The Viscous

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Introduction

Galaxies

In June 2018, the news from astronomers we had all been wait-ing for hit the press. It was not the huge subterranean lake of water they found on Mars. That, in any case, was found a month later in July. It was not the conditions for the possibility for extra-terrestrial life this water offered. No, it was something much more subtly transformative, a seemingly negligible alteration in the cosmological layout of things that was, like all of the most important upheavals, curiously astounding and then almost immediately unremarkable. Here is that landmark moment, using all the typographic emphases at my disposal to facilitate full absorption:

OUTER SPACE IS FULL OF GREASE.¹

“Yeah, so?” a friend of mine said when I excitedly messaged her the headline. “It’s massive, the universe, I’m not surprised, I’m

¹ This discovery was widely reported in the mainstream press. The official article is, however, B. Güway et al., “Aliphatic Hydrocarbon Content of Interstellar Dust,” *Monthly Notices of the Royal Astronomical Society* 479, no. 4 (October 1, 2018): 4336–44.
sure there’s lots of stuff up there.” True, the universe is massive: the 10 billion trillion trillion tonnes of gloop, enough for 40 trillion trillion trillion packs of butter, they claim to be dispersed until now imperceptibly through the voidish space really is just another day in those innumerable light years of the Milky Way. Future space ships traveling through interstellar space should expect to return lightly coated in hydrogen bound up with carbon in a grease-like form, a kind of naphthalene. I can almost see before me now the alien smear marks wiped off the surface of a large, smooth intergalactic phallus, squeezed out of a sponge into a plastic tub full of warm soapy water. Space grease: so what?

Like me, Hegel thought the stars were boring. They meant much less to him than a rash on a body, or an ant colony for that matter, which exhibits “intelligence and necessity.” They are much less interesting than animality, even if that animality presents “nothing but jelly.” The host of stars is an abstraction, this jelly is concrete, something we would be wrong to see as inferior to the heavens above. The passage from liquidity to sliminess was, for Hegel, a passage from the abstract to the concrete. The earth excretes the “abstractness of its fresh water,” which hurries forth towards “concrete animation” in the sea. As the sea blooms in the summer months, it becomes turbid and slimy, yet full of a “multitude of vegetable points, threads and surfaces.” This gelatinous slime takes on more determinate formations, “fusorial animalcula, transparent molusca,” and contains a tendency to break out in “vast expanses of phosphorescent light.” This momentary gelatinous existence cannot hold light, Hegel imagines, in the form of selfhood, so identity instead breaks out if itself as physical light, “densely crowded into galaxies.”² An organic, jellied, submarine cosmos, smelly yet glistening — this is more real to Hegel than the stars.

In more recent times, it is extremely common, though somehow forgettably so, for us to imagine the starlight excreting

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some goo-like substance. The popular imaginary of extra-terrestrial encounter is almost always an encounter with a being of, if not total blobbiness, a corporeality of considerably intensified tremulousness. With a few exceptions, opening a can of baked beans has more in common with how people tend, or tended, to imagine a meeting with the third kind than what scientists might be able to predict. The life forms on Earth chosen by the popular imagination as most likely to have come from the celestial are generally the jellied ones. This is perhaps because these creatures form bioluminescent aggregates that seem to mimic the cosmos. But also because jelly is a substance that while being most undoubtedly and cloyingly there, is something that speaks of the beyond, its texture is the texture of the “other.” Which is, as much psychoanalysis teaches us, also the texture of our interior.

Stuff worming through the starlight is an intimation of the gruesome core of our supposedly most transcendent moments. In the 1955 horror B-movie The Blob, the kiss that initiates the film’s love story is not seen on screen. Instead we have the cliché of the camera giving the lovers some privacy, turning its view gently towards the stars. The one shooting star we witness as a symbol of the kindling love, is also, as we find out soon, the coming to Earth of this viscous mass, the blob. What might we find in this monstrous starlight? The story is an old one — the struggle between spiritual love and carnal lust; what might feel like a celestial explosion of love in a man’s heart is just his need to ejaculate. This we may know already. But now we have learnt that the cosmos is actually full of grease, does anything change? It is not monstrous, not transcendent, not recognizably intelligent, not “other,” just ever so slightly buttery. Dare I ask — are things now more real?

It is not, either, unusual for us — as humans — to imagine the cosmos, or galaxy, as related in some way to emulsified

dairy products. The Milky Way finds its mythological origin in Hermes suckling the infant Heracles at the breast of the sleeping Athena who, on awakening, pulls Heracles away, splattering milk through the heavens. In Hindu cosmology, the Ocean of Milk was the substance that separated directional space from non-directional space. Until, that is, one day the devas and the asuras straightened out a snake and used it to churn the ocean for a millennium until it curdled and released Amrita, the nectar of immortal life.\footnote{George M. Williams, 
\textit{Handbook of Hindu Mythology} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 53.} Milk is a substance of origins not only as, most likely, the first food to pass over our tongue, but also as something that can curdle, its body cracking open into differentiated being: cheese.

The grease in outer space belongs to a familiar realm, then: mythologies of emulsions, oozings of starlight. But these imaginaries are also strangely terminated by the revelations of a greasy universe. A viscous outer space becomes bathetically literal, rather than mythological. The awesome expanse of the void is normalized, brought into thrilling union with the interior walls of my oven. Grease in space? Exactly! “So what?” I realized — at long last, some information about the universe that isn’t unutterably sublime, one that leaves me staring affectionately into my fridge, some imagery which cannot in any way be used to sell me broadband. It is this everydayness of the viscous, its normalizing powers that live simultaneously beside its presence as carnal horror, or its mythology, that I hope to persistently haunt this writing on its substance that follows.

