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Non-Standard Stainless: Laruelle, Inconsistency and Sense-impressions

Abstract

"Stains" can serve as a metaphor for the role allotted to meaninglessness not only by partisans of the deterritorializing force of "brute matter", but also by diagnosticians of symbolic incompleteness. For both, the blindspot that will lead to the disturbance of a given regime of meaning must be determined through a smear or glitch which that regime cannot sublimate: the mark of a Real stripped of systematizing mediation. However, we argue that it is all too easy to allow the stringency of this Real to be undermined by the inflation in its name of merely contingent empirical instances. Such blockages to theoretical and artistic practice can be removed with the aid of the articulation of incompleteness and inconsistency implied by François Laruelle's conception of the Real as non-consistent but hypercomplete "radical immanence". À rebours of Laruelle himself, different types of meaninglessness can then be distinguished, de-metaphorized, and conceptualized as "noise".

Keywords: Laruelle, incompleteness, identity, sense-impressions, substance, incommensurability

Introduction

The awkward teetering of the "stain" between metaphor and concept provides us with a means of isolating philosophical problems relating to the role of meaninglessness.

Three types of meaninglessness loom large since the break with classical metaphysical rationalism: meaninglessness as genetically primitive ground of meanings; meaninglessness as excessive overspilling of the sterility of meanings; and meaninglessness as the empty gap of the incompleteness of meanings. Gains won in the drawing of these distinctions have led to losses elsewhere. Namely, on the one hand, in the stifling of the question of the role of spatio-temporal and qualitative-intensive stain-forms – such as in Stockhausen's music or in the bristles of Philip Guston's paintbrush, or Goya's – and of our desire for them. And, on the other hand, in the stifling of the question of what specific relations

may obtain between *different types* of meaninglessness or purported "formlessness" and *different types* of meaning and form – within any one of, or cutting across, the three categories.

We will argue that, by upping the ante of the competition to strip away conditionality from the Real, François Laruelle's "non-standard philosophy" helps us to better reformulate these non-trivial open questions, which are hardly even askable from the dead-ends into which it is all too easy to be forced. Laruelle's theory has been elaborated in a – still expanding – series of works over the past four decades, and we hope to give a glimpse of the conceptual innovations putting it shoulder to shoulder with his as yet more famous peers.

Introducing Laruelle's formidably abstract – but, we suggest, practically urgent – intervention will require a relatively lengthy prefatory historical survey, in our first section, of two problems and a crux. Firstly, we will review a problem regarding David Hume's sense-impressions and the classical metaphysical conception of "substance"; secondly, a full-bloodedly speculative problem emerging between Bergson and Deleuze regarding the link, or lack thereof, between the infinitesimal vibrations of sensation and the dividing line between the possible and the impossible; and, finally, a crux reached at the point where meaninglessness is purified by Žižek so as to become a kind of "void".

By fleshing out these three moments it is hoped that the best possible springboard will be provided for a relatively snappy exposition, in the second section of the article, of Laruelle's highly original reworking of Kant's thing-in-itself. This will lead, in the third section, to our "pay-off" argument that non-standard philosophy allows us – somewhat against the grain of Laruelle's own commitments – to shake off the shackles of our crux, such as to prize open and multiply our questions in a way that is newly fruitful, albeit ragged. The issue of meaninglessness in art will be foregrounded, and we will briefly discuss two video works by Amanda Beech, and will suggest that if something like a desire-for-the-stain constitutes a pertinent artistic drive, this drive should be untethered from an exclusive marriage to "sheer sensation", in order to avoid suppressing art's capacity for conceptual discovery.

The methodology of non-standard philosophy is, for reasons to be sketched, radically non-linear, and so our exposition will be obliged to proceed through a lurching series of broken loops. The article will close with a coda in which we will glancingly crystallise a query we may want to pose to Laruelle himself.

A hint of what non-standard philosophy will do with the stain may be given before we launch into our historical survey by citing – for now cryptically – his use of the geometrical figure of the fractal, a pattern (scribble or regular polygon) reiterated self-similarly so as to take on unexpected complex properties as it scales up. Leaving hanging a quotation or two may give a sense of Laruelle's scrambling of the philosophical registers of "concrete"

and "abstract", a crucial de-reification which we will salute and try to unpack starting from our second section. "[F]ractality is not only in the World, it is just as much in your head and your eye" (Laruelle 2011, 131), which makes possible "a fractal practice of philosophy at the same time as a 'de-intuitivation' of the fractal itself; and an ontological or real use of the fractal extended beyond physical or geometrical intuitivity at the same time as a refusal of the metaphorical use to which a 'fractal vision of the world' inevitably leads." (Laruelle 2011, 140).

**I. The stain between impression and substance:
a motley history in two problems and a crux**

1. The problem of sense-impressions and auto-intelligible substance

1.1. Hume's "impressions" and the triangle-in-general

Hume's empiricism makes sense-impressions – the raw data impinging upon sight, hearing, touch, taste, and smell – the primitive building-blocks of the theory dealing with the possibility and acquisition of knowledge. We will sketch first of all a certain reading of Hume's argument associated with the Kantian "critical" current – for this is the tradition which Laruelle will seek to push to its *n*-th degree.

