Weaponising Speculation

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BRACKETING the taxonomic controversies surrounding Speculative Realism (is it a species of thought, how many subclasses are there, does it cohere at all?) one can assert that the rhetorical if not argumentative core of Quentin Meillassoux’s reopening of the ‘great outdoors’ has been, and continues to be, a pervasive trajectory in contemporary thinking. This wilderness is differently carved according to varying rubrics: the proliferation of entities (Harman), the unbinding of the transcendental power of thought (Brassier), the absolutisation of facticity (Meillassoux), and the precedence of being-as-nature prior to thinking (Grant). I wish to argue, unsurprisingly, for the importance of Grant’s model for speculatively navigating the spaces of nature. Grant’s position is fortified, I would argue, by the utilisation of Peirce’s continuum and the numerous thinkers of the geometric-cognitive (geo-cog) turn who cast alliances, however obliquely at times, with Schelling and the project of Naturphilosophie.

In order to narrow the boundary of this argument I wish to focus on the realm of the biological, (as the third of Schelling’s Potenz or potencies alongside physics and chemistry). Following Giuseppe Longo’s construal of the biological as a kind of ‘geometry gone wrong,’ I wish to outline a geometrically inflected biology paying particular attention to parasitic nesting taking the genus of gelatinous fungus Septobasidium as an illustrative case study.

Following this claustrophobic biology, I want to argue that speculation (as biologically nested in the philosopher-as-meat-sack) calls for a rigorous theory of localisation to be heretically adapted from sheaf theory as a means of tracking movement in a topological space (here the space of life). Thought, becomes an asymptotic effluvium of the nested parasite that is not only cast out in into the world as a speculative probe and lure but also directly and indirectly haunts the biological, gluing the folds of thought.
to the folds of nested-composition comprising/compromising the speculative thinker.

/1/ – Schelling’s Organics
Schelling’s writing on life begins from the simultaneous critique of vitalism and mechanism. In many ways, as Grant has pointed out, Schelling utilises the organic as a form of organisation. Schelling’s valorisation of life is not, like Bergson’s, a romanticisation of creativity but posits life as a particular corruption of dynamics, or feedback loop between spatial forms at the level of the biological. That is, life is not an explanation but a problem necessitating further explanation; while nature is a kind of movement for Schelling, this does not explain life. This was the impetus beyond my coining ‘dark vitalism,’ [1] thereby painting life as a kind of cosmologically-scaled trajectory of putrescence splattered across the undulations of local space-time vectors. To pull back from the gothic imagery (though useful in blasting the long standing coruscating aesthetic of life) the goal, the difficult project beyond the rhetorical acid, is of attempting to understand the relation of actualisations of life to so-called capital ‘L’ Life (Life as a triumvirate of Humanist, Existential, and Theological hangovers). The trick is understanding life as life-forming particularly in relation to seemingly limitless thought.

For Schelling evolution or the unfolding of forms always presupposes involution (enfolding) but Schelling importantly dismisses immanence as a model for nature, as it exaggerates stability in the real whereas pure idealism hypostasises the stability of mind. For nature to be what it is, it must be fundamentally contradictory as infinite productivity which is infinitely inhibited, which explains how an organism can be productive yet in a limited fashion, it remains vaguely itself as it continues to exist.

Biological entities do not result from a development of fixed forms which exist ideally in nature, but are merely ‘the visible expression of an internal proportion’ between orginary qualities such as electromagnetism, chemical reactivity, and the like.

These qualities are valences of nature which can only be described as unconditioned dynamics, nature can produce only as it is an agon of forces, but these kinds of dynamics, or activities, can only be ideally surmised. It is here that Schelling’s particular take on the transcendental is pivotal.

1. For more on Dark Vitalism see my Slime Dynamics (Zer0 Books: 2012).
In his remarkable essay ‘Movements of the World: The Sources of Transcendental Philosophy’ Grant demonstrates how Schelling’s articulation of the transcendental is not the sterilised schematic of Kant’s idealism, nor the perilous march of Hegel’s logic, but is the motion of the formless, the dynamics of form’s derivation [2]. While in the realm of physics this entails exploring the dynamics of light and darkness, and in chemistry the visceralisation of empiricism and the inversion of phenomenology (‘what thinks in me is outside of me’), in biology, as has been suggested, this derivation the exploration of the involution and evolution of life. Let’s take a particularly odd example.

