

## Editorial

# Noise Music

By Paul Hegarty

For something seemingly very difficult to talk about, noise music has spawned a range of options for theorists, as if theory was waiting all the time to answer its question. Why the wait, why the current interest? Perhaps it is that noise has been held at bay by centuries of rationalism and, prior to that, religions based on organization and the clarity of belief. We can certainly find noise within religions, generally as that which is to be combated: temptation or doubt in Christianity, the world in Buddhism. Noise is ever-absent amidst the rendering of the world as rational – even Descartes got to Reason through dreams filled with thunderclaps, falling and the noise of the city in opposition to he would erect a mental being. Newton's thinking is filled with the noise of 'bad science', Hooke's with the aesthetic. Renaissance and early modern science could be the noise of religious thinking and vice-versa. But the thought of noise comes late, just as the thought of chaos finally comes to map systems that do not seem to obey systemic principles. Like chaos theory, noise theory is not 'just noise', but an attempt to structure noise's relation to form, structure, logic, linearity. This attempt should, in my view fail, or else it will no longer be noise. But all thinking dooms the unthinking to be thought, brought in, and lose its noisiness – this too is part of an inevitable circuiting of failure, which is in itself noise.

### I. Applying Theory to Noise

The wish to theorize noise, or to use noise as model, object or whatever, is a wish to understand what previously eluded others: its appearance in the radicalization of music

is initially an attempt to finally summon the universe that had up until now been veiled to humanity. Noise was the truth of nature and the truth of human society (Cage, Russolo) – its exploration would make of humanity an expanding universe of sensation. However, as the futurists intuited, this world of sensation was not going to be a gentle one. The late 20th century produces a more disillusioned music, away from the restricted economy of the academic 'avant-garde', and now noise is offered as that which cannot be appropriated, mastered, made musical – whilst all the while occurring in the place of music, without allowing dwelling in that place. Jacques Attali first tried to deal with noise in his 1977 book *Noise*, but only in the last few years has the notion spread, to become a heuristic tool (even in cybernetics, it is too easily defined, closed off, isolated and muffled). Writers shift between imagining noise as being utopian (in a good way) and utopian (in a way fit to be criticized). I will argue below that this imaginary of noise is too simple, and based on 'strength' models of theory, which aspire to rightness, definition, results – so that noise becomes a utility and/or a decorative flourish. Against, outside or beyond this, noise should be the continual failing of noise, the ceaseless exclusion of what is produced as unacceptable sound whilst being taken in to social ritual and convention. Noise signals the failing of sense and structure, but in so doing, becomes incorporated as non-noise. The moment of noise is always just a suspension between these failures.

Thinking on noise is a curious part of 'new musicology', which since Adorno's multiple restatements of the necessity of an

avant-garde to reflect social conditions (without necessarily explicitly referring to them), has sought to place music in the wider context of an understanding that many musical paradigms and 'givens' are socially constructed, embedded in particular societies and analyzable beyond the positivism of score-reading. Noise is no different, and implies an assessment, whether good or bad, of the capacity of music to transgress codes, whether such transgression is also an actual subversion, and whether this can be extended beyond 'the musical'. Popular music has purported to be the sound of rebellion since the 1950s, at least away from the flabby genre of 'pop' itself, but in order to remain avant-garde, the stakes became higher for every micro-generation of musicians, as they had to go against, or go further than predecessors. Noise is in this change, in the initial unacceptability of dissonances, but noise is actually in it too – as music incorporated feedback, for example, or introduced samples, played with recording, and so on. A Hegelian 'story of rock' would tell of an ever higher noise content, interspersed with backlash tunefulness. The pinnacle would then be the noise music that comes out of and after industrial music of the late 1970s, which brought in everyday objects, the ruined industrial environment providing material, and much of this comes from Japan, hence the grab-bag term 'Japanese noise' which accounts for a highly diverse range of performers. Like Hegel, it is hard to argue with this story, but it does not have to be told as a teleology, unidirectional and meaningful. Instead, what seems like an obvious tool to apply – Bataille's notion of excess – offers a different theorization: where noise is always a momentary sacrificial experience, that sacrifices itself, an oscillating accursed share; here noise is always what is excluded as waste, only now brought in (sonic debris, mistakes, 'non-musical' objects, the too loud or the too quiet). As the exclusion is brought under control (e.g. by ears adjusting at a performance, or by getting some familiarity with a recording), noise fades, so must endlessly be resuscitated, to be killed again, over and over. Below, I will put this idea alongside the practice of Japanese noise performer Masonna, and then go further (or, more accurately, always less far) with Gianni Vattimo's idea of weakness.

Why listen to noise? Firstly, we could return to Cage and say that it is the immanence of the world presenting itself to us, and we should not (because we cannot) escape it. As well as this, noise is imagined as resistance, one that goes beyond, that is literally the loudest, toughest, etc. But the

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reward there is fleeting – noise will fail you there, and your drive to escalation will always be thwarted. Noise's power (through volume, dissonance and disruption) is physical – it resists mastery (albeit like Kant's sublime). Instead of a utopia of listening, noise is the infliction of hearing. Does that mean any noise is good? No – noise is bad.... Sound that is purposely created might be perceived by others (e.g. neighbours) as noise, and to some extent that looks like an ideal of noise – proximity along with lack of control, as well as being, probably, only a byproduct or waste of other activity. But like 'white noise', it is lacking the suggestion of purposiveness that makes noise a question, a challenge rather than a thump in the face. If it is too purposive (e.g. loud behaviour expressly loud to annoy others) it has nothing to do with noise and everything to do with control through rationalized means. Noise cannot be a utility and still be noise. The noise of say, muzak in shopping malls is more curious, a simulation of noise (noise in airports and the use of the address system would be worth investigating, particularly in the age of the 'war on/of terror').

The various theorizations of noise split into the following styles:

*Ecstatic*: noise offering a communion, a new society, however briefly. Such an approach has close connections to writing on what in the 1990s was referred to as rave/club culture. The emphasis here is on the physical taking over from the rational.

*Extreme/Excess*: here noise really is more: noise is the avant-garde, the furthest music has got. This can still be interested in the physical, but also in how thought breaks down. Noise has great potential, in this formulation. Noise as potential, even.

*Adorno*: noise music is just another commodification of attempted avant-gardism. Those who engage in it are doubly misled, as since Adorno 'identified' the culture industry problematic, any avant-gardism that ignores it is in some way doomed to fail whilst believing it is offering something new. Noise here is the culture industry's last gasp, and possibly a sign of its desperation. Any new noise, if such a thing is possible, is turned into cultural capital, reified by its consumers. Those who use Adorno have to forget his hostility to anything that comes after classical music.

*Attali*: noise is what society does not accept; so negatively defined, it is always caught up in its relation to what is considered meaningful, acceptable. Noise here is an inheritance of sacrifice, with the notion of sound being physically threatening. He advocates pirate radio, sampling etc., as means of creating 'noise in the system'. The first edition of his book was implicitly Bataillean, combining Hegelian and Nietzschean views. His conclusions are weak, and, unfortunately,

expanded on to the cost of the better bits, in his 2001 rewrite.

*Deleuze and Guattari*: noise here is a proliferation of sound, / deterritorialization of both music and listener. Noise is rhizomatic, a plateau of intensities etc. Such an approach is used as a means of identifying transgressive, 'subversive' culture. Here, too, there is always a happy outcome.

*Failure/impossibility*: noise is only ever defined against something else, operating in the absence of meaning, but caught in the paradox of nihilism – that the absence of meaning seems to be some sort of meaning.

*Not thinking about it at all*: here, to try to think critically or understand noise is to betray it, to lose its radicality. This must be the most traditional perspective.

*Authenticity/purity*: noise as pure expression (like Jackson Pollock, or Clement Greenberg's Pollock). This would be one response to Adorno, in saying that noise is only possible in reaction to an all-pervasive hyperculture industry.

These are all 'strong' theories, to which we could add a weak, failing theory, that would not be about failure but an enactment, a supplementary replaying of noise's failure, where neither failure is definitive. The way into this, I think, is through Bataille's notion of excess, which superficially seems to work only as a validation for those who might praise an authentic transgression in the extremes of noise. Masonna too, offers us a very literal form of excess, in terms of his own 'excessive' physical performances, the 'extreme' noise of his concerts and recordings. But he also offers us an equally 'obvious' weakness or failing, at the moments where he gasps for breath, or loses track of the noise, and it falls back into being strumming or thumping. I want to claim that Masonna suggests the application of Bataillean excess to his work. Firstly at the obvious level, then at the level where both Bataille and Masonna approach failure, and also in how the obviousness of excess is key to understanding that this 'present' excess is the trace of the actual, absent excess that structures noise, noise as failure. But this is a failure that is not self-contained, a result of musical badness, or listeners' lack of competence or capacity, nor that it is only noise that fails.

Why failure, though? Certainly not to stand in awe before the 'ineffable object of noise', or to claim noise fails because it is fundamentally misguided. It is not a bad failure – noise fails to be noise, even as, hopefully, it fails in being music, and this is its condition – not exactly what it sets out to do, but how it could function, if it did or does. This double failure – not being noise, not being music – is the only fleeting success noise can have. This is not negative, except at the level of noise being a negativity – i.e., noise does not positively inhere in a specific piece or style of music, it occurs in a relation. The failure of noise is not due to some problem with how it got made, or how it is listened to, understood – failure occurs

in the relation to noise of: music, a piece of noise, noise music, the performer or the listener. Failure is not about not doing something, nor is it a result, what it is is an operator of noise.

## II. Containing

Bataille's notion of 'sovereign failure', as expressed in *The Accursed Share*, vols. II and III, offers a way of thinking about failure and impossibility not as tragic, but as functional – as the mode or formlessness of noise and the listening to noise. Excess can be about losing the self, but more than this, excess is actually less (having become more first). Excess, for Bataille, is part of the principle of expenditure that defines the universe, and endlessly alternates with the principle of conservation or accumulation. Excess is about death, waste, eroticism, drunkenness, sacrifice, transgression – all the good things in life....so noise seems to be ideal for Bataille and vice-versa – but Bataille's notion of excess is not about goodness, about communion or some sort of realization of nothingness: it is a principle of evil, apathetic evil. Excess cannot be about gain, but instead involves loss: the loss of self in ritual or noise music will only ever be virtual loss, a suggestion of how waste might come out. And there is only ever this not-quite-occurring of excess, the same as noise never quite occurs as noise, as it is always multiply mediated in order to be heard, let alone listened to.

Excess is not transgression, nor attainable through it – excess parallels those, but also parallels the restricted world of survival, saving, truth, logic and so on. Noise as excess does not exist purely, authentically as excess, but only in relation to both music and to judgments about noise. In other words, putting excess and noise together is the combining of two things that have no autonomous existence. But it does seem like this: why is noise music excessive? Firstly in very mundane ways – volume, or absence of, use of materials deemed non-musical, pushing materials beyond a point where the sound coheres in discrete patches; but secondly, because we conceive it as excess as a result of these elements. Excess, though, is not quantitative, 'louder', 'harsher', 'more shocking': it is in the pushing to the ordinary levels of excess and then in the excess that occurs toward the listener. Excess is waste, not a surplus: it only is in being spent:

Excess energy (wealth) can be used for the growth of a system (e.g. an organism); if the system can no longer grow, or if the excess cannot be completely absorbed in its growth, it must necessarily be lost without profit; it must be spent, willingly or not, gloriously or catastrophically (Bataille 1991: 21).

If it only comes to be – in fact only fails to come to be – as waste, nonetheless it is always there, "energy is always in excess" (1991: 23), and it is the non-excessive that is the by-product.

So noise music has to try to get to some sort of limit, or be some sort of limit, to work. But noise isn't at the limit, or the limit – even the most 'cathartic', loud harsh

performance or recording only works as noise when the limits of that particular bit of noise/music are in play. And this is the possibility of weakness, failure, being consumed rather than blazing gloriously, rock god style, and where no-one is in control, or the beneficiary of loss. What you get is still nothing.

This NOTHING is what Bataille describes as sovereignty, a deformed version of (what he imagines to be) Hegel's idea of mastery. Sovereignty is where the subject is exceeded, lost, put beyond the self. This might lead us to imagine a happy catharsis for performer and individual, but this loss is loss, not something to be chalked up as experience, as gain, as cultural capital. It is also a loss that has always been within us, existing as being-to-be-lost. The unknowing possibly induced by the 'experience' of noise also fails – and this is sovereign failure (1991: 204). In terms of noise, this applies not only to the listening, but also to the process of understanding or theorizing it. Nick Smith (2005) has recently talked and written of the mundane failure of noise when we either: a) get used to it; or b) reflect on it. But what if this is not a mundane failure at all, but a necessary part of a machinic conception of noise that is not about noise objects that get sense imposed on them, or lose impact as they get listened to by grateful listeners, but about a noise-relation, a noise-body? I think the answer to this is the absence of an answer that can maintain a critical purity or the purity of some sort of ideal noise that eludes our impositions. For Bataille, anguish alternates with apathy as two states of interest, and in the setting of noise, apathy is the outcome of noise and noise's failure coming together, and this apathy cannot be sustained, as it gives way to judgment. The outcome of noise is the failure to inhabit a moment of sovereign failure (where we so nearly know nothing), such that, as he says in his novel *Mme Edwarda*, all we have left is irony and the long wait for death – irony is not, of course, to be taken as the rational, diacritical awareness that would help us control things. Rather it is Bataille's ultimate end of anything worth doing, the last thing. How pleased we are if noise succeeds or fails, and how much closer to noise when frustrated, excited, and physically addressed by noise. How pleased we are if we have a strong theory that masters either the success or failure.

### III. Instead Weakness

Masonna is consistently described as being at the extreme end of Japanese noise, so that is what makes him a good example of weakness and excess. Excess in normal terms, applying to the blocs of intense sound and similarly weakness in the normal sense describing the gaps or the collapses in that noise. Through Bataille and Vattimo, we can rethink these two categories as crossing one another (with Masonna ahead of the game). Just like Bataille's own aesthetic readings, excess starts out from fairly transparent excesses, and only then does it move on. The pieces I will discuss demonstrate what superficially seem like blocs of excessive or extreme noise, broken

with moments of failure, where extravagance dissipates. I am looking at those obvious excesses and failures as ways into a more intricate weakness, wherein the excess resonates across loud phases and gaps, and where the weakness crosses out and over from the superficial moments of failing strength in Masonna's performances and recordings.