This critical reading is sympathetic to Hume's goal of striking a blow against idle metaphysical speculation by refuting its question-begging positing of a purely spiritual faculty of mind capable of acceding to "refined perceptions" (Hume 1956, 183) from some ethereal realm. It is seen as entirely fair and just that Hume should take umbrage with Descartes' claim that our capacity to form an idea, for example, of the abstract essence of the triangular-shape-in-general, detached from any particular triangles we have in fact seen drawn in chalk on blackboards, is accounted for *simply* by the fact that upon introspection it appears to us "clearly and distinctly" that contained in the idea of a triangle are the properties of having three sides and angles adding up to 180°. These are purely formal, non-sensible determinations, such that this triangular-shape-in-general is "neither isosceles nor scalenum, nor [...] confined to any particular length and proportion of sides" (Hume 1956, 183), and yet for the classical rationalist these constraints are *objective*. For Hume this recourse to apparent logical-geometrical clarity and distinctness is nothing other than woe-ful obscurity, because the genesis of the knowledge in question remains obfuscated.

However, on the critical reading the worry regarding Hume's attack is that, in order to "destroy this artifice" by means of which philosophers are wont to "cover many of their absurdities" (Hume 1956, 183), he may have been obliged to presuppose that the sense-

impressions in question – those accounting for the genesis of ideas – are able to reveal and transmit *their own* content, directly and – as it were – of their own accord, without the aid of any mediating structures, to the mind's system of ideas. If "*all our ideas are copied from our impressions*" (Hume 1956, 183) – "impressions" presumably being a certain species of spatio-temporal and qualitatively intensive forms – and if impressions and ideas are distinguished only in "the degrees of force and liveliness with which they strike upon the mind" (Hume 1956, 167), then the question of how exactly "force and liveliness" allows the impression to cross the threshold from meaningless physicality to cognitive intelligibility is now puzzling. It may be that Hume here requires – against his own explicit commitments – the assumption of certain aspects of the classical metaphysical characterization of *substance*. A historical detour regarding substance will here be worth the trouble.

1.2. "*Substance*" from Aristotle to Spinoza

In his *Categories*, Aristotle defines substances as individual bodies, these individual bodies being the ultimate bearers of linguistic predication, such as themselves to not be sayable of anything else (Aristotle, *Categories* 2a11). He gives the examples of "man" and "horse". Let us consider the horse Red Rum, who is fast and reddish-brown. Neither "fast" nor "reddish-brown" are substances, for they require attribution to something else, namely the particular horse Red Rum. Not even "horse", it turns out, meets the stringent criteria of "that which is called a substance most strictly, primarily, and most of all" (Aristotle, *Categories* 2a11), because "horse" is a *species* and so requires individual instances of horses of which it can be predicated. According to this key strut of the classical definition, Red Rum is a *primary substance* only as a strictly individual body in the very coincidence of his flesh and blood with itself. Substance is therefore that which is *identical to itself*. In Aristotle's *Metaphysics* a certain nuance is added: the *matter* of living tissue (or stone for a house, or fire for a flame) is distinguished from the essential *form* of the being, and it is this latter which takes the role of substance qua subject of predication and change (another property given in the *Categories*), without which it would be impossible for any of the being's attributes to exist. This remains a guiding thread throughout the scholastic Medieval period: substance is able to furnish the explanation of why a horse runs, neighs, and seeks nourishment insofar as the identity-to-self of the animal's substantial form causally guarantees that these goals have been added to the otherwise mechanically law-bound material stuff from which the horse is constituted.

In the seventeenth-century Spinoza breaks with the scholastic tradition, but does so precisely by rendering explicit and elucidating a tacit presupposition which had, arguably,

been present since Aristotle. It transpires that substance is that which contains within itself both its own cause and, by the same token, the capacity to intelligibly auto-unveil its own form and properties to the philosopher. Rejecting the unexplained teleological explainer of a substantial form-essence for every organic species and empirical thing, Spinoza assimilates their goals and functions seamlessly into the causal order of matter. A "substance" is now that and only that "which is in itself and is conceived through itself, that is, that whose concept does not require the concept of another thing, from which it must be formed." (Spinoza, *Ethics* ID3¹). The consequence is that there is *only one* substance, because there can be only one self-caused cause of the totality of all those non-substantial things (phones; ink blots; sodium chloride; the concept of finitude) which need to be conceived through something other than themselves (a compulsion to communication; a leaky pen; electrostatic attraction; distinguishment from the concept of infinity).

As we hope will become clear, Laruelle can be viewed as pressing this collapse of substance to its extreme terminus, but only if we note that he will seek to rend asunder the short-circuit of transparent reciprocity between ideal thought (justified understanding) and real thing (material causality) upon which we clearly see that Spinoza relies. Spinoza's substance – taking on the name of God – is able to directly ensure the intelligibility of *everything*, in the guise of *anything's* ultimate cause *and* sufficient explanation. And this is why he views all logical possibilities as actual in real terms – including Descartes' purely geometrical-ideal triangle-in-general. This latter is not internally contradictory, as would be a square circle, and so for Spinoza it is real, because the intimacy with thought of his unified-and-unitary substance qua both *causa sui* and universal *explanans* fuses the conceivable – i.e., the non-contradictory – with the real (... at the price of robbing contradictions of reality, and hence of philosophical interest; a loose thread for our open questions later).

