



DOCUMENT

UFD004  Amanda Beech  Mikko Canini  Mark Fisher  Iain Hamilton Grant  Robin Mackay

# The Real Thing: Panel Discussion

In this panel discussion held as part of The Real Thing at Tate Britain in 2010, participants explore the aesthetic, political, and philosophical questions raised by Speculative Realism

---

ROBIN MACKAY: Perhaps the best way to sum up the core concern of speculative realism is in a question: How can human thought access a reality that would exist before, after, or without the human? Upon which another question immediately arises: Why would we assume that thought can indeed do so? The various figures within speculative realist thought have different answers to these questions, and indeed different reasons for asking them. This is the first thing to emphasise: SR is not really a unified doctrine; it's more of a set of shared problematics.

Two of the authors who have been associated with the term, Quentin Meillassoux and Ray Brassier, take as their starting point the status of scientific knowledge: How is it that we are able to make statements about, for example, stars that are billions of years older than our planet? What is it that we're talking about when we talk about phenomena that existed before they could have been manifest to any mind? Because such statements only make sense if they refer to some sort of real that precedes the capacity for its manifestation to consciousness (presumably human). The only alternative would be a strain of relativism holding that reality—including the realities indexed by such scientific statements—ultimately consists in the fact of our linguistic or social agreement on a certain way of speaking, a consensus among consciousnesses.

The crucial point is that this would make nonsense of any scientific statement of the aforementioned sort, because it simply doesn't make sense to say 'this star burnt out two million years ago—for us'. This is what Meillassoux has dubbed the 'correlationist' problem, then. It seems to present us with an acute conflict between the powers of thought, as the Humanities understands them, bounded by the finite frame of the human, and what would seem to be the cognitive achievements of the scientific world-image, the very material basis of modern human civilization.<sup>1</sup>

Iain Hamilton Grant's book *Philosophies of Nature after Schelling*<sup>2</sup> begins with a different question: Why should thought itself be excluded from a naturalizing principle: thought is produced, thought is synthesized, and therefore philosophy has to think its own production.

What unifies SR is not so much the starting points and the traditions from which its proponents hail, as their shared refusal of this collapse into correlationism. For one thing, as Graham Harman has rightly said, the latter simply makes philosophy a lot less interesting. And I think one of the driving forces behind SR has been a will to make philosophy more interesting; and more interested in the world beyond human discourse, language, and consciousness.

1. See the 'dossier' on Speculative Realism in *Collapse II*.  
2. (London and New York: Continuum, 2008).

---

## A realist philosophy is not some kind of reversion to our default perception of a world of 'real things', but a necessarily speculative enterprise

---

But in any case, this real we are talking about, whether it's addressed by quantum physics, geology, naturephilosophy, or a theory concerning the relations between objects amongst themselves, is not a naive realism—naive realism is as much to be avoided as the slide into correlationism: Harman has called it, instead, a 'weird realism'. For example, the reality that contemporary physics tells us about has no correlative correspondence with our everyday experience of reality; and so SR, I would say, comprises both the thought that contemporary realism *de facto* involves a speculative point of view, and the insistence that a realist philosophy is not some kind of reversion to our default perception of a world of 'real things', but a necessarily speculative enterprise.

One starting point for this Late at Tate event, *The Real Thing*, was Mark Fisher's recent article in *Frieze* in which he asked what the wider cultural ramifications of this move towards new kinds of realism might be. This question is very pertinent on a number of levels. Firstly just because of the fact—and we're proving it right now—that SR has engendered a lot of interest outside the realm of academic philosophy. That's simply a fact, people are interested in it. Someone was telling me tonight that geographers are particularly interested in SR thought: who would have thought that geographers would be coming to speculative philosophy for new tools, this is fascinating—and what's more, ending up at an art show. Because—secondly—we find that artists are evidently intrigued by these developments and are using SR in various different ways; and this is not all one-way, since, equally, I think, art and art discourse have anticipated many of the themes and questions of realism that are emerging in SR. Of course, if artists were just appropriating concepts from philosophy and illustrating or exemplifying them, that wouldn't be particularly interesting. In fact, the concerns of SR are echoed, or paralleled, in art discourse, and in the struggle against certain orthodoxies whose roots are similar to or identical to those of the philosophical orthodoxies

from which speculative realists are trying to find an escape route.

Just as the philosophical realism we are talking about is not a naive realism, the way in which the artists selected for this event have addressed realism is not primarily in terms of realistic depiction; there is a divergence here between realism and representation, and I think we can use SR to think back into art history in various ways, and to think about what is philosophically at stake when realism becomes divorced from representation, indexicality, or authenticity; and even antagonistic towards them.

And as Mark also pointed out in his article, we need to address the question of the political stakes of SR. We'll open the discussion by asking the panelists what they think the wider cultural ramifications of SR might be, and firstly I'd like to ask Mark about this political dimension.

