Abstract Experience

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Abstract

The speculative philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead offers critical social and cultural theory an unusual way of rethinking the place and value of experience in its concerns. This article explores the challenges that Whitehead's approach to experience, deliberately contrasted with the subject-object thinking of modernity, creates. The article seeks to provide an account of the importance of Whitehead's appeal to naïve experience and of how this appeal counters some of the problems of more recent and more familiar accounts of the fate of experience which draw on some of the same historical points of reference – especially Romantic poetry. In particular, the article suggests that Whitehead's broadly impersonal conception of the open structure of experience as constructive process mitigates the 'pathos of finitude' attendant upon critical accounts which presume the unity of experience and then ask how this unity is shattered under modernity. Whitehead's work is situated transversally to analysis and phenomenology and is argued to accord a value to and role for abstraction which calls for a more experimental approach to the topic. While 'naïve experience' clearly differs from the understanding of experience evident in other accounts, the article also suggests that it is not incompatible with a more Foucauldian kind of singular history.

Key words

■ abstraction ■ critical theory ■ culture ■ experience

IT HAS become something of a commonplace assumption in contemporary critical social and cultural theory that experience is no longer a useful or valuable term for problematizing the field of research. The anti-humanism of post-structuralist theorizing marks a gleeful destruction of the possibilities of making experience a valid term of investigation. It is less widely accepted that theorizations of culture which hold onto a notion of the

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authentic, or stick to a rigid distinction between the proper concerns of the natural and historical sciences, might equally be submitted to the same judgement.[1] Yet, to the extent that this distinction is adhered to, however tacitly, the perpetuation of a framework for research which falls into the trap of what Whitehead called the 'bifurcation of nature' will practically inevitably negate the reality and value of experience for theory. The claim of this article is that the work of Alfred North Whitehead will provide some of the conceptual tools for developing an account of experience which can counter the difficulties that beset critical social and cultural theory. It concentrates for the most part on Whitehead's later philosophy – primarily *Process and Reality* – and endeavours to think through some of the issues which Whitehead's speculative work poses for contemporary social and cultural theory.

The speculative quality of Alfred North Whitehead's later writings is evident to anyone who undertakes a reading of *Process and Reality*. Whitehead explicitly characterizes this work in metaphysical terms as an 'essay in Speculative Philosophy' (1978: 3), the endeavour of which is 'to frame a coherent, logical, necessary scheme of general ideas in terms of which every element in our experience can be interpreted' (1978: 3). In his essay in speculative philosophy, Whitehead deliberately turns his attention away from the critical rationality which has, at least since Kant, been thought ineluctable in framing the discussion regarding the relationship between science and experience. In order to grasp the import of Whitehead's work for developing an account of experience, we first need to address briefly the role of critical thinking in shaping current 'debates' regarding the role of experience in history and culture.

Bifurcations

A cursory review of some of the major figures in the development of social and cultural theory should be sufficient to suggest the importance for it of Kantian philosophy – whether that be in the work of Weber, the Frankfurt School, Durkheim's work, or more distantly in the dialectic. The 'Copernican Revolution' which Kant's philosophy – turning on the argument that the conditions for the experience of objects were identically the conditions for the objects of experience – endeavoured to accomplish has evidently been of crucial importance to the development of thinking about society and culture. Indeed, while it has been possible in recent years to argue that culture, for example, has the characteristic consistency and operative logic of a text, the specific history of the concept of culture itself may, technical details notwithstanding, be traced back to a Romanticism that found its conceptual resources for opposing culture to the mechanizing effects of the burgeoning industrial society in the post-Kantian take-up of the third critique. Recent biologically inspired attempts to develop an explanatory rather than interpretative approach to culture (e.g. evolutionary psychology), in its vocal hostility to final causes and teleological explanations, confirms this in the way that it situates itself firmly on the other

side of the divide that the problematic outlined by Kant in the third critique set up.

