact the only plane of its emergence). Furthermore, perhaps the specifically literary quality of this *thing* resides in its capability of facilitating new ways of thinking not only by way of concepts, stories, content in general, but through its material profile, its haptic qualities, working on us through sensation, communicating with our bodies before communicating with ˈus”, finally provoking new thoughts precisely through that corporeal haecceity.

Of course, attempt to bypass the Ego by recourse to sensation, materiality, affect etc. is one of the oldest preoccupations of art in general (perhaps art considered in opposition to philosophy), but the question of an appropriate theoretical approach to these liminal areas has yet to be solved. Writing about the dangers of theory assimilating and overcoming the alleged unreadability, Dworkin warned against the rehabilitation of noise, downgrading noise to a hermeneutically attainable content or value and cancelling its power by accepting it as a decorative layer of a readable message: ˈEven critical and scholarly work that pays close attention to the disruptive possibilities of visual prosody runs the risk of neutralizing the very disruptive potential it identifies. Such work must try to avoid co-opting those disruptions for its own rhetorical ends, and might instead attempt to communicate noise in the way one might communicate a disease” (49).

And this brings us back to the beginning, the ˈTechnical Manifesto of Futurist Literature”, a paradigmatic blind embracing of the black hole, where we are also assured that ˈit isn't necessary to be understood” (Marinetti 124).

But who or what can stand behind this claim? Who can speak in the name of noise?

This paper has certainly failed in pursuit of a practical xenography, channelling noise, but not because of some misplaced feeling of duty towards the divide between literature and theory. The problem lies elsewhere; writing or speaking from this position, one can only *impersonate* illegibility: no ˈI” can become a true noise generator.

Besides, while we're still here, there will be a different reason for remaining in the grey zone, as I have already repeated several times: we have no choice but to keep thinking out the interferences between the sensible and the intelligible, as this is the only continnum we inhabit. A strange attractor ˈcertainly cannot be calculated”, but ˈit has to provoke negotiation” (Hobson 232); a diagram is ˈmade in order for something to *emerge* from it, and if nothing emerges from it, it fails” (Deleuze, *Francis Bacon* 111). From our position, the absent absolute, the unattainable ˈpure writing”, offers no point of contact and no prospect of change; all becoming might

occur on the way to a smooth space, but never believe that a smooth space will suffice to save us" (Deleuze and Guattari 551).

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