MARK FISHER: I think we're living at a time when the word 'reality' is at a premium, right at the centre of culture. But the model of reality that is pushed by mainstream entertainment media, and indeed by a supporting political culture, neoliberal culture, which is sadly still around us, is a very banal and reduced sense of what reality is. At the centre of this model of reality is what I call *psychobiographical individualism*—the reality TV show, the idea that we are somehow seeing some unadorned reality there. Now, as Robin's already indicated, of course this has implications for culture and art—this very reduced, narcissistic, and neurotic model of reality which is not only human-centred, but centred on a particular ultra-banal understanding that humans have of themselves. And what SR has done is exposed that model of reality as a very limited and local construction.

---

## The world disclosed by science and the world of our own phenomenological self-perceptions are completely at odds with each other

---

So, to take the long shot and to return to the question about the relation between art history and philosophy, I would say that for me the starting point of

SR as philosophy is Kant. Now, Kant is the most disputed figure in SR. For some, he's the figure against which the whole of SR must be defined. But for me, Kant is in many ways the first speculative realist, or rather he opens up SR even though he abjures it himself. What Kant does simply is to register, you might say, the trauma of enlightenment, which is that the world disclosed by science and the world of our own phenomenological self-perceptions are completely at odds with each other. Science simply tells us this; science explodes naive realism, the idea the world simply is just like it appears to us; which is kind of what the meat-and-potatoes British empiricist tradition started off trying to say: the world's just like it appears to us, forget all these abstractions. Really, Kant's starting point is the problems that British empiricism got into when it tried to maintain that, and couldn't do so convincingly. So, as opposed to that naive realism, where things are just as we experience them to be, if you don't start from experience, but from something else completely different, then the world turns out to be totally alien to how we actually experience it. And Kant registers this disjunct in philosophy in a fundamental way.

Now, the subsequent history of philosophy in the academy, you could say, consisted in saying that, since we can't know the world in itself, as it really is, forget about that, and we'll just talk about how the world's *constructed*. And there are various different models of this with varying degrees of tedium, right up to deconstruction (which, allegedly, is realist and has always been realist! But I'll leave that aside for the moment...). So I think Kant is one figure, then, for this traumatic disjunct. Because we know that the world isn't how it appears to us. We know that. Yet we can't *live* it. So life is idiotic in that way, that's what Kant shows: life's idiotic, life has certain demands, and we can't help but construct the world, we can't help but think that we're real people, that we exist as subjects, even though in a certain sense we don't.

A parallel figure to Kant in art, I think, may be Holbein. And I'm sure people are familiar with Holbein's famous painting *The Ambassadors*, which in some ways discloses the same disjunct. On the one hand, at the top you have the full plenitude of a symbolic world, the socially-mediated world that we're all familiar with. And at the bottom, via anamorphosis,



we see the famous skull. And the point is, we can't see the two together. The skull, in a way, stands in for the real; in the sense that your death is more real than you are. But what you're seeing in science now, and what SR is interested in, is that your own death is banal. You also now face solar catastrophism—we know it's going to happen: you know more certainly than you know you're going to wake up tomorrow, that the sun is going to explode. But that's a mere minor catastrophe compared to the total destruction of the universe, in this asymptopia where the whole structure of matter will fall apart. Now, the point is that that is unequivocally real; and it's more real than any of us. And even though we can't experience that—plainly, it's incompatible with us as experiencing subjects—nevertheless we can think about it, and we're compelled to think about it.

That, for me, is what SR opens up. And as Robin says, that's not a new thing in a way, but its not accidental that it appears particularly at this time, where there's a weird parallel between reality TV on the one hand and the standard discourse of philosophy in the academy on the other—it appears as a real traumatic event.

RM: I'd like to pick up on a couple of things there. First of all the absolutely crucial point that we can't live what we know. And what's important to me, in terms of looking at philosophy with art, with literature, is that this is what artists and writers allow us to do, is to make experiments in living this impossible reality. That's why science fiction, weird fiction, are

so important to SR. Because those are the writers who create scenarios that allow us to imagine for a moment what it would be like to actually inhabit a reality where, say, we directly experienced every moment of every day the fact that we would soon be destroyed by solar catastrophe; that our our so-called self is just a puppet; and so on—without falling back into that dogmatic slumber of the spontaneous, banal image of reality that Mark spoke about.

That's important in terms of the way in which SR connects philosophy to its outside. Incidentally it is also behind the whole vector of the sequence of recent volumes of collapse, where SR was followed by *Concept Horror*—What kind of horrors would it deliver us to if we were able to live this reality?—and then *The Copernican Imperative*—How can we accept the insufficiency of our intuition to gain any traction on the real that the collective enterprise of scientific thought reveals to us?