In parallel to the development of the concept of culture, many of the developments to which the concept of history has been subject since the early 1800s can equally be traced back, if not perhaps to Kant directly, then certainly to the way that post-Kantian thinking developed the 'constitutive finitude' of the human subject as the motor force for history. It is worth recalling that it is this finitude which, albeit in very different ways, shapes both the Hegelian conception of the dialectic and the hermeneutic conception of interpretation. While it is certainly possible to adhere to a conception of critical rationality without necessarily subscribing to the thinking of the subject, recent developments in critical theory which derive from the developments mentioned above tend to suggest that the particular interpretative bent to which these developments are prone yields what Alain Badiou calls the 'pathos of finitude'. Proclamations of the end of this and the end of that, which are symptomatic of this pathos, make it evident that rescuing experience, in many respects so closely associated with a thinking of the subject, will be a tricky operation if it is not to fall into the same trap. This article would like to suggest that one of the values of Whitehead's later writings is precisely that it might allow us to accomplish such an operation.

An exemplary account of the pathos-ridden fate of experience under conditions of modernity is provided by Giorgio Agamben in his book *L'enfance et l'histoire* (1989). Commenting on Walter Benjamin's well-known argument in his essay 'The Storyteller' concerning the destruction of experience, Agamben claims not only that experience is something of which humans have been completely expropriated but that any discourse which attempts to discuss it 'must' begin from the observation that experience no longer offers 'anything realisable'. The problem, according to Agamben, is not that there is nothing to experience – 'never', he suggests, 'has everyday life been as rich as it is today in significant events' (1989: 20) – but that no one possesses sufficiently the *authority* conferred by speech and narrative to provide the guarantee for experience. The appropriate response to this situation is, he suggests, not to deplore, for example, those tourists who before the work of an old master (e.g. the Mona Lisa in the Louvre) simply record the painting on video but rather to interpret this 'refusal' of experience as the announcement of a future possibility in which experience would affirm its uniquely linguistic being. For Agamben there is a crucially political dimension to this refusal of experience:

> When one imposes a manipulative and directed experience on a humanity dispossessed of its experience, like rats in a labyrinth; in other words, when experience is only possible in horror or mendacity, then the refusal of experience can – provisionally – constitute a legitimate defence. (1989: 23)

Agamben's essay can be seen as one attempt to think through Benjamin's enigmatic claims for a 'transcendental experience' (but not the

only one – see Caygill, 1997). Following the developments in philosophy from the medieval period through Descartes to the present, Agamben finds in the appeal made by Edmund Husserl to an ante-predicative sphere of pure experience the need, in spite of itself, to recognize that any theory of experience must in fact be a theory of language. Modern science destroys experience to the exact extent that, in the guise of the Cartesian cogito, it identifies the subject of knowledge and the subject of experience and, *because* this Cartesian cogito is ultimately nothing substantial (despite what Descartes argued), it indicates the ego's nature as a purely linguistic being.

Although Agamben elsewhere sets himself against Derrida (the tradition thinks the voice as pure negativity) and Foucault (the archive cannot provide us with an adequate account of being-in-language), his work resonates quite clearly with the preoccupations of much of post-structuralist thinking in both its general suspicion of experience and its adoption of quasi-Kantian gestures: Derridean archi-transcendental non-concepts, the Foucauldian historical a priori. In its elegant reductive purity, in which a theory of experience becomes a theory of language, which in turn becomes a theory of history (which in turn is considered equivalent to a theory of origins) and in which an account of science becomes largely a discussion of the Cartesian cogito, Agamben's hermeneutic approach to culture in general and experience in particular exemplifies a style of research which, in its tacit acceptance of the bifurcation of nature, lets slip some of the more interesting and more problematic of questions that could be asked a propos of science and the problem of experience (Agamben, 1991, 2002).[2]

Naïve Experience

Building on his claim in *The Concept of Nature* for an 'immediate instinctive attitude towards perceptual knowledge' by virtue of which 'we are instinctively willing to believe that by due attention, more can be found in nature than that which is observed at first sight' (1920: 29), Whitehead's appeal, in *Science and the Modern World*, to 'naive experience' – expressed for him most clearly in the poetry of Wordsworth – as a crucial requisite for rethinking the relationship between science and culture might itself appear to the professionals of textual interpretation as a desperately naïve gesture. However, I would like to suggest that this is not at all the case and that in fact the way that Whitehead develops his appeal to experience should be considered a more risky, and thus a more interesting, theoretical move than the usual turn to poetry to rescue philosophy.

