

'Thoughts Not Human', a paper presented at *Checkered Reality - Reality Check: A provocation*, Royal College of Art, July 2021

<https://2021.rca.ac.uk/events/from-checkered-reality-to-reality-check-pgr2021>

I have something to read for you this evening and, in the course of doing so, hope to present you with some images. The ideas are divided into varyingly autonomous passages. I'll explain why in a moment.

- It's always the hope when preparing a talk that novel perspectives can be found on what are, usually, well-rehearsed themes (the opportunity to make a presentation doesn't lend itself well to an exploration of entirely new terrain). Some of my thoughts recently have been around the question of how to think beyond a world circumscribed by human concerns. I have been thinking with Eugene Thacker, reading his book *In the Dust of This Planet* (2011). Even more recently, my appropriation of his terms has been aided and expanded by some work on the topic of new materialism, which has led me in turn to Speculative Realist thought.

The problem of imminent environmental collapse is the issue. And the question concerns our apparent slowness to address the coming catastrophe, the extent to which it is a result of our inability to think a 'world-without-us', a world without humanity. (Thacker 2011: 5) Those are Thacker's preferred phrases. At a sharp point of his argument, he proposes that we can succeed in thinking the world without us by mobilising a kind of thought that is not human. In fact, Thacker is rehearsing an old philosophical problem regarding how to imagine the far future, or the distant past. To do so is, inevitably, to cast a sensing human mind into that place/time, thus ensuring the distant time no longer without humanity.

Reading Thacker, it strikes me that in many modern and contemporary cases, artists have tried, are trying, to invent non-human ways of thinking. It's Jean-Francois Lyotard's theme in *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*. (1991) For our purposes today I want to share with you an analogy

that presents itself as a useful way of limiting the scope of what would otherwise be too expansive a discussion.

The analogy is as follows. Forms of thought not already conditioned entirely by human concerns, thoughts from the outside, may be coaxed closer through the use of decoys. The implication here is that we have an inkling of how to think the world without us. We can catch a glimpse of it but, as the term implies, that view cannot be sustained. All the same, having seen it fleetingly, we have a model to work with and so the task of extending or sustaining that view beyond all human-centred apprehension is a form of work with its own politics.

Just like hunters when they float carved wooden ducks on the water as a way of attracting their prey, we can use decoys to draw in thoughts that are not human. Certain structures for ideas, stories, images, perhaps defined to some extent by a resistance to the logic of sequence are the decoys in this case.

- Several years ago, it occurred to me to experiment with the question of what it might mean to have and to communicate one idea. The thought was provoked by comments in Claire Parinet's film interview with Gilles Deleuze. I have those recordings somewhere, can barely remember the point but feel committed to my encounter with the ideas, which has a certain kind of status in the absence of any solid grasp of what might have been the philosophical point and has that status on account of the peculiarities of the encounter, which draw me back again and again. Is there such a thing as one idea? What would it mean to communicate one idea? More to the point, what would it mean to interest a listener with the communication of one idea? The question invokes old philosophical problems of the relationships between parts and wholes, and perhaps more recent philosophical inquiries regarding 'assemblage'. Maybe it's a question betraying a certain fetishizing of clarity too, an irrational desire for a kind of communication that always proves impossible. In any event, since I never achieve it and since the desire does not go away, I conclude that it's necessary to intensify the aspiration, to see if something like 'one idea' can be understood, even if only through a certain structuring of ideas where, if there are several or many, at least they are separated, for instance through enumeration, through the use of pullet points symbols, or asterisks placed centrally on the page, or through pauses in speaking. And it can be understood also that I am

flagging up, again, a practical exploration of discontinuity at work in this presentation.

- A friend told me about something that took place when he came across Henri Rousseau's *Surprised!: Tiger in a Tropical Storm*. (1891) You'll be familiar with this over-reproduced painting. My friend's experience in front of the painting had been, he told me, of the most astonishing kind. It was delusionary. When he looked at the picture he could hear and feel the warm rain. The sensation was so strong that he was inclined to be self-conscious, as if others standing near him in the National Gallery might notice the thunderstorm that was manifesting itself for him alone. Part of the curiosity of what took place, he said, was that when he turned away from the painting, the sensation stopped just as suddenly as it had begun. It was as if there was a switch. And that led him to play, like a child (on/off, on/off) with the simple gesture of turning his gaze towards the painting and then away.