Birds

For if we look for an origin to the viscous, it is in fact a trap, a trap specifically used for birds. Etymologically speaking, “viscous” comes from the Latin word \textit{viscum} meaning “mistletoe,” but also the sticky excretions produced by this plant that were extracted, then smeared onto branches as “birdlime.” The birds
would land on the branch and find themselves stuck, before being yanked off and cooked. Would they break at the knees? I wonder if this is the reason we’re meant to kiss underneath mistletoe at Christmas time, to inspire a particularly glutinous adhesion of the lips, the soul, the heart.

To ensnare you in things is the viscous way. The fact that you’re struggling for freedom only ensnares you further is its irony. This entrapment through an enraged indifference, a maddening docility, is dramatized in the Br’er Rabbit stories. The wolf, Br’er Rabbit’s nemesis, constructs a doll out of tar, dresses it in clothes and places it by the side of a road he knows Br’er Rabbit will pass. When Br’er Rabbit does indeed pass the baby, he greets the doll, but gets no response. Offended by the figure’s apparent lack of manners, he greets him again, again being met with silence. Increasingly insulted to the apparent indifference to him, Br’er Rabbit strikes the figure, getting stuck in its tar. As he strikes and struggles further, he is gradually consumed by the tar baby, left immobilized on the road side, before the wolf comes to gleefully bundle him up to cook.\footnote{The story of the tar baby has deep significance for images of “blackness” in American and colonial race relations, something that goes beyond what is possible to discuss here. For insight into to this aspect of tar, see Marcus Woods’s film made with Richard Misek, \textit{High Tar Babies}, from 2001 (see Richard Misek, “High Tar Babies,” \textit{Vimeo}, September 10, 2013, https://vimeo.com/74189761). The film is accompanied by paintings, documented in Marcus Wood, \textit{High Tar Babies: Race, Hatred, Slavery, Love} (London: Clinamen Press, 2001).}

The bird caught in this \textit{viscum} has been imagined by theologians like Saint Augustine as the predicament of mankind:

\begin{quote}
Increase, O Lord, thy graces more and more upon me, that my soul may follow myself home to thee, wholly freed from the birdlime of concupiscence.\footnote{Saint Augustine, \textit{Confessions}, trans. William Watts (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 153.}
\end{quote}

For birdlime shares something with the results of his shame, Augustine’s semen — stickiness: the quality of matter that binds
him to sin, which also reduces the bird’s wings to useless flaps, no longer used to ascend. Wet dreams, Augustine wonders in this passage, might be considered a kind of rape, one caused by the soul’s agglutination in the body. *Viscum* navigated into the Latin *viscus*, a word of ambiguous meaning, certainly involving the body, sometimes specifically the external parts of the genitalia, connective tissue between muscle and bone, the bladder, a kind of sausage, and sometimes all at the same time.\(^7\)

To feel something *viscerally* is to feel it in the guts. To remove the organs, to empty something of meaning, is to *eviscerate*. And it is by some gut feeling that we are most likely satisfied with the fact that birdlime came to mean the *viscera*, and then onwards to *the viscous*, everything that is neither solid nor liquid, not one thing, but rather a quality of resistance and of flow, of stickiness and of slipperiness. *Because it is sticky* seems like justification enough. It spreads through likeness like magical thinking. The viscous is a bird trap, but also somewhere where we are prone to take flight into a myriad of different discrete worlds and objects, all in one way completely unrelated, yet in another all occupants of that one alluring aversion. To touch something sticky is to be sent out into an indeterminate network of other sticky things—dog’s noses, the walls of caves, slugs, toothpaste, sugar syrup, sweaty palms. That is not to say that all these things are in anyway the same. No. One of the things I want to do with the viscous is to unfold its manifold articulations. And it is not, either, to say that we should allow these linkages to form thoughtlessly, without efforts to disassociate them. But *because they are sticky*, they associate, it seems, whether we like it or not. It is in this kind of web of association, at once deeply felt and wholly superficial, that the viscous traps us. It is something we are obliged to deal with when dealing with this matter.

The World

To be more involved with the world than we would like, or think we should be, is often the sensation theorized to be at the heart of the viscous encounter. It is an affront to an ethics, puts things out of whack, disturbs the sense we serenely construct of “things” on the one hand and “me” on the other. As Sartre famously theorizes in a passage of writing that forms an important basis for this book and which I will discuss at length in chapter one, to touch slime is to risk, it feels, becoming slime. What is crucial, here, is the elongated sense of risk the viscous excites. At the core of this sensation is the fact that we never become slime, but continue feeling that we might. The slimy encounter locks us into a state of becoming, or rather the becoming of an un-becoming. We start to wonder that maybe there is no “world,” just a monstrous congregation of different matters and textures, variously throbbing.

The Sartrean viscous is the site of a power struggle between the for-itself and the in-itself. During particular moments in our lives, the viscous can seem to take over. When we stop having ideas, during times of depression perhaps, the world can coalesce into singularity, become nothing but mass, density. But, as I will elaborate, this coalescence is, for Sartre, one also of intense excitement and adventure. It is simultaneously a vertiginous feeling, where rules feel as if they might be re-written. The task of his writing is to bring these two states of being into as close proximity as possible, without ever letting them merge.