The importance for Whitehead of the ultimate appeal to 'naive experience' imposed itself as an antidote to the consequences of the professionalization and specialism to which thinking has been subject under modernity, resulting in what Whitehead (1985) called 'thinking in grooves'. Whitehead placed a great deal of importance on poetry because for him it expressed the sense, concordant with naïve experience, that we inhabit a world of colours, sounds and other sense-objects, that colours, sounds and so on are not additions to the world by mind. In this respect poetry testifies

to a sense of the world prior to the bifurcation of nature, prior to the distinction between mind and matter, the doctrine of primary and secondary qualities and so on. Considering what he calls the 'subjectivist' and 'objectivist' positions and their shortcomings with regard to experience, he states that 'If we are to include the secondary qualities in the common world, a very drastic reorganisation of our fundamental concept is necessary' (1985: 113). The ulterior development of *Science and the Modern World* indicates that it is to a conception of the irreducibility of the event, already evident in *The Concept of Nature*, having *value* as its intrinsic reality (modulated in *Process and Reality* to an emphasis on 'actual occasions') that Whitehead deemed it necessary to turn to rescue naïve experience.

This appeal to Romanticism is of interest to the account that is being proposed here because it is precisely, if problematically, in relation to Romanticism that many of the major accounts of the modern critical turn have situated themselves. While it is certainly true that the likes of Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe centred their discussion of Romanticism around the Schlegels and the post-Kantian philosophies of Hegel and Schelling, just as it is to the same German Romantics that Agamben turns in his endeavour to theorize an account of the objectless object of critique (in the literary sense of the word), there are sufficient family resemblances between the German and English Romantic movements to prevent the following comments being fanciful. Within British Cultural Studies, Wordsworth's literature is seen typically as a response to the mechanization of life ushered in by industrialization. His work is thus best explained with reference to the macroscopic (totalizing) narrative of the movements of history. In Raymond Williams's richly documented account, *The Lyrical Ballads* express the incipience of alienation in modern life – the 'crisis of the knowable community' as he puts it (Williams, 1985). For Agamben, by contrast, as too for Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, the Romantic movement is understood in terms of an historical interpretation of Being. German Romanticism is indicative of a way of thinking which, with ominous resonances, aestheticizes politics or opens up the space for a messianic nihilism and the development of a conception of the human sciences in which the identification of subject and object is considered equivalent to its dissolution (Agamben, 1993; Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy, 1978).

Whitehead's view is both far more simple than this and more complex. Naïve experience of the kind expressed in Wordsworth's poetry testifies to 'an intuitive refusal to accept the abstract materialism of science' (1985: 106). Industrial civilization, with its well-meaning but ultimately stupid professional specializations, has served to divorce nature from its aesthetic values.[3] In this respect there is little to distinguish Whitehead's view from that of, say, Williams. However, the general shape of Whitehead's metaphysics makes it difficult to argue that this marginalizing of naïve experience could be taken as an expression of alienation or, indeed, in another familiar narrative, as exemplifying the general process of the disenchantment of the world. For while Whitehead talks somewhat ambivalently of the

'benumbing repression of commonsense' (1978: 9),[4] his refusal to ground experience within a subject makes it impossible to understand what one might actually be alienated from in the modern world. And while Whitehead's general emphasis on 'routes of actual occasions' in his work suggests that his thinking is more than compatible with historical thought, one senses that he would have baulked at the idea common to dialectical and hermeneutic approaches to history that we could and should find some analytic reason for its development (the problematic status of the idea of 'laws of historical development' associated with certain varieties of Marxist theory should in this respect make it sufficiently clear that there are dangers associated with adopting the position of the prophet).

While Whitehead makes it abundantly clear that he thinks of philosophy as the 'critic of abstractions' (1985: 108), it would be well to point out that, for Whitehead, to criticize abstractions is not to adopt the position of the ironist, as was the case with German Romanticism, or to seek to ground science in some other instance. As he puts it in *Science and the Modern World*, 'its function is the double one, first of harmonising [abstractions] by assigning them their right relative status as abstractions, and secondly by completing them by direct comparison with more concrete intuitions of the universe, and thereby promoting the formation of more complete schemes of thought' (p. 108). The entirety of *Process and Reality* is, in its turn, suggestive of the complexity of the task of creating a style of thinking which would allow us to render thinkable together the developments of modern science which have in part been responsible for the marginalizing of experience and that experience itself.