1.3. A hidden presupposition in the impression's eclipse of the abstract?

The problem with Humean impressions, allotted the role of most basic source of the content of thoughts – "basic" as in, not analytically decomposable, and supposedly explanatorily sufficient – is that they seem to need the very auto-bestowing intelligibility of classical metaphysical substance in order to transmute the acephalic, uniform meaninglessness, excessive ubiquity, and overwhelming density of spatio-temporal and qualitatively intensive stains into organized and potentially classifiable *ideas* (Humean or otherwise). This threatens to undermine Hume's distaste for abstract objects, such as the generalized, formal-

¹ Definition 3 of the first Part of the *Ethics* (Spinoza 1996, 1).

ly construed triangle, but also his aim – which we strongly reaffirm – of having done with the foggy presupposition of an unconditioned faculty of transparent and reciprocal intellectual intuition between thought and real. Notwithstanding Spinoza's welcome collapse of metaphysically teleological substances, and as philosophically earth-shattering as it undoubtedly was, his elision of cause and reason can only count as an instance of such a question-begging pre-established harmony.

The progressive, naturalizing thrust of Hume's assault upon unscrupulous presumption risks ending up mired in a self-imposed – and equally complacent – stubbornness vis-a-vis his requirement of a moment of intuitive verification before any postulate can be declared to count as true knowledge. The theory of the lively and forceful impression would appear to not be coherent in the places where it would need to be coherent in order to disqualify the reality of the abstract triangle. Genesis is, in the first instance, irrelevant to intelligibility, whether operational or deductive, and its prioritization entails a vicious circularity. To reject intellectual intuition *à la* Descartes and Spinoza is not to refute their attribution of an autonomy, of a certain kind, to formal determinations defined through axiomatic stipulation or construction – the bare bones of which relative autonomy we will attempt, through Laruelle, *also* to strongly reaffirm. Without a very good reason, allowing the stain to solidify into a halting-point blocking practices involving abstraction can only be abhorrent to the very spirit of Hume's own project of emancipation from – in Kantian language – dogmatic slumber.

2. The problem of the continuity of sensation and infinite impossibility

A second possible stance which affirms that it is the sensorial stain, which occupies the position of "brute" underivable reference-point aims to entirely upset the stability of the system of ideas. Henri Bergson, in seeking an answer to the venerable question "What is time?", separates out two types of "multiplicity": discrete and continuous. Discrete, discontinuous multiplicities tend to be those which are implicated in analytic thought and mathematico-scientific calculation – for example: mutually exclusive categories; numerical degree; and extended space qua metrically measurable, simultaneously in any direction. In contrast, examples of continuous, "smooth" multiplicities would include intermingling feelings, or the gapless succession of graded shades in the colour-spectrum, or a climbing sonorous pitch graphically figureable as a sound wave of which the contiguous peaks and troughs grow ever closer as its frequency increases. Time itself – which, for Bergson, is, qua pure "duration", a continuous multiplicity – will only be reached by purifying sensuous intuition of the clutter of discrete multiplicities.

The waxing of memory through lived experience – always singular and, at each new moment, holistically recalibrated – on this account puts us in touch with the Absolute insofar as, on the level of sensuous intuition, prior to any skewed analysis proceeding along the lines of biased criteria, the vibration of *our own* duration can be integrated with the vibrations immediately surrounding it, both faster and slower in frequency (cf., for example, Bergson 1992, 149-152). Deleuze, at least in *Difference and Repetition*, appears to retain from Bergson this privileging of the a-semantic *sentientum*, which, at least in the central chapter of the book, remains purportedly untouched by the slightest mediation (Deleuze 2004, 176-178). This radically meaningless stain is allotted the crucial role of instigator of the cascade of shocks which disturbs the habitual, banal accord of the faculties of mind, forcing them to snap out of the representational mode, wherein anything exterior is commensurated with pre-established frames of scale and categorization, and into a direct coitus with their own ontological substrates.

One must of course grant that space and (not just) time, as the dimensions of sensuous intuition are – as Kant specifies – infinitely divisible continua, registering degrees of strength and weakness in matter's affection of intuition so unbroken as to become, at their most fine-grained, infinitesimal: infinitely and unmeasurably small. But why should the ribbons of phenomenal smoothness – by all accounts themselves synthetically derivative, and *ideal* qua phenomenal and apparent as opposed to (meta-)physical – be unified and allowed to swell up, bloating once again on the model of substance, so as to erect yet another barrier and halting point to our investigation into the relations between meaningless stains and meaningful non-stains?

The vibration or sine-wave is but one possible model of the behaviour of raw matter, or of metaphysical temporality. And Deleuze's declared intention is, after all, to scatter Spinoza's uber-substance onto its non-substantial modes, fulfilling its collapse by deriving it from them in order to attain an immanent and non-closed dispersal of sufficient explanations, thereby warding off the risk that Spinozist univocity be ideologically operationalized as a totalized, domineering unexplained explainer (Deleuze 2004, 50). Possibility – construed as ontological-real, rather than epistemic – is to be unboundedly infinitized such as not to be allowed to exclude impossibility and incommensurability from within itself. As this is attempted in *Difference and Repetition* via the altogether *conceptual* thought-experiment of a dice-throw reiterated to infinity, permitting the affirmation of the necessity of chance as a whole (Deleuze 2004, 248-249), the question is all the more urgently begged as to why it should be a *sentientum*, rather than something thoroughly abstract and cognitive – such a square circle, or an even less banal contradiction than this – that is permitted alone to provide the friction of discovery.