Masonna is described on his own website as the 'rock god of noise music', and here are some representative comments:

Alien8: "Maso Yamazaki a.k.a Masonna is undoubtedly the most over the top player in the field of extreme noise", using a "barbaric mix of vocals and noise".

Mute: Masonna is "Japan's most extreme noise artist".

Nick Smith: Masonna "creates the brutal high-volume nearly-white noise that has become increasingly characteristic of the movement known as noise music" (2005: 44).

A UK Music Reviews site: "intense, harsh, and brutal feedback, white noise, and screaming. There's no melodies here, no singing or lyrics, not even a proper rhythm – just free form noise, the agony of sound" (kowz.co.uk).

But all of this is not just the commodification and/or deification of Masonna – his stuff plays this game too, with the 'extreme' performance, seemingly unpredictable sound outcomes, and the intensity of what is produced. Everything seems to be combining to attribute purity, authenticity and a newly centered artist, master of his form, or formlessness. Mason Jones argues that "Masonna is too much concerned with pure expression to be theoretical enough" to follow John Cage (seaoftranquility.org) – in a good, decisive and masterful way. But what if what made this noise music noise was more formless, a process of form disintegrating and accreting, and that all pure human-driven noise did produce bursts of noisiness – moments where the listening is interrupted, whether the listener is familiar/smug or deeply traumatized by the newness? This process would not come clear either in the building apparent formless form of the noise piece, or in its failure to stay noise.

If we take his DVD montage of performances, *Like a Vagina*, we see and hear something that promises to take us to a new level of excessive performance (while tying in to a lengthy tradition, or history, of 'extreme' performance), and where the performer is putting himself at stake, pushing himself, the equipment and audiences beyond functioning. Noise is being staged as a maximum (of sounds or noises), and also at and as its breaking apart. Where or when is the noise? When is the judgment of noise in play? Noise and its failure never emerge as discrete: instead the louder noise, the recognizable noise fails, while the failing, gasping, panting becomes noise. But the noise is maybe never heard as such – it would be that which crosses over, transgresses in the sense of the crossing that has always crossed over already, unknown.

Then the noise could be at the moments Smith describes as those pauses that suggest meaning, "like the vertical strips in Barnett Newman" (2005: 3), the points where we seem to be nearest to controlling the noisiness, or that the noise lets up, the moments of gathering.

Instead of gathering noise, noise as gathering of noise; instead of noise as loss, noise as loss of noise (in terms both of the disappearance of noise, and the attempt at imposing meaning, and then this imposition failing, not through being wrong, but because that imposition had always been emerging from the noise anyway).

This could apply to the moments of failure: of instrument, of voice, or of recording (or editing). The moment might occur as direct excess is in itself exceeded – and distortion stops, or the voice cracks. In Masonna we could still think of these occurrences as illustrating the commitment, the authenticity of pushing the barriers, of letting go. "Assenting to life up to the point of death" as Bataille says in *Eroticism* (1962: 11). They also offer a pause for reflection, but only if we think that reflection has been prevented in the rest. Or it could be assimilation – a space where judgment is allowed to occur, where distance, critical or otherwise is re-established. This relies on the notion that distance is abolished in the harsher explosive noise blocks. So what these moments give is like Kant's sublime – the sense that something we cannot judge just occurred, but this is only a trick – the apparent breakdown of noise, an exacerbation of noise, not its ending. Noise becomes a mobile force and momentary weakness then seems to confirm noise as force: and force disrupts form (and form in turn includes the connection to the listener). Force, though, is not to be taken as strength, but something like Nietzsche's 'will to power' (a force that does not belong to someone, but acts between, like gravity). This force is also material, or what connects and disconnects the material from the realm of hearing or judging noise – literally played out in the bad use of equipment – hands on foot pedal, bad drumming, bad editing of the video (notably around the 5 minute mark), the cringing use of what we have to call a 'noise harmonica' (10 minutes in). It is this bad element that distinguishes noise from other uses of noise, which work through mastery of equipment, composition, technique. That this 'badness' can be done well only adds to its wrongness. For now.

### IV. More, Weakness

Masonna often veers between loud noise and silences, occasional glimpses of music and semi-contemplative voice sounds. This is combined, as in "Test Edit", on the album *Noskl in Ana*, with bad montage, emphasizing that noise cannot become a unity, an amorphous ambience and stay noise (Similar 'structures' occur in track 4, 1.05, and towards the 2 minute mark; and in track 7, where the 'gap' outside of noise goes from 11.30 to 12.35. Does the time counting of digital media reduce something noisy about noise? Or is that to imagine a purity of performance that has never been there, only imagined as lost, or to come?).

In this piece, voice, guitar and percussion fight through blasts of feedback. This then gives way (1.05) to panting, very close to the microphone and a rhythmic machine clicking. At 1.39-1.41, noise again comes in, overloading even as noise, at 1.41. Silence, a voice at some sort of limit, and suggestions of music are not pauses but act as changes in the relation of piece and/or performer to audience: expectation removes the presence of noise, stopping it from just being, from being there to be understood: familiar. This is where noise starts to appear, and endlessly fails to appear. The voice is noisy for being outside of language, and seemingly indexing the limits of endurance, but what we largely hear is a 'bad' version of that, mediated by the microphone's reception of breath - the possibly authentic carrier of Masonna's subjectivity is there only in how it is diminished, made noisy.

Repetition, and even the fascination of a noise becoming something we can follow, and carrying on anyway, apathetic to our appropriation also work like silence in the setting of noise. In the Ruins' track "B.U.G.", on *Stonehenge*, we have the setting of heavy percussion and bass - rock power, but a weaker force, in the guise of strength, emerges in the painful repetition of a short phrase (from just past 1.00 to about 2.50), which gradually loses all variation, creating a kind of non-anticipation (the phrase is also short enough that if played by a DJ, the audience can suspect the CD to be broken, so they veer between different types of anticipation). From 1.19 to 1.26, a ride or something similar suggests a gathering change, only for the riff to return and repeat, unaltered for over a minute. The rest of the track (over 2 minutes) is also the repetition of a riff, but the busyness of the drums suggests some sort of dynamic.

There isn't really a way around the moment where conceptualizing or processing leads to familiarity of noise - but if noise music is aware of that, it can alternate between endless alteration and the suggestion of coherence. This living on is what Vattimo (1988:1) proposes with his idea of weakness. He argues that "the 'weakening' of Being allows thought to situate itself in a constructive manner within the post-modern condition". Being is weakened, via Nietzsche and Heidegger, by its persistence in a world that has lost the notion of true, properly ontological Being: it exists as if it were real Being, and whilst it represents the mourning of Being, this mourning is also weak. Once Being lives on in weakness, so does art and culture as whole: or it does if it is culture/art that tries to address what is actually going on, rather than believing in modes of thinking and acting that are gone, or exposed as completed weakness (Vattimo's weakness cannot end itself - that is the weakness). Art becomes a remnant, a remainder or residue among other remnants, and if it realizes this (i.e., acts as if it is remnant and as if it were something more), then it can still have value, the kind of value proposed by Nietzsche, that is outside of judgments of goodness, correctness, truth or falsity. It will then be possible to:

Transform the work of art into a residue and into a monument capable of enduring because from the outset

it is produced in the form of that which is dead. It is capable of enduring not because of its force, in other words, but because of its weakness (Vattimo 1988: 86).

Noise, then, becomes something capable of living on in a commodified culture, and is perhaps the form music should take (or should be given, attributed). Noise itself must be residue, and within that residue remnants and relics of musical form undo each other, producing not only 'weakened' music, but 'weak noise' - noise that lives on in its own failure (to come to be, to be itself, to be other, to get outside). Noise does not seek to win, and theorizing about it should also weaken.

This philosophical, or 'ontological' weakness supplants the literal moments of weakening within noise. Like excess, it is not heroic, but profoundly comic, pointless, wasteful and the place to look for it is where excess is at its most obvious or banal, and then, almost but not quite against that - in direct banal weakness and where we might be hit by a limit rather than forcing our way through - this is the place weakness emanates from. Take Masonna's "Acid Recordings, parts 1, 2 and 3", on the compilation *Extreme Music from Japan*. From 0.22 in, we have heavy breathing into the microphone, feeble, vaguely animalistic; this is broken by 2 seconds of noise, and then followed by a combination of pathetic sing song and banging. It ends in feedback howls. Are these to be taken as triumph (or extravagant failure)? Possibly, but the 'noise' of the piece is in the non-relation of the different 'sections', and the awkwardness rather than the perversely measured ending. But, it is not that these transparently 'weak' sections are noisy because they index weakness, they are noise to the weakness of the transparently noisy elements. Weakness is the living on of the transgression of 'extreme' noise and the living on of noise where, ostensibly, it isn't (when in relation to the more overt noise, i.e., within the context of noise music, mostly).

That is the start of it, but then the weakening infiltrates the rest of the production and listening, to the point where what was strong, or full of force, is the weakness as art, as music. To respond to noise might be to fail in the most mundane way, but maybe that failure functions. Maybe we can aspire to fail in our understanding, not to be mystical, ecstatic, respectful of the music, or the performance; but because to succeed is the greater failure, to master noise through critique or assess the failure of the strong, the failure of the passive nihilist. The weak failure is not abstract, dematerialized, but historically situated. It fails to fail, and cannot hope to succeed. Instead it alternates between the two possibilities, never settling. The weakening that is noise is paralleled by weakening of theory - and these cannot meet, only recognize the residue of how they tried to meet. Is noise tragic, then? Hardly.

#### V. On the Pessimism of Strength (chez Nietzsche)

Weakness and noise as failure are a weakening of tropes such as the body, the

listener, the musician. All or none of these begin to constitute a noise-body, a perpetually weakening body that is always n-1, minus the 1 hidden in modernist multiplicities, including in music of the avant-garde. The noise-body emanates noise, hears elsewhere than its ears, and cannot balance very well. The noise-body started out in Descartes' dream, where he is endlessly toppling but not falling, woken by a thunderclap. Reason and the mind as conductor of the body do not only stem from this, they are perpetually haunted by it. As noise tries to go elsewhere, to be the going and not-quite-arriving, it too is haunted by meaning, music and bodies that work as they should. So maybe the weakening noise-body is an expression of will to power as haunting. Instead of the noise/meaning division, or that between noisy and disciplined bodies, the noise-body is a connecting, an opening between discrete, semi-noisy bodies and the disciplined - in which case this haunting is an ethics, an ethics of the impossibility of connection, where that impossibility drives further attempts and affects the world of non-noise, which, after all, is only a by-product, a noise of noise, a precarious, even if long-lived, organization. Eugene Thacker (2004: 45) writes of bioinformatics excluding noise because of its capacity for unpredictable transformation: "above all, the noise reduction in the process of translation is concerned with a denial of the transformative capacities of different media and informational contexts themselves". At the same time, biomedica are precisely such endless mediations, an internal noising of the body with, within and without technology. One thing: the noise-body will secrete more and more noise, even as noises are brought into the realm of aesthetic or ethical understanding, and the noise body will be secreted more and more.

Noise is material - the failing of form, and a failing that has led to all form, before it is materialist, before it partakes in either commercial, artistic or communal circuits. A material that is emission, not presence. Nor is it absent - thinking about noise is not enough; thinking about a Platonic noise unmatched by our weak noise is too much. Weak noise filters across strong meaning, strong attributions, strong being. Weakness prevents failure through living on as if failure was inevitable and never going to happen, here, now. So, noise, and here, in the shape of Masonna, is, barely. As if it were not.

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## Ecosocial Semiotics

**Paul J. Thibault, *Brain, Mind, and the Signifying Body: An Ecosocial Semiotic Theory*. With a Foreword by M. A. K. Halliday. London and New York: Continuum, 2004.**

By Scott Simpkins

Paul Thibault develops a densely theoretical discussion of cognitive and ecosocial components of semiotics that could be viewed as a cognitive science perspective on work undertaken in modern times from Charles Sanders Peirce to Roland Barthes. Published in Continuum's wide-ranging Open Linguistics Series, *Brain, Mind, and the Signifying Body* is "linguistic" in the looser sense insofar as Thibault's interest is in self-organizing, complex semiotic systems but has language (in its broadest sense) as its basis. Yet, Thibault adds a biological/ecological focus to this investigation because, as he contends, "language in all of its facets is intrinsic to our biological make-up" (281-82).

Thibault is contributing to part of a larger body of work by related thinkers attempting to, as M. A. K. Halliday remarks in his Foreword to the book, develop "new strategies of thought, new dimensions of knowledge" (xi). Halliday, Thibault, Jay Lemke, Colwyn Trevarthen, James J. Gibson, and a handful of others working on cognitive studies have been publishing books in venues such as the Continuum series and articles in journals such as *Linguistics and the Human Sciences*, *Theory & Psychology*, *Recherches Sémiotiques/Semiotic Inquiry*, *Social Semiotics*, *Semiotica*, *The Journal of Mind and Behavior*, *Journal of Pragmatics*, and *Mind, Culture, and Activity*.

Overall, Thibault is working within a fairly lengthy tradition motivated by the desire to make semiotics, the study of signs and sign systems, more nuanced and comprehensive. He acknowledges his debt to the four decades of research in the "systemic-functional theory of language" outlined by Halliday, Christian Matthiessen, and others. Thibault's focus is on the ways that language, in all its facets (e.g., lexicography, phonology, grammar) and purposes, is structured in response to societal influences and human practices. This would include speech situations and genres, nonverbal communication, the actual material shape of a given language, oral discourse, and a host of other considerations, such as the ways in which we write and talk with others in relation to our environment. For example, my sitting in the courtyard of my university's Student Union while writing this right now – listening to birds chirping,

feeling and hearing the wind, and catching snatches of several conversations, some of which are in languages other than English – undoubtedly could have an impact on the language I use, as opposed to if I were in a cubicle in one of several libraries nearby, or squirreled away in my cluttered office or working at home.