Situating Whitehead

A better appreciation of the interest of the position that Whitehead adopts vis-à-vis experience can be gained by situating his work relative to two distinct inheritors of the gestures of Kantian critique.

To the extent that they both sought to grasp the unity of perceptual experience with mathematics and physics which the development of modern science had threatened to disjoin, both the analytic philosophy developed by Bertrand Russell and the phenomenological philosophy developed by Edmund Husserl may be counted as distant inheritors of the Kantian critical turn. Of course, Russell's approach, deploring the appeal to intuition (which would attenuate the realism of the objects captured within the logical atomistic framework, the ability to say yes, the green grass really is green), endeavoured to do this by prioritizing mathematical proofs, while for Husserl – since the *Logical Investigations* 'discovered' a peculiar categoreal intuition (which would in turn provide something of an incipit for Heidegger's radicalization of phenomenological enquiry) – the mathematical would be situated in a revised notion of the transcendental. However, as Claude Imbert has pointed out, even if they did avoid the way that Kant sought to deduce his categories from empirical judgements (with all that that entailed), both phenomenology and analysis found themselves

symmetrically negotiating exactly the same problem with the same symmetric difficulties. While both maintained what Imbert calls an 'empiricist profession of faith' in the given, whether the given came from a *Lebenswelt* or from sense data, both required an appeal to *logic* in order to hold together that which their respective approaches to the problem equally threatened to dissolve: 'only the common denominator of a unitary logical mediation would hold in equal proximity the primary intelligence of mathematics with the primary apperceptions, in whichever order one might wish to take them' (1992: 20). For phenomenology, the remarkable efficacy of mathematical logic was to be grounded in a transcendental logic ultimately referred back to a transcendental ego or some other phenomenological last instance (such as the aforementioned lifeworld). For analysis, by contrast, the immediate certainties of sense experience were required to be referred back to the metalinguistic constructions of the logician, with regrettable consequences, if Deleuze and Rosset are to be believed (see Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 135–62; Rosset, 1997). In either case, a similar gesture is accomplished, what Imbert calls a 'distancing' of the certainties of apophansis (1992: 21)

Whitehead, of course, was quite adamant that philosophy had to relativize the attributive schema which Kant's categories, in so far as they were worked out from a schema of judgement which precisely embeds attribution, raised to an a priori status.[5] He argues in addition, in *Process and Reality*, that metaphysics has, on the whole, taken the subject–predicate relationship for an ultimate truth, where it is in reality actually a highly accomplished abstraction. Logic, he points out, often confuses propositions with judgements. At the same time, as Whitehead's characterization of his philosophy as a philosophy of organism tends to suggest, physics and mathematics were not to be thought of as the final court of appeal. Within the concept of organism, as *Science and the Modern World* develops it, the unchanging static environment is completed with the introduction of the creative relation to environment. This approach was to unite the 'larger organisms' of biology with the 'smaller organisms' of physics (1985: 129). Finally, in *Process and Reality* not only is *everything* experience – 'drops of experience, complex and interdependent' (p. 18) – but the ontological principle of 'no actual entity, then no reason' (p. 19) insists that there is no distance between experience and its now immanent reason. In this respect, and despite the complexity of the operation undertaken in *Process and Reality*, Whitehead *intensifies* the value of an appeal to experience, but neither to judge it nor to have it stand as judge but to develop its own peculiar logic.

Constructing Experience

> Subject and object give a poor approximation of thought. (Deleuze and Guattari, 1994: 85)

It has been suggested, then, that in contrast to many of the theoretical positions characteristic of modern thought, experience occupies an unfamiliar

and unusual place for Whitehead. In *Science and the Modern World*, the ultimate appeal is to a naïve experience grasped under the auspices of the event. In *Process and Reality*, the event becomes a nexus of actual occasions, whilst an actual occasion becomes the 'limiting type of an event with only one member' (p. 73). When he introduced the concept of the event in *Science and the Modern World*, it was with the express aim of breaking with the bifurcated way of thinking which begins with and ends with a world divided up between subjects and objects. More pointedly, in *Process and Reality* he describes the philosophy of organism as the inverse of Kantian philosophy. *The Critique of Pure Reason* describes the process by which subjective data pass into the appearance of an objective world. The philosophy of organism seeks to describe how objective data pass into subjective satisfaction and how order in the objective data provides intensity in the subjective satisfaction. For Kant, the world emerges from the subject; for the philosophy of organism, the subject emerges from the world – 'a "superject" rather than a subject' (1978: 88). Such, then, is the 'drastic reorganisation' of our fundamental concept to which Whitehead had alluded.

