

Battle of Pornography: Philosophy and the Fate of the Absolute

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Abstract: Throughout the essay the terms ‘pornography’ and ‘philosophy’ are rendered synonymous in the sense that philosophy exhibits a pornographic character, a unique way of looking into the thing itself otherwise declared by Kant to be beyond representation. But, by going where Kant hesitated to go, we claim that it is rather the goal of pornography in the last instance to extract the thing itself against his insistence that there is only one way we can reach the unfathomable without incurring self-contradiction. In this paper, we are assigning this illicit thing-in-itself the equivalent of the fourth term that we are deploying against the third term of the so-called argument of correlationism (which Kant is said to have ushered in Western thought) where subject and object, existing in a relation of co-dependence, is covertly supervised by a third term, the other half of the subject which splits itself in two (subject and object). The third term is no less the moral subject which guarantees the relation of co-dependence against which we propose the fourth term (or simply, the *fourth*) as a figure of diverse modalities of becoming. And as this may surprise if not repel the ultra-moderns among us, we also contend that as early as Plato the ‘fourth’ is already in place within the tradition of philosophy though at most, and even today, deemed practically unrealizable.

Keywords: Absolute, correlationism, fourth term, pornography

Introduction

The paper is divided into five sections, including a brief conclusion, the first section being a sort of foregrounding the direction of the paper in terms of Plato’s oblique treatment of the critical role of male guardians of the *Republic*. In this short introductory section, Plato’s treatment of the guardians is redirected to an affirmation of a sort of

undoing gender identity.¹ This kind of undoing also sort of critically recomposes the direction of the dialogue in the *Republic* in light of the problematic landscape of governing an ideal city. The concept of the noble lie is briefly discussed in this section which forms the crucial background of governance for which Socrates admonished his male audience to pursue, but as we will contend in this section, with a different purpose in mind. Under focus here is Plato's attitude towards the young male elite of his time tasked to pursue a rather difficult path of rulership vis-à-vis their reluctance to govern the polis. In the *Republic* we can, for instance, read into Plato's notion of poetic mimesis,² exercised by these young male elite, a subtle critique of the dominance of the male figure. Yet, as one scholar observes, the critique "raises a problem [Plato] ultimately cannot settle."³

This leads us to a brief discussion of the first section with regard to Deleuze's interest in Plato's dialogues which to him exhibit a consistent affirmation of tension, underlining the fact that where the task of modern philosophy is to overturn Platonism, "[the] overturning should conserve," as Deleuze importantly asserts, "many Platonic characteristics [which] is not only inevitable but desirable."⁴ Plato's lack of commitment to resolution lends us a critical frame within which to pursue the task of extracting a desirable absolute out of indifference to categories of sexual difference (which we will tackle in the third section).

The second section briefly introduces the notion of the 'fourth term,' building on a number of crucial leads from Deleuze and Guattari. As with these two thinkers, the *fourth* is not a term that has a subject in it, identifiable as a substance as in traditional ontology, but rather a term whose very nature transcends humanistic categories. The term thus approximates a Deleuzian "line of flight" pursuing an "aparallel evolution through to the end."⁵

The third section attempts to redraw the contemporary debate on *correlationism* which we will briefly recapitulate in this section. In the main, the debate puts the legacy of Kant into question, especially the concept of a subject capable of mastering the inherent contradictions or antinomies of

¹ See Ronald Bogue, *Deleuzian Fabulation and the Scars of History* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 20.

² See Arne Melberg, "Plato's Mimesis," in *Theories of Mimesis* (University Press Cambridge: Cambridge, 1995), 10-50.

³ See Wendy Brown, "Supposing Truth Were A Woman ... : Plato's Inversion of Masculine Discourse," in *Political Theory*, 16:4 (November 1988), 594-616.

⁴ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. by Paul Patton (London: Athlone Press, 1994), 59.

⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Vol. 2, trans. by Brian Massumi (London: Continuum, 1987), 11.

reason.⁶ It is this reflexive practice of the subject that is under interrogation in the correlationist debate at the same time identifying a number of areas neglected by Kant.⁷ The section focuses on the contemporary critique of correlationism which, according to Meillassoux, is Kant's most notorious achievement.⁸

The fourth section is a brief introduction to Agamben's concept of pornography as it relates to the paper's main theme—philosophy as pornography. The pornography in question is philosophy's quest to attain an understanding of the absolute, the thing-in-itself that as early as Kant's dismissal of its supposed knowable properties has been consigned to that which ultimately human knowledge is unable to represent. The importance of this section is underscored through our discussion of the difference between two pornographic faculties (strong and weak pornography) which complements the familiar difference between Copernican and Ptolemaic models of the cosmos. (We will also briefly identify examples from D.H. Lawrence and Marquis de Sade to underscore how attempts to demonstrate the absolute can end up complementing its historically enforced obscurity, meaning, its pornographic background).

The conclusion follows the arguments of the preceding section, briefly recomposing the arguments for and in behalf of the fourth term.

Plato's Early Intervention: A Deleuzian Experiment

Why evolution favoured the difference of the sexes or why there are different sexes after all is still an open question.⁹ Throughout known history, however, the male figure has taken upon itself to act as the *third term*, as the guarantor of the paradoxical structure of the difference between the sexes.

⁶ See Immanuel Kant, "The Antinomy of Pure Reason," in *Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. by Werner Pluhar (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Incorporated, 1996), 458-559.

⁷ For much recent account of this contemporary challenge to Kant, see Leon Niemoczynski, "21st Century Speculative Philosophy: Reflections on the 'New Metaphysics' and its Realism and Materialism," in *Cosmos and History: Journal of Natural and Social Philosophy*, 9:2 (2013), 13-21. See also a number of recent publications dealing with speculative realism that has come out recently: Levy Bryant, *Onto-Cartography. An Ontology of Machines and Media* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014); Peter Gratton, *Speculative Realism. Problems and Prospects* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014); Graham Harman, *Bells and Whistles. More Speculative Realism* (Washington: Zero Books, 2013); Steven Shaviro, *The Universe of Things. On Speculative Realism* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), and Tom Sparrow, *The End of Phenomenology. Metaphysics and New Realism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014).