I'd like to ask Amanda Beech, whose work has been inspired and informed by SR, and who is herself a writer and theorist as well as an artist, what are the implications of SR that she finds compelling.

AMANDA BEECH: I think many of the reasons I would give for an interest in the debates and problematics that, in its loose form, SR describes or articulates, relate to my negative feelings about a lot of the orthodoxies of critique that have been around in the art world for such a long time, and persist today. I could sit here and be very negative, which I'm going to try not to be, but I do think it's necessary for me to describe some of these orthodoxies in order to describe how SR and the debates that stem from it allow me to try to think past those doxas.

Art has often had a fear of making meaning, and of thinking about the image, to the extent that, in the orthodoxies of relational aesthetics, there's this primacy of the relation that's discussed and idealized in art practice; and which is mapped onto 'social engagement', 'good political practice', 'participation'. I know that we're all aware of this, so I won't go into it. But I do think that this primacy, this orthodoxy and this idealization of relations, which have been paramount in art for some time now, comes about because they don't want to think about what images *mean*, and they don't want to think about

the production of the meaning that they articulate in terms of what they *represent*. So they normatively dismiss meaning on behalf of representationalism, but they forget about realism. So that is my problem with a lot of those practices. Also that they claim politics—left or radical politics—in very specific ways which I don't agree with.

On the other hand, we have a lot of practices in art around us that work with irony. And they figure a notion of institutional power with which to identify, and then complain about their finitude in the face of it, in a knowing and 'clever' or 'funny' way. And, whether you like it or not, in art, both of those genres of practice, whether it's the open, convivial, interpretative field of relations, or the ironic interest in the finitude of 'what art can/can't do these days', both have expressions of finitude within them that don't really look at the banality of finitude, as it's treated in SR thinking.

---

### SR allowed me to think a concept of a mind-independent reality that isn't re-mapped back onto the condition of subjectivity, whether in the form of mastery or mysticism

---

So when I'm making my work or thinking about ideas in terms of artistic culture, what has been interesting for me in SR was that it has allowed me to think a concept of a mind-independent reality that isn't re-mapped back onto the condition of subjectivity, whether in the form of mastery or mysticism, which is what I see a lot in artistic practice.

What that might mean in terms of making art is an open question. An important fact for me is that it's not genre-specific. It doesn't correlate back to a particular genre. And that's what's engaging to me about it, it's a very speculative premise: that one can think about producing images, and making meaning, at the same time understanding that there's no absolute and stable referent to rely on for the stable production of that meaning.

RM: I think we should turn now to Iain, 'the insider'! Iain, are you interested in what SR can do outside philosophy, and what do you think about the way in which it's being used?

IAIN HAMILTON GRANT: First of all, let's think about what realism is, and what sense it would make to say that there are parts of it in which interest could valuably be spent. Because this is the best way, I think, of considering where we are now. And by 'we' I mean all of us: Europe, its civilization—this is the root of it. What we think is valuable is what we think is real. And that problem, the idea that we value things that are real, gives rise to Santa Claus: it's insanity, it is schizophrenia written into the constitution of European civilization. And yet this is what we think. And were I to say, I am interested in realism, but only as it occurs in philosophy, I would be playing that game.

But there's a serious point behind that: which is to ask a question about realism and the nature of our experience. The alibi for the fact that this European legacy of thinking—and Mark is quite right, it is Kant—thinks about what is valuable in terms of what is real, and thinks about what is real, therefore, reciprocally, only in terms of what is valuable; the idea, in other words, that politics and ethics governs reality—this delusion—will feed directly into exactly how we might characterize the contemporary state not only of philosophy, but of culture in general. And I think this relates to some of Amanda's comments there about how the art world considers its products, its making of artworks—what is possible for art *now*, as if 'now' has a significance it didn't have 'then'. How many people actually think that? Hands up if you think we live in a privileged era of history! Hands up if you think that all humanity has been struggling to get to this point! Hands up if you think fourteen billion years of evolution has been only in the service of producing this evening...because I do!

---

### Do you only believe things once the eye has been appropriately stimulated? 'I want a belief—press my eye'!

---

If we don't accept that, if we don't think fourteen billion years of evolution produces exactly the kind of set-up that we might value, then what's at stake in the idea that, simply because we can't experience it, it isn't real? We can doubt things we can't experience. This is the other side of the folk wisdom that seeing is believing...and it is garbage. Actually, belief

usually has nothing to do with the organ of the eye. Do you only believe things once the eye has been appropriately stimulated? 'I want a belief—press my eye'!

