



REVIEWS

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REVIEW ARTICLE

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The flat-lining of metaphysics: François Laruelle's 'science-fiction' theory of non-photography

The main body of François Laruelle's work is now finally being translated into English, generating the same kind of intense and empathic response that Badiou's philosophy did in the Anglo-American academy ten years ago. Laruelle, however, is a very different philosophical figure, with a very different programme and tone, to that of Badiou – although both share a similar range of concepts and problems (the generic, infinitude and being, non-relationality, the status of the subject) and both share a generational background in the politics of May '68. For 40 years Laruelle has honed what he calls a 'non-philosophy' that draws in part on Feuerbach's critique of religion (as non-philosophy),

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Heidegger's critique of metaphysics, Althusser's critique of 'expressive totality, and Derrida and Lacan's respective critiques of subjectivity, to a cut a final swathe, he contends, through the metaphysical self-sufficiency of the philosophical enterprise. But his non-philosophy is in no sense an *anti*-philosophy, a hyper-deconstructionism, or a version of negative dialectics. On the contrary, Laruelle's thinking certainly works to deplete the philosopher-centring hubris of philosophy, but in order to refound its categories on a scientific basis. Yet this depletion/repletion is not, in the customary way of such a move, a scientific positivization of philosophy, but a means, he argues, of finally breaking out of philosophy's self-reflection and auto-affection, to found a science that is truly – and not arbitrarily and contingently – adequate to philosophical thinking – to its powers of theoretic becoming. As such this is predicated on a very different treatment of the science/philosophy dyad, inherited on the one side from Carnap and Popper, and on the other, from Heidegger and his anti-science heirs. Where Carnap and Popper replace philosophy with method in the name of Science, and Heidegger replaces the Scientific subject of reason (1993) in post-Cartesian philosophy with Dasein as a bringing-forth that is not the reason of the 'I think' of the subject, Laruelle replaces both Scientific Method and its Heideggerian critique with a non-positivizing science that operates under a post-metaphysical philosophy that is at the same time transcendentalizing in ambition.

Non-philosophy is a globally transcendental discipline, that is to say, one that is real-in-the-last-instance (making use of philosophy's transcendental dimension in order to formulate itself). It is the determination-in-the-last-instance of a theory (of a knowledge that remains distinct from its object – a model taken from science), and identically (of a usage of philosophy 'with a view to' to the non-philosophical subject – model taken from philosophy). It is theoretical by virtue of one of its models: science. But it is neither a philosophical and self-positing theoreticism, nor a philosophical and self-positing pragmatics.

(1999: 146)

In other words, non-philosophy is the product of a suspension of philosophy's scienticization, under the direction of the suspension of science's philosophization. And this is expressed methodologically through a duality of thinking (of problems) that does not issue in sublative Unity or an aporetic or identitary synthesis of opposites. In this sense the double-suspension of philosophy and science, here for Laruelle, replaces the autonomous self-positing of the philosophical decision with an axiomatic method that operates transcendently in relation to the real (the axiomatic method being the replacement of a coherent and complex body of propositions with simpler propositions, thereby allowing the original propositions to be deduced from the simpler propositions as a basis for the deductive production of theorems). Against the philosophical decision and positivistic scientific method, Laruelle calls for a theoretical method that *thinks transcendently* at the level of axiomatic

1. 'There is no overturning of philosophy. There is not even a reduction in the Husserlian sense or a bracketing of philosophical decision. There is, if one wants to take up the term reduction – but you will challenge me on the use of philosophical terms so I will come back to this presently – there is what I call an already-accomplished reduction, an already present reduction of the philosophical decision by science. Because science is precisely not constituted in the same way in which a philosophy is constituted, through a set of operations certain of which might be transcendental reductions; science is already a transcendental reduction in act. And this is why the order that I follow, the real order, is the order that proceeds from science to philosophy' (see Derrida and Laruelle 1988).

reduction. Or rather, we might say, the production of an axiomatic method is precisely the outcome of non-philosophical philosophical thinking.