/2/ – Septic Space
Septobasidium is a fascinating genus of gelatinous fungus found on tree bark that Diana and Mark McMenamin discuss in their text *Hypersea*. Septobasidium appears in different varieties but often as a mound of folds. Scale insects of the family Coccidae, which feed on plant sap via ‘suctorial tubes’ [3] engage in what was seen seen as a parasitic relation the septobasidium but what is now seen as oddly symbiotic. The relation between the insects and fungus which is described as ‘animal-lichen’ [4] is described by the McMenamin’s in the following way:

*Septobasidium forms a dense, flat mycelial growth on a tree branch. The mycelial mat possesses chambers, channels, and tunnels which harbor a colony of scale insects. Some of the adult insects are penetrated by the septobasidium hyphae, which branch into complex haustoria inside the scale insect. The ‘lichenised’ insects are paralysed but not killed, and they are able to give birth to numerous progeny. In effect, the insects are turned into living pumps; they continue to feed on the sap of the tree branch even as nutrients and water are passed through their bodies to the invading fungus*. [5]

The younger insects born inside the fungus, due to their waxy shells, carry the fungus with them to found new colonies. There is even a wasp which parasitises the scale insect that is already in symbiotic relation with septobasidium.

This example, I hope, demonstrates the importance of spatiality in constructing a modern Naturphilosophie, as proposed by Giuseppe Longo (and other related thinkers). In numerous co-authored texts, Longo discusses biology in relation to entropy, not, as commonly done, as negentropy but as anti-entropy. Life does not apparently violate physics but borrows and maneuvers in ways only possible due to complex spatial connectivity and particular proximities.

One strange spatial aspect is that life-as-organism becomes a hollow in which its external and internal configurations are maintained by the activities of its parts in combat with its affordances. As Longo, Montevilli, and Kauffman put it, nature becomes non-ergodic (non-averaging) above the atomistic level [6] which complicates the idea of physical entropy, in terms of whether a biological phase-space

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5. Ibid.
The organic dictum ‘everything is connected’ is even possible [7]. In an essay co-authored with Buiatti, Longo suggests that biological randomness is altogether different as it is a nested randomness, one composed of biological antinomies [8], between chance and necessity, and continuity and discreteness. The potentialities of life do not break or reverse entropy, but complicate it as a kind of local acceleration, as any account of a biological phase-space is a dissipative one [9]. But, in its dissipation, the organism is ‘largely the iteration of a never identical morphogenetic process’ [10] and this is why an organism is not just a process but a permanent passage through a critical state, as it is continually breaking symmetries but always replacing them [11]. As thinking beings, this articulation can cause a certain clausrophobic reaction, as the space where that festering imp ‘the subject’ once lived is made vacant and filled with parasites and symbiotes and its exterior becomes a wasteland of irritants and susceptibilities.

Here we can conjoint Longo’s wonderful description of life as a geometry ‘gone wrong’ with Schelling’s use of the ‘unthinged’ resulting form his particular twist on the transcendental. Since ideas and things are equally natural for Schelling, the thing is that which never ceases to be what it is while remaining part of an active continuity, the boundless sea of diversity, though the movement of things away from each other as a transcendental break is not a purely ideal move but where form as such shifts to another form. The transcendental is space making space for other spaces. In this sense, Schelling’s strange philosophical move is to support the continuous at the cost of the discrete without allowing thought to determine individuation. The transcendental is the redoubling of the problem of the continuous and the discrete at the level of thought while asymmetrically, in the last instance, emerging from nature.

/3/ – Sheaf-Surgery and Claustraphobic Biology

The organic dictum ‘everything is connected’ can now mean something clausrophobic in terms of biological composition as this intense form of nestedness redraws what a biological trajectory means, and how thought attempts to intuitively practice this enmeshed mapping speculatively on a global level by itself parasitising the biological. In other words, thinking the biological becomes a form of self-mutilation, a kind of Frankensteinian surgery in that we must isolate and operate on particular boundaries which are themselves bigger on the inside than on the outside.