However, this reorganization of the concept of experience which Whitehead requires unsettles some of our commonplace assumptions. Let's address some of the peculiarities of Whitehead's approach. The key point about the way that Whitehead 're-organizes' our concept of experience lies in the way that it argues that the unity of experience must be explained, rather than presupposed. While Whitehead accepts, but humorously modifies, what he calls the 'subjectivist principle' which has characterized modern thinking, the unity of experience is a creative *attainment*. The unification of experience by the *superject* as an attainment does not and cannot, for Whitehead, be considered in terms of the reflexive coincidence with self which has characterized philosophies of subjectivity. In terms somewhat reminiscent of Nietzsche, Whitehead remarks in *Process and Reality*:

> All the life in the body is the life of the individual cells. There are thus millions of centres of life in each animal body. So what needs to be explained is not dissociation of personality but unifying control, by reason of which we not only have unified behaviour, which can be observed by others, but also consciousness of a unified experience. (p. 108)

In this regard, then, Whitehead reverses the relationship which philosophers since Descartes had established between consciousness and experience: consciousness not only presupposes experience but thinking presupposes the thought: 'Descartes in his own philosophy conceives the thinker as creating the occasional thought. The philosophy of organism inverts the order, and conceives the thought as a constituent operation in the creation of the occasional thinker' (1978: 151).

The move that Whitehead makes clearly changes the status of experience. One cannot think of experience as something from which one would be alienated, as from a series of predicates which would have been

attributed to a subject. Taking the concrete reality of experience, qua creative concrescence of a series of actual occasions, seriously requires us to acknowledge that experience is an activity both in and for the world. Arguing that Whitehead consciously systematizes the insights of William James's philosophy of radical empiricism, Isabelle Stengers (2002) has suggested that there are some distinct parallels between the latter's concept of a *pure* experience, developed in his *Essays in Radical Empiricism* (1971), and the former's understanding of the *perceiving event* developed in *The Concept of Nature* (1920). Pure experience, for James, is an impersonal current of experience, what Gilles Deleuze calls a pure transcendental field, a plane of immanence. The impersonality of experience and the inapplicability of the 'I' as ground for this experience suggests that the solipsism into which attempts to found experience on consciousness slip (as in Husserl's *Cartesian Meditations* [1960]) is the fruit of a badly posed problem (with interesting consequences of its own when attempts are made to *explain* consciousness – how can 'natural' science accept first-person accounts?). For Whitehead there can be no decisive epistemological privilege accorded to the 'I' (any more than there can be any reason for dismissing the importance of the achievement of its continuity). As Stengers puts it, the 'I' is simply 'one construction amongst others' and argues that, for both Whitehead and for James, it can never be a question of 'transforming experience – which is indeterminate with regard to the manner in which it will eventually, possibly, be appropriated – into an instrument for the judgement or disqualification of an experience' (2002: 85–90).[6]

Contrary to the view proposed by Agamben, that the lack of linguistic authority is sufficient to disqualify the value of experience, for Whitehead, it is precisely the lack of the authority which judgement would confer that gives experience its value and which allows us to understand its radically constructive and constructed nature, its crucially contingent quality.