He defines the basis of this process as a 'Unilateral duality'. Duality is no longer a bilateral partition (endless subtraction and the supplement), as in the philosophical apparatus, but a 'unifacial' one; a duality that is Two but never conjoinable. This is predicated on what he calls *l'Un/the One* or Vision-in-One; the One being a process immanent to itself, without folding back into itself. In this sense Laruelle's One proposes a radical immanence of method – an identity-without-transcendence. This is because if non-philosophy is to overhaul the entire decisionist philosophical apparatus, then, the One must serve a primary non-relational role, in which the presence of the real in thought excludes linguistic and symbolic relation – in Lacan's sense. For it is precisely through the exclusion of relationality that non-philosophy stands to fundamentally weaken decisionism's separation of the real and transcendental by taking on and speaking for 'one side' of the philosophical duality non-positivistically. But, for Laruelle this non-relationality, is not *posited* by the theorist, in any Kantian sense. On the contrary, the One is the name for a real that is already non-conceptually manifest prior to the transcendental synthesis; already acquired prior to all intuitive apprehension; already an undivided unity rather than a transcendental unity; and as such something that the subject is in its thinking and practice is already produced by. In other words Laruelle's realism here presupposes that thought can have a relationship to the real prior to the transcendental synthesis and, therefore, have access to a 'non-decisional' real. Thought is not the apprehension of the object, but a relay to what is unobjectifiable in the object, access to the object, thereby, being based on the object functioning as a quasi-subject, determining its own objectification. The construction of a unilateral front – as Laruelle elaborates his programme – therefore is the axiomization of the indivisibility of the real and transcendental, as the means by which non-philosophy acts to exert its primacy over philosophy and its specular decisionist apparatus. But this primacy is not a rejection of philosophy, or even a belief that in suspending the philosophical decision through axiomatics, decisionism can be dissolved *tout court*, but a processual reversal of science over philosophy, without, in turn, assuming that science thereby takes over the role of philosophy. In this sense non-philosophy's relationship to science is predicated upon the fact that science is already a transcendental reduction. So, insofar as science describes the order of the real, science, moves towards philosophy, rather than philosophy moving towards science.¹

As evident from this, 'Unilateral duality' represents yet another methodological variant of anti-dialectical thinking within post-war French philosophy, in which poor old Hegel represents the ur-thinker of 'premature synthesis' and decisionism. Thus Laruelle's suspension of the self-positing of philosophy and the positivization of science is not to be mistaken for a dialectical move, a bridging of the 'limits' of philosophy and science in the name of their hybridization or reconvention. On the contrary, non-philosophy represents a penetration or interruption of one realm into the other, as a means of restructuring and extending the *edges* of both; each discipline produces an unfolding

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edge that never closes or dissolves itself by enfolding back into itself, or subsuming itself into an exteriorized or interiorized All. Laruelle calls this move internal to the unilateral front and axiomatization, the generic, insofar as the penetrating knowledge does not fold into another domain or discipline in order to hybridize or synthesize its contents in the name of a larger whole. Rather, the generic modality of non-philosophy comes as a 'stranger' to philosophy and to science. As a result, the generic does not repeat the inherited structures of the host discipline – it does not augment knowledge supplied by the discipline – but 'modifies or helps them transform their object and therefore transform themselves' ([2008] 2011: 249). 'Its goal is to equip existing disciplines with a new function of intervention or fecundity and with an unprecedented type of communication' ([2008] 2011: 241). Or rather it transforms the discipline as truth from its symptomatic condition.