Sartre’s conception and description of the viscous has been immensely influential, and its effects can be traced through much subsequent writing on materiality. Bachelard responds to it first in Earth and the Reveries of Will: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter, where viscous matter is opened outwards not only as a threat, but as a site where different convictions and

ideals might play out. The viscous can also be, for Bachelard, a moment of harmony, of deep satisfaction, an ideal coexistence of the soft and the hard. He, as opposed to Sartre, is more interested in the playful and oneiric states of mind that emerge out of the numerous practical applications of viscous semi-states, which he sees Sartre as having ignored in favor of this dreadful, needy, leechlike “feminine sucking.” And then there is also the explicit misogyny and fear of sex in Sartre’s writing that Bachelard doesn’t appear to share. In chapter one, I will attempt a reading of Sartre’s blatant reduction of “femininity” to “slime” as also containing a way to escape such essentialism.

Sartre’s writing on the sensation and processes where the distinction between the self and world might become confused, though not entirely erased, is at the heart of many contemporary discourses on issues such as ecology, technology and gender. In chapter two, “Sticky Words/Sticky Worlds,” I will show how the dynamics of sliminess that Sartre identifies have become fundamental tools by which new philosophies of ecology are able to function. In chapter three, “Smear Screens and Fondled Things,” Sartre’s writing, as it is refracted through Bachelard, can offer useful starting points to thinking about media technology, specifically digital visual interfaces. And in chapter four, I hope to expose how the Sartrean viscous has been turned on its head, which is also, paradoxically, a realization of want it yearned for, in a contemporary work of gender theory, Testo Junkie, a work that takes the dizziness that Sartre feels and runs, finding in it an immense realm of volatile, subversive pharmacological possibility.

That is not to say, however, that the Sartrean viscous is in any way the sole driving definition of what follows. For my writing on the viscous, I have used a multitude of different sources and domains for instruction, insight and guidance, often finding the most inspiration in places that are far removed from what we might call theory, art practices or literature. In chapter one, the Boston Molasses Disaster of 1919, a moment when a huge indus-
trial molasses tank spontaneously burst, engulfing the people and buildings of its surroundings, constitutes our enigmatic entrance into a contemplation of what slime is when it meets the urban. The journalism of this moment seems to me a perfect introduction to the power of the viscous both in actuality and as an imaginative moment. Chapter two finds its origins in a trip I made to an asphalt lake in Baku, Azerbaijan, the “home” of petroleum oil. Chapter three is interested, primarily, in the digital, but found its opening into this region of experience and technology through the viral videos of teenagers playing with homemade slime on online platforms such as Instagram. Chapter four is a theorization of colloidal structures of matter — emulsions, gels, sols — that occurred to me as a possibility as I was making mayonnaise one day. These events — in the world, but always a troubling of what exactly that is — occurred at specific times and places and are the points from which I hoped and hope to take flight.

I want to approach these events as philosophical in themselves, as part of a perspective on philosophy that is slightly deviant. Although I use and discuss philosophers throughout what follows, I am not a philosopher and this is not a work of philosophy in any systematic or traditional sense. The viscous has an important philosophical tradition, and I am most interested in how the philosophers have felt it necessary to write about its stuff or idea, rather than solely the philosophical content of their work. I am interested in the kinds of expressive postures the viscous forces us to pull.

But the most important thought I’ve had while researching and writing the viscous is this: the viscous doesn’t exist. It isn’t a thing, nor is it anything. And if it is a thing, it is troubled, as I will discuss in just a moment. It is a quality of resistance and of flow, of stickiness and of slipperiness. But it is also many others: stretchiness, trembling, or its deeper version, shuddering. The list, as I see it, unfolds indefinitely. The viscous is an impossible state of matter, a fantasy, a fancy, one that extrudes itself from and attaches itself, at various moments, to reality. There is an unstable distinction between “slime” on the one hand, and the
“viscous” on the other. Where the viscous doesn’t exist as anything, “slime” does, but only slightly. Slime is the viscous edging into existence. Still a fantasy, still a fantastical matter, but unlike the viscous, it can be pointed to as an object in the world, in toy shops and in B-movies. But it is held in a state of retreat into the imaginary, stuff slipping into dream. Both the viscous and slime are dubious states of matter that dissolve eagerly into an operation of thought, a way of being and of feeling.

Beyond Flow

Brie is not shampoo. Just as wax is not chainsaw oil, in the same way that mayonnaise is not quicksand. But we might describe all these things, to a greater or lesser extent, as viscous. They occupy a common liminal space between solid and liquid, a space in which the manifold, sometimes contradictory, deviant material qualities of “the viscous” might be said to congregate. What makes the viscous so useful, so joyful, is that it is a site of abundance, it means far too much.

In grouping these substances together — brie, shampoo, oil, mayonnaise, quicksand — we are undertaking a particular study of matter, one that is attuned to the quality of its flow, the way it moves or creeps under pressure, whether spread across a surface or rubbed between the hands, dripped onto a table top, or used to lube up the mechanics of a machine. The study we are undertaking is what science calls rheology, a term coined by the American chemist Eugene Bingham in the 1920s. And something we learn from the science of rheology is something we all already, intuitively might know: that there is no such thing as pure flow. Or rather, there is no such thing as a linear continuum between solid things and liquid things, where substances get progressively more fluid until they reach an absolute state of fluidity, before puffing off into vapor. From within the fantasy trinity of solid–liquid–gas erupt all number of stickinesses, seizures, sudden stretchinesses, squirmings, slushinesses, shudderings, bouncings that overcome and engulf this tripartite system.
Scientists have managed, however, to produce a liquid that possess almost no viscosity at all. Helium liquefies when cooled to just above absolute zero, producing a liquid with little to no internal friction that exhibits bizarre and perhaps unexpected properties. It will drain out of a glass beaker, slipping its way through the microscopic holes in its structure. If placed in a special container, out of which it cannot drain, it will climb the walls, gushing out over the lip. This is a material intent on exceeding all containment. It has left the world of molecules and has begun obeying the laws of the quantum.  