3. The crux of non-trivial meaninglessness suppressed by empty indeterminacy

A final preparatory loop will bring us to our crux. A third strategy for undermining the auto-sufficiency of meaningfulness, elaborated in Lacanianism, involves focusing on the meaningless structure underpinning semantics. We may be obliged pragmatically to treat the world as a coherent totality, but the non-existence of any neutral meta-language, and the discovery that a set containing all sets is a logico-mathematical paradox, undermine the stability of the boundaries of the symbolic order upon which we rely and reveal that it functions only thanks to its disavowed structuration around the "void" constituted by its fractured openness to its own exterior.

Thus for Žižek the "stain" of meaninglessness is at one and the same time the disturbing eruption of the inconsistency of the real and the manifestation of the dislocated gap of the subject's unconscious desire. He cites the tramp in Chaplin's *City Lights*, who in the film's first scene is found when a newly minted statue is uncovered by the mayor, asleep in its lap, only to be awoken by the noise of the surprised audience, who are provoked to laughter by his embarrassed scrabbling attempts to get out of the way. Žižek notes that the tramp "is always interposed between a gaze and its 'proper' object, fixating upon himself a gaze destined for another, ideal point or object – a stain which disturbs 'direct' communication (...) leading the straight gaze astray, changing it into a kind of squint" (Žižek 1992, 5). Mistaken again and again for someone else – a rich benefactor – by a flower-seller girl who is blind and in need of funds for an operation, the tramp finally presents himself to her without hiding behind this confusion. "This is the moment of death and sublimation: (...) his being is no longer determined by a place in the symbolic network, it materializes the pure Nothingness of the hole, the void in the Other (the symbolic order)" (Žižek 1992, 8).

Identifying the stain-disturbance with *meaningless per se and as a whole* allows Žižek to de-metaphorize it by cauterizing it sharply in the sequestration of a (purportedly) non-relational, purely empty void. However, there is cause for hesitation here. The unsublatable "void" is no doubt central in the psychoanalytic register of unconscious desire, but as we understand him Žižek's philosophical commitment is that such a void (to which we will return via Laruelle) is the precondition of *any and all intelligibility whatsoever*. If that which throws a spanner in the works of meaning is construed as *always* being the twin void of desire and symbolic incompleteness, we may be left wondering why the possibility of a nuanced discernment of *different types of meaninglessness* should have thus been excluded. This is the nub of our crux: is there not more to be said about what separates an as-signifying musical riff or ritornello, or an unrecognizable smear of paint, from an a-

semantic anomaly in scientific observation, and these from an impossibly over-semantic superimposition of clashing beliefs?

II. Laruelle's "non-standard philosophy": the indifferenciation-of-the-last-instance of concrete and abstract

1. Hyper-Kantianism

Laruelle intervenes here first of all by encouraging us to concede the Kantian point that *any* perception or experience or thinking is *conditioned* by operations of shaping or enabling determination which are transcendental with respect to it. "Transcendental" in this broadly Kantian sense is to be understood in the skeletal, metaphysically threadbare sense of "minimally necessary condition of possibility, without which the very intelligibility of the thing in question is lost".

Kant insists that to have an experience you need to have had a synthesis of *both* a sensible stuff *and* a form-giving function or "concept". Moreover, the matter of sensation is itself no longer all that "brute" by the time it arrives at the faculty of understanding to be stitched in to classificatory-categorial concepts selected via logical-propositional judgments, for it has already been – as it were – industrially squeezed through the spatio-temporal filters constituting the pure a priori dimensions of sensible intuition. "Matter" is faceless, whereas sensuous perception is *per se* formed. Knowledge of the operativity of classificatory categories and rules for their connection is not derived from metaphysical principles but transcendently deduced from what knowledge inescapably knows about its own structure. A Laruellean question mark already pops up regarding how one might hope to empirically distinguish a privileged instance of *matter* from amongst transcendently shaped *forms*.

Euclidean three-dimensional simultaneous metrical extension *partes extra partes*, for space, and linear succession, for time, are for Kant not to be mistaken for properties of the bare things-in-themselves, even though we rely on these forms to attain knowledge of any things at all. The nineteenth-century neo-Kantians, among them Hermann Cohen, take the further step of de-reifying these specific forms, which were in fact peremptorily nailed down and frozen by Kant in an ahistorical snapshot as unsurpassably necessary "forms of intuition" – in spite of his unlatching of them from metaphysical constraint. On the neo-Kantian account, there is no in-principle barrier to our coming in the future to conceive of – if not intuitively experience – as-yet-unconceptualized spatio-temporal modalities, as had in fact happened with the eighteenth-century discovery of non-Euclidean geometries – which

follow from the cancellation of Euclid's "fifth postulate" proscribing the touching of parallel straight lines, a cancellation achieved through the plotting of the parallels on the surface of a sphere – or with Einstein's elaboration of general relativity.