In these terms, above all else – and in way that far exceeds Badiou's partisan and heroic philosophical subject/non-subject – Laruelle's primary struggle with the legacy of the philosophical subject is not so much the construction of a different kind of intellectual self-identity for the philosopher – although this is true in a formal sense – but with the construction a kind of Feuerbachian appropriation of the human as an infinite, collective praxis and consciousness, in which Man – suitably desubjectivized and de-empiricized (Man and the subject-as-subject are quite different as Laruelle stresses) – takes on a Science Fictive, Utopian and Messianicist role. Following Heidegger, the philosophizing 'I think' can only negate this distributive logic. The attack on decisionism, therefore, is essentially, an attack on the reduction of thinking in philosophy to the enclosure of the decisional act within a metaphysically undetermined All, with all the 'pre-scientific' and interminable 'interpretative' thinking of the philosophic subject that this presupposes. As such the generic is the term he develops to flatten metaphysics, a universalizing resistance of unilaterality to the hermeneutic link between the philosopher and philosophical totalization and absolutization. On this basis Laruelle describes Man, no less, as a 'depthless', idempotent thing. Idempotency is an algebraic term. It means: qualities that remain invariant within a given sequence, and in so doing thereby produces a sequence that never produces side effects. So 'idempotent' qualities guarantee that the repeated use of a figure will have no unintended consequences. One simple idempotent figure is $1 \times 1 = 1$; it is unchanged when multiplied by itself. This is not to suggest that Man is 'unchanged when multiplied by himself', but rather that what Laruelle calls Lived Experience is itself an idempotent realm: it defines Man immanent to his own powers, and not in relation to an outside (World, Spirit, All, Totality). There is no Transcendental Subject. Or more precisely, Man is separate from the world on the basis of his material and cognitive powers, but he is not an *exception* to the world as a thinking and reflecting being. 'Man is not consciousness, he is the force of utopia or immanent Messianism that accompanies his confrontation with the world and invests every possible course of history' (1998). The echoes of Feuerbach and Marx here are self-evident. But for Laruelle the idempotent is not another name for a reinvigorated Materialism; Man reflects on

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a world separate from his thinking, but his being is not separate from his thinking. He does not apply his theories, he is already theoretical in his affective place in the World and collective transformation of matter. 'Man, precisely because of its universal but non-total Being-One, is not the neo-Platonic One; Man is instead the passage through the material a priori that gives access to the Lived real towards the genre which has special non-synthetic properties' ([2008] 2011: 258). The material powers of Man, find their universality in their localized, but non-systematizing conditions of embodiment. That is, the generic represents the universal as the human or concrete instance; a universal that is non-totalizing in its unfolding.

This brief discussion of Laruelle's vast and technically complex thought is obviously limited in its descriptive and analytic scope. But it at least allows us to develop a range of critical responses to his non-philosophy more generally, and to his recent writing on photography more specifically – the topic of this article. As is evident some of Laruelle's key terms and concepts – the generic, thinking as the intervention of the 'stranger', the idempotent, unilaterality and the already real, non-relationality – presuppose an interventionist and estranging between the philosophical subject and the categories and objects of philosophical reflection. This is why he is – to acknowledge one of his own favoured self-descriptions – one of the most Science Fictive of contemporary 'philosophers': the depthless plane of his thinking is essentially non-compliant with any unitary stabilization of the object; his forcing of the edge, is essentially, a fractalization of philosophy, a stretching of cognition beyond the phenomenal encounter. Or rather, the constitutive openness of thinking is best described as a fractal process, and as such the thinker's fractal encounter with the object is that which best reflects the non-cumulative, non-sublative, unobjectifiable space of the One (1992). The non-philosophical subject, then, purged of all hermeneutic and reflective habits and ambitions, operates functionally as a kind of algorithmic 'motor'. The result of this methodological 'estrangement' from decisionism and dialectics is twofold: first, it inflates non-philosophy into an extraordinary meta-process in which methodological clarification becomes an overweening priority and endless necessity for fear that philosophy might sweep away what scientific advances non-philosophy has made. And second, philosophy itself, its history, its diverse methods and traditions are reduced to an unwieldy metaphysical lump (Laruelle's reading of Hegel for instance, is barely a caricature). In this respect for polemical ends, he defines all philosophy with his concept of decisionism. The effect is that the application of non-philosophy to various theoretical subjects (Marxism, religion, psychoanalysis) is vague and almost epicene. As Ray Brassier puts it in his critical, but sympathetic account of Laruelle, in *Nihil Unbound* (2007) one is struck by the 'formalism and paucity of detail in his handling of these topics':

Lacking the capacity for conceptual specificity, the non-philosophical theory that Laruelle elaborates as a consequence of his negative characterization of the essence of philosophy is

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undermined not so much by its abstraction as by its sheer generality: it is too loose-cut, to fit its object; too coarse-grained to provide useful conceptual traction upon the material for which it is supposedly designed.