⁸ Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. by Ray Brassier (London: Continuum, 2008).

⁹ See John Gribbin and Jeremy Cherfas. *The Mating Game. In Search of the Meaning of Sex* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 2001).

Psychoanalytically, this is known as the standpoint of the subject 'who knows' which is always the male or the paternal metaphor of the Father.¹⁰ In this light, the mastering (in the sense of the epistemic) figure of the father becomes a non-sexual expression of the paradox of sexual difference.

Arguably, Plato was the first to introduce this concept, not without the contradiction it purposively evokes, in terms of the male guardianship of the *Republic*. There the male figure is treated as a subject that we contend approaches the character of a machine on the grounds that machines are non-sexual; in short, transcendent to the paradoxicality of the 'sexed' subject.¹¹ To make sense of this Platonic gesture, we need to recall Plato's concept of the 'noble lie'. In the *Republic*, the lie is thought up by the class of guardians.¹² But the over-all tone of Plato's dialogues can tell us that he was ill at ease with this concept. Take note that in the *Republic* Socrates' audience was all-male; most were trained in sophistry but were reluctant to govern. They would put on a sense of responsibility by accepting Socrates' challenge to build an ideal city, yet when Socrates exposed the actual burdens that come with governing the polis they complained that he was making it difficult for philosophers to rule the city.

The noble lie is the lie that rigid class distinctions, which sets the guardians apart from other classes, accords well with the natural state of things. The lie is the supremacy of elite and esoteric knowledge over the presumed ignorance and common sense knowledge of the lower class. But as a lie any claim to which cannot be professed. In short, the guardians are not allowed to practice their sophistry.

We may argue here that Socrates proposed the noble lie because his audience were males and posing as philosophers. In addition to banning the practice of sophistry (which is also correlated to a certain practice of individuation), Plato proposed restrictions on the sexual rights of guardians (that is to say, over their wives) and emotional right (over their progenies). Seemingly at all fronts the masculine is reduced to a machine. The masculine loses its absolute singularity and thus, arguably in essence, non-existent.¹³

¹⁰ Jacques Lacan, "On a Question Prior to Any Possible Treatment of Psychosis," in *Ecrits*, trans. by Bruce Fink (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2006), 445-488.

¹¹ This somehow prefigures Guattari's description of 'motherless machine.' During his post-collaboration period with Deleuze, Guattari speaks about a motherless machine which "does not speak for a cerebral father, but for a collective full body, the machinic agency on which the machine sets up its connections and produces its ruptures." See Felix Guattari, *Chaosophy. Interviews and Texts (1972-1977)*, ed. by Sylvère Lotringer, trans. David L. Sweet, Jarred Becker and Taylor Adkins [Los Angeles, California: Semiotext(e), 2007], 97-98.

¹² See Allan, Bloom (trans.), *The Republic of Plato. Translated with notes, an interpretive essay, and a new introduction by Allan Bloom*, 2nd edition (New York: Basic Books, 1991), 63-96.

¹³ Cf. n. 11.

Plato's ambivalence towards the male elite of his time might well be occasioning here a subtle critique of the masculine which, as noted previously, he cannot however firmly settle.¹⁴ Hence, we are more inclined to follow Deleuze whose project of overturning Platonism convinces us that an experience of Plato's ambivalence is possible outside of familiar Aristotelian critiques which have influenced the reception of Plato up to this day. Deleuze rather sees in Plato "his own flights of intoxication,"¹⁵ a vertiginous dialectic, which lies at the root of his rationalist scheme. This however may prove to be his actual strength: "[Lacking] a reason in terms of which we could decide whether something falls into one species rather than another."¹⁶

In short, we are taking the same treatment of Plato with regard to his dialectical exposition of the nature of the masculine which ties up to his complicated view of governance. In the final analysis, Plato's (delirious) concept of reason "[permits] the construction of a model according to which the different pretenders can be judged." Deleuze adds: "What needs a foundation, in fact, is always a pretension or a claim."¹⁷ If the male audience of Plato can claim to have the necessary intelligence to govern, then certainly the *Republic* is the right foundation in need of the kind of intelligence they may claim to possess. And yet, as soon as the foundation is built after aspiring guardians of the *Republic* (Socrates' young audience) agreed to pursue the ideal city in the full measure of speech (the city in speech, *kallipolis*), each has to take on the responsibility to become other than what he used to be, in light of the familiar sanction against property ownership and the right to one's offspring/s, the non-filiation extending to emotional and sexual affairs with women; all in all, a demand to lose oneself in the process of linguistic creation of the polis.

In this context the male guardians of the *Republic* may also be said to be undergoing what Deleuze and Guattari describe as becoming-woman (or becoming-other),¹⁸ "a becoming that lacks a subject distinct from itself."¹⁹ We are inclined to further explore this notion of becoming-other (or – woman) as that in which no term can be adequate to it since "its term exists only as taken up in another of which it is a subject."²⁰ The self-dissolving, becoming-woman/other of the subject is essential to the linguistic

¹⁴ Cf. n. 3.

¹⁵ Gregory Flaxman, "Plato," in *Deleuze's Philosophical Lineage*, ed. by Graham Hones and John Roffe (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 13.

¹⁶ Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 59.

¹⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*, trans. by Marx Lester (London: Athlone Press, 1990), 255.