Aiming to radicalize this transcendentalist stance, non-standard philosophy will, among other things, seek to definitively unstick the unsatisfactory category of "the matter of intuition" – with its shifting models: sine wave, particulate atoms, unbalanced clashing forces, and so on – from what it will view as its arbitrary, methodologically incoherent nomination as metaphysical primitive. We will now adumbrate a few of Laruelle's central ideas, which we will argue are indispensable for escaping the clasp of our crux.

2. Radical immanence

Laruelle's innovation hereupon lies in his contestation that to think in a thoroughly immanent, non-representational manner involves accepting the "Identity-of-the-last-instance" of thought itself with the Real, the *indifferent* unseparation of the two, in such a way as to acknowledge – in a seeming paradox – the sheerness of the *scission* between transcendently conditioned and determined forms, of any kind, and that which is entirely undivided and identical to itself, and hence no longer the slightest bit ideal, but real and only real. Laruelle's Real is given the name of "radical immanence" or "the One", and is apodictically deduced and axiomatically defined as precisely that which is not muddled by even the slightest hint of transcendence, or of any *relativity to anything* – other than itself.

The merest scrap of empirical data will always imply a split or division between its conditional occasionment and that unconditioned Real which is immanent only to itself, rather than to anything else, and which "gives nothing of itself and receives nothing of itself except the modality in which it is given. This is only possible if it is the one or the indivision, the Without-division, which is given to itself in its specific (that is, indivisible) modality" (Laruelle 2010, 22). Thus, the One is in-principle separated from and *foreclosed to* any type of thought: not only to sensuous phenomenal palpation, but also to the operations of representation, as well as to any philosophical manoeuvre relying upon the glue of substance to hold it together: it is "*index sui* prior to any indication" (Laruelle 2010, 22).

According to Laruelle, thought must therefore distinguish itself from the One, while the One does not distinguish itself from thought in return. Its foreclosure is tied up with this irreversible, untransparent asymmetry. Empirically given data – be they numbers or smudges – are, as per Kant, determinate (exhibiting certain specific characteristics rather than others), as well as synthetically unified (not to mistake them for thing-in-themselves). But the fact that determinacy must *per se* be distinguished from indeterminacy, does not war-

rant any hypostatization of the gap between the two, for how could one flesh-out a narrative describing the emergence of the condition of possibility of narrativization? Such an attempt would reify what is a skeletal, merely intelligible transcendental necessity into a story held hostage by the very contingent empirical experiences it is supposed to account for.

We are thus forced to confront the undeniable split between conditioned and unconditioned as an epistemic lacuna which pulverizes any pretension we may have had to diaphanously discern, in a representational mode of truth-as-correspondence, the relations of causality and conditioning which are in fact in play. A blindspot which, further, undermines the sufficiency of the very notions of "causality" and "conditioning" to the task of binding the phenomenal appearances together at a safely regulated distance from the unbound indeterminacy of the Kantian negative noumenon, that cut of withdrawal cauterizing our finite cognition from its own outside. Thus, in the theoretical practice Laruelle is recommending, the non-standard theoretician does not contemplate or represent anything, but rather *does* something, slicing into overinflated co-optations of the Real illegitimately construed, on the model of substance, as a totality of relations which the philosopher might exhaustively survey. This action requires the *axiomatic* affirmation of the "determination-in-the-last-instance" of the determined *per se* – whether it ends up being occasionally determined, via whatever transcendental operations of objectivation, as this or as that, as a headache or Fermat's last theorem – by the purely immanent Identity-of-the-last-instance of everything with the Real. The mainstay of non-standard philosophical practice – the word *practice* being heavily emphasized – is the carrying out of this act, which "unilateralizes" philosophical decisions.

3. Determination in the last instance and Unilateralization

Who is really acting though? Laruelle often nominates the subject of non-standard philosophy as none other than the "human" or "Man-in-person", whose immediate "Lived Experience" is, in-itself, said to be perfectly irreflexive – i.e., subsisting prior to the closing of the loop of linguistic self-reference through which philosophy, according to Laruelle, tries to plaster over its own dislocation from the Real. However, on this point we will prefer to look at an instance of a conflicting tendency in his work, whereby the ultimate irreflexive instance of Identity in itself – strictly in-itself, rather than through any of its mediations; that which applies the negative "pressure-from-below" which dislodges the attempt to substantialize conceptual synthesis – is construed as being simply the One itself. If we are to carry out a thorough criticism of the auto-sufficiency of conceptual synthesis, why would

the "human" and "lived experience" be let off the hook? (For two powerful variants of this quibble, see Fox 2017 and Brassier 2012.)

"Determination in the last instance" means then,

among other things, that the One does not act by itself and through a part of itself which it would alienate into the World and which it would identify with this latter; and also that the finite act upon the World is identically, immediately, its distanciation from the One, the affirmation of its non-unitary non-confusion with the One. The One acts *in the last instance only*, and it acts on the World by determining it to not be the One. (Laruelle 1985, 140; my translation, D. B.)