(2007: 207–08)

This lack of conceptual traction is certainly evident in *The Concept of Non-Photography* (2011), Laruelle's short, but ambitious, attempt to introduce some of the categories and terms of non-philosophy into the theory of photography and representation. Thus, although Laruelle is quick to declare that the concept of non-photography is not a negation of photography as such, but, rather, a fundamental de-acclimatization of the claims of the theories of photography, nevertheless absent from the book is any direct engagement with any specific theories and practices. This leaves Laruelle's de-acclimatization underdetermined, at the level of the problems and intractabilities of photography practice and thinking. Thus, in a polemical echo of his attack on philosophical decisionism, to think photography anew we must 'deliver ourselves' 'outside every vicious' (2011: 4) circle of photographic theory from the spirit of photography, and therefore 'suspend or... bracket out, radically and without remainder, all of Western onto-photo-graphics' (2011: 5).

This is because the essence of photography, Laruelle declares, is not itself photographic, in the onto-photographic sense. In this respect the bracketing out of onto-photo-graphics produces an axiomatization of photography fundamentally distinct from the perceptual, stylistic, artistic, cultural and technical claims of photography. Indeed this axiomatization requires that photographic theory sever the relations of photography to the World, philosophy, technology, culture and science itself. 'To understand photography, we must... cease to take perception and being-in-the-World as our paradigm' (2011: 11). In its place a new photographic theory – or more precisely the concept of non-photography – must focus on photography's non-worldly (not unworldly) relation to the real, in order to establish photography as an essence unto itself. Consequently the concept of non-photography here follows the non-relational logic of unilaterality. In order to 'think' photography, theory must abstract itself from the wordly, decisionist, hermeneutic claims that mediate the History of Photography. In doing so, what is definitional of photography is not its phenomenal characteristics or affects, its eventual possibilities or its cultural or political functions, but a 'certain specific relation to the real' (2011: 6). And this relation-non-relationality is fundamentally irreflective, a non-circular objectivity, which overrides the subjectivity of the photographer. Photography 'doesn't necessarily have a will – for example to transform the World, the City, History, etc.' (2011: 24). Accordingly, what excites Laruelle is that photography incarnates a decisionless move from original to copy. Hence, contrary to the whole modern history of photographic theory that assumes a wholly specular relationship between photography and its referents, photography is, in itself, a fundamentally anti-specular mechanism, insofar as it initiates a transcendental automatism.

For Laruelle, then, photography provides the space for the support of his non-philosophical, axiomatizing, disembodied and non-thetic subject. Indeed, what photography announces and sustains, in its negation of the decisional immersion in appearances according to Laruelle, is precisely the conditions for the ideal production of the non-philosophical subject itself: a subject's whose relationship to the objects of thought are not predetermined by philosophy's unities or contraries. In this respect photography offers, above all else, an idempotent experience for photographer and spectator: a going amongst things, flatly, immersively, without interpretative cues and guidance, thereby denying the position of the spectator who looks as if above the world (as enshrined in the philosophical subject). Laruelle calls this an immanent realism: a looking, and a return of the look 'that has nothing to prove', philosophically (2011: 24). This sense of photography's technical and perceptual indifference to the world – as it moves 'blindly' through it – is a notion, of course, which has been mobilized by many photographers and theorists in the name of photography's radical anti-aestheticism and in defence of various accounts of realism since the 1920s. But Laruelle has no interest in this type of avant-gardism (and offers no reflections on it). When he talks of immanent realism he is talking not about how photography's radical indifference might open out the truth-claims of photography, but rather, how the idempotency of the photographic experience and apparatus, functions externally to, or runs in parallel with, the World. As such the notion of immanent realism is embedded in an utterly conventionalist understanding of the photographic referent: photographs have more in common with *other photographs* than they do with their depicted referents; and therefore it is more exacting and persuasive to talk about the fictiveness of the photographic image, than it is about the truth-conditions of the index as the conditions of photography's figurality. Photography produces a 'quasi-space of an absolute fiction wholly distinct from the World' (2011: 20). This argument gained considerable number of grandiloquent (and banal) adherents in the late 1980s and 1990s, as the attack on the truth-conditions of indexicality became attached, post-digitalization, to the increased formal mutability of photographic practice. But Laruelle's defence of a conventionalist defence of photography – of its 'unlimited space of fiction that is the finished photo' (2011: 20) – is far from an endorsement of this kind of thinking's anti-realist proscriptions. On the contrary, the irreflective, flat, immersive, automated, anti-thetic, character of photography provides his notion of photographic parallelism with the best realist credentials of all: scientific ones. Photography's idempotent and irreflective flatness is comparable to the framework in which scientific knowledge is experienced and produced – note: produced and experienced, rather than actually being the same as the operations of science – insofar as photography and its observers work in the manner of science to extrude subjective irrelevances and residues. Thus, in these terms, Laruelle is not re-rehearsing the tired arguments about the 'scientificity' of photography that once underwrote photography's positivistic emergence and defence: photographic realism is truth disclosing: ergo photography is