Like Thibault's attempt to broaden his range of data for this study, Barthes, Stanley Fish and others have argued similarly along these lines for moving past the rather narrow limitations of data selection in linguistics, for instance as can be seen in John Stewart's (1995) stress on analyzing sentences derived from transcribed actual conversation, as opposed to sentences constructed by linguists to demonstrate a principle – such as, an example of positive "any more": "There's a lot of female truck drivers any more". Or, to put it another way, to use models of analysis drawn from the sentence for larger, syntagm-based models which essentially extend that form of analysis proportionately. Thibault proposes "a shift away from the sentence-based units that characterized formal grammars, which were mainly based on assumptions about written language" (46) and promotes a form of analysis that is intertextual, in the sense of analyzing speech exchanges among speakers, not unlike the work of conversational analysis inspired, in part, by the theorizing undertaken by figures such as Mikhail Bakhtin and Gilles Deleuze (in *Cinema 2* [1989 (1985): 225-234]) on conversation. Thibault champions an emphasis on communicative interaction and the overall Gestalt produced by a given speech situation; indeed, even the fact that such a Gestalt can take place under the circumstances. The systemic-functional theory Thibault is engaging here could even be said, as he claims, to have "helped to redefine what grammar itself is and does" (46).

This practice of dialogic consideration is extended by Thibault toward various elements of consciousness entailed in communicative exchanges, such as event complexes/simplexes, gestural activity, affordances, message units, reportability, object systems, mental images, scenes, interaction systems, rhythm and the metrical foot, tone groups, infant noise (protolanguage), eye contact, and re-

encoding of speech in the course of hearing/reading it from others. Essentially, then, Thibault is "bringing together the intra-organism and inter-organism perspectives on meaning-making" (46). This, again, offers exciting new possibilities for semiotics by blending realms which are often seen as independent or of varying degrees of salience in the larger scheme of semiosis. Citing work by Wilson (1998) and others, Thibault argues that "recent developments in the theory of complex dynamic open systems show the importance of developing a theory of social semiosis in which the socio-cultural and the biological domains of inquiry are brought into a new dialogue with each other". A congruence of this nature provides for a much more responsive portrayal of the nature of semiosis. As Thibault suggests, "it is now becoming possible to make a start in the process of building the theoretical bridges between the 'intra-organism' and the 'inter-organism' perspectives on meaning-making activity such that there is no contradiction or dichotomy between the two" (48).

In this study, Thibault offers the following premises: "The purpose of language and other semiotic modalities is to guide and co-ordinate our interactions with the non-self and to integrate us with our ecosocial environment across space-time scales that go beyond the here-now scale of the biological organism's material interactivity with its immediate physical environment" (48). A number of significant concerns are introduced here as again Thibault endeavours to imagine a communicative Gestalt resulting from a transcendent semiotics. As he observes, the argument can be made convincingly that the system of language would have, over time, developed progressively as a decidedly human practice influenced, in part, both by the impact that our bodies themselves and our surroundings overall would exercise. This would be true for both individual sign users as well as humans as a whole. This focus on the bodily contribution to consciousness, along with the ecosocial consideration, enables Thibault to substantially expand our conception of the realm of thought typically considered the sole purview of the mind. Taking chronological factors into account, Thibault asserts further his interest in exploring how



“language and other semiotic modalities” are “modes of embodied meaning-making activity-in-time which directly contribute to the self-organization of neural processes at the same time as the latter – neural processes – directly participate, on their own scalar level, in semiotic processes, rather than lying behind these as the efficient causes of semiotic activity”.

Essentially, Thibault is theorizing a perspective on human thought by way of semiotics in this present work, one that includes considering the impact of both external and internal stimuli and operations. In his “Preface” he notes that it is crucial for semiotics to develop a perspective that takes into account collectively crucial consideration of social interaction, environmental factors, and the body in order to emphasize facets of semiosis that have been seen as immaterial by virtue of their very materiality. This internal/external, upward/downward perspective allows Thibault to considerably thicken a semiotic theory far beyond other less-inclusive orientations. By focusing on how the brain in conjunction with the mind contribute to the signifying process among human beings and their environment, he emphasizes both the immaterial facet of thought as well as its material component.

A multi-planer model allows Thibault to focus on several different aspects of signification simultaneously, as well as on the way in which our larger sense of self (“SELF” to Thibault; the “Me myself” to Walt Whitman) is constructed/constructing within it. Thus, the emphasis here is on what Thibault conceives of as multiple planes of scales and the ways in which we are situated within them. Thibault examines how our environment, and our position within it, along with the impact of the brain/mind complex, influence the interrelated processes of signification that he views as “trajectories”. “It is only through the attempt to understand the constitutive inseparability of the semiotic-discursive and physical-material cross-couplings and dynamics”, he argues, “that we can adequately theorize our and others’ embodiment, our subjective experience of our ecosocial environments, our perceptions of our inner states and sensations and the meanings we attribute to these both in our internal dialogues in ‘inner’ speech activity, as well as in our interactions with others, and the materiality of the body as playing a central, not marginal, role in social meaning-making activity” (xiv).

One impetus for this study is Thibault’s desire to address what he sees as a needlessly constrained tendency in semiotics to employ a linguistic conception of the text as a model for semiosis. (Recall the earlier commentary on semiotic analyses based on the sentence paradigm.) This can lead to the inability to “see not only the continuities that link human semiosis with the semiosis of other species”, he observes, “but also the continuities that exist between perception, non-linguistic conceptual thinking, mental imagining, consciousness, and semiosis”. Accordingly, the multidirectional spatial conception of chronology figures in as well, as Thibault frames signification as multiply chronological, moving both in the future as

well as the past. Thus, “trajectory” would not entail a linear arc in this sense, but rather an oscillating linkage or network that radiates out in all directions of time. Indeed, this arc of time can be viewed, from this perspective, as offering a type of time-line to conceptualize its path of activities back and forth. This, for Thibault, becomes an “action-trajectory” or a “semiogenetic trajectory” which “affords the integration of the body-brain’s material interactivity with its here-now environment with past events and occasions of interacting with others, as well as with anticipated possible future outcomes” (5). In effect, Thibault tries to sketch out a capacious, multi-connective web of considerations that factor into the human engagement in semiosis. As a result, this perspective “provides a way of conceptualizing how body-brains contextually integrate information deriving from different perceptual modalities (e.g. seeing, hearing, moving) in the here-now of their own and others’ bodily activities to events, activities, and so on, on other space-time scales, both in the actual past and in the anticipated future, involving either the same or other participants” (6). This concern for widening his schema of signification to include inter-group elements, as well as those elements pertinent to each individual participant, creates a significantly all-encompassing view of our semiotic practices.

Thibault sketches out the process by which humans, as sign users, are inextricably bound up in their environments, as opposed to those who propound “formalist models of language” (7) based on the belief that “language is autonomous with respect to both its physical-material basis in the body-brain complex of the individual organism and the wider social and cultural practices and meaning systems that characterize and constitute a given human community”. In this regard, he challenges what could be conceived as the mentalist view of semiotics and, instead, explores a schema of semiosis that accounts for numerous scales of activity embedded in the realm of individual sign users which, in turn, accounts for context in a fluid manner that views it both as flexible yet constraining. It becomes clear that Thibault is genuinely combining both environmental/bodily factors into his schema and the social facet of meaning-making which is, indeed, also integral to semiotic undertakings, although this could be viewed as a weak point given its reliance upon a notion of context which is unnecessarily essentialistic (for a challenge to such a notion of context, see Derrida, 1979 [1978]; 1982 [1971]). Thibault argues that our “body-brain complex” is indistinguishable from consciousness in the course of signification and addresses what he views as a lack in cognitive semiotics of accounting for the broader system of social production of meaning which includes an individual sign user in the whole of semiosis. This suggestion of systematic organization may be a less-compelling aspect of Thibault’s argument, granting, perhaps, a vaguely teleological cast to things that might not necessarily possess such features. One could, obviously, allow for the possibility of such organized order, in the same way that Charles Darwin gamely

accepted the possibility of intelligent design (although not in its current, politicized rendition in the United States), but system theorists entertain what, to me, seems sufficient: namely, that a system doesn’t necessarily have to be systematic (on this issue, see Simpkins 2001: 87-120). But, it depends on what sense of “context”, “integral”, “structure” and “systemically organized” (and later, “pattern”) that Thibault had in mind here.

Given the illusory distinctions that seem to position humans as entities distinct from their own materiality and the surroundings they inhabit, the history of consciousness has repeatedly, one could argue, struggled with attempts to reconcile all of the factors Thibault entertains here as interactive by nature. Significantly, Thibault undertakes a conceptualization that proposes considering them all in relation to, and having impact on, each other. “Rather than a constitutive separation of mind, body, and environment”, Thibault considers “the ways in which individuals and their interactions with both their inner and outer environments are mediated by higher-scalar systems of interpretance and the social practices in and through which these systems of interpretance are deployed in particular contexts” (8). Clearly, a spatial consideration of these elements provides a radically different notion of the semiosis involved in constituting ourselves as subjects than perhaps is more commonly portrayed in semiotics. Yet Thibault conceives of these spatial constraints produced by the multi-scalar planes of signification as exercising considerable reduction of our options for determining whether something is “meaningful”, a systemic limitation that perhaps cannot operate with as much effectiveness as he contends. Unlike, say, the presumption of a clue in a detective novel having a material ground connection with an actual crime, it could be argued instead that there is no transcendental signified within a world of unmoored (and perhaps unmoorable) signifiers. Such a situation based on supposedly infinite semiosis is not unlike Gertrude Stein’s complaint about California: there’s no there there.

For Thibault, stimuli to and from every plane, as well as the organs used to recognize, and arguably re-create those stimuli, are considered as partaking in an immense interactional process. “Perception and action are closely linked to each other at the same time as they implicate, on-line, and constantly respond to, neural, motor, and contextual (environmental) factors”, he maintains. Not surprisingly, “the traditional conception of the brain as a central processing unit that ‘represents’ or ‘models’ an external world has no place here” (13). As opposed to a more “traditional” view, Thibault contends that the site where semiosis and thought take place is not necessarily the brain in and of itself, but possibly a nexus of trajectories connecting our social interaction, environments, bodies, and minds. This consideration obviously gives the body-brain a substantial role in the creation of consciousness typically associated with “mind”.

Furthermore, Thibault effectively outlines a three-tiered model of scales of cognition, the uppermost (not unlike Peirce's sense of Thirdness) of which essentially is constituted by something beyond the individual in a manner akin to our notion of an entity such as "society". Thibault levels a challenge to notions of upward causation by suggesting that potential directionality could operate in several directions, even at the same time. He contends that "the lower-scalar neural processes in the brain and central nervous system, along with the body's sensori-motor activity, are neither the source nor the 'cause' of meanings and their interpretation" (see also Thibault 2000). To the contrary, he suggests that a synergistic operation is at work in the course of consciousness. Thus, the activities of the body-brain are seen to take place within a greater "timescale" of different planes simultaneously. By way of this schema of interactional planes, Thibault assesses the operations of what he views as a "supersystem" that has a mediating influence over a given sign user. Within such a rhizomorphic conceptualization, the combined elements of social and environmental interaction become intertwined with the body-brain construct.

By this rejection of a reliance upon a causal path that trickles upward from seemingly less salient elements, Thibault's dismantling of a privileged direction enables him to entertain influences regardless of priority. He maintains, for instance, that "the structuralist reading of the semiotic notion of stratification has overemphasized the nontransitivity of the relations across different strata" (43). In contrast to structuralists who in his view have "co-opted" paradigms from Saussure, Thibault attempts to outline a way that "value" could be reconciled with his view of closureless, fluid systems. This perspective would focus understandably both on action and chronology, thereby enabling him, he argues, to displace the notion of a language as a fixed, pre-existing sign system with a more responsive model that accounts for language coming forth as signification is actually occurring. The emphasis on real-time semiotic exchanges here, as found in interpersonal communication, is extended further to any form of semiosis, and once more related to both bodily and cognitive factors.

By disregarding the more conventional perspective of ostensibly logical impact, Thibault arguably creates a decidedly different view of semiotic systems here. Drawing upon Togeby (2000) and making good on Halliday's contention in his Foreword, Thibault observes that "we need to develop a new discourse for talking and thinking about the ways in which brain, body, and ecosocial semiotic environment are embedded in and are functioning participants in higher-scalar systems that link all three components in complex, hierarchically organized and non-linear interactions across the many levels of relations and space-time scales that are involved" (17). To make it fully sensitive to external considerations, this undertaking would need to be supplemented by taking into account the ways in which an ecosocial

consideration perceives the process of producing meaning. Furthermore, Thibault maintains that the brain's systemic manifestation influences the structures of our semiotic systems. From this perspective, then, Thibault imagines the body, the environment, social dynamics, and brain structures as mutually attuned.

In part, Thibault engages in a similar discourse strategy in regard to semiotics here. Using Nöth (1990) as an illustration, he maintains that the convention in many semiotic undertakings entails a desire to establish a typology of signs or to focus on decoding them. Here, though, Thibault refrains from making the "sign" a prominent component of his attention. Citing work by Bouissac (1998), he adds: "The pervasive and uncritical acceptance of the notion of the sign as something which calls to mind something other than what it is has failed to clarify the ontological status of the concept of the sign or the ways in which this concept relates to processes of meaning-making and their textual and artefactual products" (34). Yet, this raises an interesting question about the sign even having the potential for an ontological status at all. Notice that Thibault frames this expression as a "concept" which would suggest to me that he is thinking in terms of its ontological being within the consciousness of a thinking subject. The sign, then, would not actually have any independent materiality or "being" itself. Aside from this issue, however, is the "fundamental question" for Thibault which is how we produce and implement notions of interactional contexts that allow us to frame something outside of our individual perspectives. This is not unrelated to Erving Goffman's observations in *Frame Analysis*, in which he, for instance, describes the human practice of discerning one's location and situation immediately upon waking (think of the beginning of Francis Ford Coppola's film, "Apocalypse Now"), or Barthes' cognitive grid imposition (in *Roland Barthes*) that allows him to recognize a scribble as a signifier without a signified, or Jacques Attali's description (in *Noise*) of information we render as intelligible by conceiving it as "noise", or those postcards you see in Australia that superimpose a contour map of that country over a map of the USA or Europe to provide a striking size comparison.