¹⁸ Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 238.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*

construction of the *Republic* (*kallipolis*) whose very foundation is premised upon the supreme value of interaction over sophistry, dialogue over monologue; altogether a city condemned to the dialectical demands of communication. As to the sexed becoming of the guardians, it is well to point out that insofar as the “becoming-woman serves as a point of reference, and eventually as a screen for other types of becoming (example: becoming-child in Schumann, becoming-animal in Kafka, becoming-vegetable in Novalis, becoming-mineral in Beckett),”²¹ the veritable becoming-woman of the guardians in Plato’s *Republic* would have provided us the best founding example of becoming-city. The notion of becoming-woman points to a “sexualization in rupture”²² in which, as Guattari continues to extend a Deleuzian line of becoming, the “becoming feminine body shouldn’t be thought of as belonging to the woman category found in the couple, the family, etc.”²³ On hindsight, the *Republic* is an attempt to prevail over the binarism of sexual relationship as well as the ideological and procreative function of the family. Juxtaposed the becoming-woman to the status of the male guardians and we obtain what radically approaches “a mutative undoing of male and female identities [creating] a line of flight toward some ... unmapped gendering of the human.”²⁴

The Machinic Subject and the Fourth Term

For all intents and purposes, this ‘unmapped gendering of the human’ may be further compressed in the notion of desiring-machine²⁵ where the relation of man to machine constitutes desire itself.²⁶ In contrast to the psychoanalytic method of “chasing [desire] back” to Oedipal signification involving the mother, father, son/daughter as pre assigned subject roles,²⁷ desiring-machines, as Deleuze and Guattari describe them, “represent nothing, signify nothing, mean nothing, and are exactly what one

²¹ Guattari, *Chaosophy*, 229.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ Bogue, *Deleuzian Fabulation*, 20. See also a fabulous essay about a complementary notion of sexlessness by Mike Roland Hernandez, “The Silence of the Sexless Dasein: Jacques Derrida and the Sex to Come,” in *Filocracia*, 1:1 (February 2014), 98-114; also, an excellent take on Lacan’s notion of desire by Darlene Demandante (in relation to the problematic of love that we would like to approach instead as a problem of the absolute [*cf.* our section on Agamben]). See Darlene Demandante, “Lacanian Perspectives on Love,” in *Kritike*, 8:1 (June 2014), 102-118.

²⁵ Guattari, *Chaosophy*, 72.

²⁶ *Ibid.* This is one of the sections of *Chaosophy* (Part I) where both Guattari and Deleuze were interviewed regarding their collaboration. The section cited herein bears the title “In Flux,” third section of Part I of the book.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 173.

makes of them, what is made with them, and what they make in themselves."²⁸

Desiring-machine takes as its model of the subject the idea that "humans constitute a machine as soon as this nature is communicated by recurrence to the ensemble of which they form a part under specific conditions."²⁹ Above all, the concept of machine deterritorializes the traditional concept of the subject, the *cogito*, in terms of uncoupling the subject from its self-projective aims, leaving it with nothing but a recurrence in contrast to "Oedipal projection."³⁰ In the following light, Guattari outlines the deterritorializing nature of the machine in relation to the logic of representation, or a kind of projection that enables the Cartesianism of the subject: "The machine stands apart from all representations (although one can always represent it, copy it, in a manner that is completely devoid of interest), and it stands apart because it is pure Abstraction."³¹ By 'pure abstraction' Guattari means "nonfigurative and nonprojective."³² The role of recurrence in this uncoupling movement of the machine in relation to the traditional subject is far more obvious than one could imagine. Recurrence is at play when the desiring-machine "[puts] desire in contact with [the libidinal world of connexions and breaks]" which "constitute," for instance, "the nonhuman element of sex."³³ In this sense, desire is recurrent relative to the connexions and ruptures it makes with nonhuman assemblages and is in the process also made with them. One can speak here of the recurrent nature of desire as the very heart of anomaly that enables and disenables at the same time the subject in its process of becoming-other, as -woman, -child, -animal, -vegetable, or -mineral.

Interestingly, Lacan had once his eyesight set on this recurrent anomaly, with regard to its critical purchase on the practice of psychoanalysis and its concept of desire, except that in the end even this portentous kind of anomaly, as he argues, "bears more on the subject's relationship to what one *cannot* know."³⁴ In principle, the anomaly is what 'one cannot know,' that which neither has object nor end.³⁵ Lacan extends

²⁸ See Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus. Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. by Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 288.

²⁹ Guattari, "Balance Sheet for Desiring-Machines," in *Chaosophy*, 91.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 97.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² *Ibid.*

³³ *Ibid.*, 100.

³⁴ Willy Apollon, Daniel Bergeron, and Lucie Cantin, *After Lacan. Clinical Practice and the Subject of the Unconscious*, ed. by Robert Hughes and Kareen Ror Malone (New York: State University of New York Press, 2002), 4.

³⁵ See Slavoj Žižek, *Tarrying with the Negative: Kant, Hegel and the Critique of Ideology* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1993), 34-35.

this argument in Seminar XI (*The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis*) when he speaks of the concept of *aphanisis*.³⁶ This concept signifies the division of the subject from within, such that self-mastery is impossible: “[When] the subject appears somewhere as meaning, he is manifested elsewhere as ‘fading’, as disappearance.”³⁷

But where the subject appears as such, as vanishing, George Bataille, a contemporary of Lacan, argues that at the same time something is “[doubled]” to the extent that it [completes] knowledge into a kind of “non-knowledge.”³⁸ Bataille is proposing here a different concept of the self (*ipse*), a self “doomed to communication,”³⁹ as it “goes no less from inside to outside, than from outside to inside.”⁴⁰ By all means, this is different from Lacan’s recourse to the symbolic, exemplified by the law,⁴¹ which penetrates the subject from without, an invasive process that gives the subject its own self-coherence. It is of interest to note here that Kant’s moral philosophy serves as Lacan’s model of the law as a necessary sticking point to the recurrent movement of desire, blocking further internal metamorphoses presumed to be potentially destructive. Lacan is referring to the necessity of the moral law which is the Law of the Father whose function is as usual Oedipal in nature: “Experience shows us that Kant is more true, and I have proved that his theory of consciousness, when he writes of practical reason, is sustained only by giving a specification of the moral law which, looked at more closely, is simply desire in its pure state, that very desire that culminates in the sacrifice ... of everything that is the object of love ...”⁴² Incidentally, Kant’s legacy would figure prominently in the contemporary turn to speculative realism which we will briefly introduce in the next section.