'Last instance' does not indicate a first or final cause in a causal continuum (the famous indefinite progressions or regressions in the conditions of a conditioned), nor does it respond to the complementary qualm regarding stopping the causal chain [...] *It is not in the slightest to these problems that the theory of determination in the last instance responds but rather to their 'exclusion', more exactly to their unilateralization.* (Laruelle 1985, 141; my translation, D. B.)

So, as hinted at above, the Real is *not a condition* but is rather the determinant of any determinacy whatsoever, insofar as the latter is *per se* separated from the undetermined. The determined thing ends up being shaped thus and so, rather than otherwise, by *contingent* occasional instances of conditioning, but this only makes sense if the determined thing is distinguished in its general sharp (or hazy) *ipseity* from the blankness of Identity qua Identity, i.e., from the facelessness from which *ipseity* is distinguished insofar as it is identical to itself rather than to "nothing", this latter being the form that pure Identity qua Identity in isolation must take. However, every phenomenon is in fact itself identical-in-the-last-instance with the Real qua the One, because anything and everything can and must, in – and only in – the last instance, be seen to fall under the mode of indivision. Indivision ultimately gains the upper hand in the parallax between, on the one hand, the perspective upon things viewed in so far as they are Identical and undivided, stripped of mediation (Laruelle's "Vision-in-One"), and, on the other, the perspective upon things viewed within the synthetic discourse-Worlds in which philosophical decisions envelop them. The latter needs the former, but not *vice versa*.

As we will see, the undivided has Identity but no unity, such that the "splintering off" from the One of the particular, specific transcendental operations by which thinking objectivates and organises things cannot be philosophically hardened into a *metaphysical* transcendence, because the ontological status of the processes leading to the separation of object from subject and subject from object, as well as the criteria for their successful mapping, have been epistemically scrambled ("fractalized"). That is, no recourse to substance

can be made in trying to put one's finger on how precisely they might work. It is not only that it is structurally impossible for a conditioned experience to glance airily back over its own shoulder in order to glimpse the mechanisms of its own conditioning – of which it is, therefore, in the first instance oblivious – but also that any fleck of experience must be exposed in its non-reciprocal dependency upon – its irreversible distinguishment from – the One, by the operation of unilateralization.

This uni-directional severment, applying indifferently across the schematic stratifications of thought to fragments and atoms just as much as to the relations between these terms, is also the annulment of any hope for the auto-intelligible or self-unveiling automatic mapping and connection of these determinations. Thus the very distinction between thinking and non-thinking itself will take the form of a *unilateral* duality or "Identity-without-unity": a duality with only one side, here that of thinking, which distinguishes itself from non-thinking without non-thinking distinguishing itself from it in return. More precisely, *both* terms, thinking (ideality), and non-thinking stuff ("materiality-without-matter", let's say), are unilateralized through the revelation of their equal relativity to the blindspot of real negativity. Thought needs the Real, but the Real does not need thought.

4. Inconsistency, incompleteness, and the de-substantialization of the void

For Kant, the appearances are of course endowed with self-Identity, having certain specific empirical properties rather than others, but so too is the noumenon, with the difference that its Identity-to-itself is non-empirical and unknowable, beyond being limited by Kant to the principle of non-contradiction. But what if the – so to speak – acidic (or oxygenating) underdetermination and non-relationality of the noumenon cannot be held back from seeping into the appearances and untethering the stifling extra layer of relational mediation with which unearned metaphysical presumption decides to arbitrarily unify and organize the otherwise splendidly immediate and unrelated singularities occurring in the realm of the determined? And what if the non-relation which asymmetrically determines relational determination entails that even by speaking of the thing-in-itself as "non-contradictory" one was illegitimately reifying it as a bound relational determination, serenely set over in front of the mind's contemplating eye, in a manner redolent of Aristotelian substance? These are the questions Laruelle asks, and his non-standard philosophical reply is that, when it comes to philosophy, this is indeed what has always already happened.

It transpires that "unity" (in contradistinction to Identity) is always synthetically constructed, because unification requires totality and totalization is always a synthetic operation. Thus the manner in which one totalizes a field of objects always follows off the back

of a supplementary decision of thought, tying together groupings of things into extraneously marshalled assemblages by catching them in a spider's web centred upon a selected principle. In the case of Bergson and certain moments in Deleuze, the Laruellean reading has it that, far from unmediated escape, we have the selection of an operational principle, which takes stochastic seriality as a necessary and reversible *name* for the very bridge supposed to let the Real flow into thought and thought flow back into the Real. This is a name for *scission itself* allowing its modelling as a smooth, continuous variation and auto-distantiation, folded back into its determinant and said to be a necessary property of it, i.e., of that unscissioned without which scission doesn't make sense. Identity (in contradistinction to unity) is for Laruelle not synthetic or transcendental but simply immanent – that is, irreflexive, and precisely *lacking* any unified horizon, limiting bound or halting point which could provide the basis for the recuperation of self-identical forms into a closed set such that a scale and a principle for the commensuration of them which each other could be found.

The uncorking of totality, however, is a familiar idea, and we seem here to be not a million miles away from being back at the Lacano-Hegelian position which we earlier claimed sacrificed the ability to distinguish between different types of meaninglessness to the void of symbolic incompleteness, thereby getting stuck in a crux with which we were not content to rest satisfied. At this stage there indeed springs up the danger of falling into the assumption that the Real's "rupturing" of the order of the conditioned World implies a *substantial crack* between the two. This may perhaps be the risk run by Žižek, and one which Laruelle might be able to dodge.