It seems here that Thibault may be too eager to embrace a type of materialist semiotics with this assertion, apprehensive possibly about the aforementioned "nothingness" of a seemingly endless oscillation of semiosis as it is viewed in some conceptions of semiotics (see Simpkins 2001: 121-66). After all, even Peirce's notion of infinite semiosis becomes a new process immediately again once a final signified is reached or apprehended as such. It is possible that Thibault engages in this refusal to accept the sign-as-constant-displacement in order to return to the possibility of an epistemological "gain" for cognitive semiotics, and clearly an argument can be made for such an accumulation of progressive understanding. A common example that I use in classroom discussions of this situation is: look up a word in a dictionary ("being", for instance) and then look up each word in its definition, and so

on. On the one hand, it would seem that comprehension of that first word would never be reached; on the other hand, eventually one would get a sense of what "being" refers to. Thibault, as I read him, would cast the end of my previous sentence as "...one would get a sense of 'being'".

"Rather than seeing the brain as a sort of digital computer which operates on and manipulates abstract symbol strings inside individual heads", Thibault envisions a "notion of value" that illustrates "how we can connect biology and society in a conceptually unified way through the notion of activity" (51). This is an important assertion for Thibault, insofar as he desires to model a discipline of semiotics that plugs the many holes, or resolves the many conflicts of, what he sees as common in so-called "mainstream semiotics" (see Hodge and Kress 1988).

Numerous examples could be culled from *Brain, Mind, and the Signifying Body* to demonstrate Thibault's approach to developing such a super-charged semiotics. As a whole, they illustrate that he is staying as far away (perhaps) as possible from a neatly reductive enterprise. In fact, he goes out of his way to stress the systemic nature of semiosis, regardless of how it manifests itself. As he asserts, "semiotic systems are open, far-from-equilibrium systems" which "maintain themselves through constant exchanges of matter, energy, and information between the thermal dynamics of the system and its external environments" (244). Let me focus on a couple of these "systems" here as a way of illustrating Thibault's project.

### Infant : Parent Semiosis

One of the more striking paradigms Thibault addresses is the "dyadic interaction that characterizes joint mother-infant semiosis" at the point of development discussed by Trevarthen (1978, 1987, 1992) as "primary intersubjectivity" (36). The rudimentary semiotic interaction between a child and its mother would seem to be just that. But, by engaging studies by Trevarthen and Halliday, Thibault outlines the multidirectional complexity entailed in this action, considering both the ways in which the child is entrained into the earliest stages of "entering semiosis" (Hodge and Kress [1988]), and the manner in which the mother is enmeshed in an adult version of the same phenomenon.

"Newborns seek out eye contact with significant others (parents, caretakers)" through "activities [that] constitute the very earliest stages of dialogic interaction" (36), Thibault observes. In part, though, this decoding of the infant's "speech" is constructed by way of the mother's projection of that encoding onto it. One could argue, in fact, that pet owners do the same thing as, in my own case, when my cat scurries into my office at home with (what I interpret as) an "upset" look on her face, which "means" that someone is at the front door (I don't have a door bell). Repeated experiences of this have led me to embrace the "habit" of associating this "look" with a specific signified. The same can be said for mothers interacting with their infants. "Such expressive moments on the part of the

newborn 'trigger' reciprocal and corresponding acts on the part of the caretaker, who construes the newborn's movement as having some meaning relevant to the emerging dyad" (36-37), Thibault asserts. One might wonder, however, whether this is a trigger, or to extend this metaphor (as I did with my cat example), a trigger "pulled" by the mother who wants to find significance in the "responses" of her infant, in the same way (to use yet another personal example) that my grandmother used to assure me that, without question, her Chihuahua understood what she was saying to it in English.

To Thibault, the mother and infant "engage in a reciprocal exploration of and a selective attention to the environment in which the dyad is formed" (37). Thibault chooses to give this "selection" a form of significance it may actually "have", if such an assertion can be allowed; although, on the other hand, it could be argued (perhaps contrary to Thibault's earlier questioning of the immateriality of the sign) that this selection is only given significance by the decoder. As in, a sign is something which stands for something to someone else.

Rather than accepting that an infant may be just "looking at" something in a non-instrumental fashion, Thibault casts this practice as a component of a developmental agenda. By gazing, for example, a child is investigating its environment and social world in search, at least in part, of ratification as a subject by others. And, Thibault adds, this visualization leads to cognitive maturation and semiotic competence. Additionally, the gaze functions as a means for individual cognitive development for both people involved, and not just the child, as one might expect, since there is a parallel, integrated activity taking place between them.

This importing of significance allows Thibault to frame these seemingly low-level exchanges as, in fact, possessing much greater sophistication and significance than would be granted from a non-instrumental frame. As Thibault notes, "the notion of meaning is a highly specified category which we normally reserve for the kinds of semiotic transactions with others and the perspectives these afford that characterize our semiotically mediated transactions with the non-self (cf. Secondness), including our conspecifics" (38).

The kinds of dyadic exchanges Thibault explores here (including those between humans and bonobos [see also Thibault 2004]) suggest that varying degrees of nonetheless similar cognitive practices indicate that humans share semiotic abilities with other beings through common denominators among a wide range of "subjects". Meaning, along these lines, is given a much broader array of allowances than is found in more conventional views of communicative salience in semiotics. Undeniably, this approach paves the way for any number of new developments and foci in this discipline. For instance, lower-level semiotic exchanges (such as those I described with my cat) take on much greater potential for analysis of the construction of meaning-making, even though obviously my

cat doesn't have cognitive or expression capacities equal to mine.

Thibault stresses "the fundamentally multimodal character of all human meaning-making" (246) and maintains that newer and higher modes of cognitive development do not leave behind the earlier, lower modes, but rather, incorporate them in a multidirectional fashion. Furthermore, to extend this observation to infant semiosis, Thibault argues that the infant's gradual cognitive development does not leave behind its earlier orientations. To the contrary, while building upon these earlier, less sophisticated skills, the infant always remains in possession of – or consults, one might say – those skills. These artefactual abilities, in other words, are never wholly superseded, rendered obsolete, or outgrown. By way of cognitive metonymy, Thibault is able to offer a parallel here in which the infant's development is compared with the invention of hybrid media or language forms. "Rather than impeding the full flowering of language as the ultimate expression of human rationality, this process of integration has afforded the possibility of the evolution of new genres and ways of making meaning including the multimedia and hypertext genres characteristic of the age of the Internet".

### The "Gaze Vector"

Studies in nonverbal communication have already made substantial progress in describing and theorizing the function of elements such as intonation, pitch, tone, volume, mouth facets (the smile versus the smirk, etc.), eyebrow facets, hand gestures, and so on. Eye facets were obviously also components to be considered in communication, and they, too, have been taken into account as well, but not perhaps in the manner that Thibault uses the "gaze vector", which he assesses as "a process-participant configuration" (201). The idea of "looking someone in the eye" and other forms of making contact (or avoiding contact) are viewed here as cognitive content in terms of the gaze's link with one's consciousness, the ratification of the other's subjecthood, and the means by which it supplies potential impetus for conjecture about the signifiers/signifieds being offered and then decoded by each participant. Thibault points out that even though "meta-functional principles operate at the lower, less specified integrative level of perceptual awareness", they nevertheless can make significant contributions to the process of interpersonal (and intrapersonal) communication. In fact, while nonverbal (or extra-verbal) elements in conversation could be viewed as merely supplemental – even outside of a given "message" – Thibault assigns them an integral part in the overall process of semiosis (of course, the pre-verbal techniques used by infants would figure in here as well). The gaze vector contains by necessity a "target" which from the perspective of semiotics can be considered something like a two-part signified. The decoder of another's gaze would, accordingly, be endeavouring to determine what it reveals in terms of the gazer's intent. Thibault's conception, then, is threefold: ultimately a

target is discerned; the decoder is led to the target by following the gaze vector; and the gazer initiates the process of analysis.

Finally, for Thibault, "the gaze is also related to the here-now ground relative to the observer (the self) who interprets the other person's gaze" (201). The gazer, accordingly, interpellates not only the gazed as a subject, but also provides something akin to "context" within the conversation. While Thibault somewhat curiously portrays the gazer's function as that of "the objective grounder or the actualizer of the gaze", arguably this is an act of subjective projection and cognitive framing, as, in fact, Thibault observes.

Thibault takes a constructivist stand toward material existence, granting it a presence only insofar as it is created by a subject involved in semiosis. This has significant implications in terms of the gazer who is seen, consequently, as a creative agent, rather than someone passively perceiving something already there prior to the gazer's agency. "The fact that the world is not something 'out there', an object in itself, having its own reality independent of our ways of making meaning about it, has important implications for the body-brain", he suggests. "The recognition of this fact requires the abandonment of the representational theory of mind and cognition and its replacement with a view in which the world and its meanings are actively produced by us" (184). From this perspective, each subject in, say, a dyadic speech exchange scenario, is effectively creating her interlocutor, but also creating herself as well. This constantly fluid process is, furthermore, influenced by factors derived from the environment and the body.

### The Hand

The hand would serve as a suitable illustration of this facet of semiosis. After all, as Thibault observes, the hand allows us to venture with greater surety, precision, agency and comprehension into our surroundings that would, perhaps, otherwise remain less accessible to cognition.

Barthes points out that the chopstick has a deictic function and serves as a signifying extension of the hand:

it points to the food, designates the fragment, brings into existence by the very gesture of choice, which is the index; but thereby, instead of ingestion following a kind of mechanical sequence, in which one would be limited to swallowing little by little the parts of one and the same dish, the chopstick, designating what it selects (and thus selecting there and then this and not that), introduces into the use of food not an order but a caprice, a certain indolence: in any case, an intelligent and no longer mechanical operation (1982 [1970]:16).

The same could be said for the function of the hand serving as a proxy of, and contributor to, consciousness. The hand, thus, would be seen as directive tool, allowing humans to construct hierarchies based upon relevance of some things over



that of others (e.g., the one approaching storm cloud among other seemingly stationary, innocuous clouds). The hand is seen as possessing the capacity to convey a wide array of signifying functions (not to mention sign language), but by adding its ability to articulate the self, Thibault significantly broadens consideration of its numerous semiotic abilities and tasks. This would be especially pertinent for the human hand, which possesses much finer increments of meaning-making than those of animals and receives the additional benefits of being connected with vision of a higher cognitive order.

Citing the gaze vector as an illustration, Thibault observes that it enables the “capacity for abstract exploration which, in turn, allows the organism to place itself in the position of others and, therefore, to view things others do, as well as to abstractly look ahead and reflect on possible courses of action and their consequences before these are put into action as actual movement and behaviour” (183). This observation also reveals how Thibault is able to sketch out an enormous chain of relations in human consciousness and semiosis, in which brain, mind, body, environment, etc. are all interconnected and constantly playing off of each other. Means of articulation further develop this semiotic web, as he notes while drawing upon Gibson (1986 [1979]). In the course of writing, for instance, think of the significance of being able to convey meaning to others by linguistic transference through our hands. And this, of course, would apply as well even to sign language “writing” among other signers. Once again, this observation shows Thibault’s constant return to the social interaction facet of semiosis, pointing out that the seemingly inward, soliloquy-like action of writing, in fact, necessarily presupposes participation of a decoder at some future point. Figuratively speaking, interpersonal communication can be conceived as an action similar to holding hands, a form of social linking across time and space that not only supplements, say, linguistic utterances, but also serves as an independent meaning-making conduit as well. Elaborating on his earlier work on this issue (1992), Thibault adds:

We produce our world in and through our semiotically mediated interventions in and engagements with this vague and undifferentiated mass of possibilities, which we can never, in any case, know or experience directly, but always only mediately. The projection into the world of the highly delicate differentiations afforded by the sensori-motor activities of the hand and face-vocal-trace systems also means that we endow the phenomena of our experience with value, affect and motivational salience (189).

As was seen earlier, Thibault stresses the constructive nature of semiosis and ironically challenges his own reluctance to accept its immateriality in light of the constant displacement of signifieds in the process of meaning-making. For, as he suggests, we clearly impose significance on a given signifier, rather than somehow determining

with certainty its significance (a significance, indeed, that it can never possess anyway).

### Inner Speech

Thibault has already established his stance on inner speech in his entry in *The Encyclopedia of Semiotics* (1998). Here, in a manner similar to his approach to the outward component of writing, Thibault addresses the ecosocial components of the internalized discourse we engage in, which he refers to as “linguistically realized thinking” (271; related to Kinsbourne 2000). Essentially, Thibault maintains that the semiotic procedures we employ in any exterior discursive practices are undertaken the same way in interiorized speech and outlines the various ways in which this semiotic practice is patterned after other more seemingly external forms of signification. This observation clearly enlarges the ways in which we define this medium of (self-) communication. Thibault observes that our conception of semantics will change if we conclude that inner speech models itself after discourse, as opposed to the sentence.

Similarly, the ways in which we communicate with others socially are patterned along the same lines as our internal “discourse” functions, Thibault contends. An important component of Thibault’s view of inner speech, then, is that it clearly follows the same operations of proposition formation and cognitive framing. Used in exterior speech, it could be said that this particular speech is the voice of consciousness, articulating and constituting itself. Inner speech, he maintains, “makes use of conceptual categorizations and allows for the taking-up of modalized propositional attitudes”, and also “exhibits properties of textual unity and coherence in relation to both its internal (textual) organization and its contexts of utterance” (273). Additionally, he notes, “inner speech qua object of conscious reflection” in part contributes to the establishment and recognition of “SELF”.

### The SELF

Thibault imagines the SELF as relational and immaterial, contingent upon interactional dynamics between the body and those elements that frame and form it on both the inside and the outside. “We have self-awareness not of the self per se, but of the self-in-interaction-with-surround (i.e. the internal milieu and the external environment)” (250). The semiotic SELF can be viewed as an interpretive construct, in keeping with Peirce’s sense of self-building (see Colapietro and Walter Benn Michaels) as opposed to self-revealing. Significantly, Thibault posits the action of interior speaking as a principal tool in this undertaking. “The meanings expressed in inner speech are only accessible to the consciousness of the SELF in whose perspective the given occurrence of inner speech is grounded”, he observes. “There is no functional requirement that these meanings be interpreted by others in the public realm” (275; see also Vygotsky [1986 (1934)] and Thibault [1998]). Drawing

upon related work by Carruthers (1996), he adds that the SELF can thus, by talking with itself, generate an awareness of the nature of the dialogue of self-thought, as well as self-scrutiny and even a form of conscious governance. Indirectly, it could be argued, Thibault extends Jacques Lacan’s contention that the unconscious is structured like a language, to consciousness along similar lines. Citing earlier work by Harré and Gillett (1994), he asserts that we create a self-trajectory by way of monitored consciousness that allows us to traverse and intelligibly grid everyday life.