In his appeal to naïve experience, Whitehead insists on the 'stubborn facts' as the very defining characteristic of constructive *attainment*. A prerequisite for the development of an affirmative position vis-à-vis the real, or what Whitehead calls the 'salvation of reality', is the acknowledgement of 'its obstinate, irreducible, matter of fact entities, which are limited to be[ing] no other than themselves' (1985: 117). However, it is crucial to recognize also that this acknowledgement of the finite bears within itself no principle of closure whereby it would be the 'constitutive' nature of finitude which grounds experience. It is difficult to generate an affirmative account of being-*for*-the-world (which would dispense with the founding value of the subject's intentionality) from being-*in*-the-world (Deleuze, 1986). As Whitehead goes on to remark:

> The endurance of things has its significance in the self-retention of that which imposes itself as a definite attainment for its own sake. That which endures is limited, obstructive, intolerant, infecting its environment with its own aspects. But it is not self-sufficient. The aspects of all things enter into its very nature. (1985: 117)

The crucial point which he makes, speaking of the philosophy of organism as a 'Critique of Pure Feeling', is that the modern intellectualization of experience precludes an understanding of sensations, data having an interconnection in themselves. What is more, the 'rush of immediate transition' has been overlooked because of an emphasis on perception 'in the mode of presentational immediacy'. A *macroscopic* insistence on the enduring 'stubborn facts' must for Whitehead be allied with a *microscopic* insistence on the process of becoming, the 'formal constitution of an actual occasion' (1978: 129). In this regard the theory of *prehensions*, which permits Whitehead to explain the 'real individual facts of the togetherness of actual entities', or the relationships which events entertain with one another, the microscopic connectedness of being and world, organism and environment, gives real consistency to the *openness* of experience, in conformity with the term's etymology (Nancy, 1988)

Technologies of Capture

> The play of the world has singularly changed as it has become the game itself which diverges. . . . It is a world of captures rather than closures. (Deleuze, 1988: 111)

For Gilles Deleuze, Whitehead's theory of prehensions bears a significant difference from the Leibnizian theory of monads with which in some respects it has quite considerable parallels. He argues that while both monadic and prehensive unities have neither door nor window, for Leibniz this is because the 'being for the world of monads is submitted to a condition of closure', whereas for Whitehead there is a condition of opening which ensures that 'every prehension is *already* the prehension of another prehension, either to capture it or to exclude it: prehension is by nature open to the world, without having to pass via a window' (Deleuze, 1988: 110). While Leibniz is often invoked by critics who wish to object to the problematically solipsistic nature of bourgeois individualism under conditions of modernity – see, for example, Frederic Jameson's essay (1996) on Adorno – Deleuze's formulation of the problem of the world as a problem of captures rather than closures suggests that Whitehead might provide a more interesting way of understanding the processes at work within modern culture and society. The work of science studies writers such as Andrew Pickering (1995) on what he calls – partially inspired by Deleuze and Guattari – the *capture of agency* provides a useful way of extending this idea into an analysis of the way that experience operates in relation to technology.

The radical openness of experience, the fact that for Whitehead every prehension is itself always already a prehension of prehension, its vectorial quality – the way that *this* experience here is an experience of *that there* – and the always novel concrescent unification achieved by the superject precludes us from arguing, as a certain strain of Heidegger's thought does (as too a certain strain of critical theory), that technology is necessarily destructive of authenticity or inevitably bound up with the domination of

instrumental rationality. Nor can we argue, along with McLuhan, that media form an 'extension' of man. At best, with Whitehead we can argue that in *some* instances technology *can* have these effects. For the openness of experience also means that we cannot say in advance what might be a pertinent element of an experiential field, what might be a relevant element in its processual becoming. Isabelle Stengers (2004) has insisted on paying attention to the 'unknowns of modernity' in her important Whiteheadian reading of the development of modern science, just as Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari have insisted, in a way that resonates strongly with Whitehead's revised empiricism, that 'history is not experimentation, it is only the set of almost negative conditions that make possible the experimentation of something that escapes history' (1994: 111). In this sense, Whitehead's speculative concept of experience allows us to say that history might *also* need to be the history of things themselves. Nothing, however, will authorize us to say in advance.