Liquid helium to one side, the study of rheology has developed ways of modeling and understanding what we might call the deviance of viscous matter by dividing it into groups. We have viscoplastics, materials that accept and record form from outside influence, and we have viscoelastics, ones that accept influence, but try to hold their form, springing back to their former mode as soon as the force has stopped. We have linear and non-linear viscous materials. Linear viscous substances behave consistently regardless of how much force you impose on them. The sweet, non-toxic viscous fluid glycerol is an example of a linear substance. So is motor oil. Non-linear viscous substances change their state depending on the forces they encounter. When you pour oobleck (cornstarch mixed with water) slowly out of a container, it emerges gradually and flows out sleepily. Punch a tub of it or run across a whole lake of it, and the substance will repel you from its surface, holding your weight as you run. The same is true of a ball of bitumen. Leave it on a tabletop and it will “creep” into a puddle. Throw it against a wall and it will bounce back, exhibiting a resilience to changing form that puts most solids to shame. Matter that resists the exertions

Although the phenomenon of liquid helium has been well covered, I have in mind here a specific film made by scientist Alfred Leitner in 1963, *Liquid Helium II: The Superfluid* (see Brett Sylvester Matulis, “Liquid Helium III: The Superfluid,” *Vimeo*, March 31, 2010, https://vimeo.com/10579813), a film that possesses significance for endurance athlete Christopher Bergland, as I will discuss in chapter two.
the world places on it are called thixotropic. Rheopectic matter relents, thinning out as force is applied, as ketchup does.\(^{11}\)

But the models only go so far, the qualities of the viscous over-spilling its parameters into what is termed *texture*, the baroque interplay between a specific set of different seizures, slippages, raspings, etc. into something like a sensual singularity, the feel of a substance. Texture is the great excess.

The Heraclitean *panta rhei* uses the metaphor of the river. Water is, of course, the substance that is most commonly used as the metaphorical basis for notions of constant flux. But if we look into the physics of water it can become an almost monstrously sticky, gooey thing, with all number of clingy attributes. We have probably all experienced the way water seizes itself ever so slightly to the end of your finger when you press one down gently onto its surface. Or there is the way it is able to syphon its way over an object of any size as if it were the tentacle of some colossal squid. We see this sticky power, too, in its ability to stretch between the lips of two glasses pulled apart. The scientist Gerald H. Pollack has for some years (and not uncontroversially) been forwarding the theory that water has in fact a fourth phase, a gel phase, that modern science has almost entirely overlooked and which is responsible for many of the things that still mystify the science community about H\(_2\)O.\(^{12}\) I am no scientist and have no research to counter or support Pollack’s theories, but what I am interested in is how our imagination of materials can suddenly change, how what we might have always felt to be an undoubtedly fluid medium, might in fact (also) be sticky. And that its stickiness, its jellied state, is, it turns out, fundamental to its ability to support complex life. I am not in any way

\(^{11}\) I am not able to ever claim anything more than a superficial technical understanding of the immensely complex science of rheology. The definitions I use have mostly been derived from R.I. Tanner and K. Watts, *Rheology: An Historical Perspective* (London: Elsevier Science, 1998).

\(^{12}\) G.H. Pollack’s books and articles on this subject are numerous, but most accessible to the reader, like me, from a non-technical background is *The Fourth Phase of Water: Beyond Solid, Liquid, Vapour* (Seattle: Ebner and Sons, 2013).
proposing science to have the answers to all our questions. It is, however a good place to start when disturbing the ideals of the material states whose textures and behaviors that hold so much power—and I mean this in a purely imaginative sense—over the ways we choose to live our lives: the metaphors we live by. This is something, of course, that greatly exceeds the scientific remit. How can water be sticky? What kinds of trouble does this idea cause?

Something else that rheology teaches us is that a substance’s viscosity is never fully on display. All materials change their quality depending on how you interact with them; viscosity is a relational event. As I’ve said, thixotropic materials thin out as you spread them across a slice of toast, rheopectics seize up when you punch them. There is also that danger of breaking your back when jumping into water from a great height. Water, if you fall at it fast enough, becomes concrete. Slippery objects are also almost always sticky, fastening you securely to their surface, before moving you around crazily on it. The qualities that are expressed depend on how we move towards and within the substance. But that is not to say that it is all about different types of approach, it is not all relational. Viscosity is about the disposition of materials, the different ways materials are indeterminately disposed to act in and on the world. Rather than talk about material qualities, we should instead talk about their tendencies, tendencies to imperceptibly thicken until movement is no longer possible, or turn on a heel, reversing the rules of the game.