I actually have a perfect example of someone who thought that this was not the way to instill beliefs, but the way to distort reality. This someone was a physicist from the early nineteenth century; his name was Johann Wilhelm Ritter. And he died at the age of thirty-eight from alcohol poisoning...and batteries! He was the Jimi Hendrix of eighteenth-century physics, if you like. He wrote a book on galvanism, in collaboration with none less than Alexander von Humboldt, soon to become a major figure, the inspiration behind Darwin, and so on. Anyway, Ritter had this idea that our intellect is derived not from sense experience but from physics. To prove this, he took Kant's theory that we have the sensations we have due to the way our mind constructs the material that it has to work with into the reality that we all, somehow, recognize. Ritter thought this importantly false—for him it was, in fact, physics that gave rise to the thoughts we might have. And so he designed an experiment to demonstrate this.

The experiment was—get this, this is like Stelarc two hundred years ago—he got a battery, and he applied the electrodes to his eyes. And then he switched the power on, and the current went through, and he started trying to write down what he was experiencing. Of course he couldn't see a damn thing, so he couldn't really read his notes later! The idea was, however, that the physics of sense experience give rise to altered states. In consequence, we cannot rely on sense experience as a reliable guide to any reality whatsoever. And this is something that I think we all recognize.

There are things, in our personal and biographical lives, that we will and won't do. We are quite happy to say 'I don't do that, I will do that'. This idea that experience is multiply malleable has always, however, been tested by artists. I'm thinking, in fact, about Stelarc. I remember a conference, which Mark will also remember, the first Virtual Futures conference at Warwick University—what a classic!—it featured Orlan, during whose presentation someone fainted, but also it featured Stelarc (who had the most tremendously encouraging laugh you have ever heard

a human being make). He was asked about his experiments. His first experiments consisted in hanging himself across the Australasian coasts by means of meat hooks in his flesh. And he was asked, How did you decide where to put the hooks? Did you do experiments first? And he said 'it's really just trial and error...did you know that skin squeaks when you pierce it?' And everyone went a strange colour and felt a little sick.... Stelarc was engaged in using 'the body'—this was how he always referred to it, he would say 'not this middle-aged slightly flabby body that happens to be my personal problem, hehee!', but 'the body', as a physical medium for ideal experiments in the real.

The body became a site of experiment. This is what art does. Concepts do this too. Philosophy's forgotten this: the idea that philosophy in the current age, that art in the current age, can do no more than rehearse new versions of old solutions to problems we no longer understand is simply giving up the ghost; it's giving up on the idea that there are still things to make, still things to think, that have not been thought or made before. It's cowardice, it's simple cowardice.

---

### **The body became a site of experiment. This is what art does. Concepts do this too. Philosophy's forgotten this**

---

The body became a site of experiment. This is what art does. Concepts do this too. Philosophy's forgotten this

RM: Mikko, I'm interested to hear how you think that SR has informed your work. Is there a particularly compelling core idea in SR that's been valuable for you?

MIKKO CANINI: I might just step back from your question and speak a bit more generally. What occurred to me in thinking about the link between SR ideas and a contemporary art, is that if we take the wider field of cultural practice, what is called 'the Humanities' or something, if we take that general field of activity through a relation between figure and ground, and we think about music or literature or film, the variety of them, and it seems to me—

speaking very generally, because there are counterexamples, and I don't want to say that this is an inherent truth about these things, just that this is how they historically developed—it seems to me that as viewers, as readers, we tend to approach most of these media with the expectation that we'll be presented ground through the figure, or at least that if we want to reach the ground, we have to go through the figure. So, in the novel, we expect to approach the narrative through the protagonists, their ideas and interests and contingent problems, etc. And in music, or at least popular music, we come to the expectation that the figure of the voice or the solo or the melody is atop the ground, which is the chords, or rhythms, or whatnot. But for some reason—and I'm sure it's just an historical accident, it's traceable—viewers have come to confront artworks at least with the possibility that they will just be presented with ground, or ground-as-figure, and that it needn't be mediated by some other fictional being in-between.

---

### **SR seems to be about trying to make some sense of the ground, and not just this kind of obsessive interest with the figure**

---

So there seems to me some kind of comfortable familial fit between contemporary art on one hand and SR thought on the other, in so far as SR seems to be about trying to make some sense of this ground, and not just this kind of obsessive interest with the figure. I still don't understand this obsessive, narcissistic interest in a particularly stupid species of monkey, but that's what the Humanities seem to be engaged with largely. And that, at least as a general field, art seems to offer some escape from, occasionally.

RM: Iain, how might this question of figure and ground relate to the philosophical search for grounds in your work?