The Correlationism of Kant

Quentin Meillassoux (2008) coined the term ‘correlationism’ to refer to a dominant motif of philosophizing that since after Kant’s so-called

³⁶ Lacan borrowed and later modified this concept from Ernst Jones. In Jones, *aphanisis* connotes “the fear of seeing desire disappear,” whereas in Lacan’s modified version, it acquires the meaning of the fading of the subject.” See Jacques Lacan, *Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis: Seminar of Jacques Lacan Book XI*, trans. by Alan Sheridan (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1978), 207.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 218.

³⁸ See Allan Stoekl, *Bataille’s Peak: Energy, Religion and Postsustainability* (Minnesota and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 219, n. 10.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 232.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 70.

⁴¹ It is in this sense that Guattari speaks of Oedipus as the “entropy of desiring-machine.” See Guattari, “Balance Sheet for ‘Desiring-Machines,’” in *Chaosophy*, 98.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 275.

'critical' intervention in the history of Western thought has radically transformed our understanding of metaphysics by laying bare the constitutive limits of reason that no knowledge can exceed without incurring self-contradictoriness. The term 'correlationism' is adopted by the speculative realist movement (which has since its first meeting in Goldsmiths, London, influenced a whole new different way of thinking, standing astride many familiar divides or boundaries of philosophical persuasions, such as between realism and idealism, etc.⁴³) whose pioneers include Meillassoux himself, Ray Brassier (the first expositor of François Laruelle's non-philosophy), Graham Harman, and Iain Hamilton Grant. In one of the first works to elaborate the new philosophical movement, Harman briefly describes the anti-correlationist position of the speculative realists:

Authors working in the continental tradition have generally claimed to stand beyond the traditional dispute between realism ('reality exists outside our mind') and idealism ('reality exists only in the mind'). The correlationist alternative, so dominant that it is often left unstated by its adherents, is to assume that we can think neither of human without world nor of world without human, but only of a primordial correlation or rapport between the two.⁴⁴

We may also speak in the above light of something like the non-decidability of difference in terms of grounding the problem of identity that has haunted philosophical speculation since Aristotle. In this sense, indeterminacy is the most intelligible form of correlationist thinking where difference guarantees the indeterminate relation, say, between thinking and action, thought and praxis, mind and matter, etc. Difference is the location of contradiction where the mutual indeterminacy of the two terms is sustained by a reflexive term, the *third*, or simply, the *subject*. Since Kant the paradoxicality that organizes itself around this term guarantees the relation that binds the 'two terms' in a relationship always nurtured by tension.

⁴³ Cf. n. 7. The transcripts of the meeting were first published in *Collapse: Philosophical Research and Development*, Vol. III (Falmouth, UK: Urbanomic, 2007) with the theme 'Speculative Realism.' The movement has since then transformed with the advent of fresh attempts to formulate a new form of realism in an anthology of essays that came out in 2011. See Levy Bryant, Graham Harman and Nick Srnicek eds., *The Speculative Turn. Continental Materialism and Realism* (Melbourne: re.press, 2011) and recently, with a flurry of major publications, further exploring the new trend (cf. n. 7).

⁴⁴ Graham Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making* (Edinburg: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), 3.

In its contemporary philosophical purchase, the ‘third term,’ or what applies as the reflexive position of the subject, may be traced to Kant’s paradigmatic Copernican turn. Recall that Kant’s version of Copernican revolution is a philosophical extension of the modern scientific turn from Ptolemy’s model of the cosmos. Just as in Copernicus, Kant’s controversial interpretation gave the subject, vis-à-vis the place it occupied in the Ptolemaic model, a new and absolutely radical purpose. Notwithstanding their pronounced differences, however, in both cosmological accounts, the center is a privileged figure. For Ptolemy, the subject is the center of divine attention; for Kant, it is the center of action, discovery, and judgement. Against the function of the Ptolemaic subject trapped in space, Kant argued for the formal temporal status of the subject moving around the object of knowledge. This enabled Kant to postulate a subject term, the *third*, capable of foregoing its self-centering, its self-rigidification (in contrast to the rigidity of the subject’s position in Ptolemy) yet in the form of centering what is otherwise than a subject, namely, the object of knowledge.

Kant thus softened the standpoint of the subject in the form of dissolving its rigid instantiation by otherwise centering, or rather, mastering the object of knowledge. Here, centering acquires a second-order sense, that of *mastery*, in contrast to *positionality*. Kant did for philosophy what Copernicus had done much earlier for astronomy—to make objects (the universe and the world, etc.) conform to reason (performing a centering act by reflexively or self-consciously decentering itself). The Copernican revolution in science allowed Kant to decenter the subject whose former status as a center was nonetheless reducible to a passive recipient of impressions coming from the outside world, hence, giving the impression that it is the outside world that thinks on behalf of the receiver. By decentering the subject Kant was able to center the universe in the sense of making it a positive target, a focus of critique, which involves a not so complicated operation—the privilege of thinking is snatched away from the object/universe, even from God.

In both models of the cosmos, the function of gaze is critical. Regardless of the positionality of the subject, whether as wanting attention or directing attention, overall, the gaze communicates a point of view, a *pov*. Borrowing a pornographic expression, this *pov* (point of view, usually of the male pornographic subject) approaches a concept of the subject invested with reflexive nature by Kant. Arguably, the reflexive subject takes a distinct pornographic view in relation to the object of representation which we can also describe as approaching a kind of feminism in its act of exposing the conditions of possibility of knowledge that has always gravitated around the figure of the masculine. By *feminism* we mean the *decentering* of the Ptolemaic auto-positioning of the subject on a fixed point of instantiation.