To help understand this notion of tendencies, we might want to turn to social theory that understands properties or outcomes as emerging through a complex of relations, rather than having their source in any one person, event, etc. Keller Easterling, in his book Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space, is similarly interested in the notion of disposition, from an infrastructural point of view. In the

fluid politics of extra-statecraft, disposition uncovers accidental, covert or stubborn forms of power—political chem-
istories and temperaments of aggression, submission or violence.\textsuperscript{13}

The “fluid politics of extra-statecraft” are, for instance, the seamless cycles of novelty and innovation that keep buyers interested, but not disoriented. This might be things like planned obsolescence, which allows for the continual renewal of content without any fundamental change. In Easterling’s conception, there is something that lives beyond, yet within, this flow, once it is seen from point of view of dispositions, a potential to seize up and snag. Thinking with the viscous is about unearthing and cherishing (not without suspicion) like forbidden jewels these hidden seizures.

\textbf{Containers}

The viscous puts pressure on our powers of description, our critical capacities, the ability we might see ourselves as having to research something and then write about it. It is about the creep of thinking. Its dispositions threaten any lovingly crafted network of knowledge with a collapse into mess. What mess is, how it occurs, is an on going concern of this writing. These questions have preoccupied me: is mess inevitable? If so, how can we accept the inevitability of mess without being useless? Is it possible to be messy and not totally useless? Or is mess, in fact, the outcome of being useful?\textsuperscript{14}

It might be best, then, to view the four independent sections of writing that follow this introductory one, as something like containers, vats, cans, whose to potential to burst outwards is, I


\textsuperscript{14} Some key texts that have guided me in my inquiries into how to think with rather than against mess: John Law, \textit{After Method: Mess in Social Theory} (New York: Taylor and Francis, 2004). A work of social and literary history which has also helped me conceptualize mess is David Trotter, \textit{Cooking with Mud: Ideas of Mess in Nineteenth Century Art and Fiction} (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
hope, intensely present. But they are chapters and they remain so, composed most often through heterogeneous mixtures of material that try in different ways to become intimate with specific places, materials, thinkings, and feelings that possess an affinity with particular viscous dynamics of matter.

Dynamics are how tendencies manifest themselves. The viscous is a set of dynamics that are never all exhibited at once, but gather awkwardly under its sign. I do not hope to provide an exhaustive list of viscous dynamics, nor do I attempt to come up with a precise working definition of which dynamics are viscous and which are not. To do so would kill our understanding of this kind of matter dead. But something they all share is a discontinuity contained within their mobility. Their movements are clustered with resistance. They are complex, hesitant, doubtful. Their interactions are never perfect or fully complete. Bursting, for instance, which I will discuss in my first chapter, is comparable to an explosion, but integral to its dynamic are a variety of resistances of matter—the straining against pressure before the ultimate giving-way, or the matter we might find lingering on after a burst has taken place. Each of the four chapters has a specific viscous dynamic lurking as its core, whose outlines I will give some definition to now, definition that will inevitably become flipped, shaken and smeared along the way. That is, if they no longer feel right, or have been left to sit too long, acquiring that taste water acquires when its been un-drunk during the night.

The first is something I will term indifference, a condition addressed in chapter one. Viscous matter is, it feels, part-less, every bit of it is the same as every other bit. Viscous matter is, if we use an Aristotelian term, homoeomerous, a word which refers to substances whose identity stays the same however many times you divide them, the whole and part being “synonymous.”15 Water might be defined, for instance, to a certain extent as homoe-
omerous: divide some water in two and you have two separate bits of water, the identity is consistent. The eye is anhomoeomerous: divide the eye and you get two halves of an eye, with different identities from eyes. The problems and exact details of Aristotle’s conception of homoeomerous matter is the subject of philosophical debate. On what terms, for instance, do you define something’s “wholeness”? But this is not something we will pursue at great length here. Rather, the notion of homoeomerous matter, not limited only to gooey things, helps us describe viscous matter. The viscous feels actively homoeomerous, a substance composed of sameness that wants, through some mysterious internal energy, to make everything around it the same as well. This non-differentiated interior is then expressed as an apparent indifference to whatever might surround it, driven by pure directionless want; its project is one of pure appropriation. This is the basis of the imaginary of the slime monster — it doesn’t care what it eats as long as it keeps on eating, it will turn anything, somehow, into itself. But as I hope to expose in chapter one, from this state of indifference, we find a very particular drama of roaming specificity — reachings out into momentary specificity before plunging back into an indifferent whole.

Stickiness is also a fundamental viscous dynamic. It is a particular quality of adhesion that is internally undoing. Its enthusiasm for attachment continually undoes its attachments. Stickiness is persistently unpredictable, the bonds it forms, unlike loops, clasps and knots, necessarily finite and breakable. Attachment is more important to stickiness than the purposes or outcome of that attachment. A struggle of thinking with the viscous is not to try to repress or pacify its arbitrary adhesive tendencies, but to move with them, describe them, attune oneself to their indifference to meaning. This poses a huge challenge to the composition of this book — how to remain true to the bloody minded, insouciant, superficial, needy attributes of viscous matter, without becoming exactly that myself? And thereby producing something that is boring to read. The answer lies, I think, in the poise of the writing that accepts, even welcomes, these attributes, while never mistaking them for the whole of reality.
But this is, crucially, a mistake the viscous wants you to make. The viscous is, at times, the energy by which things, tiny details, creep outwards, consuming you, obsessing you, becoming the entirety of your world. In chapter two, I will trace different kinds of thinking, feeling and being that have involved, for better or for worse, in an attachment to stickiness.

*Fondling* is the third main activity and concept of this work. It stands for a kind of viscous encounter that is, in many ways, of a different category from the former two. When fondled, the viscous is softer, comforting, not threatening, not cloying, but doughy-eyed and cute. In the story of these semi-states, the fondled is an instance of the unruly powers of viscous matter tempered into submission. This is something Sartre doesn’t seem to contemplate. What allegiances with other things have to be forged for this to happen? Of particular interest to this study is the phenomenon of Instagram slime: short clips of teenage hands fondling homemade slime on the internet. What can we learn about the status of digital technology from the emergence of this craze?