In response to his account, I gave my friend some advice that I find surprising now when I think back on it. I told him to ignore what had happened. Perhaps I was worried for him that the event would become an obstacle to his viewing of paintings, that it would skew his expectations. Notably, he hasn't followed the advice. Indeed, he has written on the topic and comes back to do so again and again, developing a way of thinking about what it means to look at images. Looking at images, he has written, always involves a choreographic movement of the body that must be understood as manifold. To look is a turning towards the image, and it is a turning away. In the end, it may be an argument that memory and anticipation of images are part of the encounter; hardly a new idea but inflected with a certain novelty through the autobiographical angle and the peculiarity of the details in this case.

- Novelist Alain Robbe-Grillet affirms the most ordinary of scenes as key to his own resolution to be a writer, scenes characterised precisely by nothing unusual taking place:

These sensations associated with night falling early in the winter city, or just after the beginning of term towards the end of autumn when the lights are already coming on early in the shabby shop windows of the neighbourhood bakers or grocers, while it's still fairly mild and a fine drizzle sprinkles gleaming light onto the

unevenly paved streets, and charcoal grey pavements where the last decaying leaves from the plane trees cling, musky and glistening . . . I've often mentioned these vivid (yet peaceful) sensations of evening calm, welcoming lamps, the distant hum of the city, vegetable soup, the lampshade covered with scorched paper, as possibly the main reasons that impelled me to write a novel. I know exactly what it means to take up writing, having noticed the yellow of an old wall. (1988: 45)

There's much that could be said about these remarks, the first-apparent democratising of the writing process that tends to become its opposite as, rhetorically, Robbe-Grillet has us understand that he possessed the skill to see ordinariness, and that it might not be so easily achieved. But his remarks have another value, as a way of helping identify a superimposition that takes place in thought, especially, perhaps, when thought is taking place in a placid, everyday environment. A kind of neutrality provided by the space, which does not stimulate the senses in any remarkable or anomalous way, enables a different kind of seeing.

- When working on my MA thesis some years ago I observed that another thesis was establishing itself in what seemed to me the most incontrovertibly material form, like a model, even while remaining ideal, in my thinking. What's more, there seemed to have been no decision made on my part that there should be a second version of the thesis. Alongside the thesis, the idea of the thesis arrived of its own accord. It came with striking punctuality. I began to feel that I was working with something that had decision-making powers of its own, to come and go as it pleased. While welcoming its arrival every day, I did so with a measure of puzzlement regarding what it was doing and a certain level of suspicion about what it wanted. For every incoherence of my writing (all those I was aware of, however dimly) there was something incoherent in the model, something that, almost on an architectural level, didn't work – an Ensor-like corner where the rules of geometry were broken. Those inconsistencies gave me the strongest feeling – not any kind of solution about how to fix the point in my argument but more like a feeling in advance of any solution, a feeling of the kind that perhaps we're familiar with from watching a calamity unfold, when we cannot influence events but find ourselves trying all the same. John Mullarkey writes about this topic in relation to disaster movies, noting how, in his experiment, viewers of

the film *Titanic* (1998) would testify to a certain kind of movement in their seats, as if doing so would tend the ship away from the iceberg it was about to strike – and despite being in no doubt about the conclusion of the story. (2007: 62) That's the kind of feeling I had when considering the correlate of my thesis with its spatial coherence compromised by other-worldly glitches.

- One of my colleagues describes how when she's compelled in her reading of a book, the ideas come to situate themselves at locations familiar to her but that she has not been aware of choosing. So, Michel Serres' ideas are distributed at a roundabout in Hoxton, by a playing field, in summer when the grass is dry and crisp to the touch. Wherever she is, whether she has the book in her hands or is merely rehearsing once more a memory of reading Michel Serres, she's back in the same place positioning points of his argument where they have been placed before.

The commonality that interests me here is that sense of visitation already mentioned that another decision-making agent seems to be present. The one deciding where the events of the book are to be placed. We are familiar enough with theories of the divided psyche and there are frameworks available that would allow us to understand how one of those divided selves might not recognise another, hence feel the alien quality of another decision-making entity apparently invading the personal space of the mind. But I want to think this through in a different way, asking: what if the other agential power is less like a mirror of the self, less like a reverse side and more like . . . what? An interloper of some kind? A squatter? Or something less human? A spectre? An infestation emerging from the woodwork? All of these seem approximately right; none of them are quite right.