Given the far-ranging density of *Brain, Mind, and the Signifying Body*, it is hardly surprising that Thibault would need more room to develop it further, and the companion volume, *Agency and Consciousness in Discourse: Self-Other Dynamics as a Complex System* (2005), is designed to enable him to do just that. In particular, Thibault follows up this investigation by focusing on the ways in which the individual subject exercises agency in relation to consciousness. His attention remains on the procedures of social semiotic interplay as it is mediated and created by the body-brain complex.

In *Brain, Mind, and the Signifying Body*, Thibault essentially responds to what he sees as “the need for a theory which can discuss different scalar levels that are implicated in the organism’s transactions with the affordances in its environment” (14). And his assertion of the significance of this enterprise to identify connections between conscious humans, their bodies, and their world seems wholly justifiable: “The functional and contextual basis of systemic-functional theory will prove to be an ideal conceptual and analytical tool for developing these links” (48).

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## Pop Spirituality

Adam Possamai, *Religion and Popular Culture: A Hyper-Real Testament*. Brussels: P.I.E.-Peter Lang, 2005.

By David A. Nock

Aspectre is haunting the sociologists of Europe – the spectre of secularization. This spectre suggests with increasing reliance on science, empirical method and rationality that the need for belief in a supernatural supra-empirical realm will dissipate. This paradigm largely influenced the European founders of sociology in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. British sociology and British sociologists of religion have powerfully revived this perspective (see Davie 1988 for a useful summary of the sociology of religion's development, 483-488). The patriarch of the British sociology of religion, Bryan Wilson (b. 1926) has been a powerful advocate of the secularization thesis (Gee 1998:558). Aberdeen's Steve Bruce (b.1954) carries on as most energetic exponent of the secularization thesis with a seemingly inexhaustible supply of books and articles which provide further evidence (Davie 1998:485; see also Bruce 2002). Little examined has been the conundrum posed by the secularization thesis: if its insights are correct, then the sociology of religion represents a dying specialty with little future. British sociologist Stephen J. Hunt (b. 1954) has noted this and comments that "the decline of religion, as a social phenomenon, will mean the decline of the sociology of religion" (2002:214) and also "if religion continues to decline in Western societies then the sociology of religion will itself become increasingly marginalized" (2002:215). The irony is that the British sociology of religion tradition has been very active and lively, especially in a country where measures of religiosity have shown a regular and steady decline.

Perhaps sociologists of religion ought to shutter up the windows and put up the signs "Going out of business". Arguably this ought to be the case, but then again, it may be premature. What specialty ever voluntarily puts out the lights? I wonder how long it took the supporters of the horse to realize that the roads were going to be the kingdom of the car and not the equine? Sociologists of religion have responded in various ways to revitalize their specialty. One has been to suggest that decline is limited to certain specific suppliers, that is, certain specific religious organizations, but that growth can be expected in new alternative suppliers. This is the viewpoint of the resurgence perspective (also dubbed the innovation or rational-choice perspective) backed by the prominent American Rodney Stark, b. 1934 (Nauta 1998:493-495) and his various collaborators. Stark has predicted that Mormonism is on the road to become the first major world religion since Islam (Stark 1984), based on similar growth rates to early Christianity in its first 175 years (despite the difficulty in estimating such growth rates in the early centuries of the Christian Era, Stark has proven himself something of a magician in establishing them at 40 percent per decade over a period of three hundred years; see Stark 1996).

Lest one think that Mormonism is simply a variant of Christianity like Catholicism, Stark makes it clear that Mormonism has added such a great deal of new content that it is distinct from Christianity in much the same way that Christianity became Judaism (that is to say, a distinctly new religious movement). Stark's paradigm has become

quite influential in the United States where both religion in general and Mormonism specifically remain quite strong. Secularization theory dominates in Britain where the established Church of England has declined like water washing away soil: slowly at first but with a persistence that picks up speed.

If one thing is clear it is that despite assertions and pretensions to the opposite, neither of these perspectives can claim to be universal. Perhaps only a Canadian can say that! Both British and American thinkers still tend to be mired in a kind of cognitive imperialism – the British see secularization everywhere. When the American evidence did not seem to support the perspective, Wilson explained away the recalcitrant data by stating that American religion was superficial and therefore just another example of secularization (1982: 152)! Similarly, Stark presents never-ending data sets showing that Mormons or other new religious movements have high growth rates in areas outside of the United States, even if the growth rates refer to teeny, tiny absolute numbers (a growth from 5 to 10 actual members provides a formidable growth rate!).

If sociology of religion is to survive it must go beyond these strategies. Secularization is a dismal prospect for devotees of the sub-discipline and prominent sociologists of religion should probably cease to be quite so eager in their endorsement of it. Perhaps the main thrust of its findings cannot be avoided in certain parts of the globe but large parts of the world seem unaffected by secularization – in Central and

South America, Africa, the Middle East, and parts of Asia (Lester 2002). The United States itself stands as a refutation of the notion that “advanced” countries characterized by science and technology shed religion as a kind of natural progression. Opposition to the resurgence theory is available and Eileen Barker has expressed doubt that any new religious movement is going to take up the slack of the declining Judeo-Christian organizations. In fact she points that many have lost ground since highpoints in the 1960s and 1970s.

If the sociology of religion is going to survive as a specialty, then other strategies will have to be tried. One has been to widen the scope by changing the title and focus of the sub-discipline: religion and spirituality, implicit religion, alternative religions, quasi-religions, functional equivalents to religion as seen in sports, political movements etc. Stephen J. Hunt has pointed to this tendency in the discipline: “It is evident that the emerging paradigms in the sociology of religion continue to extend definitions of religion. The problem remains, however, that such a broad definition appears to include too much of what has not historically counted as religion... Today, practically anything can be regarded as religion by using a broad criterion...” (2002:214-215).

In general, the larger strategy is to envisage religion as an element of culture. In this approach, the emphasis hinges less on organizations and organized religions, and more on finding new religious and spiritual themes that are found in culture and popular culture. Although some organizations may emerge to support these forms of religion and spirituality, they are usually quite different, more recent, and less socially dominant from the traditional forms and houses of worship associated not only with Christianity, but with the major world religions in general. Many of these new cultural expressions of religion and spirituality may seem facile or ephemeral to those who are used to the massive institutional expressions of the historic organized religions, but arguably if one is looking to the future of religion and spirituality, it is to these manifestations that one should look (rather than to a traditional organization such as Anglicanism in Canada about whom prominent religion and spirituality author and renegade priest Anglican Tom Harpur has predicted will see its last member leave by 2061!; Shackleton 2005). As I complete this article, word came to me of a new book by Hunt that discusses rational choice and postmodernist theories of religion as the main rivals to the secularization paradigm.

Adam Possamai’s *Religion and Popular Culture: A Hyper-Real Testament* fits comfortably within such a postmodernist frame that rejects the rational-choice and secularization-as-demise alternatives. His focus is on the intersection of religion and spirituality with the mass media and popular culture. As he says: “It will be the argument of this book that religious imagination is also present in popular culture, perhaps more now than ever” (17).

There follows a discussion of culture in general and the previous distinction between “Fine Art” or “high” culture often patronized by the “upper classes” (18) and “popular

culture” often “part of the mass media and...consumed by the masses” (Ibid.). Possamai appeals to postmodernism as destroying this formerly clear and easy distinction since this perspective argues against boundaries and hierarchies, and argues that nothing new can be invented, therefore that cultural innovation is more a matter of “promiscuous” mixing and matching of artistic styles.

The emphasis on popular culture is important, says Possamai, because it accords with a new fluidity and freedom in determining self-expression. Formerly, he says, “we were the social reflection of our parents” in terms of religion, ethnicity, class, political affiliation, and cultural tastes and choices. This has disappeared and we live in a world where the individual increasingly “create[s] one’s own biographic/identity” from what the author calls “this library of choices” available (20-21). Possamai recognizes that traditional institutions, including organized religion, are on the defensive in modern society, and this pervades the realm of the religious and the spiritual. Instead of looking for insights of transcendence at the buildings and facilities of mainstream churches, there is a move to “draw on a vast range of religious resources through consumerism” associated with the mass media and popular culture (21). Spirituality is increasingly built up by what is on offer through popular culture, and popular culture is an important facet of today’s marketplace. Possamai asserts that in today’s society “we can know people by what they consume”, perhaps a sad replacement for “cogito, ergo sum” (22).

Theoretically, this book aims to incorporate the influence of postmodernism (Baudrillard and Lipovetsky) and critical theorists such as the Frankfurt School and Jameson. However the author avows that he is a disciple of neither approach. His work, he says, “does not follow a postmodernist approach” (21). He distances himself from the Frankfurt School by criticizing their tendency to view “social actors as dupes” (22). So, in the end, the author views himself as a Weberian. However when it comes to Weber, one must always ask, which Weber? Is it the Weber who is the Parsonian idealist emphasizing cultural values as causative; the materialist Weber who emphasized the importance of economic and political factors; or, the Weber who developed *verstehen* and who may be cited as a pioneer of symbolic interaction, or indeed, some other Weber? For Possamai, Weber’s attraction is that he did *not* view social actors as dupes but as “agents” or *actors* but still carried by some socio/cultural forces” (22). The Weber summoned by Possamai is the *verstehen* Weber who calls for analysis of “the meaning social actors give to their actions” but a Weber who is neither completely idealist in simply asserting that what actors state determines their world nor a positivist or determinist who would suggest that actors are simply pre-programmed by external forces.

Such a theoretical perspective carries methodological implications. The author specifically endorses “a more impressionistic than positivistic approach” (22) and he cites the examples of Simmel and Weber himself

in this regard. In working on a doctoral dissertation on New Age Spirituality, Possamai conducted various interviews. He has extended this with published texts and also surfing Internet sites and chat-rooms. Possamai comments he aims “to produce a type of anthropological/sociological ‘thick’ description” through development of such “a reflexive ethnography” (26).

The chapters that follow elaborate these ideas and strategies. Chapter 1 on “Religion and Spirituality: From Modernity to Postmodernity” underlines the vicissitudes that religion has undergone with the transition from a modern to a postmodern world. Possamai presents evidence that religion is on decline, especially among the young. Yet as religion declines, interest in spirituality survives, even thrives. The author (34) recapitulates some of the theoretical debates entered into by sociologists of religion (secularization, resurgence) and suggests the emergence of a “*tertium quid*” (“some third thing”). This relates to the increasingly individualized character of spiritualities and their divorce from organized religions, yet significance as an important trend. He cites recent Australian research that on any given day ten percent of households report participating in religious/spiritual activities and are similar in incidence to “sporting and cultural activities” (40). Watching TV remains a more frequent activity but Possamai reminds us that in this new era, even the spiritual dimensions of watching TV cannot be dismissed as “some of the shows and movies can provide a source of spiritual inspiration” (40).

Chapter 2 is titled “Consumer Religions”. It starts by emphasizing the importance of consumer marketing in a world where individuals are not so much citizens as consumers. In this spiritual marketplace, groups and movements which do not pay close attention to the wants of the consumer will be facing empty pews (or theatre seats as in the New Paradigm churches discussed by the author). Possamai starts by recounting a scene from the movie *Dogma* in which an innovative Catholic priest tries to woo believers back with a reimagined Christ – gone is the suffering crucifixion victim, in is a smiling “Buddy Christ” with a cheerful thumbs-up gesture. Possamai asserts that in our postmodern times, religion “is definitely part of consumer culture” (47). He recognizes that “some groups are more involved than others” but the overall trend is toward this incorporation of religion into consumer culture and that “what is new is religion’s full immersion into it” (Ibid.). Since Mel Gibson’s *Passion of the Christ* appeared after the substance of this book was finished, it seems that even a suffering Messiah can sell at the box office if a cultural commodity has enough Hollywood charisma behind it!

The chapter then goes on to discuss what the author terms *Hyper-Consumer Religions*. Specifically these turn out to be New Age groups and individuals. However the author finds that many such interviewees dislike the New Age designation, and he utilizes a new terminology for the movements, in particular “presentist perennialism”, meaning alternative spiritualities looking neither to the future nor to the past for their inspiration but to general “deep cultural changes occurring...[within]

post-industrial societies” (51) such as declining belief in progress, radical individualism, and fluidity between sub-cultures.

Possamai interviewed 35 respondents from Melbourne who belong to such alternative spiritualities. Topics discussed include the Cultural Appropriation of Indigenous Cultures and also the tendency for perennists not to expect or demand objective historicity in their “reconstructing[ing] history into myths”. These interviews may provide some insights into this alternative spirituality but it seems to me to lose the thrust of the chapter since no real evidence is presented to support the claim that New Age perennism is the hyper-consumer religion *par excellence*. While mention is made of its “products for gaining and enhancing sensations” (49), my own visits to St. Francis Cathedral in Sante Fe, New Mexico and the Catholic Marian shrine at Knock, Ireland provide evidence that hyper-consumer religions may have had ample precedents before the perennists (note to Possamai: I doubt “presentist perennism” is going to replace a catchy label such as “New Age”. Perhaps he should go back to the graphic novels that he loves so much for new (if not new age) inspiration!).

Chapter 3, “Subjective Myths”, takes its cue from Jean Baudrillard with his suggestion that “the real and the unreal have imploded”, that we live in a society of “signs” and that a “de-materialised concept of reality” is sustained by “media generated images” (24). For persistent empiricists such as myself (no positivist, however), this chapter resonates with interest as it delves into various specific groups and movements using the empiric of Internet sites. The chapter further extends the assumption of the previous chapter that it is “perennists” who in particular “find inspiration from popular culture” in addition to “an array of diverse religions for the source of their spirituality”.

