The Viscous
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Of Slime and the City

PLACE: Boston, USA, 1919

Molasses, waist deep, covered the street and swirled and bubbled about the wreckage. Here and there struggled a form — whether it was an animal or human being was impossible to tell. Only an upheaval, a thrashing about in the sticky mass, showed where any life was. [...] Horses died like so many flies on sticky paper. The more they struggled the deeper in the mess they were ensnared. Human beings — men and woman — suffered likewise.¹

Flood

At 45 minutes past midday on January 15, 1919, a 25 foot high and 160 foot wide wave of molasses engulfed the city of Boston's waterfront. A tank that had been recently constructed near the harbor to contain the 23 million tonnes of industrial syrup had burst. The rivets that held the huge curved steel sheets pinged cartoonishly off before the sides gave way entirely, the dark gloop gushing out, carrying parts of the tank with it, tearing the world around it apart and plunging the streets and buildings of north Boston into sugary, viscous darkness. Where a tidal wave would have moved in one direction, this wave of molasses es-

¹ The Boston Globe, January 16, 1919, 14
THE VISCOUS

caped the tank in four directions, creating four walls of syrup that smashed through the wharf between it and the shore, the elevated railway to left of this picture (fig. 1) and the commercial and residential structures in the foreground and to the right.

Looking at this photo, you can make out the top of the tank at the top, center, just under the white building, nestled like the bald patch of a shy town planner amid the scattered strands and splinters of the debris. Figures are hopping about like birds, probably looking for bodies or survivors, prizing their feet free from the slick. One man is dressed in white — the angel of the syrup — the only figure with his back to the scene, heading determinedly home to bed to escape this madness.

One wave obliterated the North End Paving Yard buildings, the remains of which can be seen in the foreground, above the vehicles and crowd of onlookers. It pulled the Engine 31 firehouse from its foundations, destroyed a timber frame house occupied by the Clougherty family (whose remains and roof I think might be just by the railway), filled kitchens, cars, offices, workshops, sheds, freight cars, shops, and basements. It pulled

Fig. 2. The aftermath of the Molasses Disaster, The Boston Globe.
electricity lines from their poles that fizzed and sputtered as they sank into the molasses. One of the steel sheets from the side of the tank surfaced the wave and was propelled into and through one of the columns holding up the elevated railway, bringing the track down.

People in the area described hearing a deep rumbling accompanied by what they thought was machine-gun fire — the rivets whizzing and ricocheting off surfaces. The photographs taken during the rescue operations by journalists recall the images of post-World War II bombed out towns and cities, none of which of course yet existed. What had occurred, of course, were the slimescapes of the First World War trenches, where the fear, it is reported, was not so much of drowning in the mud but of turning into it. Twenty-one people drowned in the molasses flood, one child, the rest workers and laborers mostly of Italian and Irish descent.

The journalism following the event is full of surreal first-hand accounts of people being smothered and consumed by this thickness, of the dark wave approaching, of the stone cutter John Barry drowning in a dark basement filled with sweetness, of Giuseppe Iantosca searching desperately for his child he had sent looking for firewood at the base of the tank. There is Martin Clougherty’s account, whose house was closest to the tank and completely destroyed. He had been asleep in bed at the moment of the explosion and was coming into consciousness as his bed gently overturned. He slid off the bed and began to sink, still half asleep, into a pool of molasses as it slowly filled up (what he thought was) his bedroom. It was only when the sweetness of the dark syrup touched his tongue that he came fully to consciousness and realized he was, along with the remains of his house, being swept down the street by a tide of brown ooze.

There are two books that cover the events of this disaster in detail. These are *Dark Tide: The Great Boston Molasses Flood of 1919* by American journalist Stephen Puleo and *The Great Molasses Flood: Boston 1919* by Deborah Kops. Through admirable archival research, both position the disaster in the legal and political situation of just-post-war America. The molasses was ini-
tially meant to be distilled into rum, but because of immanent prohibition was being held in the tank to be turned (ironically perhaps) into explosives instead. In the immediate aftermath of the disaster, the media and authorities were convinced that the tank had been blown up by Italian anarchists who were active in the area and were using bombs. In fact, although the causes for the tank’s collapse have never been fully understood, it seems most likely that human error and negligence during the tanks construction combined with fermentation and overfilling led to its fracturing and eventual bursting. Puleo uses the molasses flood as a way to paint a picture of Boston at a particular historical moment — the anxieties, the perceived threats, the ethnic tensions, the paranoia, the impending gloom of prohibition. He is, or at least claims to be, exasperated by the perceived weirdness of the event as the reason that it is not taken seriously as a historical moment, the reaction that involves, “a raised eyebrow, maybe a restrained giggle, followed by the incredulous, ‘What you’re serious? It’s really true?’”

For me, these raised eyebrows and restrained giggles are part of, rather than hostile to, the history of this event. Or rather, there is a history that can be told that is the history of this collision — the viscous spewing out over the city — and its weirdness. It also seems to me that this event, each of its constituent parts, is a peculiarly modern one. And by modern I mean this: it requires the accumulation of matter in such quantities that it might suddenly erupt, overpowering the technologies made to contain it, and reduce the streets around it to what we might imagine as a pre-historical quagmire. It is a moment when an infrastructure can’t appear to manage the abundance it produces. These images feel as if they unearth a set of dialectics: technologies of containment are simultaneously technologies of bursting. Technologies of control are simultaneously technologies of chaos.