IHG: One of the things that did occur to me was that figure stands out against the ground by relief, by contrast, and so forth. And yet figure and ground are themselves local phenomena in a series of figures and grounds. So there's an infinity-room effect

there: the mirrors reflecting the reflection in the first mirror, being reflected in a third, and so on. This is like set theory constructed in glass and metal...you have this endless succession of grounds and figures, in other words, all receding from the one, begging the question, fundamentally, what is the ground? What is the ground on which it all stands? And this is a prime example of the kind of question that is as equally ridiculed in some circles as it is pursued in others. I'm thinking for example of Stephen Hawking: 'Physics has proved that God is unnecessary', to which Rabbi Sachs responded 'No, no, no, no, no, you haven't explained *why*, you've only explained *how*'. So, the ground is supplied by—wait for it—the law of gravity. To which the obvious retort is, where does the law of gravity come from? Are the laws of nature themselves creatures of evolutionary development, or are the laws of nature there forever? Are they, in other words, a replacement for God, or do they not answer the question of ground? So I think that's a fantastic kaleidoscope to open up, to get some image, some workable structure, to think about the kind of problems that thinking about reality poses us.

MF: The question of atheism is crucial here to the whole problem of SR. The problem of atheism hasn't even really started in culture yet. Another reason to talk about Holbein is because of Holbein's dead Christ, because a conventionally realistic picture of Christ was a horrific kind of trauma. But atheism hasn't filtered through into culture at all. We get people like, famously, Dawkins. Dawkins has this model of evolution, but he still thinks—as Sadie Plant used to say—that he can be Richard Dawkins; he still thinks that the same old world of punting on the river remains the same, that we can have the same old world we used to have and we can have atheism. Well, SR is saying that enlightenment entails atheism, and atheism has not even begun.

---

## The question of atheism is crucial to the whole problem of SR. The problem of atheism hasn't even really started in culture yet

---

It's significant that a lot of these key thinkers, starting with Descartes and then Kant also, have to posit God; in order to rescue ordinary banal reality at any level, they have to use God to act as the guarantor for that. And that remains the case today, only we've got different kinds of God that survive. And evolutionary psychology is the home of the new god. Against the sense that evolution is the destruction of teleology, this is the idea that the model was constructed in advance for some purpose. The point of evolution is to completely crash that, but the way in which evolution is retold to us in culture is the opposite: Oh look, everything you do has some purpose; this meta-subject called 'evolution' has sorted things out for you. God creeps back in, and it creeps back in amongst those people who claim to be speaking from the atheist's perspective.

I think the great phrase in Amanda's *Sanity Assassin* is 'Life is a Myth'—but we still think there's this thing called life, we still think this has some kind of meaning. At any level: not just that life itself has meaning, but that even that the word 'life' has any meaning, which no-one's ever been able to establish. Except, the only thing you can say definitively about things that are alive is that they die. So once again I think we confront this disjunct: that we, through a series of pure happenstance events, are a form of intelligence—or rather, a form of intelligence operates through us—that is able to contemplate the demise of every substrate that allowed that form of intelligence to emerge. And that's what SR is registering.



RM: On the broadest level, would the question of SR in cultural practice then be: What experiments are possible in practice in attempting to glimpse or to 'live' that reality? But what makes us think it might be possible for us to make that kind of escape from the default realities with which evolution has saddled us?

AB: And that's the kind of question where you have to say, is this possible *for us*? For us.... Isn't it about being able to speak to the nature of knowledge *without* correlating it back to precisely what you're saying?

RM: 'What is to be done?'

---

### Any art that might want to involve itself in an SR discourse completely runs the risk of looping back into bemoaning some type of finitude

---

AB: I was actually going to mention 'What is to be Done', and that kind of post-Leninist thing—and then post- that, Nancy and Lacoue-Labarthe's invocation of it in the '80s, the What is to be done? question. And I think the interesting thing for me is how SR thought allows me to critique that notion of instrumentalism or purposiveness that art has often loved, whether ironically or otherwise. Also, the issue a lot of the time for me is that any art that might want to involve itself in an SR discourse completely runs the risk of looping back into bemoaning some type of finitude.

MF: The point about humans is that we don't even have finitude: if we had finitude things would be much better. We'd then be animals. But we don't have finitude, because we're tormented by the infinite.

IHG: That's a fantastic point, I'm glad you raised it, and I'd like to address this question of purposes, and how we might make this project here cohere. The thing I was thinking about Hume was that he criticized virtually all of philosophy and all of theology on the following grounds: How dare we take this tiny little bit of organic matter as the model for the entire universe?

RM: We still haven't learnt that lesson.

IHG: We still haven't. And you ask how is it possible to make these experiments; it's not easy to overthrow all of this conditioning. You know, when I asked how many of you think that now is important, well, this is the question of modernity. Read Kant: What is Enlightenment, What is modernity? Enlightenment is now, enlightenment is the day today that marks out the difference between yesterday and tomorrow. Enlightenment is what allows us to ask questions like 'What is to be done?'. Enlightenment is what says, we can create purpose, we can make things make sense, we can make things better. Enlightenment is exactly that, it is that difference that *now* introduces with respect to the past—this is exactly what he says. Foucault repeats it two hundred years later, after translating Kant's Anthropology: the fascinating idea that history is somehow (a) significantly marching forward (b) significantly divorced from natural history to be able to be a separate register, this is a bizarre thought.