Whitehead's general insistence on the constructive *attainment* of experience suggests more of an affinity with the singular histories of the Foucauldian approach to the role of technique in formations of power and knowledge. Jonathan Crary's recent work on the place of *attention* within modernity (Crary, 2000) is in this regard a suggestive account of the way that certain kinds of experience, and in particular a kind of focused attentiveness, are historically constructed and function as parts of a disciplinary regime. As he argues: 'At the moment when the dynamic logic of capital began to dramatically undermine any stable or enduring structure of perception, this logic simultaneously attempted to impose a regime of disciplinary attentiveness' (2000: 13). Attentiveness is not a given but a historical construct, fabricated, according to Crary, as 'part of a space in which new conditions of subjectivity were articulated, and thus a space in which effects of power operated and circulated' (2000: 24). Attention in Crary's account is constructed within institutions as a multivalent epistemological object forming part of the ground of modern psychological inquiry, part of its historical a priori. Visual art forms an important component of the historical apparatus constructive – and destructive – of certain forms of attentive awareness and underlines Crary's claim that attention 'as an indispensable part of an expanding terrain of modern spectacle, becomes both a simulation of and a compensation for a chimerical "real" experience' (2000: 361).

However, Crary's insistence on holding on to Debord's notion of the society of the spectacle, which functions – albeit surreptitiously – as a critical explanatory principle, at the same time as he adheres to the largely descriptive quality of the Foucauldian approach, lends his essay a peculiar gait, as the agnosticism of the latter aspect of his work is overlaid with the resolutely historicist critique of the former. And because Crary *assumes* experience must be the property of a subject, and because forms of subjectivity are mutable (increasingly so), a doubt must remain in his account about the latter's status[7] and a professional scepticism must be maintained about the possibilities presented by complex new agencies or assemblages

of experience. The archaeological insistence on the way that epistemological spaces function as the historically a priori conditions of experience acts as a useful reminder that the new communicative machinery of capitalism emerges from a singular history of antecedent occasions which shape what Whitehead might have called its 'real potentiality'. However, while it suggests a degree of caution with regard to so-called new media (which may not quite have the value some of the more utopian of West Coast technological libertarians declare),[8] it is vital to bear in mind Stengers's (2004) important point about not transforming specific constructed appropriations of experience into instruments for its judgement or disqualification.

The capacity which such an approach may have for lending itself to this sort of practice is clearly evident in the work of Friedrich Kittler (1990, 1996, 1999). Kittler's emphasis on the role of technology and communications media in the networks of discourse which constitute the symbolic environment in which humans operate (an environment which for that very reason ceases to be symbolic in any simple way) emphasizes the importance of the materiality of communication processes. 'Mediality' understood in this way becomes a constitutive element in who and what humans are, and communications media form a decisive component of the historical a priori that each such discourse network forms.

Kittler revises Foucault's theorization of discourse on several important points. While he agrees with Foucault's underlining of the fact that the forms of historical existence of language indicate that not everything can be stated at any moment in history (only *these* enunciative events occurred) and that discourse (immanently) constitutes the rules determining what can be said at any one moment, Kittler argues that Foucault did not go far enough in his analysis because he limited his attention to the *archive*. Foucault's reliance on print media makes his practice of discourse analysis of restricted value much beyond 1900, by which time other media forms had themselves become significant loci of 'inscription'.

Kittler's determinedly inflexible parsing of these historically singular discourse networks and his insistence on the utter materiality of discourse engenders an unwillingness to consider that a discourse network might be somehow mitigated or that agency might be imagined in any way other than that of the humanism he opposes. The methodological consistency of his approach dictates that as the rules governing what can be said at any historical moment can only be uncovered retrospectively, one can say nothing about the present – although in his more recent writing, such as his brief history of communications technologies, it is not clear if this is maintained (Kittler, 1996). More significantly, perhaps, while the archaeological approach insists on the singularity of historical processes, its efforts to outline the conditions of enunciation mean it tends to overemphasize the coherence of an epoch. In some respects this is not surprising – after all, the relationship between necessity and contingency is a complex one in which past events, in becoming past, acquire an ineluctability which they do not have in the present.[9] The important point, though, is the way that it

provides the modest analyst with a somewhat exorbitant authority: 'All data streams flow into a state *n* of Turing's universal machine; Romanticism not withstanding, numbers and figures become the key to all creatures' (Kittler, 1999: 19).