However it remains the standpoint of a male subject that has managed to wean itself away from its obsessive auto-positioning hungry for attention. This could well be the standpoint of the feminist masculine which in itself carries a potential for becoming-other (though unrealized in Kant), the feminine, recall the argument of Guattari, acting as a “screen for other types of becoming.”⁴⁵

The feminism that is introduced here is an attribution already implied in Kant.⁴⁶ The attribution wishes to articulate a certain notion of rehabilitation, recovery, and reformation. Kant’s Copernican revolution is therefore feminist in this respect—he corrected the hardcore pornography of metaphysics by unstiffening a certain practice of phallogentrism. But, as Meillassoux argues, to a certain extent this Kantian reflexivity managed to rob us of an important pornographic focus. This is not to mention that the feminine potential of critical philosophy that Kant initiated eventually fell into a moral abyss, unable to pursue lines of becomings to their radical extent. Reflexivity is that capacity to induce guilt that strikes at the heart of masculine indulgence to masturbatory excess, enabling the subject to appropriate guilt as the new object of knowledge. The world or the cosmos, as in Ptolemy’s model where either thing applies as the object of knowledge (emphasis on the cosmological purchase), is displaced by the subject that has become the center or object of renewed attention and intensity where the emphasis now shifts into the moral purchase of, presumably sufficient, cosmological model. In other words, the subject has been recentered by Kant’s Copernican revolution, curiously by way of Ptolemaic counter-revolution. Exposing the kernel of this argument, Meillassoux offers a radical interpretation of the central assumption of this revolution:

The philosopher thereby claims to have carried out what he calls, following Kant, his own Copernican revolution—a claim which cannot but strike us as a fantastic obfuscation. In philosophical jargon, ‘Copernican revolution’ means that the deeper meaning of science’s Copernican revolution is provided by

⁴⁵ Guattari, *Chaosophy*, 229.

⁴⁶ Feminism is meant to counteract the *pov* or male pornographic gaze so long as it stays within the business of representing the thing-in-itself. Pornography, as we have so far utilized its concept, is a metaphor for philosophy’s quest to understand the absolute (or the thing itself) insofar as it takes its business to be one of ‘seeing.’ In this light, feminism attempts to counter-act from within the robustness of the male *pov* by appealing to the soft side of philosophy and also by denying to it its final word on the absolute. In Kant, this is precisely the case—the thing-in-itself is unknowable, if not impenetrable.

philosophy's Ptolemaic counter-revolution ... in other words, *its eminently speculative character*.⁴⁷

The Ptolemaic counter-revolution would make its impact on the role of philosophy as pornography, if we mean *pornography* as a certain professional way of looking into the essence of things, the bareness of in-themselves structures of things, the absolutes of the world, or nature and cosmos. But instead of pursuing the utmost logical direction of the Copernican revolution (by maximizing the speculative character of the Ptolemaic model), Kant finally disavowed speculation or hardcore pornography as a means to obtain the absolute in favor of a kind of softcore pornography, intrinsic to the declaration that speculation alone cannot fully attain the absolute, that which ultimately denies to the subject the capacity to attain it. Such denial amounts to knowledge annulling itself in the face of the unattainable.⁴⁸ For Kant, the comprehension of the thing-in-itself, the absolute, is not for any science to achieve, not for speculation to attain to. It is rather for morals to deny that it can be grasped without knowledge annulling itself. Unsurprisingly, in Kant, the thing-in-itself becomes a moral problem in its own right.

But notwithstanding his critical exposition, Meillassoux is not critiquing Kant for the inherent limitations of his system, rather for his reluctance to pursue the radical direction of his thought. The fault of Kant is his star, so to speak. Recall the famous conclusion of the *Critique of Practical Reason*: "Two things fill the mind with new and ever increasing admiration and reverence, the more frequently and persistently one's meditation deals with them: *the starry sky above me and the moral law within me*."⁴⁹ Kant's fault begins with this own scientific inclination—by any measure his star—which he would expand later on to the realm of morals. It is well to note here that Kant's reduction of scientific knowledge to the empirical laws of nature is in fact a double reduction. Empiricism is reduced to the apprehension of phenomenal laws understood as surface effects of a more fundamental relation to the unknowable, that is, in the absence of any ontological criterion. Recall that Kant would reduce this criterion to freedom whose unmistakable essence is rather easy to spell out but feared by Kant for its Leibnizian-Wolffian dogmatism.⁵⁰ The limitation of logical or empirical apprehension of the phenomenal world would lead Kant to assume that a deeper understanding of reality is beyond the reach of the sciences. And yet it is just about the same operation that is made to apply to the apprehension

⁴⁷ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 192.

⁴⁸ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, viii.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 204.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 35.

of the noumenon, extending the use of logical or empirical reasoning that Kant invested otherwise with moralistic rather than speculative direction. Kant is referring here to the universal precondition of all knowledge, namely, (moral) freedom.⁵¹

As it is of belief in God, (moral) freedom is arguably the same condition of possibility of science whose radical purchase in relation to the absolute Meillassoux seeks to revive in Kant (and against Kant as well). Meillassoux argues: “[Thought] is capable of the ‘absolute,’ capable of even producing something like ‘eternal truths’; and this despite the various destructions and deconstructions that all traditional metaphysics have undergone over the last century and a half.”⁵² However, for Meillassoux, the apprehension of the ‘absolute’ is possible by mathematization, not by morals. “The mathematizable,” he argues, “indicates a world capable of autonomy—a world wherein bodies as well as movements can be described independently of sensible bodies.”⁵³

But where Meillassoux argues for mathematization as the only way to apprehend the absolute, we are building instead on the radical possibilities of attaining the absolute in terms of “diverse possible modalities”⁵⁴ of becoming, that is to say, other than the mathematical. But first, philosophy must reorient its relation to the absolute.⁵⁵ This aspect of the paper will be dealt with in the following sections.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 442-59.