A variety of groups and movements are discussed in this light, starting with the influence of science fiction on the creation of new religious movements. These include the Church of All Worlds which took its inspiration from Robert Heinlein, Scientology “another movement clearly inspired by science fiction” (o.c.), the Star Wars Appreciation Society which has been operating in Australia to establish the Jedi as an officially recognized religion, and the Heaven’s Gate group inspired as they were by the *X-Files* and *Star Trek*. More generally, Possamai refers to such aforementioned movies and television series, and others previously unmentioned such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, as having “opened, or even popularised the doors of extraordinary perception and appeal to these spiritual consumers” (59).

The author then discusses further examples of popular culture on alternative spiritualities from other genres. These include the influence of writer H.P. Lovecraft on new religious movements such as the Church of Satan and relatively unorganized examples such as Teenage Satanism. Another set of influences is that of vampire-inspired groups that “base their religiosity on

vampire fictions” (60). Yet another substantial genre is that of “fantasy” and here the author lists various examples (can hobbits be far behind?) that “are all parts of a cultural reservoir which contribute to neo-pagan thinking” (61).

Not only does popular culture contribute to the creation of sustained narratives and myths but also to the creation of “pop icons” who neo-pagans often utilize in their practice of magic “instead of more traditional gods” (62). When an example of this is given, invoking the image of Jared from the Subway submarine sandwich ads to help the believer achieve success on a diet, one starts to wonder if Bryan Wilson was on to something with his musings about the facile nature of religion in the United States!

The rest of this chapter turns to more theoretical considerations about these changes in postmodern society which have led from Yahweh to Jared! Attention is paid to Lipovetsky, Featherstone and others. Lipovetsky suggests that in “advanced ‘modern’ societies”, the hold of roles, norms, and class have waned as the autonomous individual “constructs who he or she is...part of the great adventure of the self” (65). This construction of the self unencumbered by traditionally ascriptive criteria is accomplished in large part by the process of consumption: “if before we inherited our social characteristics from our family and kept them as part of our identity for the rest of our life, today, it can be argued that we make ourselves who we want to be” (65).

Chapter 4 on “Hyper-Real Religions” carries on exploring religions (spiritualities) which have been created or heavily influenced by constructed stories and fiction from popular culture. Possamai concentrates on the Jedi religion as an extended case study. He cites 2001 censuses in Australia and the United Kingdom showing large numbers of devotees, refers to his interview with one such devotee (“Christina”), also to various Web sites of the movement, and ends with interviews with George Lucas. He makes clear that some of the allure has to do with the disillusionment felt by many in this postmodern era with the traditional churches and with the political sector (73).

Ironically, Lucas seems less than blissful about a “completely secular world where entertainment [is] passing for some kind of religious experience” (75). This however is the tendency that Possamai suggests “might be growing in the near future” (75).

Possamai outlines his own ideal-typology based on spiritual growth involving illuminational development, instrumental development, and entertainment arguing that hyper-real religions are in a position to contribute to all three forms of spiritual growth. Specifically each type of spiritual development can be realized with the Jedi religion, such as meditation, the use of yoga, socializing, having fun, etc.

Possamai then draws upon the work of Ulrich Beck on the risk society (especially in the incarnation of terrorism since 2001) to suggest that increased perception of risk enhances the prospects of hyper-real religions (81). He speculates (his own word) on why hyper-real religions may appeal in the post-9-11 risk society. Traditional

religions may represent violence and confrontation while hyper-real religions may offer forms of escapism from an unedifying present; unreal religion may bring comfort in that as in stories like *Lord of the Rings*, it is the weakling hobbits who eventually overcome the evil wizards. Possamai also draws upon Latin America where hyper-real religions may serve the disempowered (“the marginalized, the demonized and the dominated”) with “a form of protest against mainstream culture” (82).

Chapter 5, “New Forms of Religious Identification Carried by Popular Culture”, for my money, is one of the most interesting in the book. It focuses on the human potential ethic, that is, “a belief in the spiritual development of the self and its latent abilities” (88). Increasingly people look to alternative spiritualities not just to worship the divine but to discover it within themselves. This may be on a reflective level but it is also conceptualized as the development of higher powers normally denied to mundane mortals. To quote from one Web site: “A Jedi strives to excel physically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually, and can put these in motion instantly” (100). One interviewee (“Julian”) reports how he attempted to develop telepathy and the powers to read minds and to send messages through the use of such powers (98). Possamai points to the ubiquitous slogan found in the New Age movement: “You are god and can do anything” (89).

Much of the chapter is expended on the interrelationship of this human potential ethic with the development of comic book superheroes from 1938 forward (the advent of Superman). Possamai points out that earlier superheroes had often been imagined as having divine or semi-divine provenance or, mortals who had to work assiduously and ascetically at their special gifts. Also such heroes often had an “official” status with religious, governmental or military hierarchies. The new superheroes, in contrast, often gained their powers as the result of accidents, were originally rather ordinary and gained their powers quickly and without special ascetic efforts. In other words, potentially they were the democratic “Everyman(woman)”. They were assuredly not charismatic religious leaders, or commanding generals, warriors or political leaders. They seemed quite ordinary as reporters or students. Finally, the modern superhero has few pretensions of launching grand new narratives relating to grandiose plans for society. Instead, despite their superpowers, they seemed to restrict their vision to sweeping crime off the streets. In Possamai’s words, “they support the status quo and are not interested in changing society” (96). The author also expends some words on how the human potential ethic including its spirituality component has pervaded the discourse of self-help experts such as Oprah Winfrey, Suze Orman, John Gray and others.

He finishes off this fascinating chapter with some musing about trends which may argue against Weber’s grim prediction of disenchantment and “the over-rationalisation of everyday life”. One of these is precisely the human potential ethic and the inspiration it

has received from popular culture and the superheroes. Through such mechanisms, e.g. “a reconnection with nature”, Possamai sees us as “at the heart of a re-enchantment process” (103).

Chapter 6, “Esoteric Knowledge(s) and Popular Culture”, zeroes in on the secret systems of knowledge often reserved for elites of cognoscenti. Over long periods of history such systems of thought have often had a great appeal as knowledge denied to the less advanced common herd. Just as I write this in Spring 2006, we have witnessed a major media blitz dealing with the long-lost *Gospel of Judas* produced in the third century by the Gnostics [followers of wisdom], suppressed by Catholic Christianity. Sure enough on p. 107 there is a reference to “the concept of esotericism—and also that of occultism and Gnosticism” (107).

Just as the *Gospel of Judas* is no longer reserved for an inner circle of adepts but has been instantly diffused in books, media reports, and the Internet so a major point of this chapter is that such esoteric and secret knowledge can no longer remain so in the postmodern era: “Within perennism, esoteric knowledge is no longer secret...and even appears to have become a public commodity” (107). One occult Web site warns: “Don’t count on having ‘secrets’ revealed to you. Ninety-nine percent of them are already published in some form, somewhere” (108).

Allied to the theme that secret knowledge systems preserved by elite groups is an anachronism in cybersociety, the author emphasizes that material which used to be available only in difficult-to-understand texts, now gets simplified into “a kind of ‘do-it-yourself’ exercise...it is quicker and easier” (110-111). Possamai inevitably draws from the work of George Ritzer in referring to this as “the McDonaldisation of Occult Culture” (117). He relates back to earlier themes in referring to several interviews with “Anne” and “Steve”, and concludes that this process of simplification contributes to a world in which “the individual becomes his or her own authority” and this process has been furthered by the development of “esotericism simplified” in which all knowledge(s) are “now so easily accessible and not controlled by some ‘intellectual of the esoteric’” (117).

Chapter 7, “The Logic of Late Capitalism and the Stasis of Religion”, is a theoretical discourse relating the author’s insights about postmodern religion and spirituality with F. Jameson’s well-known analysis about the nature of late capitalism. Possamai essays something which I have hinted at in several articles: that there is a *conjuncture* between the nature of religion and spirituality in any society and its economic system of production. As such, Possamai summarizes some key points of Jameson’s thinking on how capitalism has advanced through three stages culminating in late capitalism. This last stage is characterized by such features as partaking in pastiche and in the collapse of well-defined standards. Another feature is the omnipresence of stasis: “Everything in art and culture has already been invented; all one can do is to re-invent” (128). When it comes to religion and spirituality, Jameson claims that “postmodern culture is thoroughly secularized”. Possamai instead

points to the contrasting view of McClure who argues that American postmodern culture can be characterized “in terms of a resurgence of spiritual energies, discourses and commitments” and that postmodern texts “make room in the worlds they project for magic, miracle, metaphysical systems of retribution and restoration” (125).

Possamai agrees with McClure that postmodern culture is not secularized but he agrees with Jameson’s general depiction of capitalism’s development and suggests that “perennism is part of the logic of late capitalism...as a new spiritual way of being in this phase of late capitalism...” (126). Possamai also agrees with the notion of stasis as characterizing both religion and spirituality in addition to the wider culture and economy. Whereas Jameson refers to the writers and artists of today as constrained by “no longer being able to invent new styles and worlds – they’ve already been invented”, Possamai insists that the “last act of religious creativity in terms of content” may have been the UFO religions (dating to the 1950s) or perhaps “the booming of New Religious Movements in the 1960s-1970s” (130-131). The author ends by celebrating “the religious vitality of our time period”. Even if nothing new is being invented when it comes to ideational content this vitality relates to the de-institutionalization of religion and the development of “individualized religions”.

Chapter 8, “Popular Culture and Hypo-Consumer Religious Groups”, takes us to what may be more familiar ground for many sociologists of religion: conservative religious groups and their objections to the mainstream use of popular culture as well as to specific occult, and perennist groups. Possamai focuses on several strands of “monotheistic fundamentalism” (using the modern and recent “extended” definition rather than the original and specific definition which dates back to 1910 and a series of pamphlets defending traditional Christian doctrine entitled *The Fundamentals*). By focusing on this extended definition, Possamai is empowered to put under his lens traditions taken from Christianity, Islam, and Judaism and their resistance both to popular culture and to the perennists so comfortable with it.

If we needed reminding, Possamai draws attention in the phrase “late capitalism” to capitalism’s continuing emphasis still on profit (no matter how much changes in the evolution of capitalism, some things do remain constant). He points out the effects that can have on cultural products even when it comes encapsulated in a religious package. Thus *The Prince of Egypt*’s narrative on Moses “finishes on a Hollywood happy/selling ending” and does not deal with “the real/not-selling ending about the punishment by God of the Jewish tribe” (141).

There follows discussion of the resistance of conservative and fundamentalist religious groups to the products of popular culture. Noteworthy to many readers might be the discussions of *Pokemon*, *Harry Potter*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Dungeons and Dragons*, *Digimon*, and heavy metal music. Possamai knows that *The Lord of the Rings* was written by a devout Roman Catholic adherent and

in fact it appears that Tolkien has caught a more favourable shake than J.K. Rowling. A Southern Baptist theologian writes about Gandalf as “a kind of archangel sent from God who has special abilities to help people...while the Potter wizard...performs magic that can be used for selfish or evil purposes” (146). Also discussed is the response of various Christians who are intrigued by some of the popular culture products and who still retain hopes that their Christianity will not be compromised. Thus there is actually a Web site for ChristianGoths! Another such site even castigates Christians for having “too long allowed non-Christians to dominate the imaginal world of role-playing, which was originally inspired by Christian men like J.R.R. Tolkien and C.S. Lewis” (155).

One strategy of such conservative groups is a “re-appropriation of popular culture” through the creation of cultural products for use internally by their own adherents. Here the author lists various Christian comics, games, and rock and heavy metal music suitably cleansed. He might have expanded this list to include movies intended mainly for committed believers, some of which have been major box office hits, although most often ignored by the mainstream media (see, however, Houpt 2001 and his claim “There’s a growing demand for movies aimed at Christians who feel ignored by Hollywood”). Readers will no doubt be stimulated to know of cultural heroes such as Captain Bible or The Cardinal (the latter being a university student who can fly but “has no other superpowers and must rely on his faith in Jesus to get him through!” 151).

According to Possamai’s analysis, if perennists are hyper-consumer religions that emphasize the values of late capitalism such as relativism and the rest, the hypo-consumer religions “tend to be absolutist and exclusivist” (155). This raises several problems. Firstly if relativism and the aforementioned values suited to late capitalism are peculiar to perennism, then the logical deduction is that conservative Christianity ought to be declining as it confronts a late capitalism with which it is not in conjuncture. One could argue at length about that scenario but most sociologists of religion would now agree that such conservative groups have showed surprising resilience. Even though in the 1960s and early 1970s it was widely predicted that religions which did not “modernize” would suffer, it has been the more liberal Christians seeking to keep up with modern values who have declined.

What is under-discussed in this book is precisely the still considerable, if diminishing, numbers of liberal Christians and how they fit into Possamai’s analysis. Typically they tend to put up far fewer barriers to popular culture. This is not the place, and it is not my task, to provide an extended analysis on this topic. However surely the current analysis (which focuses on perennists and fundamentalists) needs to be extended to other religious and spiritual groups if a full understanding of the trends of late capitalism is ever to be fulfilled. In Canada, at least, the numbers of perennists and fundamentalists are fairly small. No doubt the influence of the former group is growing if considered as a



cultural resource rather than card-carrying members of organized groups (notice the sections of any big box bookstore on New Age, wiccanism, etc). Reginald Bibby (b. 1943), Canada's best-known sociologist of religion, has repeatedly pooh-poohed any suggestion that perennists are making a break-through in Canada (1993; 2002: 63-65). As far as fundamentalism is concerned, it has made few gains in Canada over an extended period and remains much, much less influential than in the United States. What has happened, to use the fortuitous phrase of Bibby and Brinkerhoff, is the circulation of the saints (Beyer 1998:55). Specifically, Canadian evangelicals who are charismatic (for example, Pentecostals) have been gaining at the expense of non-charismatic Evangelicals (e.g. Baptists). Also relevant here are the insights of the late George Rawlyk (1996) and Sam Reimer (2003) that Canadian Evangelicalism tends to be less doctrinally fixated, less contentious, and less politically affiliated to the political right than is the case in the United States. Canada's largest religious groups include Roman Catholics, liberal and moderate Protestants, and "nones" (the religious non-affiliates) and these groups are largely ignored in Possamai's association of religion and spirituality with late capitalism. In Canada, at least, many Catholics are not as conservative as the two recent popes would like (Nock 1993:52-53). In the 2001 census they counted just over 43% of the population. Mainline Protestants numbered 20%, the "nones" 16.5%. Conservative Protestants, despite the "buzz" produced by them, are at 5.5%, actually down from previous estimates in 1961 and 1991 (Bowen 2004:24). "Perennists" in Canada as members of organizations have always counted less than 1% (discussed as "New Age" by Bibby 1993, 2002).