This is one concept that can be taken from Sheaf theory as outlined by Fernando Zalamea. A topological sheaf is a cut of regional fields from the continuum yet this cut, this selection of the supermultidinous continuum, is an unbound genericity. As Zalamea relates the concept to Rene Thom, if the sheaf is a cut in the continuum, then the selection (in our case the organism) becomes a vacuum in a qualitative homogeneity. Sheaves become a way of cutting out in order to track the local while it remains attached to the global, or to the continuum, to examine (in the terms here) the homology between a local life-form and the formations of its global environment. Sheaf theory is a means of intuiting an impossibly complex category but isolating a section of it in and thinking it in terms of its relations to the larger category (‘how does this particular life-form form life?’).

Mark Danielewski’s House of Leaves illustrates this troubling ‘bigger on the inside’ geometrical and topological maneuver as the exploration of an isolated selection of space becomes a trajectory with a universal ambit. In the novel the inhabitants discover a ‘spatial disparity’ as doors appear which lead to seemingly infinite rooms as well as an endless spiral staircase. The children in the house explore without fear as ‘There are certainly no primal associations with spatial anomalies’ [12]. We might say that there are no primal associations with spatial anomalies because exploration and association is the anomalisation of space-as-it-appears for us. This is the importance of Gilles Chatelet’s notion of the virtual separate from Deleuze’s: the virtual is the pressure of movement, not a predetermined or decided power, but a propulsion diagrammed by the arrow from the cut out object. This loosening of the constraints of the arrow-of-movement, marks the central shift from set theory to category theory, from thought as a construction of belonging, to a construction as a function from one topology to another.

10. Ibid, 23
11. Ibid, 19
The emphasis Chatelet makes is that one should avoid falsely assuming the force of the arrow is a cause which is purely externalised. The outside is another’s interior and thus, following this, the organic becomes a miasma of enablement (against abstract law and order), which in turn colors thought as an intuitive construction as already implicating nature. But this does not give us harmony as the movements of nature and of nature-as-thought are always fed back through the local actualisation of the singular thinker, and, therefore always suspect to negation and failure.

/4/ – Conclusion

The mobility of the explorer in nature is one of envoiding with thought while being envoided by nature. Schelling’s organic nature is that which works to be at a point of indifference but, such polarised activity causes it to hacks itself into pieces only to produce new productivities: ‘Nature is an activity that constantly strives toward identity, an activity, therefore, which in order to endure as such, constantly presupposes the antithesis’ [13].

In relation to the organic in particular ‘Life, where it comes into existence, comes against the will of external nature (invita natura externa), as it were by tearing away from it’ [14].

This freedom, or tearing away, is one highly constrained and, for the human organism, we might say that speculative thought is the freedom of a parasite that detects and reproduces abstract movement. Following Longo perhaps this is why despite, and because of, our ability to change our environment ‘Living entities go wrong most of the time’ hence his invocation of Heraclitus, ‘Life Bubbles Forth’ [15].

Thinking or navigating nature, in utilising sheaf theory (as well as other forms of topological thinking) is a program in the spirit of the scream common to biological horror films involving invasive forms of life, the scream of ‘Get this thing out of me!’ yet with the realisation that one cannot escape the continuum of life as a conglomeration of chemical and biological forces.

The alternative, to take a cue from our aforementioned scale insects, is to weaponise our parasitic nestedness while accepting the parasites with which complicity will extend our influence. Speculation is the freedom of the diseased organ, still connected by striving out, attempting to leave its ground, demonstrates, as Christopher Lauer puts it, ‘reason is neither entirely self-grounding nor grounded in nature’s circulation of forces, the Freedom essay begins to carve out a place where reason can be positively determined as freely given’ [16]. But this is possible only by thought internalising the constraints of the physical world while unfolding the apparently unreasonable into reason.

To reassert the spatial here, we can relate Schelling’s thinking of the world as never attempting to overcome the Spielraum der Kontingenz (the placespace of contingency). That is, there is space to think because the unconditioned spaces outward and inward, because the actual is possible because of an unprethinkable dynamic movement, but a movement that belongs to the actual in all its parasitic tangles, and is thought only by rooting and exponentialising the fleshy extractions we are.

15. Longo, Montévil & Kauffman No entailing laws, 2