⁵² Quentin Meillassoux, “Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition: A Speculative Analysis of the Meaningless Sign,” Lecture at Freie Universität Berlin, April 20, 2012, trans. by Robin Mackay, in <www.spekulative-poetic.de>, Date accessed March 20, 2014.

⁵³ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 101.

⁵⁴ Guattari, *Chaosophy*, 230.

⁵⁵ Incidentally, one of the characteristic approaches of critical theory in relation to the notion of the ‘absolute’ concerns mainly with Hegel’s concept of Absolute Spirit and how it supplies an essential dialectical background for overcoming the divide between, for instance, the ideal and material dimensions of reality. It is in this context that the characteristic resolution of critical theory in terms of, as Bolaños puts it, the “overcoming the divorce between ... psychical and material conditions of human existence” becomes no less a highly abstract augmentation of the correlationist argument. Hegel’s dialectical unity between these two dimensions of the real is a necessary completion of the Kantian correlation, whereby foreclosing the possibility of transcending the correlation in post-Hegelian philosophy. The price of such foreclosure has been for a long time characterized by the very inability of philosophy to attain an understanding of the absolute, for instance, in the deconstructive strategy of endless “overmining” and “undermining” (using Harman’s terminologies) of the infinite plasticity of language. See Paolo Bolaños, “What Is Critical Theory? Max Horkheimer and the Makings of the Frankfurt School Tradition,” in *Mabini Review*, 3 (2013), 6; see Graham Harman, *The Quadruple Object* (Alresford, Hants, UK: Zero Books, 2011), 10-11).

The Restoration of the Absolute

Two intervening examples interest us here, D.H. Lawrence and Marquis de Sade. Lawrence and de Sade are examples of how moral pornography is restated in otherwise naïve attempts to reorient our understanding of the absolute by forcing it to conform to something else. On the one hand, while throwing the whole weight of his literary genius against the sexual practices of bourgeois society, D.H. Lawrence aims to achieve a kind of pornography that approaches the level of ‘realizing’ a hidden asset. This asset, according to him, is rendered as “dead loss” by bourgeois economy in terms of repressing desire and, afterwards, channelling it to social goods. This is the moral hypocrisy immanent in the liberal posture of modern social organization whose foundations are built on the strong ideals of freedom, including freedom of commerce and the practice of individual autonomy which finally shattered the old regime, its feudal economy and cultural parochialism. Bourgeois economy is pornographic (but not pornographic enough) on the side of keeping desire practically ‘untouched,’ impenetrable, by making it substitutable for consumption of social goods which take the place of the possession of the ‘thing’ itself, or rather, an asset capable of the absolute. Lawrence’s counter-argument to this notion of repressed asset is free sex which he describes in the following: “I want men and women to be able to think sex, fully, completely, honestly, and cleanly. Even if we can’t act sexually to our complete satisfaction, let us at least think sexually.... [Our] business is to realize sex.”⁵⁶

However, Lawrence’s pornographic challenge to moral hypocrisy simply restates the kind of pornography inherent in bourgeois society in terms of validating the libidinal economy that he at the same time rejects. The key to understand this point lies in the mechanism by which desire is circulated and exchanged, that is, in Lawrence’s unstated declaration, to put this hidden asset back to social circulation (as he does in his fiction of free sex whose public consumption through his readership still follows the logic of the market); in general, by realizing sex in cultural discourse serving as production factory and consumption hub of otherwise substitutable forms of desire, replaceable assets, consumable absolutes. In short, to ensure that the absolute (or desire) stays in the correlation, that is, as a repressed asset, which alone may be allowed to fuel the industrial and commercial engines of both production and consumption necessary to maintain the status quo which in turn enables the fiction of free sex but not its possession.⁵⁷ The

⁵⁶ See D.H. Lawrence, *Lady Chatterly’s Lover and A propos of Lady Chatterly’s*, ed. by Michael Squires (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 308.

⁵⁷ I am indebted here to David Bennett’s wonderful essay “Burghers, Burglars, Masturbators: The Sovereign Spender in the Age of Consumerism,” in *New Literary History*, 30:2

circle of desire, from production to consumption and vice-versa, ensures that desire cannot escape.

On the other hand, it is well to note in passing de Sade's assault against moralism grounded on a curious scientific conception of Nature. We would like to underscore here de Sade's assault on two fronts, namely, 1) his attack against moralism and, 2) his rejection of the positivism of science (in favor of a certain rehabilitated notion of morals founded on a dialectic that is said to be immanent in nature). de Sade writes in the *Philosophy in the Bedroom*: "Nature ... has sometimes need of vices and sometimes of virtues ... in accordance with what she requires."⁵⁸ In this sense, Nature, for de Sade, "thwarts one's pleasure at every moment, all the while creating desires beyond the bounds of human possibility."⁵⁹ To which de Sade responds through a dialectical notion of transgression exemplified in extreme practice of pornography. By imitating the self-destructive tendency of Nature in his practice of sadism, de Sade's transgressive dialectic is entrapped within an irremissible correlation from which there is no escape—humans are also part of Nature. And yet, this very impossibility of escaping Nature will be rechanneled into a medium of culture (culture as second nature) where de Sade's imitation of nature's transgressive dialectic is realized, particularly, in commercial pornography. In this type of pornography, porn actors are "monitored" and "supervised" according to a porn script written precisely to imitate the transgressive nature of the sexual act (which imitates the transgression of nature by way of the sexual instincts) before the camera.⁶⁰ The script and the camera thus enable a certain kind of transgression by eliminating and removing, in an attempt to liberate desire, "sexual fantasies from behind the scenes,"⁶¹ from the privacy of the bedroom or whatever, whereby ultimately, by "[posting] them (...) in one's immediate vicinity,"⁶² transgression is seized from nature's jurisdiction to become the sole prerogative of freedom. Modern commercial pornography, with the camera and script at its disposal, therefore offers an exit from nature's transgressive dialectic. Sadean pornography in this sense technically recomposes the paradigmatic invention of culture as second nature; a moral exit from the steely necessity imposed by nature through the

(Spring 1999), 269:294. In principle, we are simply rehearsing Bennett's positions in this paper, yet with an added twist regarding the absolute as an asset or capability, *a propos* of the focus of this section on pornography as a way to attain the absolute.