From Laruelle's perspective, the gap at stake here cannot be substantialized, because this would require that it be totalized, and, as per the above, *unity* can only be the product of a synthetic operation. Division too requires the unification of terms into a grouping separated from the undivided. This is not the case for our conceptualization of Identity or indivision itself, which can and must be defined negatively (or rather, positively, insofar as we are dealing with the cancellation of a constraint not unlike the removal of a speed-limit (cf. Brassier 2007, 146)) through the procedure of the lifting or crossing-out of division. Epistemic formlessness qua the Real qua Identity qua the One has been rendered so thoroughly vacuous by Laruelle as to "constitute a *hole in nothingness itself*" (Laruelle 2003, 175). In Brassier's words, it lacks "even the minimal consistency of the void" (Brassier 2007, 137). What does this mean? The precise sense we give to "consistency" here is important. The Real is *inconsistent* because it does not "hang together", surpassing any synthetic unification. However, it is crucial to note that, for this very reason, it is *not* "incomplete", to use this term in an extended Gödelian-logical sense as meaning, roughly, "lacking something it should incorporate".

The question of logical completeness can only arise with respect to a system of stipulated rules and statements which is *consistent*, i.e., not allowing any contradictions to be derived from the propositions which constitute it, since (in classical logic at least) from a contradiction anything follows (the "principle of explosion"). If we're dealing with a set of properties of a thing or a model of a thing's functioning, logical consistency can only be determined through a contradiction-free propositional characterization of the object. Positive consistency, to be logically coherent, has to be *systematic*, even if only in the exiguous sense of the disjunctively juxtapositional negation or exclusion from the object of what is opposed to it. Overspilling even opposition, and a stranger to the possibility of contradiction, Laruelle's Real is *hypercomplete*, at the same time as being absolutely non-consistent. This *negation of consistency* is, we recall, itself not question-begging, because non-consistency is indexed by *indifference* to the distinction between contradictory and non-contradictory – that is, by the operation of lifting or crossing-out consistency, the suspension of the pretention to substantial sufficiency of the synthetic operation upon which consistency relied in the first place. Non-consistency is therefore not the mere product of another supercilious decision, and this Real non-object – even though it cannot be propositionally encapsulated; or rather, precisely because of this, but *only* under these stringent procedural conditions – is not just one more dogmatic and queasy philosophical confection-fantasy.

We thus arrive at an injunction to remain vigilant against any facile or simplistically intuitive conception of *inconsistency*. As Žižek and Deleuze insist, the Real is not a closed totality, and so is as indifferent to the category of essence as it is to the distinction between autonomous self-causedness and heteronomous causation. But the default of totalization *for this very reason* does *not* at all mean that particular objects, whether concrete *or abstract*, lose their own reality, integrity, or relative autonomy. Slime and other types of oozing gunge may topple from a state of hanging together towards one of falling apart, but only in a register already presupposing the tacit consistency of a system of quasi-logical relations to associate them with, and distinguish them from, more stolid objects. And the void, once de-substantialized, is shown to remain relative to non-voids, the opposition between void and non-void plenum or atom having been, as a whole – both of its poles – unilateralized or pushed over onto the separatedly relational side of the scission between what is relational and the absolutely non-relational and unseparated One. The non-consistent One is always glued to the heel of any minimally thinkable determination, as its determinant-of-the-last-instance. Neither slime nor holes are therefore any more straightforwardly emblematic of the Real than chess-pieces, Pythagoras's theorem, or partial-differential equations, which they cannot, in the first instance, be taken to swallow up, corrode, crush, or reduce.

III. Art & noise

Laruelle may attain the *nec plus ultra* of French anti-dialectical suspicion, but doesn't the above point in the direction of reopening, or keeping open, the unreified dialectical placement of sensation in art? In this section we will allow ourselves to briefly stray from the letter of non-standard philosophy, in order to deploy it in a manner at odds with Laruelle's own stated goals, such as to formulate some important open questions which risked being suffocated by our crux.

We thus note, with respect to sensorial stains, that if they suspend their own classification in order to do things with spatio-temporal materials, then, for a start, this suspension depends on classifications being in play, rather than not. Obscurity is grasped as such in distinction from clarity, however provisional or fake. Are there particular types of clarity or pseudo-clarity in relation to which specific types of innovation in the shaping of sensorial form become especially pertinent? And what are the reasons why we might have come to desire to separate out sensorial smearing as worth pursuing in isolation from other kinds of cognitive disturbance?

Art does not just confront us with sensorial blurring, undermining our workaday representational complacency (which is not to deny that since at least Cézanne it does do this). It also (*cognitively*) confronts us with the *cognitive* breakdown entrained by our necessary lack of a full synoptic grasp or schematic overview of our own intricacy within ideological machines and global systems, presenting systemic complexity *qua* systemic complexity. Is not another goal the production of new incommensurabilities through the deployment of the various rule-bound games which constitute art's own clichéd lines of least resistance, as well as its opportunities for breaking with these? A desideratum on both counts being to help stave off false substantial-Aristotelian totality. And shouldn't art bring to light something specific we didn't know about our desires now?