The last of the chapters concerns *mixtures*, the way in which most gloops are colloids, minute dispersions of two substances within each other that have to be worked, stirred, whipped-up into life. How the viscous might operate as a technology is a persistent interest of this book. In colloids, we find the viscous in its most technologized and technologizable state. It is the place where gooeyness might be designed. Through mixtures we find introduction to two other key dynamics, the dynamics of coagulation and coalescence. Colloids are, then, the tight maintenance of two substances in a state of inter-dispersal, always in the risk of an internal collapse into singularity, or the complete separation into difference. It is in colloids that we also find the viscous as a technology of mingling, of intimacy. If gloop is associated with obscurity, mess, blur, we have in colloids the viscous as also a substance that provides the very possibility of connection. This is, however, an unruly and fragile cohesion, one that lives off of its powers to fall apart, coagulate.
Life

The viscous is adhesive, it is excitable, yet it is slow, lingering. It has trouble getting to the point, but it loves the attention and will try to hold it for as long as it can. And it may have already become apparent, irritating even, that I often refer to this stuff as if it were a person with wants, intents, ambitions, confusions, moods, opinions, and so on. I justify this in two ways. First of all, this is something I’ve found that happens anyway in other attempts to work with or describe gooey matter. In senses that are phenomenological, biological, and technological, viscous matter often plays with our sense of aliveness. Rather than something I’ve invented, it is already part of its experience. As a means of getting closer to the material, rather than repress this impulse, I’ve chosen to follow and sometimes exaggerate it, involving myself in its allure.

But this is also an approach I’ve actively synthesized for myself, a kind of writing that allows for agency in material qualities to be not just metaphors for states of mind, but operators in and on the world. “Thing-power” has gathered momentum in recent years, thanks to the work of Bruno Latour and the various theories that have stemmed from actor-network theory. My writing is not, however, about things, but a bundle of disparate qualities, that might and also might not be ascribed to particular objects. My question, then, is not so much about the generative power of things as they exist between people, but of material qualities as they exist between objects, people and things. I prefer to see this as an expanding of the power of metaphors, rather than a rejection of them.

All of this comes to pass as if we come to life in a universe where feelings and acts are all charged with something mate-

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material, have a substantial stuff, are really soft, dull, slimy, low, elevated etc.17

So says Sartre in the concluding pages of *Being and Nothingness*. His observation is a foundational notion of the “material imagination,” a termed coined by his contemporary Gaston Bachelard, that holds there to be a certain continuity between the ways matter behaves and our imaginative processes.18 This is not only limited to how we might imagine materials, but the materiality of the imagination itself, the way in which material transformations seem to condition how our thoughts “unfold,” or don’t. The “material imagination” has seen some exciting applications and refashionings by contemporary writers and theorists, notably Esther Leslie and Steven Connor, whose work has had major influence on my attempts at reading viscous materials. What we learn from these four writers is that the dynamics of matter, whether it bursts, trembles, sticks, shimmers or pulls is always as well an imaginative event.

Yesterday, I cleaned the window in the room where I’ve been working lately. I did a good job; the glass is completely free of marks and dust. Right now, I feel like I’m thinking quite clearly, managing to get the introduction written. The clean window and my managing to write suddenly find companionship. What’s going on here exactly? We might assume that I’ve simply found a rather dull and extremely unimaginative way of describing my state of mind with the glass of the window in front of me. The slimier way to see things, however, is to consider the possibility that something much weirder is going on. Is there some material, non-human, link between the glass in the window and the feeling I have now? Is there some hidden slimy solidarity between being able to write and this glass over which we, as humans — even though we have constructed situations in which to

17 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 605
experience it—have no say? This is the implication of Sartre’s speculation: my feeling somehow charged with the glass. Metaphors become momentary insights into a meshwork of material qualities that by day correspond to our will, but at night secretly migrate between bodies and brains, things and thoughts, creep across the border to get married.19 Here, I am not so interested in whether or not this meshwork, these secret marriages or slimy solidarities actually exist, but rather what their feeling has made people do.

My work is on the viscous as it is both materially and imaginatively composed. But it is also about the tyranny of so-called “materiality,” that is, the way in which this word, “materiality,” has become something of a fetish, as if finding the material bases or “analogue” to something, some thought, were an end in itself. Or, there is the stranger tendency to try and find in materials ethical instruction on how to live. This is the idea that in the real properties of completely un-idealized matter we might find some “way of being” that is preferable to how we are now, whatever that might be. In this work, material states are, instead, always deeply ideological. The ways viscous matter is perceived, used, manipulated, twisted, engineered, felt, ignored, managed, and described are all traces of particular convictions, values, and worldviews. The dizziness of its repulsive allure can be at times, rather than a grounding in the materiality of “here and now,” a state of mind that shuffles towards the utopian, as I will explore in chapter one. The viscous holds, for sure, a silent wonder.