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scientific. Rather the 'scienticity' of photography here lies in the way it interpellates the photographer and spectator within the objectifiable, non-subjective space of the real's conceptualization. Hence, like the experimental methods of science photography operates in the realm of symbolic representations, but, rather than these representations being representations of concepts as in science – concepts of concepts – they are representations of *images*. So, contrary to the transparency and intuitivism of naturalistic accounts of photography, the spectator experiences the real as mediated. So far, so ... very familiar. But what distinguishes Laruelle's account from customary account of mediation based on indexicality is that photographic representation exists in a non-causal relationship to the thing depicted. We experience the real as *Identity* not as depicted object (referent). 'Semblance derives neither from iconic manifestation nor from pragmatics or the norms that make of the photo a visual index, but from the photo's non-specular manifestation of Identity' (2011: 113).

That is, the thing we see and experience is not the thing but its *photographic* image (Identity). But if this identity is not a copy of the real, this identity-effect is in the last-instance real. In turn this real-in-the-last-instance presupposes a further distinction (derived, as we might call it, from the photographic One): the photographic act does not intentionally produce this identity; it simply *presents* it. So, what photography photographs, automatically, non-thetically, idempotently, is *Identity* – which the photographer cannot see – rather than objects, *through* the given depicted objects. '[T]he thing itself in-its-image, rather than the image-of-the-thing' (2011: 98). The photographer "'gives" to things – manifesting as it is without producing or transforming it – their *real identity*' (2011: 56).

This unilateral non-realist realist derailment of photographic causality – that photographs have some residual indexical connection to the thing depicted – has a wider purpose for Laruelle. It punctures a hole in the notion that photography is fundamentally outward looking in orientation, that its mode of depiction is essentially worldly. In this, the unilateral defence of photography as a parallelism is a way of 'scienticizing' the photograph from the 'inside'. That is, once the philosophical, cultural, historical and political 'metaphysic' of photography is stripped away, its autonomous fractal dimension – or rather photography's place in the fractalization of thought, its immanent dimensions – can then be explored. This is where, we might say, the Science-Fictionalization of Laruelle's non-philosophical account of photography begins to offer a point of clarification or concretization, even if it is hard to say it produces anything actually substantive.

How do we look at photographs when we cease to perceive their physical objects as a priority?² What happens when the worldly hermeneutic (decisionist) frameworks of philosophical account of photography and phototherapy are deposed, in order to think the 'photographic state of things in a more 'internal' or more immanent way [?]' (2011: 62). For Laruelle, the answer is: photography releases its non-relational essence: an absolute reflection, unique each time, that is ceaselessly

2. This question seems to have been derived from a long lost modernist phototherapy manual: how do we look at photographs beyond their manifest objects and relations?

3. Although, it is hard not to see the concepts of Man – as irregular force – and Lived Experience, as anything but vitalist in orientation. (An influence on Laruelle has been Michel Henry's phenomenology). As Brassier notes in *Nihil Unbound*, Laruelle, tends to assume that we already 'know' ourselves to be human (2007: 214).