Conceptual Politics: Experimentality

> Philosophy is the welding of imagination and common sense into a restraint upon specialists. (Whitehead, 1978: 17)

In a short essay defending her 'constructivist' reading of *Process and Reality*, Isabelle Stengers (this issue) has talked about the need to 'experiment a constructivist approach to *Process and Reality*' (p. 92). In this essay Stengers offers a gloss on what she believes Whitehead may have meant by his view of philosophy as the critic of abstractions: the point is not to criticize abstractions in the name of some more originary intuition. As was suggested earlier on, such a move ends up replicating the bifurcated understanding of nature that it generally wishes to escape from. The point, Stengers suggests, is to appreciate abstractions as 'lures for feeling'. Philosophical abstractions are a success only if they 'induce empirically felt variations in the way our experience matters' (p. 96), and they create difficulties when used beyond the problem field for which they were originally produced. One cannot, then, think of philosophy as trying to articulate a pre-given experience in general, and in this sense it becomes absolutely crucial to follow the 'flight' of 'imaginative experiment' (Whitehead, 1978: 5) which philosophical abstractions create.

In this respect it can be argued that the 'categoreal scheme' which Whitehead proposes in *Process and Reality* as the 'matrix' of his speculative philosophy functions in a manner redolent of Deleuze and Guattari's *abstract machine* to resolve the problem which has typically dogged philosophy in its attempts to deal with the concept of experience. In contrast to the relatively abstract attributive schema evident in Kant's philosophy – relative because it derives from empirical forms of judgement encoded in natural language and abstract because it unifies experience under putatively universal categories – the categoreal scheme is more abstract, the result of a deliberate *engineering* of language (according to a requirement of rational *coherence* which creates friction in natural language), its categories quite unlike traditional representative generalities and more like 'erewhon', as Deleuze has it: imaginative, phantasmatic categories which it is rather difficult to think of as *defining* anything. But for precisely this reason, empirical *adequacy* (the other requirement for the categoreal scheme) cannot be understood as the verification of pre-existing conceptual generalities because the latter are relative to specific fields of enquiry (which can now be understood as tools for the expropriation of the common).[10]

Naïve experience does not necessarily mean theory-free or interpretation-free experience. We are quite literally *infected* by abstractions. And as Whitehead remarks, only a stone can provide an account of uninterpreted

experience. But by the same token, interpretation does not mean the reflexive self-understanding characteristic of hermeneutics. Science would not have got very far on the basis of Baconian induction or hermeneutics. *Process and Reality* will not provide an account of either the limits of experience or of its meaning. There is a certain conceptual politics involved in the way that this text functions to deterritorialize forms of experience, interrogated – as Whitehead has it in his ambivalent way – with the 'benumbing repression of commonsense' (1978: 9), so as to lure experience outside of itself.

Notes

1. The 'differend' between structural Marxism of the Althusserian variety and the historicist Marxism of E.P. Thompson is a case in point.

2. The acceptance is probably not tacit: Dilthey's distinction between the natural and the human sciences, placing history on the side of the latter, was a crucial influence in the modern development of hermeneutics.

3. Stupidity here is to be taken in the precise sense conferred on it by Gilles Deleuze in his *Difference and Repetition* (1994). The link between Whiteheadian specialism and Deleuzean stupidity has been suggested by Isabelle Stengers. See Deleuze (1994) and Stengers (2005).

4. As Isabelle Stengers has pointed out, it is not clear whether commonsense is repressed or repressor here. While the general tenets of the approach that Whitehead develops in *Process and Reality* suggest that he is concerned with the repression of commonsense by specialism, the editors seem less certain. The first entry under 'Commonsense' in the index is 'repressive'. *Process and Reality* requires negotiating a fine line between commonsense and specialism in its construction of experience, what Whitehead describes as the 'constant reaction between specialism and commonsense' (1978: 17).

5. See, for example, the opening chapter of Whitehead (1920) and the numerous references in Whitehead (1978).

6. Point of translation: the French term *éventuellement* conveys a nuance of contingency which the English *eventually* does not. Hence 'eventually, possibly'.

7. Crary tends, for example, to accept uncritically the standard reading of James as an apologist for the marketplace, the subjectively isolated proprietor.

8. See Andrew Murphie's (2005) interesting Whiteheadian account of technics and what he calls an 'ecology of self-enjoyment'.

9. This is the extremely complex issue of the aporia of the 'Master argument' proposed by Diodorus Cronus. See Vuillemin (1984).

10. These issues are addressed in more detail in Goffey (2005).

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