But what do I mean, exactly, by “dynamics”? In using this word “dynamic,” I am thinking in line with Daniel Stern’s use of the term as something that describes an activity in things that spreads itself between modalities. As he says in Forms of Vitality, experiences of bursting, pulsing, fading, are

19 This is an image used by Bruno Latour, We Have Never Been Modern, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1993,) 6: “The tiny networks we have unfolded are torn apart like the Kurds by the Iranians, the Iraqis and the Turks; once night has fallen, they slip across the border to get married.”
not sensations in the strict sense, as they have no modality. They are not direct cognitions in any usual sense. They are not acts as they have no goal state and specific means. They are the felt experience of force — in movement — with a temporal contour, and a sense of aliveness, of going somewhere.\textsuperscript{20}

The story of this writing is a story from indifference to articulation. The viscous, while remaining viscous, shifts from being an amorphous blob threatening to ingest you to something of such delicate articulation that only appears indifferent. Everything and nothing changes. It poses, therefore, oblique questions to our conceptions of mechanization.

Technology

As I’ve said, the viscous has a troubled relationship with thingness. The mollusc, as Francis Ponge says, “is a thing — but almost a quality.”\textsuperscript{21} We might think of viscous objects as resisting thingness in their refusal to be neatly pocketed, used, bought sold, collected, arranged. These can all be considered the world-making attributes of things, things that connect us to the world, to our sense of ourselves, things we think through, the objects of our thought. Mucus, shit, and sludge, for instance, are not like this, they don’t readily compose a world of activities and possibilities. They too easily make a mess, spread themselves maddeningly onto everything and reduce us to nothing but scrubbers. All powers of delicate articulation are denied as our hands, in a pot of some goo, acquire all the dexterity of cheeks.\textsuperscript{22}

But as every exclamation of B-movie horror betrays — WHAT IS THAT...THAT THING?! — the slimy object is also the “thing” par excellence. As we’ve learnt from Bill Brown, things are objects whose objecthood has gone weird, gained access to our

\textsuperscript{22} Bachelard, \textit{Earth and the Reveries of Will}, 91.
THE VISCOUS

souls, when their “flow within the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition has been arrested.”

As Steven Connor observes, the weirdness of things comes into presence through us secreting part of ourselves into them, that part being, paradoxically, the capacity to be enigmatically “other.” “Just like me in my otherness,” is the paradox of the thing. Thingness comes to life when the object starts to resemble the subject

not in sharing its particular powers or capacities, but in exhibiting the power of resistance or reserve, the power to withdraw or withhold itself from being known.

The thing adheres to us while simultaneously withdrawing, just as a gooey toy might fasten itself to your finger, stretch outwards with it, to then suddenly relent, detach, recoiling back into its body. The slimy thing, then, performs its own thingness within its material behavior.

But it is this dubious status of the slimy object that may make it difficult to imagine as a kind of technology. Viscous technology might seem like squaring the circle, turning the very definition of the unarticulated, amorphous, negligible, messy matter into something with function, processes, repeatable maneuvers. But its substance as it squirms, shudders, and smears is a technologized state of matter, one that is becoming more and more so. As I will discuss in most depth in the last two chapters, viscous matter can be seen as containing extremely powerful kinds of articulation, the first (in the order I address them) being the liquid crystalline phase, a semi-solid state that, depending on its arrangement and the electrical currents passed through it, is able to represent the world in high definition images. As the physicist who first conducted rigorous analysis of the liquid

crystal, Otto Lehmann, in the early years of the 20th century, said:

It does not seem inconceivable that physics might succeed in learning from plants the secret of energy storage. In such a case it would be possible to replace the technology based on iron and steel and the steam engine. This new technology would use soft and half-fluid materials.\(^{25}\)

Though not quite in the domains of energy storage, Lehmann’s prediction was not far off the mark for the directions modern engineering and technology is taking us. The textures of our machines are changing. The conception of technology as composed of metallic materials, fueled by liquid ones, is coming to an end.

There have always been viscous substances. Its semi-state speaks of the “warm little pond,” the primordial soup, from which it is generally accepted we emerged.\(^{26}\) But with the large-scale extraction of petroleum from the earth, we have witnessed a proliferation in the variety of its forms. Stuff like Vaseline was made from the residue of petroleum distillation. The technologies of emulsions and gels produced new advancements in lubrication, explosives technology, lacquers, paints, emulsions, sols, gels, jellies, gums, plastics, and pastes. Gel cosmetics are a spectacle in themselves, frothing, fizzing as you rub them, secreting the nourishment of paradise gently through our skin, beckoning us to join them in their steamy eternity. Most recently we are confronted with semi-solid, gelled technologies and infrastructure. Slime mold, it turns out, can design better road networks than we can. The viscous is the frontline between the technological and the biological. Robotics is turning increas-

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ingly to silicone as its primary material, AI becoming soft like flesh. Articulation is being made through the channeling of air into rubber chambers, swelling like bubbles. Imagine a future where buildings will be grown like algae, constructed, potentially, of materials that can heal themselves, metabolize, breath. My screen as I write this is secretly squirming. I consider this all to be a change in our made environments into ones that increasingly include viscous states of matter as part of their technology. Importantly, the viscous isn’t only the fuel, or the lubricant that allows the metallic parts to move smoothly, it isn’t a facilitator of technological movement, but a technology in its own right. As we will see, the viscous has not only been channeled into a technologized state, but its dubiousnesses, its deviances, have been technologized as well.

My time frame for this work, then, is for the most part post-industrial. Time constraints like this, though, are always a performance of some kind; knowledges I employ have their origins in work and sensations that long precede the industrial and post-industrial periods. The viscous as something that reaches simultaneously into primordial depths and into the worlds of high technology requires a kind of approach to history that is willing to scramble erratically out of temporal continuity. That said, I want to expose how there seems to be a particular obligation in the contemporary moment (even if the viscous makes such a category difficult to sustain) to attune ourselves to non-solid, non-liquid, sometimes messy kinds of technology and knowledge. I would never suggest that this obligation is all encompassing, but it is there.