productive of multiple identities. And this is generated theoretically, through what Laruelle calls, a Generalized Fractality – in order to distinguish it from a conventional Mandelbrotian grammar of geometric fractality (the familiar figures of jagged profiles, points and sharp angles from Chaos theory that bisect a curve). For, employing fractality to photographs in general terms, for Laruelle, is not, about simply placing the disjunction between the photograph and its objects, within a geometric framework of analysis that will speak the language of photographic immanence 'microscopically', as if we are being encouraged to calculate the hidden mathematical relations of the photograph. Rather, General Fractality is a putting out of play of resemblance through a generalized openness to the irregularity of appearances in any given photographic representation, in order to purge visualization of the stabilizations of the (philosophical) imaginary. Indeed, if photographs are fictive in their parallelism to the World, they nevertheless operate in order to purge representation and the arts of the disabling fictions of hermeneutics (in this sense Laruelle's non-concept of photography, whether he acknowledges or not, operates from within this realist legacy of the avant-garde). In these terms, General Fractality functions more broadly within Laruelle's non-philosophical critique of 'wholes' and 'totalities' – of which, in this instance, would be the humanist, political or worldly accounts of manifest photographic content. Thus General Fractality works to break the symmetries of perception and thought that constitute the fatigued 'wholes' of the philosophical and literary categories of photographic intention and interpretation, by producing a non-hierarchical conceptualization of the cognitive materials provided by the photograph. This is because photographs possess non-schematic content that is irreducible to the classical dimension of perception. 'A photo is more than a window or an opening, it is an infinite open, an unlimited universe from vision to the pure state, with neither mirror nor window' (2011: 108). General Fractality, then, is a non-hierarchical forcing based on the separation of photographic Identity from the object, rather, than a subtractive mathematization of vision and the object. Furthermore, fractality plays a larger part in Laruelle's non-philosophical account of the image and photography. Fractality is not a scientizing method that non-philosophy harnesses, but a 'transcendental creative force' (2011: 141) in which non-philosophy and the concept of non-photography participate. Hence non-philosophy is the theoretic account of irregularity-force – the forcing of the edge – as a force of creation, a sweeping away of all inert symmetries. That is, in short, non-philosophy is the theory of the excess of creation over the created (of pre-given 'wholes', whether those 'wholes' are disciplines or discrete entities). However, for Laruelle this theoretic account of irregularity-force is not a Deleuzian-type vitalism.³ General Fractality 'does not float in an irreal and indeterminate transcendence, but adds itself to the real-One of which it is the only possible action' (2011: 136).

But how far does this commitment to fractality, irregularity-force as transcendental creative force, and unilaterality get us? Does it take us into the realms of a 'new vision' (2011: 136), as Laruelle hopes, or leave us stranded on a bleak moon in a distant galaxy, with odd-looking creatures?

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Indeed, how far can any anti-dialectical, philosophically suspensive theory take us, particularly one that, as Ray Brassier (2003: 33) describes is 'neither critical nor constructive'? Fractality, irregularity-force, 'stranger-thought', unilaterality, idempotency and the generic, are all frustratingly without objectifiable outcome. At no point do we learn in *The Concept of Non-Photography*, for instance, how General Fractality works as an engagement with extant photographs, or, as a principle of 'excess creation over the created' embedded in actual practices and actual institutions. General Fractality, may not float in the irreal, but it certainly floats somewhere.

Laruelle's non-philosophy, like all anti-dialectical philosophies is predicated upon the notion that thinking fails or stops when 'of-relations' overstep 'this is-relations'. Of-relations presuppose indeterminate connections between part and whole, one and all, one and the other, leading to all kind of philosophical speculation; 'this-is' relations, secure a non-metaphysical supplement or clarity, leading to non-positivistic identity and possible axiomatization. 'Of-relations' are held to be predicated, then, on a range of weak connectives ('about', 'expression', 'indication', 'concerned with'), that favour first-person supposition: 'I believe so, on the best available evidence'. 'This is-relations' infer the opposite: knowledge claims are derived from non-subjective and non-translatable, experimentally testable criteria. But Laruelle is not saying, along with working scientists, that 'of-relations' are thereby illicit because they are not testable. This is his non-positivistic, transcendentalizing side. Rather, he is saying that 'of-relations' are illicit, because they inflate the (philosophical) Subject and thereby deflate the open, 'stranger friendly' production of knowledge. Philosophy is a system or systems designed to produce interminable difference, but not actual Difference (methodologies that can instantiate the unintuitable real). But there is problem. Once thinking in these terms becomes a 'surgical intervention upon the body of transcendental synthesis; severing terms from relations, amputing reciprocity and sharpening one-sidedness' (Brassier 2007: 230), it looses in workable pliancy what it gains in scientific Identitarian clarity. Dialectical reflexivity is not the nadir of decisionist subjectivity, but the means of reflecting the passage of thought and praxis through its real conditions of existence. Thus what is actually won in the name of a new science, in speaking of the essence of the real, when the real, in these terms, is reductively opposed to reality (the World, History, the Social, Culture)? The result is that Laruelle's various non-decisionist 'escape velocities' from philosophy, produce a *de-circumscribed* thought of the real, in conjunction with a *re-phenomenalized* account of Man, a mixture that places at one end of the scale a deconstrained radical immanence, and at the other a pre-ontology of Being. One needs only to apply a modicum of dialectical reflexivity, to ask, then: why does Laruelle's non-philosophy take the strained form it does, at the conjuncture it does?