So it's not a simple matter to say 'down with correlationism!' In fact, Meillassoux's term, correlation, is used by Husserl: it's used to refer to what takes place when we have what Husserl calls 'evidence'. I have an experience, what is the 'evidentness' of that experience to me? There is a correlation that takes place between the experience and the evidence. And the evidence sits uneasily on the borderline between the content of my experience and the cause of my experience, it's reducible to neither, but that's where it sits, that's the role Husserl allots to it.

So it's very interesting to think that even the coining of the term 'correlationism' itself has a rich and deep history. I was recently at a conference of phenomenologists in Italy, and they couldn't stop talking about speculative realism being—and this was embarrassing—being simply a naive response to correlationism, which is not something we can do without, because it's fundamental to the nature of experience. These are arguments that have been made for hundreds of years, and it's interesting that they recur.

So when I'm saying, do something new, when Robin says, make these experiments, when we ask what is to be done, when we ask what is the character



of modernity with respect to the past, we're asking huge questions. Fundamentally, what is the nature of the experiment? An experiment is something that, unless you're working for ICI, you don't know the result of before you start it; or Pfizer: if you're testing a drug, you damn well want to know the answer before you test it, that's why we slaughter other species—take another animal, fill it with drugs...four hundred saccharine a day down a rat's throat and, surprise surprise, it gets cancer!

RM: But it's not only the fact that most of us are too cowardly to put a battery in our eye—that's part of the reason, of course, that these experiments haven't been carried forward with the alacrity we might wish! But there's also the apparently irremediable imperviousness of the manifest image, of our default image of ourselves, to even the most bizarre and incredibly strange deliverances of science. One entertaining example of this is the interview we did with Julian Barbour in *Collapse V*. This is a well-respected physicist, who insists that time doesn't exist. This is not just a crackpot theory, he mathematically constructs a model in which time has been literally taken out of the equation, and he believes—and many physicists are taking this seriously—that this elimination of time is the way to bring together the quantum level and the cosmological level. Now, all through the process of editing that volume with Damian Veal, I was interested in this question of whether the 'Copernican Imperative', which demands that we cede to a model of reality in which we—sentient earth-dwelling mammals—are excentred, means that we have to give up all hope of connecting on an experiential level with this reality. So I said, we should ask him what it would mean if we were able to absorb the knowledge that time doesn't exist, if somehow we could cognitively digest that into a compelling belief that would transform our everyday conduct; if we could 'live it'. Barbour's reply was rather disarmingly mundane: he basically said, well, I think we'd all be a lot more relaxed! So there's the disconnect....

What I'd like to move on to now, if the panelists find it interesting, is the sense in which we're being *forced* into thinking this way. Considering SR in its relation to apocalyptic environmental scenarios, one popular text I've found myself turning to over and over again when I talk to people from outside

philosophy about SR is Alan Weisman's book *The World Without Us*.<sup>3</sup> The title really says it all: it's simply an account of how the various traces of civilization on Earth would gradually degrade and disappear following the extinction of the human race. It basically is a speculative fiction bearing upon what Meillassoux calls the archeofossil—that which exists without being manifest to any consciousness—but with the opposite temporality (it is a fossil of the future, not the past). A symmetry that is evident, I think, to anyone who reads SR and connects it with current ecological concerns.

---

### SR seems to be timely in a certain sense with respect to these contemporary ecological concerns

---

So I'd like to note this way in which SR seems to be timely in a certain sense with respect to these contemporary ecological concerns, which is something I see reflected in several of the works we are showing here tonight. Particularly Mikko, I think, in his work, has located the imaginary site for this thinking of the real or the 'object without us' in the genre of the apocalyptic. This may seem a crass reading of SR, but there is something very compelling about this link between the philosophical level and this pop-cultural level, and the fact that this 'movement' appears at a moment when we're effectively being forced to contemplate the scenario of a 'world without us'. Mikko, in *The Black Sun Rise*, these two levels seem to be articulated to create a certain affect of dread.

MC: I'm gonna dodge the question—some kind of anxiety about talking about my work in front of large groups of people! But you said something SR and the contemporary: Why now, why did it happen now, where is the interest in these things coming from? And you raised the issue of ecological collapse, which of course we're all familiar with, the various possible scenarios and how they play out. That does seem to be one side of it: What is the world, the ground, or however we describe this place out there, nature? But the other side seems to be a growing awareness that it's not just the world that is changing, but humans as a group. And I was struck by the

3. (London: Virgin Books, 2008).

geologists who say that we are living in a distinct geological period, the anthropocene, which has to do with the fact that through technology and human activity, we've been moving materials all over the world, terraforming the planet, creating new bodies of water, drying up other ones, digging up materials from ancient geological strata and bringing them to the surface, producing new chemicals; so that human beings have gone from just being a biological factor throughout the world, like other animals, to being a geological fact.