**A Glass Eye**

It may be surprising, perhaps disappointing, that I don’t deal in any explicit or direct way here with the sensation of disgust. The viscous is, after all, the substance we might immediately associate with the abject, the repulsive, the gory, putrescence, shit. I have consciously avoided talking directly about disgust, because, first of all, a lot has already been written about it and
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I felt my efforts would be more usefully placed elsewhere. But where instead? Just as I have chosen to see the viscous as a set of dynamics, disgust is similarly a kind of structure, or rather a collapse of structure that contains the potential for another kind of structure. Rather than disgust itself, I’ve become obsessed with the remarkable things the structure of disgust is able to transform into once the tendencies of repulsion or revulsion have subsided.

The most disgusted I have ever been was during a job I had before I started doing a PhD as a full-time personal assistant to a severely disabled woman. Antonia was the name of my boss. At the age of 7, she had been blown up by an unexploded Second World War bomb left in a stream in Sardinia, where she had grown up. In her fifties and living alone in London in a hotel in Bermondsey, she lives her life without arms and without eyes, relying on constant help from assistants like me that she selects herself via adverts on Gumtree. On the side of her face they managed to reconstruct, she has an eye socket fashioned, I believe, from the skin of her bicep that contains a glass eye. Her other eye is perpetually closed, containing, I think, pieces of eye, but the exact physiognomy is not clear to me. One of the tasks I would perform for her as her assistant would be to remove the glass eye from its socket with a specially designed miniature plunger, wash the eye and the socket with warm water, before inserting it back in. The procedure was not only terrifying, but also terrifyingly awkward. The eye refused to easily slot back in, you had to really ram it; I was ordered by Antonia not to be delicate: “There’s nothing in there anyway! Just get it in!” There were all number of mysterious viscous semi-states involved, which I would flush out from the socket, and wipe from the surface of the eye.

Lear’s “vile jelly,” _Un Chien Andalou’s_ razor blade to the cornea, Saint Lucia with her eyes on a plate, Bataille, Oedipus: eye enucleation is an archetypal horror. And the horror comes from the revelation of the eye’s jelly, as opposed to the glassiness we might likely hope it to be. The jelly is the trembling vulnerability squirting out of what was supposedly the crystalline core of our
subjectivity. But nevertheless, when Antonia first asked me to remove her eye with the plunger, I wretched, I panicked, I felt faint. I exhibited all the signs of total disgust. But I just about managed to do it. After a few times of removing and cleaning the eye, however, I no longer felt disgust. This is perhaps something we might expect: we get “used to things,” however repulsive you found them at the beginning. It’s what must happen to doctors when they learn how to cut into human flesh with a knife as if it were nothing in particular.

But I don’t think this is what happened. It wasn’t a tolerance that I found. I didn’t just distance myself from the substances of the task or learn how to remove or repress my initial repulsion. I didn’t mechanize the situation as I imagine doctors might do during the “clinical encounter.” It wasn’t a widening in the spectrum of what I was able to tolerate. I had the feeling of being just as sensitive and involved with the world as I had been when I wretched, but that the quality of this involvement had changed into something else. It became something I was good at doing. It became personal, part of the sense I had and have of myself. It became something I enjoyed. And this joy was deeply entwined with the sense that I had overcome something. The joy came, in part, through a sense of having pierced a barrier, defeating a resistance.27

We might often think of things bursting as disgusting, but it is rarer, I think, for us to think of disgust as something that can itself burst. And that, on the other side of its membranes, lie new structures of experience. I am not suggesting we try to entirely erase disgust, far from it. Disgust is just as much a complex part of life as anything else and as disgust has very important practical day-to-day applications. It of course saves us from doing things that might infect and potentially kill us. But it is also clear to see that this isn’t only how disgust operates. Just as

27 Raymond Guess discusses a similar issue in Public Goods, Private Goods (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001), 21: “It is part of the pleasure that a devotee of ‘high’ game or of strong cheeses experiences to overcome the ever so slight revulsion that could be caused by the smell.”
I said of “the viscous” a moment ago, disgust spreads through likeness like magical thinking. It is intensely conscious not only of the threatening or poisonous contents of a particular disgusting object, but also that object’s tactile attributes. Disgust is also an aversion to a particular quality of experience, one that quite often involves viscous dynamics. A major ambition of this work is to zoom in on these particular qualities of experience and engineer them out of their association with disgust. I want to find in them structures of being that can be experimented with, used and repurposed. For the most part, the attention of this book is placed in this region — the joy, the thinking, the writing, the making, the technology, the social possibility that emerge out of the structures that lie beyond disgust, leaving it behind, but involving its dynamics. This bursting does not constitute a numbing of sensation, nor an increase in what we are able to tolerate, but, I hope, something like the opposite, something more adventurous. These are our protagonists: indifference, stickiness, fondling, mixing. And it is to the aftermath of a huge, accidental burst that we will turn to now.

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I do, here, hope to gesture towards certain ways in which we might attune ourselves to sliminess. But this is an attunement, it involves limits and necessarily some resistance.

This writing isn’t completely slimy, slime isn’t ever an answer.

While it recognizes the want of slime, it also resists this want.

These aren’t the words the viscous always wanted me to write.
Fig. 1. The aftermath of the Molasses Disaster, *The Boston Globe*. 