Laruelle's non-philosophy is formed under the three substantive non-philosophical scepticisms of modern thought: Feuerbach (Man as collective consciousness or general intellect); Freud (the implacability of the unconscious; Man as 'unthinking' thinking being) and Marx (the real transformative work of praxis), but what is deemed merely speculative in these thinkers, becomes

4. In this light, see one of Laruelle's former pupil, Gilles Grelet (2002).

unrealizable in Laruelle. In working to essentialize philosophy as decisionist, and thereby, carry Feuerbach, Freud and Marx with him into a 'new vision', he simultaneously denudes philosophy of its historical powers of reflection. Marx does not critique the fictive 'wholes' of philosophy in order to terminate philosophy's reflective dialectical reach. Rather, he delimits its presumptions to conceptualize the real on the basis of pre-existing philosophical categories. Clearly Laruelle, at one level, inherits this demand. But in his hands it becomes a purgative rather than a corrective, a stripping out of all historical relationality, as if the emancipation of humans from the theatre of Cartesian consciousness – if it is to remain unilaterally consistent – must at all points be unbound from 'expressive forms' of 'I think'. Thus in the post-philosophical and post-political fallout from May '68, its hard not to see in Laruelle a resolute attempt to force philosophy beyond the 'poor and desperate' finitude of dialectical reconciliation with the moment of political defeat. In this he is the philosophic partner of Deleuze and Badiou. But unlike these thinkers, his theory of radical immanence of the One, refuses to bend to circumstances at all. Philosophy as the making of 'fictive worlds' of belief remains the (ultra-leftist) primary target.⁴ In this he is far from unembarrassed to compare his non-philosophy to kind of Gnosticism. The Gnostics, '*gnostikos*'/'the learned', believed in the spiritual release of man from his bondage in matter. As such – and this is why they were condemned as heretics – knowledge was held to be more important than faith. Indeed, the salvation of the soul was to be achieved through a working knowledge of the mysteries of the universe, and not through a submission to faith and its institutional power. So, in the operations of non-philosophy there is a militant, almost hyper-Bolshevization of thinking against the categorial, in which the 'flattened' Subject – the subject who is 'algorithmic' rather than expressive in his or her thinking – moves in *unswerving thought* against dead matter. This wholly abstracted conception of the Subject in the book on photography produces a peculiar kind of estrangement of received knowledge. We learn a lot about what photography *cannot* possibly be under non-philosophy (connected to the World, the Event, History, the City and Politics) in order to release it from the symmetrical torments of decisionism, yet it is not clear that in the absence of such things what materials General Fractality has to work with and struggle against. The estrangements of non-philosophy, then, are untendered things. Which is not to say they are not compelling by way of their radical axiomatic reductions, but, given their levels of abstraction, they operate without issue, insofar as what drives non-philosophy is the essence of things separate from all historical mediation. But, maybe, this is a consequence of the relative 'youth' and density of Laruelle's non-philosophy in translation. Laruelle's non-philosophy now in turn has to be 'broken' down and assimilated (or dis-assimilated), in ways that allow the concepts of unilaterality, the generic, the idempotent, General Fractality and thinking as the intervention of the stranger, to find lines of flight to the political and social emancipatory claims of non-philosophy more generally. Then the unfortunate impression of a mountain producing a mouse – albeit a very smart and able mouse – can be assuaged.

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