There follows a brief conclusion. Possamai does acknowledge that he has focused on two extremes (the hyper-consumer perennists on the one hand, and the hypo-consumer fundamentalist religions on the other). He acknowledges, "in between these two ideal-types of consumption, many other types of consumption that were just touched upon are to be found" (158).

Although briefly raised, Possamai clearly expects hyper-consumer religions to be a focus of growth. Although he allows that they may be "just a fashion created by the logic of late capitalism", he clearly expects more of them. Thus he writes: "This hyper-real testament reflects contemporary practices in the religious field that cannot be left unstudied. These religious practices might become dominant in the near future ... hyper-real is here with us and is more likely to grow as it becomes more mainstream" (158-59). Stephen J. Hunt is less sanguine when he comments, "nonetheless, if it is the case that fresh forms of religiosity are replacing the old, this may not effectively reverse the processes of the long-term decline of religion. It may well be that from a historical perspective the evidence still points towards an overall demise. The new religiosity, so it may be argued, does not make up for the decline of traditional Christianity" (2002:213).

Whether that is true or not seems to me to depend on the correspondence of postmodernist and late capitalist theory to reality. As I understand postmodernism, however, correspondence to external reality is rarely this paradigm's strong suit. The Canadian political scientist Pauline Rosenau (1992:110), upon whom Possamai relies in part, discusses at length the skeptical postmodernists who deny such an external reality whatsoever, or at least the ability of human cognition to uncover it. The analysis of late capitalism, with its reliance on Marxist political economy as interpreted by Ernest Mandel and Fredric Jameson, may have more prospects of uncovering verifiable propositions that correspond to the real world we live in.

Sociologists of religion, it seems to me, have occasion to welcome this book. As I suggested at the beginning, there has long been a dour discourse within this specialty that religion was doomed with the completion of the rationalization process and its correlates of science and higher education. Possamai provides a new rationale that religion may not be dying but changing in line with the new features of late capitalism. Since this new religiosity (or better yet, spirituality) is by nature more individualistic and based upon personal choice than previous religious economies, it stands to reason that sociologists of religion need to look less to traditional religious organizations and more to the products and commodities of popular culture on the one hand and to the Internet and chat-rooms on the other hand. This should also suggest to traditional religious organizations that they may need alternate forms of financing, service provision, and even of worship than meeting together physically. If Possamai's work vindicates Durkheim on the one hand (in the Frenchman's insight that the old gods are dying but that there is no reason why new ones may not take their place), his work rather undercuts Durkheim's insistence that religion is a collective phenomenon that best expresses itself in communal worship.

According to Possamai religion will survive in later capitalism but sociologists of religion had better get used to getting beyond their traditional haunts in temples and cathedrals. They will need to develop a keen eye for the resources of popular culture and cyberspace. Perhaps, then, I should conclude by saluting the work of Chris Seay in his *The Gospel According to Tony Soprano: An Unauthorized Look Into the Soul of TV's Top Mob Boss and His Family* (2002). When I bought it, I will admit that I was just fuelling my counterintuitive interest in organized crime and its influence in Europe and North America. It didn't hit me at the time that I was actually developing "data" for my interest in the sociology of religion! Remember, however, that for Possamai, looking for religious inspiration in popular culture is looking "in all the right places". The back cover blurb of Seay's book promises that "...God permeates the show", that "deeper moral issues" we can all relate to, resonate in it; and that pastor Seay will analyze the Soprano "family" (both of them!) and the various family characters and help "us evaluate our own humanity, and ultimately our relationship with God".

Thankfully, sociologists of religion may not have to turn out the lights; but we may have to turn on the TV, our friendly PC, and replace the Bible with a few salient (graphic) novels!

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## Toronto Semiotic Circle Redux

By Gary Genosko

The Toronto Semiotic Circle was founded in 1973 through the combined efforts of three University of Toronto professors: Paul Bouissac (French), Lubomir Dolezel (Slavic Languages and Literatures), and Barron Brainerd (Linguistics). In the search for origins, the next best thing to a primal scene is a "crucible letter". Just such a letter was circulated and signed by all three scholars mentioned above. However, at the time Bouissac was not in Toronto but in Wassenaar, Holland at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study in the Humanities and Social Sciences. The founding gesture was extended outward to likely fellow travelers in other units in the University of Toronto, and neighbouring universities in the southern Ontario region. Shortly thereafter the invitation was favourably received and the figures whose participation defined the TSC's early years emerged: Tom McFeat (Anthropology) and David Savan (Philosophy), along with several colleagues in the French and Psychology departments. In 1976, the TSC launched its Working Papers and Pre-publications series with Savan's *An Introduction to C.S. Peirce's Semiotics, Part 1*. Of course, TSC did not 'found alone' for 1973 was also the year that saw the launch of the *Journal Canadien de Recherche Sémiotique (The Canadian J. of Research in Semiotics)* by Pierre and Madeleine Monod (Romance Languages, Alberta). In 1981, the JCRS/CJRS was superseded by *Recherches Sémiotiques/Semiotic Inquiry (RSSI)*, under Bouissac's editorship.

Although the TSC has seen over the course of its discontinuous history its share of high and low points, lulls, leaps and stumbles, it is perhaps best known for the diversity of its colloquia. The weekend peace and quiet in an ordinary Victoria College academic building would be broken on Saturday mornings at 10am – still an ungodly hour for many – as coffee percolated and chairs were moved to accommodate TSC

stalwarts, guests and the curious, as they assembled to hear the invited speaker. That the interdisciplinary explorations of the TSC were undertaken each month on a Saturday in 'overtime', if you like, or even 'downtime', beyond the weekday schedule with its tangle of classes, meetings and commitments, speaks to the marginality of the project in relation to the academic and administrative mainstream. This did much to define the TSC's independence; yet it was the Circle's diversity that found full expression in the freedom of the weekend occasion. The marginality of semiotics itself within the University of Toronto during the 1970s undoubtedly contributed to the TSC's weekend slot.

The TSC was a productive institution. Beyond its colloquia, Working Papers, and sponsorship of RSSI, it published biannually the International Semiotic Spectrum (ISS) beginning in 1983 until 1992 under a variety of managing editors, and later sponsored the founding of *The Semiotic Review of Books* in 1990 by editor-in-chief Bouissac, which continues publication to this day. Most significant is the role that the TSC played in establishing the International Summer Institutes in Semiotic and Structural Studies (ISISSS) beginning in Toronto at Victoria College in 1980. The first year of ISISSS witnessed the participation of the kernel of Toronto semioticians – Savan, McFeat, Bouissac, Dolezel – all of whom offered courses during June. Again, semiotics was a matter to which one's attention turned at end-of term, making it an early summer pursuit.

With the rebirth in 2006 of the Toronto Semiotic Circle under the presidency of Anne Urbancic (Toronto), it is appropriate to reflect upon the original editorial that appeared in *The Semiotic Review of Books* 1.1 (1990) by Bouissac, "The Lesson of Durkheim". The revolutionary multidisciplinary of Durkheim's annual publication *L'Année sociologique* that sought,

from a sociological perspective, to present results from the whole range of 'special sciences' in a manner that would be mutually fruitful, inspired Bouissac to create the SRB but with semiotics as the mediator and modeller of contemporary knowledge production across the disciplines. Still, this bold gesture situated semiotics not in relation to philosophical or linguistic precursors but rather in terms of sociology, in Durkheim's day an emerging social science struggling for legitimacy, and in addition found in the journal format – not a book-like journal but a no-frills broadsheet – a medium of communication and dissemination adequate to the task.

Of course, some prefer the uncle (Durkheim) and others, like myself, prefer the nephew (Mauss). Marcel Mauss's monumental contributions to the *Année* and his efforts to see that his uncle's project survived him have inspired me to call upon the renowned anthropologist James T. Clifford to provide the SRB with an "Insight" article in honour of the TSC's rebirth as well as to regain the original model of the Durkheim/Mauss *Année*. Overlooked by intellectual biographers of Mauss, and so deeply embedded in his files that Clifford himself had not consulted it in decades, the gem of an article "Mauss's Memory", first published in the obscure, defunct journal *Sulfur: A Literary Tri-Quarterly* 17 (1986): 145-53, went where nobody dared to tread: into Mauss's filing cabinets where the deterioration of his mind worked itself out through hypercategorization. The great thinker of categories and the social origins of classification retreated into a labyrinth of combinatorial possibilities under the stresses of age, personal tragedy, illness, and war. A sober lesson for all intellectually adventurous semioticians: the burden of "knowing everything" is too difficult for even the greatest to bear.

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I N T E R N A T I O N A L  
SEMIO TIC S P E C T R U M

# Insight: Mauss's Memory

By James Clifford

Marcel Mauss's erudition was legendary. Claude Lévi-Strauss reports that the audience would leave his lectures at the Collège de France or the Ecole Pratiques des Hautes Etudes shaking their heads: "Mauss knows everything"! He could uncannily retrieve apt details from a seemingly limitless reading of historical and ethnographic sources in a dozen languages. A passing reference to earrings could trigger a fascinating half-hour, with unexpected asides, on earrings in Polynesia, India, Australia, South America, Africa, Ancient Rome, etc. Lévi-Strauss:

In his work, and still more in his teaching, unthought-of comparisons flourish. While he is often obscure by the constant use of antitheses, shortcuts and apparent paradoxes which, later on, prove to be the result of a deeper insight, he gratifies his listener, suddenly, with fulgurating intuitions, providing the substance for months of fruitful thinking.

An essay called "Techniques of the Body" gives a hint of Mauss's oral style. Here are a few lines from what is essentially a long list of the things people in different parts of the world do with their bodies:

It's normal for children to squat. We no longer know how to squat. I consider this to be an absurdity and inferiority of our races, civilizations, societies. [...]

The notion that sleeping is something natural is completely inexact.[...] Nothing is more dizzying than to see a Kabylie come downstairs with babouches on. How can he stand without losing his slippers? I've tried to watch, to do it, I don't see how. And I don't understand either how women can walk in their high heels. [...]

*Hygiene of natural body functions.* Here I could list numberless facts.[...]

Finally, it must be understood that dancing while embracing is a product of modern European civilization. This should show you that things quite natural for us are historical; they may horrify everyone else in the world except us.

Mauss was Emile Durkheim's nephew and chief inheritor of the *Année Sociologique* tradition after 1917. Until 1941, as an influential Paris university professor, he inspired several generations of anthropologists and sociologists. Mauss wrote or contributed to classic studies of magic, social morphology, primitive classification, prayer, sacrifice, reciprocity, and the category of "the person". His ideas also ricocheted in the literary and artistic world. For example, something said at a lecture, "taboos are made to be broken", crystallized Georges Bataille's theory of transgression – at least according to ethnographer Alfred Métraux who heard

the *mot* and passed it on to his friend.

Unlike Durkheim, Mauss was less concerned to defend the specific terrain of sociology than he was to build bridges between diverse perspectives – psychological, sociological, ethnographic, historical – on "l'homme total". The scope of his anthropological vision was summed up best, perhaps, in a famous intervention at the Société de Psychologie in 1924. Discussion had turned to the philosophical problem of identifying fundamental categories of the human mind:

The Aristotelian categories are not in fact the only ones that exist in our minds, or that have existed in the mind and have to be dealt with. Above all it is essential to draw up the largest possible catalogue of categories; it is essential to start with all those we are able to know men have used. It will then be apparent that there have been and still are quite a few dead, or pale, or obscure moons in the firmament of reason. Small and large, animate and inanimate, right and left have been categories. Among those familiar to us, take as an example that of substance with which I have dealt in a highly technical way: how many vicissitudes has it not undergone? For example, it had among its prototypes, especially in India and Greece, another notion: the notion of food.

All the categories are merely general symbols which, like other symbols, have been acquired by humanity very slowly. We need to describe this labour of construction. Indeed, this is one of the main chapters of sociology understood from the historical point of view. For this labour was itself complex, perilous, chancy. Humanity has constructed its mind by every means: technical and non-technical, mystical and non-mystical; making use of its mind (senses, feelings, reason) making use of its body; taking advantage of chance choices, things and times; taking advantage of nations, their accomplishments, their ruins.

Our general concepts are still unstable and imperfect. I sincerely believe that by concerted efforts, coming from opposite directions, our psychological, sociological, and historical sciences will someday be able to attempt a description of this painful history. And I believe that the best philosophy will perhaps be inspired by this science, this awareness of the present relativity of our reason. Allow me to conclude thus.

This founding statement of modern anthropology (in Lévi-Strauss's reading) has much in it that could also attract a surrealist,

or anyone working to expand the recognized categories of the human spirit. For Mauss, the "mind" is neither a given product of the intellect nor a biological inheritance, but rather a complex historical mix of psychological, emotional, social and political interventions. An emergent anthropology's ability to map and classify this totality is, he thinks, still precarious. And it has no choice but to build its science on the assumption of its own historical and cultural relativity. Unlike Lévi-Strauss, Mauss had no organizing model, drawn from structural linguistics, to order the vast diversity of human symbols and categories. Indeed, he saw social, mental, or moral orders as tentative, constantly menaced by disorder, produced by historical transformation or ruin. This was particularly evident in his work after the First World War shook his belief in the stability of civilized institutions.

Mauss's best-known work, *The Gift*, builds this awareness of disorder into its survey of one of humankind's basic means for creating social stability: reciprocal exchange. Mauss portrays the fragility of agreements to give and receive. More disturbingly, he stresses the affinities between agonistic giving and violent competition, the thin line separating festival and war. Human sociality – for the Durkheimian, human essence – depends on entering into relations of reciprocity: giving and receiving relatives, commodities, money, visits, words, or any symbolic tokens binding the person to others, groups to other groups. But one cannot be related to everyone; there must be exclusions.