RM: There's an image in Weisman's book, at the beginning, where he says we could compare the impact of the human race to that of a volcanic event. Effectively the human race is just one massive volcano, bringing stuff up from the earth and scattering it on the surface and up into the atmosphere.

---

### **It's not just about geological concerns, but about both sides of this coin—also about a transformation of what we mean by human**

---

MC: However many thousand years into the future, when a new species has developed and wants to know something about the history of the earth, they won't find information about this time period in the fossil record or remains of skeletons and bits of laptops, but it'll be a distinct geological stratum. And I think anyway it struck me that it's not just about geological concerns, but about both sides of this coin—also about a transformation of what we mean by human.

MF: I think that this brings us to the question of what politics is now. And nothing could be clearer about the important questions which some of these themes such as, as you've said, the ecological thing, starkly confront us with. I think Zizek has dealt with this really well: the problem with ecological politics, green politics, is precisely that the object of it is not experienceable. When you flick a kettle on, you can't connect that with planetary heat-death—certainly, you can't connect it on the level of experience. So the idiotic level of your functioning as a vital machine is operating in a completely different space.

RM: So why not take that as a cue for a kind of politics where each of us comes to understand where power and resources come from, how to generate electricity—let's make our own electricity, have local food, etc., so we can bring all of these operations back within the purview of our local, direct knowledge and experience?

---

### **There's intellectual knowledge, and there's knowledge at the level of life. And I believe that they are just incompatible**

---

MF: Because there's intellectual knowledge, and there's knowledge at the level of life, as it were. And I believe that they are just incompatible in that way. That is why we're facing ecological catastrophe....

RM: So the political solution is not to try to bring together these two types of knowledge.

MF: No, it's to instrumentalize that knowledge *against* everyday experience. Everyday experience is, on every level, the problem. That's why it's interesting that Britain should have been at the centre of the emergence of SR, looking at Britain as a culture: Britain is the oldest capitalist country. On one hand, the home of the most reactionary, boring, commonsense drivel ever. And the philosophical tradition, such as it is, in Britain has been a mandate for that dreary kind of worldview. But at the same time, it's also where you get the most outer-edge cultural production. And what we're confronting here, with this mediocre model of 'experienced reality is all there can be', is the empiricist tradition, which has its philosophical expressions—but more importantly, its cultural expressions. And it puts you in a position of total naivety in relation to anything that, if you think about it for a moment, you would actually regard as real. Clearly this isn't just a philosophical problem, when you're faced with ecological catastrophe.

So, assuming we can't bring these two things together, we can't bring lived experience together with the knowledge we've got, nevertheless I think that we can direct life in accordance with this knowledge we have.

RM: According to your argument, the emergence of SR would be owing to the same reasons why we've got a really crappy railway system? We got there early and now we're suffering....

MF: Maybe...! But again, if you look at Hume as a key figure, because Hume starts out trying to be Mr. meat-and-potatoes: all of your ideas have to come from impressions. Your impressions are your memories and your sense experience. He gets into real problems with this, because there are clearly some forms of ideas that don't seem to have any sort of sensory correlate at all. And it's remarkable in fact that Hume is a key figure in SR on account of two of his statements, fundamentally: Firstly, the one that Meillassoux takes up: reason alone can't give you any sort of mandate for assuming that reality will continue to be as it has in the past.<sup>4</sup> So it's a complete undermining of that whole empiricist tradition that says, put your trust in experience. Because from the point of view of reason, there's absolutely no justification for doing that at all. There's no reason why this microphone wouldn't suddenly fly up into the air. There might be local contingent factors that keep it where it is. But according to reason alone, there's nothing that can guarantee that. And the other statement of Hume, one taken up by Thomas Ligotti in his book *The Conspiracy Against the Human Race*,<sup>5</sup> is this idea that, really, if you lack any kind of drive or interests, then reason can't tell you why you ought to have those interests. Hume's way out of this is to say, well, we just have to go along with the idiocy of social biology, really, what he calls habit; these questions can't be philosophically resolved, and that's where you give up on reason, and just say, okay, these are the sorts of creatures that we are—no more philosophical discussion. I think SR wants to go in the other direction and say, we can think outside the way we are as habituated animals.

RM: Talking to Quentin recently,<sup>6</sup> he pointed out, I thought, a paradoxical but fascinating thing: he said that for centuries people have opposed the imagination to reason, but in fact reason is the imagination because, according to reason, anything can happen.

4. See 'Potentiality and Virtuality', in *Collapse II*.

5. (New York: Hippocampus Press, 2011). See 'Thinking Horror' in *Collapse IV* for an extract.