⁵⁸ D.A. F. de Sade, *Philosophy in the Bedroom*, trans. by Richard Seaver and Austin Wainhouse (New York: Grove Press 1966), 360.

⁵⁹ Alan Weiss, "A New History of Passions," in *October*, 49 (Summer, 1989), 104.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*

⁶² *Ibid.*

use of practical reason. Here, the moralism of Sadean pornography lies in monitoring and supervising the practical expressibility of human desire.

To a certain degree this is what Kantian correlation already endorses—viewed in the special light of de Sade’s transgression, moral freedom secures the conformity of the (otherwise unreachable) thing-in-itself to human purpose (the moral side) whose most categorical command is the perpetuation of the species (through the subsumption of Nature). In this sense, de Sade is much closer to Kant than one could imagine.⁶³ Transgressive dialectic presupposes an inescapable correlation between freedom and nature which cannot be exceeded, anyhow, by any transgressive means. What can actually take the place of unattainable transgression (in place of a more active possession of the absolute) is a liberal, albeit, painful imitation of nature’s transgressive dialectic. In this way, nature is divested of its own dialectic (in de Sade) in the same manner the quest for the absolute is abandoned in favor of practical reason (in Kant).

The consequences of the loss of absolute. Deprived of an absolute to pursue, the human subject becomes alienated from its own constituted history and, as a consequence, takes so much interest in itself—takes itself unnecessarily if not fantastically as the un-constituted site, the abyssal foundation of the absolute. Arguing from Agamben’s critique of a similar form of pornography in the guise of the nullification of the absolute,⁶⁴ alienation from pornography, let alone, from hardcore, operates in terms of enabling a type of subject oblivious to its negotiated and constructed nature.⁶⁵ Interestingly, Agamben describes this erratic kind of nullification (which resonates in modern philosophy’s reflexive turn ‘inward’) in the following example he made in relation to the cinema:

Film historians record as a disconcerting novelty the sequence in *Summer with Monika* (1952) when the protagonist, Harriet Andersson, suddenly fixes her gaze for a few seconds on the camera (‘Here for the first

⁶³ See Lacan, “Kant with Sade,” in *Ecrits*, 645-668.

⁶⁴ Agamben’s words are ‘nullification of the pure’. See Giorgio Agamben, *Profanations*, trans. by Jeff Fort (New York: Zane Books, 2007), 89.

⁶⁵ In her essay “Reading Wild, Seriously: Confession of an Epistemophilic,” Lynn Worsham identifies a distinctive “symptom of scopophilia” in one’s desire to see truth for oneself, underscoring the erotic component of the visual in the practice of hermeneutics, for instance, which incidentally, as Worsham adds, is structured and organized by a phallogocentric investment in “the machinery of research.” What we intend to exploit in Worsham’s thesis is the correlation between demonstration of proof and scopophilia which comes close to our notion of philosophical pornography vis-à-vis the thing-in-itself. See Lynn Worsham, “Reading Wild, Seriously: Confession of an Epistemophilic,” in *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 22:1 (Winter, 1992), 42.

time in the history of cinema," the director Ingmar Bergman commented, "there is established a shameless and direct contact with the spectator'). Since then pornography has rendered this procedure banal: in the very act of executing their most intimate caresses, porn stars now look resolutely into the camera, showing that they are more interested in the spectators than in their partners.⁶⁶

By way of analogy, the actor's interest in the spectator may be likened to the counter-revolution of Ptolemy, so to speak. Within the pornographic setting, actors are expected to perform a Kantian decentering in the sense that each actor is expected to move around the object of knowledge, discovery or action. When a spectator looks in front of the camera, the Kantian revolution exposes what it assumes it has already suppressed, namely, the centering of the Ptolemaic subject craving for attention. The actors crave for attention outside of one another as if the object of attention, the actors themselves, inside the pornographic setting, is not enough to motivate them, not seductive enough to pursue the action that each craves from one another. In short, the Kantian revolution is found wanting. For his part, Agamben proposes how pornography may be reclaimed in light of the Kantian dilemma:

The unprofanable of pornography—everything that is unprofanable—is founded on the arrest and diversion of an authentically profanatory intention. For this reason, we must always wrest from the apparatuses (of pornography and the fashion show)—from all apparatuses—the possibility of use that they have captured.⁶⁷

Of interest to note here is what immediately strikes to us as Agamben's oblique criticism of Kant's correlationism, offering us a clue as to how we can conjugate a certain idea of profanation to Kant's idea of the absolute which renders the absolute already impure to begin with. Agamben asserts:

Sacred or religious were the things ... removed from the free use and commerce of men ... [If] to consecrate

⁶⁶ Agamben, *Profanation*, 89.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 92.

(*sacrare*) was the term that indicated the removal of things from the sphere of human law, to profane, meant conversely, to return them to the free use of men...