Mauss's survey shows that hospitality or gift-giving often have a dangerous side. They may be violently excessive like the Kwakiutl potlatch. (This was the aspect of Mauss's essay that most interested Bataille and which he would extrapolate in his curious work of "economics", *La part maudite*.) For if *The Gift* most explicitly portrays exchange as a check on violence and potential war, it also shows "normal" social contexts in which giving appears to go haywire, where the agonistic element takes over. Here, the equilibrium model of exchange tips over into the experience of pure spending, ludic or violent excess. Mauss's model of social order does not exclude this ever-present reality. The stakes remain high. His story of reciprocity always contains an "or else" – like the Kwakiutl ritual he cites:

Part of the ceremonial opens with the "ceremony of the dogs". These are represented by masked men who come out of one house and force their way into another. They commemorate the occasion on which the people of the three other tribes of Kwakiutl proper neglected to invite the clan which ranked highest among them, the Guetela who, having no desire to remain outsiders, entered the dancing house and destroyed everything.

The prehistorian André Leroi-Gourhan, remembers his teacher as “a man of inspired confusion... [who] managed to concentrate a number of crucial things in very few articles”. In an interview Leroi-Gourhan was asked what he recalled of his teacher’s speech:

His silences, if I may put it thus. I can’t provide an imitation; so many years have passed, and I have an idealized image of Mauss; but he constructed his sentences in a way that suggested things without declaring them inflexibly. His discourse was all articulations and elasticity. Most of his sentences came up empty, but it was an emptiness that invited you to build. That’s why I said the most characteristic things were his silences.

He was especially amazing when we did textual explications on authors who had worked in Siberia on the Giliaks or Goldies. I remember sessions at Hautes Etudes – there were never more than ten of us, and yet! We gathered around a table like this one, not quite as long; Mauss translated from German to French with commentaries that drew comparisons from every corner of the globe. His erudition was fantastic, and we took it in without really being able to say afterwards how he had managed to be so engrossing.

Mauss did not write books. His *Oeuvres complètes* (edited by Victor Karady) is composed of scholarly articles, essays, interventions at meetings, countless book reviews. Compressed classics like *The Gift*, and *A General Theory of Magic* were published in the *Année Sociologique*. His magnum opus, a dissertation on Prayer remained a collection of drafts, essays, scraps and notes. So did other synthetic works on Money and the Nation. Perhaps because so much was connected in his encyclopedic mind, Mauss could be easily sidetracked. And he was profligate with commitments and loyalties. He lectured constantly and spent years bringing work by deceased colleagues (Durkheim, Robert Hertz, Hubert) to completion. A dreyfusard and socialist in the tradition of Jaurès, he wrote for *L’Humanité*, took part in strikes, elections, and the “popular university” movement. Unlike his rather austere uncle, Mauss was gregarious, bohemian, and something of a *bon vivant*.

Some recall Mauss as a loyal Durkheimian. Others see a precursor of structuralism. Some see primarily an anthropologist, others a historian. Still others, citing his rabbinical roots, training in Sanskrit, and lifelong interest in ritual, ally him with students of religion like his friends Hubert and Leenhardt. Some stress Mauss’s bohemian iconoclasm, others his coherent, socialist-humanist vision. Some see a brilliant armchair theorist. Others remember a sharp empirical observer, able to inspire a generation of fieldworkers. The different versions of Mauss are not irreconcilable. But they do not quite add up. People reading and remembering him always seem to find something of themselves.

(Leroi-Gourhan) For a period of two years when I was attending nearly all his courses it was agreed that a comrade and I – a Russian Jew, Deborah Lipschitz, who died in the Nazi deportation – would take notes in turn and in a way that would let us compare them to determine the real content of Mauss’s teaching. And we never managed to construct anything coherent because it was too rich and always ended up at the horizon. Later, a record of his course was published by a group of former students. Well, there was a total divergence between what they noted and what Deborah and I took down. This is the secret, I believe, of the real spell cast on his followers.

I have one small story to add to, and no doubt further confuse, Mauss’s memory. It started in a conversation with Denise Paulme, the ethnographer from Africa responsible for publishing some of Mauss’s lectures under the title *Cours d’ethnographie*. Paulme was reminiscing about her teacher who, even as a Professor at the Collège de France, always retained something of the *bon élève* – brilliant, enthusiastic, chaotic.

We spoke of his tragic end. As is widely-known, Mauss spent the German occupation in isolation and emerged without full possession of his mind. A Jew and a socialist, he was a doubly marked man. Without illusions, when the Germans approached Paris he gave up his teaching and took early retirement as President of the Ecole Pratique des Hautes Etudes. In public he wore the Star of David stitched to his coat, with pride. But like many others during those years he stayed out of sight. Close Jewish colleagues – Deborah Lipschitz and Maurice Halbwachs – were deported to their deaths. Mauss saw the reciprocity and collective discipline that had been the underpinning of both his sociology and his socialism crumble. He had once before survived the decimation of a generation. The new assault seemed to break his spirit.

When the Nazis entered Paris, Denise Paulme told me, they set about requisitioning “available” apartments for officers’ quarters. Mauss had acquired a rather large flat when he was appointed to the Collège de France. Evicted by the Germans, he moved in with his companion of many years, a woman of working-class origins who lived in a smaller dwelling nearby. But there was no room for Mauss’s large library. Paulme and her husband, the ethnomusicologist André Schaeffner (also Mauss’s student), were among the friends who helped move his collection of books to the Musée de l’Homme.

The books, she said, were certainly still at the Musée. But she didn’t know whether they had been fully integrated into its library. Perhaps not – Mauss’s books were an odd accumulation. His rule was not to acquire anything available at the Paris University. (Professors had the run of the library stacks and enjoyed lenient borrowing privileges.) Since Mauss’s interests were unpredictable, covering both high and low culture, I was charmed by the idea of his library, a systematic collection of odds and ends. What

if it still existed, a dusty heap, uncatalogued somewhere in the Musée’s labyrinthine basements?

Yes, I was told when I went to look, of course, the Mauss collection was catalogued long ago. Also, the record of its contents is missing. No way to tell the things that were kept and those discarded. But would I like to see what remains in storage?

Some metal shelves in the dark, covered with dust. Resting on them, a series of wooden drawers of different sizes evidently once belonging to a single large cabinet: Mauss’s *fichier de travail*, his working card-file.

The drawers are numbered 1-15, with two missing. They are stuffed with cards, 8 x 12 1/2 centimetres in size. The cards are annotated across the short end (but sometimes the other way) in small, smudged script, often abbreviated and barely legible. Most of the cards merely record a citation. Occasionally a theme is registered. Larger cards, 15 x 9 cm., mark off the categories.

Taking inventory of half a drawer I count 700 smaller and 128 larger cards. Sometimes they are arranged alphabetically, sometimes not. A sampling of categories:

- Sociological esthetics (100 cards)
- Primitive drawings (80)
- Animals (1)
- Primitives (3)
- Ornament (1)
- Distinctive ornament (2)
- Tattooing (2)
- Jewels (2 – with small pencil drawings, apparently of necklaces)
- Plastic arts (3 – Australian art, French popular art, Indonesian art)
- Japanese art (1)
- Kinds of ornament (8 – mostly Australian references)
- Basket ornamentation (2)
- Spiral (4 – from diverse locales, mostly illegible)
- Figures (2)
- Music (1)
- Literature (no cards)
- Popular literature (4 – one illegible, one on Turkish and Rumanian marionettes, two in German, on folktales of Indonesia and Togo)
- Popular songs and rhymes (4)
- Legends and stories (200)
- Fables (10)
- Transmission of fables (1)
- Aesop’s fables (1)
- Parables (1)

Also noted (a partial list): Myths, Meteorology, Weapons, Religion, Collecting, Phenomenology, Definitions, Explanatory theories, Ancient theories, Truth (3 cards: one illegible, two on Medieval theology), Representations of Nature (1 card: an article by K. Allen, “The Treatment of Nature in the Poetry of the Roman Republic”, *Bulletin of the Univ. of Wisconsin*, 1899)...

The drawers are numbered, not labelled. Thus one cannot guess the file's overall topic, if there was one. On a conservative estimate, the thirteen extant trays from Mauss's file contain 18,000 small cards divided by over 7,000 larger cards.

The number of categories is troubling.

Mauss lived until 1950, a sad figure. He could become animated...but then would lose track and become confused. His extraordinary mind seemed to be turning out of control, starting up lucid, then discouraged, aimless. Little is generally known about his ailment, and most accounts pass over it quickly. Jean Cazeneuve in his short study of Mauss simply mentions "nine years of half-sleep". A terrible nine years. One of Mauss's former students, Pierre-Henri Chombart-de-Lauwe, who saw him in 1946 told me that after a frustrating conversation of fits and starts Mauss's parting admonition was: "Il faut publier"! Make sure you publish! The younger man sensed a scholar with many projects to bring together, an enormous knowledge still to communicate, but lacking the capacity or occasions to do so. A mind fully aware of its own ruin.

Mauss's disarray had medical, moral and sociological causes. I would like merely to add a dimension suggested by the disturbing card file with its 18,000 references and nearly half as many categories.

One of Mauss's most elusive and influential ideas, enunciated in *The Gift* and elsewhere, was that of the "total social fact". According to this doctrine, crucial human institutions – gift exchange for example – should be seen simultaneously as "religious", "political", "economic", and "social" facts; moreover, one must not forget their "legal", "cosmological", "aesthetic", "ecological", and "morphological" aspects. To understand such "total" phenomena means to tie them into the whole fabric of human culture, to multiply their connections with other institutions. But there is a limit to the number of interpretive contexts one can bring to bear. And if the outline of the "institution" in question (be it gift exchange, prayer, magic, or the nation) becomes unduly

complex then the vision of "total social facts" may dissolve into a frustrating awareness that everything is related to everything else.

Mauss did what comparative sociology does best, with an incomparable, even excessive flair. He unexpectedly illumined one portion of the world by another; one domain of society by another. Within the focus of an essay, a lecture, or a conversation, he could brilliantly bring to bear his enormous learning, deepening a topic, extending its ramifications. Mauss was an "anthropologist" whose subject was ultimately "man". And his complementary socialist-humanist vision of unity in diversity embraced virtually all cultures and all epochs.

But there is always another side to such inclusive programs. For wholeness cannot avoid selection and taxonomy – an irreducible arbitrariness. "Mauss knows everything", said his wondering students. But might not knowing so much become a painful disorder when the categories proliferated and the pegs of memory slipped, when the reciprocal contexts in which Mauss's marvelous knowledge could be spoken and heard, taught and learned, were swept away by an abrupt history?

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#### Sources

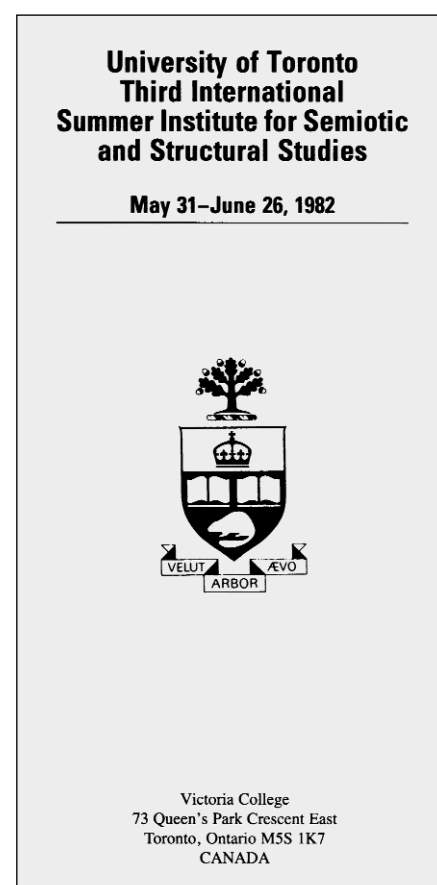
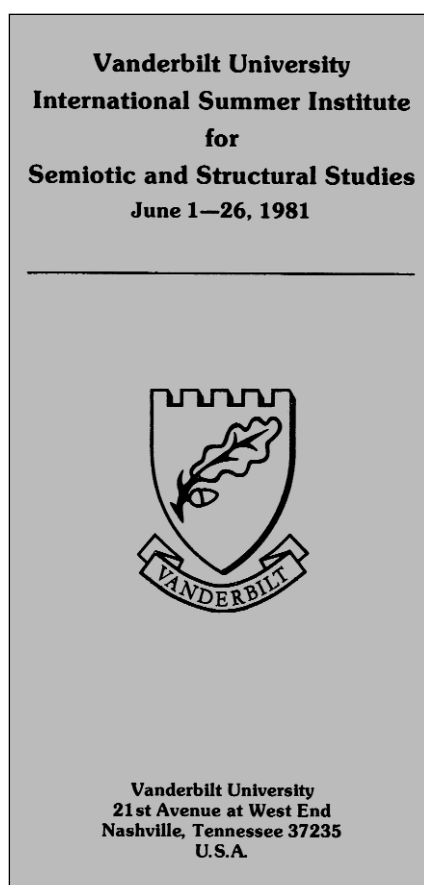
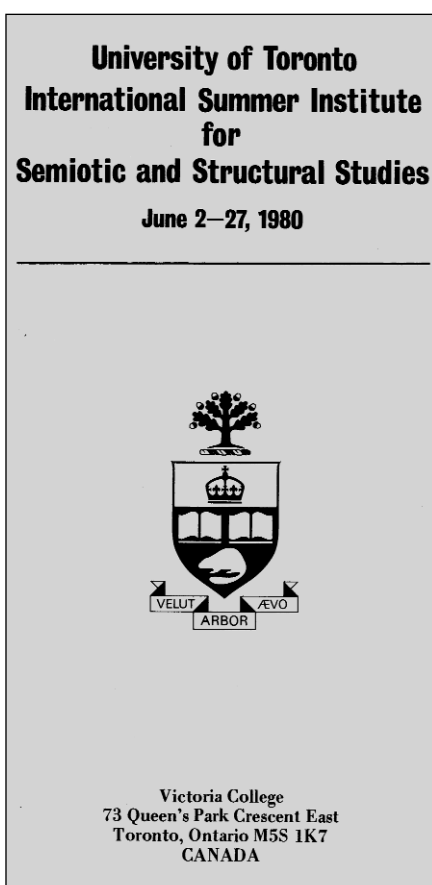
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