It might therefore be useful to supplement a desubstantialized conception of the stain with the quasi-information-theoretic function of "noise", glossed as interference in the communication of a message – not an in-principle occluded non-informational substrate of information, but rather the presence of too much information. If the sensorial stain no longer enjoys a special privilege, it makes sense to blur and efface the lines demarcating it from the array of other types of meaninglessness, as a first step precisely towards a more nuanced taxonomy of these. Our hunch is that the blindspot which harbours the most truth in any given situation may turn out to be locatable thanks only to its mediation with the determinate meaningfulness at play in the situation. The absolute meaninglessness of the One would then be the spur to accepting that the most fecund contradictions are only discovera-

ble through a laborious, slow and gropingly proceeding investigation of the entailments and incompatibilities implicated in the occasional resources which happen to be lying around in our current situation. This is of course not a suggestion likely to enthuse Laruelle, whose ultimate *bête-noir* is the Master-dialectician Hegel.

By way of examples, chosen with the intention of maximally prizing open the reach of our open questions, two video works by Amanda Beech contain plenty of the multifaceted type of noise we have in mind. Firstly, in "Gz and Hustlas" (2003)², a mash up of Apocalypse Now and Snoop Dogg, scenes from the film have been chopped up and edited together against the eponymous rap track, as if to construct a slick promotional clip. Instead of Snoop, we admire preening helicopters, puffed-up soldier-laden boats, and bridges being dynamited in synch with the snare. The artist has filmed the movie playing on her own TV, so the quality of the image is degraded by the electronic smudge of fuzzy pixels. But there is also an enormous amount of systemic and narrative noise. The globe-trotting machinery of military power is shoved in our face, and one is revolted, and at the same time, *thrilled* by the ludicrous, but somehow apt, surfeit of machismo, Realpolitik, and sheer blockbuster entertainment. A repellently *jouissif* contradictory entanglement in capital-power, made a bit more explicit.

Secondly, "Sanity Assassin" (Beech 2010). Creeping zooms upon an opulent but stark Californian interior, with grand piano and floral arrangements, but also on clandestine masonic paneled ceilings; rough side-of-the-freeway landscape glimpses; the inky infinity of interstellar space, with some kind of chemical snow falling, or architectural models gliding with utilitarian efficiency in and out of shot, in sharp relief in the foreground; floating: what appear to be spaceships, made of curious oblong surfaces plastered with homey wallpaper, and rendered in low- to mid- fidelity CGI.

Gain corporate enfranchisement, ushered into mahogany chambers behind closed doors? Or pursue public transparency in circulating through municipal precincts? Which is better? Upon what can I fall back to help me decide? The work enacts the deprivation of any would-be metaphysically-given pointers by juxtaposing and superimposing uncanny cosmic intimations of the acephalic modality of indivision with normatively grasped, desire-baiting social conundrums. However, as the sci-fi-utopian charge of interstellar space grabs us propositionally-conceptually – as does the very notion that (the notion of) modal indivision is in play –, we are dealing here with the *concept of* outer space and its attendant culturally sedimented baggage. The unease felt in face of the work's contradictions is cognitive and social at the same time as pulsional.

² This video is not available online, but others are, at: <http://www.amandabeech.com>.

Coda: Incommensurability

We contest that unilateralization unblocks an obstruction to philosophical and artistic activity by showing that *nothing* in radical immanence qua radical immanence can furnish any criterion for success. The deprivation of any short-circuit between the Real and the conditioned for Laruelle liberates determinate singularities from smothering envelopment by what is for him that otiose extra layer of philosophical mediation forcibly commensurating them – be they "concrete" forms *or* "abstract" ones – with arbitrarily decided-upon metaphysical yardsticks. The slick but vicious circularity of philosophical auto-sufficiency is thereby broken and dislocated.

We would like to suggest that two conclusions should be drawn from this. Firstly, that philosophy, science, and art must be seen to be labouring under the necessarily unmitigated charge of an effortful experimentation, investigating their determinate situations through hypothesis-testing and the setting and resetting of fungible axioms. This is our attempted dialectical twist on non-standard philosophy's anti-dialectical dismemberment of terms from relations. And secondly – a slightly more Laruellean claim, though not straightforwardly so – that philosophy's insufficiency to definitively patch up its own blindspots entails that incommensurabilities, which are necessary in order to kick against false engluements of totality, have to be *constructed*, for, against what we have interpreted as Deleuze's modal realism, no reservoir of *prêt à porter* infinite impossibility will be found lying around ready to be leveraged in the Real.

The *fractal*, then, can be read as a figure of that specific indifferenciation resulting from the default of substance: identical to itself and modally undivided across its phenomenally broken scales and stratifications, but no longer offering any simply given yardstick-criterion from which to infer the principles governing its (in effect) absolutely chaotic internal mappings. The query to be addressed to non-standard philosophy, then, concerns the worry that this under-determined, blankly infinite complexity may after all harden into yet another precipitate halting point. To fractalize substance may be to get close to its definitive collapse. But must the Real as inconsistent zero-degree rule out the very possibility of non-substantial criteria for determinate truth?

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