6. 'Speculative Solution: Quentin Meillassoux and Florian Hecker Talk Hyperchaos'; Urbanomic Document UD001.

So there's a necessary link between SR and the imagination.

IHG: Absolutely true. And of course the reason why, in order to edit purpose out of chaos, Kant has to sacrifice imagination—literally, he says 'you must sacrifice the imagination'... You have to imagine this Prussian protestant with a stiff back, who likes seeing other people in hell. He used to invite people round to his house, get them drunk, and then record them by whatever means was available in the eighteenth century, and post the evidence back to their friends and loved ones, and so forth.... A real swine!

RM: Has this ever been proven?

---

### What speculative realism is interested in, if it's interested in eliminativism at all, is total elimination: there is no immortality guaranteed to the human species

---

IHG: No. Well, Boswell wrote an account of it happening to him.... But what I was wanting to say was that, say we take this problem of instrumentalizing, we technologize our responses to one form, only one form, of global catastrophe. And as Robin said earlier, we've fourteen billion years here, but there are fourteen billion years to come, and then—snuff—out you go—candle in the wind! But let's just take the idea that we might instrumentalize our response to this particular catastrophe, the ecological catastrophe, the catastrophe that is the planet being destroyed. We will still end up with a geology that has a layer that is expressly technological. Maybe it will get larger. Maybe it'll be smaller. But in the long run, there will be, if not this catastrophe, then another. And that's something that I think is worth pondering. Not in and of itself, not for moral lessons—although I think certain moral lessons do derive from it [laughs]! But if you think about the necessity of extinction—and it's a contingent necessity, there's no reason why it will be, other than that it will be—extinction *will* happen—one of the things speculative realists have been interested in is, if you like, the architecture of the ontology of elimination. There are various technical things that could be mentioned about what eliminativism is in

philosophy of mind, but essentially it's saying: see your experience, it's crap, we're gonna strip it away and replace it with codes that say things like, neuron number x is firing at this frequency, and so forth. That's eliminativism. But that's only local—that's only about brains and about our experiences of them. What speculative realism is interested in, if it's interested in eliminativism at all, is total elimination, the absolute elimination that is happening: there is no immortality guaranteed to the human species.

Kant saw this and was worried by it when they dug up fossils, and discovered there was no trace of man. It got the biologist Cuvier so worried that he misidentified a skeleton as belonging to the man who witnessed the flood, when in fact it was a salamander [laughs]! There's a good example of the imagination...!

But there is a role for experience here, and this brings us back to art. If we take this ontology of elimination seriously, all things are teetering on the brink of not being. That applies not just to us: *everything* is teetering on the brink of not being. So there is a fragility to everything: it stands at a very very very narrow point on what's called a scalar field, and should the scale shift at all, it will go, the thing will not be there any more. And yet there is a role for experience in all this. If you doubt this, go and watch Amanda's movie. I was sitting watching it and expecting to have thoughts, boning up for this panel, expecting to have thoughts about it; what I didn't expect was to be carried away. And it was only when I started pulling back from the conclusion—I won't give away the ending [laughs]!—that I began to realize this: it *motivates*; the fact that our bodies are the motors through which physics articulates our brains, as it were, does provide an immediate experience of the necessity of elimination.

RM: Amanda, how would you understand your work sitting between this notion of the instrumentalization of 'useless' and corrosive knowledge, perhaps by way of the imagination, and Iain's advocacy for the fact that one is carried away by the work?

---

## The optimism of SR is the possibility of recoding and revising and reconceptualizing what we might have ever thought to have been manifest in the first place

---

AB: Going back to this idea of reason and the imagination, and maybe the two dynamics that you mention, one of the things I've constantly been interested in is the relationship between rhetoric and force; and also representation and demonstration. And when you're talking about reason and the imagination, I can't help—because, I don't know why, but I'm still interested in Hobbes [laughs] and his revision of his interest in scientific reason towards the end of *Leviathan* and subsequently, where he talks about the idea that the demonstrative powers of science are also rhetorical, in the sense that force is met with in both of those operations. And for me that's something that's always been understood implicitly in the work, where—and it's really hard to answer your question, I'll just do it really quickly—there's a level at which I could talk about the content of the work and the narratives that are played out in a fictional kind of way, and the interests and the kind of micro-debates that are going on the practice. But then also one could talk about the work itself, the work as an object of experience—this is what Iain was talking about—and as, I'd hope, the construction of another language, that demands to be negotiated again. Which is what I'd see as the optimism of SR: the possibility of recoding and revising and reconceptualizing what we might have ever thought to have been manifest in the first place. So it doesn't move away from the idea of the given and the manifest, but thinks about the rearticulation, the reconfiguration, of what that might be.

---