The thing that is returned to the free use of men is pure, profane, free of sacred names. But use does not appear here as something natural; rather one arrives at it only by means of profanation.⁶⁸

Here, the absolute would have to be diluted if it is to have any use at all. The absolute, either in science or metaphysics which all desire it, is judged in Kant by the moral criterion of reason. All disciplines of knowledge could only arrive at the absolute *absolutely* on moral grounds. But the moral grounds in this sense have always been an economy of sort, a moral economy that apportions the use of the absolute according to different methods of appropriating its value which also delimit the disciplinal autonomy and integrity of all sorts of objective knowledge (science, mathematics, etc.). Moral reason is economic reason through and through; in short, a profane business of expenditure. It is in this sense that from the beginning the absolute is already impure. Even supposing, expenditure is capable of the absolute, parenthesizing Meillassoux.⁶⁹ In Kant, reason is capable of the absolute, albeit, a moral absolute shy of a kind of absolute otherwise suppressed by Kant in favor of the moral pornography of reason. In this sense, nothing is actually returned for the free use of men. What is nonetheless made to appear as absolute for the free use of humanity is the absolute of the moral ground of metaphysics at the expense of the absolute/s that can be attained by other modes of apprehension, individuation, discovery and becoming.

Conclusion

We may argue in conclusion that the study of the thing-in-itself is beyond Kant, beyond the correlationism of subject and object, beyond the human subject (the third term) which profanes the absolute but not for the sake of the absolute. The absolute nonetheless can be radically pursued on condition that the subject (the third) has finally abandoned its faith in itself. It is in this new condition of the subject that the profanization of the absolute renders itself to the comprehensive *pov* of the subject, the full transparency of the absolute, its impurity and contingency, by the most

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 73-74.

⁶⁹ Cf. n. 52.

radical pornographic means; in other words, of the same approach as Agamben's profaning of the absolute.

Agamben's approach may be further complemented by a kind of restoring the absolute which requires, at least for Meillassoux, the reconstitution of Ptolemy into the modern discourse of truth if only to finally reveal how philosophy is unable to pursue the absolute in its most radical sense. Meillassoux's declaration that 'thought is capable of the absolute' attempts to break the Kantian spell that limits access to the apprehension of the absolute to the moral pornography of reason (as we argued in the preceding sections). However, Meillassoux's strong bias for the speculative kernel of scientific reasoning (whose chief model is Galileo), which, he argues, could radicalize our understanding of the absolute by formal mathematical means, is only one possible modality of the kind of becoming that approaches the modality of the *fourth* term.

But the emphasis on the mathematizable may not be entirely novel as Plato was the first to elaborate the critical import of mathematical deduction as a preliminary ascent to the dialectical contemplation of the Forms, or eternal truths. The single most important contribution of Meillassoux, however, lies in defending the mathematizable as the only direct access to the absolute which previous philosophies ignored or fell short of pushing through to its most radical extent. On the advent of the 19th century, mathematics received renewed attention, for instance, in Kant's critical intervention by exposing the pure speculative basis of mathematics⁷⁰ (along with other sciences) though in the end was subordinated to the demands of moral reason. This is the context of Meillassoux's criticism of Kant. By subordinating speculation to morals, Kant finally surrendered to the sciences the speculative kernel of reason after using up its resources to forge a revolution in philosophy already drained by centuries of metaphysical speculation without the benefit of self-critique.⁷¹ Since then, science has conquered the *great outdoors*, further extending the speculative to the unravelling of the most ancestral thing-in-itself (the notion of ancestry in Meillassoux), or the origin of the universe.⁷² In the meantime, philosophy even today remains stuck in the moral correlationism of subject and object, or a kind of "primordial rapport between the two"⁷³ in a closed circuit of reflexive communication that must be sheltered, kept from harm's way, against the radical pornography of the profane, of the thing-in-itself that science otherwise is continuing to conquer. The question however remains if this absolute can be returned to the free use of humanity, in light

⁷⁰ Kant, "Preface, Second Edition," *Critique of Pure Reason*, 17.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, "Preface, First Edition," 8.

⁷² Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 10.

⁷³ Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux*, 3.

of Agamben's notion of the utmost possibility of its profanatory use, or if it is rather increasingly drifting away into the uninhabitable dimension of the cosmos which risks making the absolute totally unprofanable, hence, resistant to "arrest and diversion of its profanatory intention."⁷⁴

Faced with such concern, the emancipation of the fourth term from the correlationism of Kantian reflexivity through Meillassoux's scientific diversion of the absolute must, therefore, be complemented by the possibility of arresting its tendency to shape up into severe, irresponsible act of diversion where nothing may be returned to the free use of humanity; or, if something could be returned, a veritable statistical delirium; assets hidden away in intractable codes, unassimilable signs, dizzying algorithms, not to mention, corporate balance-sheets barely communicable to the majority of the human race, speaking of the social circulation of goods rendered as 'dead loss' (in bourgeois society), etc. Where nothing meaningful and intelligible is returned for the possibility of its free use, there the absolute becomes another correlationist material available for moral (pornographic) capture.

Even supposing, the fourth term is an object still in need of unpacking. After all, one can still interpret this term as yet another Kantian correlationist term, albeit, disguised if not coded (as if returned for further human consumption), assigning the same value to the cognizing capacity of the subject at the expense of the non-subject (or the object itself) otherwise consigned to potential readiness for human purposes. It may be argued that it is still the function of cognition to filter the mutation of the object in consciousness. But contrary to the Kantian project in which concepts speak the subject, we are rather inspired by Deleuze and Guattari's conception of "[concepts] that speak the event."⁷⁵ The event is where concepts speak of the Other,⁷⁶ of becomings rather than being. As speech of becoming, a concept is the outcome of "diverse possible modalities"⁷⁷of becoming beyond the moral economy of the subject, of the *third* that is blocking all other lines of metamorphosis. So far, we deemed it most desirable that this metamorphosis stands for the term in which all other expressions of becoming are packed together for purposes of conceptual designation, apropos of the Deleuzian concept of the event, the *fourth*.

Finally, in terms of understanding the absolute, conception in light of the *fourth* is deployed to nullify the absolute's moral relation to the subject. From here, it may now be possible to speak of unbinding the subject

⁷⁴ Agamben, *Profanation*, 92.

⁷⁵ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, trans. by Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchell (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 21.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ Guattari, *Chaosophy*, 230.

from correlationism in order that a new event of creation can at last trigger a new type of delirium, a new people.

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