- To think this way is to tap into current discourses around the 'human', particularly some comments by Eugene Thacker in his book *In the Dust of this Planet* (2011). Thacker's framing is useful because of the audacious step in his argument. Not only is the mind a site that can provide access (against one's knowledge, against one's will) to uninvited decision-making powers that are not human, thought itself can be said to be not human, at least potentially so (2011: 7). Here, the mind is understood as a meeting place, a crossroads for various unexpected traffic. Thacker's analogy is with the micro-organic symbionts that make up much of the body's mass. If the body is ninety percent not human, might the same be

true of the mind? (2011: 7) Intuitively, the proposition seems to square with an experience that often we are not in control of the thoughts we think, that our thoughts are not acting in our interests. Again, on the one hand the psychoanalytic paradigm that would have us understand this situation as a self-in-conflict, and on the other a discourse in which the conscious thinking we identify with as ourselves is merely the emergent property of relations and interactions far beyond the human.

- N. Katherine Hayles coins the term 'unthought' for strata of cognitive activity that she distinguishes from so-called 'higher consciousness' as the more significant and almost completely unknown foundation on which consciousness sits like the miniscule peak of an otherwise submerged iceberg (2017: 1). And what's beneath (if 'beneath' is the right term) is a complex of agential, cognitive although not conscious decision-making faculties that belong to the technologies we interact with as well as the micro-organisms that populate the gut and any number of other cognitions that come to shape a so-called human mind.

Hayles looks in some detail at a novel by Colson Whitehead called *The Intuitionist*. (1999) The protagonist, Lila Mae Watson, is an elevator inspector in an imagined culture of elevator inspection divided fundamentally between 'empiricists', whose methods are plodding and old-fashioned, and 'intuitionists', who conduct their work in ways mysterious but statistically more effective than those of the conventional inspectors. Her intuitionist approach is described in the following way:

Lila Mae [...] leans against the dorsal wall of the elevator and listens. 125 Walker is only twelve floors high, and the vibration of the idling drive doesn't diminish that much as it swims through the gritty loop of the diverting pulley, descending down the cables, navigates the suspension gear, and grasps the car. Lila Mae can feel the idling in her back. She hears the door operator click above her in the dark well and then the door shuts, halting a small degree as the strata of paint chafes. Three Gemco helical springs are standard-issue buffers on Arbo elevators. They wait fifteen feet below her like stalagmites. "Press twelve," Lila Mae orders the super. Even with her eyes closed she could have done it herself, but she's trying to concentrate on the vibrations massaging her back. She can almost see them now. This elevator's vibrations are resolving themselves in her mind as an aqua-blue cone. Her pen rests in her palm and her

grip loosens. It might fall. She shuts out the sound of the super's breathing, which is a low rumble lilting into a wheeze at the ultimate convexity of his exhalation. That's noise. The elevator moves. The elevator moves upwards in the well, towards the grunting in the machine room, and Lila Mae turns that into a picture, too. The ascension is a red spike circling around the blue cone, which doubles in size and wobbles as the elevator starts climbing. (1999: 5)

I want to say that the correspondence in Whitehead's novel with the non-conscious cognition theme becomes less strong at the point he attributes his character's correlating model to her personal proclivity for geometric shapes. "Everyone has their own set of genies." (1999: 6) The elements will be gleaned from somewhere but it's the mode of their assemblage and their tendencies that are the point. Those qualities are achieved by other decision-making agents.

Perhaps the call here is for a kind of fallow work during which ideas-in-the-making map themselves onto a scene, a 'New Materialism' in which the ideal is drawn out of a real scene just as much as it is superimposed by the eye's idle traversing. Let's say the scene must be one in which nothing much is happening, that top corner of the room you can see above your screen when you're working in the kitchen, the portion between the larder door and the ceiling, where the principles of alien organisation can be coaxed to emerge, mated with intentional thoughts to pull intensions elsewhere.

**HAYLES**, N. Katherine. 2017. *Unthought: The Power of the Cognitive Nonconscious*. London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press

**LYOTARD**, Jean-Francois. 1991. *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*. Oxford: Polity Press

**MULLARKEY**, John. 2007. 'Life, Movement and the Fabulation of the Event' *Theory, Culture & Society*, 24:6. pp. 53-70

**ROBBE-GRILLET**, Alain. 1988. *Ghosts in the Mirror*, Jo Levy (trans.). London: Calder

**THACKER**, Eugene. 2011. *In the Dust of This Planet*, London: Zero books

**WHITEHEAD**, Colson. 1999. *The Intuitionist*, New York: Anchor books