Describing a Dream

The disaster — its flamboyance, its comedy, its suddenness, its fascination — has given me a spectacular and improbable excuse to interrogate how slime, its tendencies, and the city interrelate. I rewind and replay the event, from different angles and degrees of zoom by assembling moments, here, where slime collides again and again with the urban space in other times, places, and imaginations. Is this a possible way of doing history? A history that extracts particular sensual instances out from their context and rampantly connects them across thought plains, greased-up and eager for traffic. Maybe this is the kind of history the viscous demands, one that reaches out and grabs in the way we might when trying to remember a dream. Because a dream is, after all, what slime transforms a city into. The dream image of the city bursting and spewing, smearing and congealing, is one of singular excitation, of some other place where “business as usual” is treated with contempt. In Ursula Le Guin’s novel The Lathe of Heaven, a novel where reality corresponds to a character’s dreams, contains one of literature’s most vividly gloopy cities, where the towering structures of bureaucracy turn into neglected food:

The buildings of downtown Portland, the Capital of the World, the high, new, handsome cubes of stone and glass interspersed with measured doses of green, the fortresses of Government—Research and Development, Communications, Industry, Economic Planning, Environmental Control—were melting. They were getting soggy and shaky, like Jell-O left out in the sun. The corners had already run down the sides, leaving great creamy smears.3

I reach out, grab and assemble things that resemble it as an attempt to re-enact it, bring it into clearer focus, make myself

more like it, even. What are we meant to do with the strange and impossible jealousy we might have for events like this? Not of the people who witnessed it, but for the event itself? Similarly, what are we meant to do with the desire to dig your fingertips into the joins of a building’s architecture and tear it into pieces like an orange (as I imagine doing when I look at the former Camden Town Hall Annex on the Euston Road, now being developed into a luxury Crosstree Hotel)? Is the desire to eat a city or one of its buildings just simply foolish, or is there something useful there to which we should be attentive, some type of knowing being made that is trying to overturn, to use Esther Leslie’s phrase, the “settled world of day”? I don’t want to elevate the molasses disaster to some special historical position. I don’t of course consider it as comparable to any of the real disastrous ruinations of the 20th century. One curious echo I’ve come across, though. It’s reported that in the siege of Leningrad, the fires in the Badaevsky food warehouses produced rivers of molten sugar flowing across the city. As the sugar crystalized, it

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merged with the rubble and dust of the bombed-out buildings, which the city’s inhabitants, starving to death, turned to eating.\textsuperscript{5}

In many ways, my choice of this disaster is arbitrary. There are all number of other urban spewings-out to choose from, but I have persisted with it. I am drawn to it as a moment of accidental wildness (can wildness be anything but accidental?) within and involving the urban space, as if, somehow, the inorganic world was enacting a revenge for the supposed supremacy of so-called enlightenment thinking. Surely this isn’t so. Or maybe it is. This is the question, then: what kinds of thinking does the molasses disaster propose?

This approach doesn’t correspond to much, if any, recognized scholarly or academic methodology. But this is something that needs to be gotten to grips with if the viscous is to be allowed to flourish. The primary obsession of my research into this material state, the one to which I will return relentlessly, is the gelling of arbitrariness. It is the persistence of association even if no real justification for it can be found. Or, it is the continuance of association even if the justifications for it can be exposed as being wholly superficial, pop, as the associations I make here may often seem. The viscous, in this way, is anti-academic. It doesn’t care too much about making ground or meaningful content. But it does care, in its own peculiar way, about something much harder to care about: those things that, though not explicitly meaningless, don’t seem to give much at all, but mingle, stick with you, all the same.

I want to unearth the slimy parts to the city that are, perhaps, repressed, but essential to its functioning. But I also want to put slime next to the city, allow them to communicate in unexpected and unrealistic ways in order that we might learn more about what these things or places are independently and also how they might learn from each other, or, of course, have already done so.

Figs. 4, 5, 6. Molasses Disaster Reenactment. Photo by the author.
Re-enactment

When researching the Molasses Disaster, I became obsessed with different ways I could synthesize its experience, ways, I suppose, of describing its dream. I applied for and received a small grant to build a scale model (about 1 m × 2 m) of the tank and its surrounding area of Boston in 1919. The tank I made was filled with sugar syrup and designed to burst on demand, flooding and destroying the buildings and elevated railway I'd lovingly replicated out of white foam board. This re-enactment was due to be performed at Somerset House in London as part of the (awkwardly named) Culture Capital Exchange Festival. The idea was to re-enact the disaster in the venue, film it in super slow-mo, then play back the slow motion version while I gave a 50-minute talk entitled “Of Slime and the City.” It became apparent that this was impossible. It wasn't even permitted to eat in the wood-paneled cinema I was to present in, let alone blow-up re-appropriated ventilation shafts full of molasses. The Perspex walls with which I surrounded the model, which I'd promised to the organizers would keep the molasses safely within its confines, were not, I gradually realized, going to achieve anything. Instead, I resigned myself to filming the explosion from multiple different angles in slow-motion in an appropriate setting and play the result back in the venue, over my talk.

A skeleton crew and I set up five different cameras filming at 250 frames per second around my model. The ventilation shaft I'd cut up to act as the tank contained a large silver balloon against which the tip of a soldering iron was gently pressed, inserted through the metal, hidden under a shed adjacent to the tank. Once the balloon was filled with the syrup and the cameras filming, the soldering iron would be switched on, rupturing the balloon, sending the molasses gushing out over and ruining the little figures and buildings we'd assembled.

Molasses corrodes latex, it turns out, and before we'd turned the cameras on, the balloon ruptured of its own accord covering me and my companions head to foot in sticky, stinking, farm-grade molasses before we'd finished arranging a miniature ver-
sion of Northern Boston in 1919. I collapsed in despair into a pool of syrup. My friends cleaned everything up, this was no small task, while I, managing to extract myself from a deep defeatist attitude, went to Lidl to buy the shop out of brown sauce. A few hours later we tried again, this time with a tank full of some disgusting concoction of brown sauce, treacle, brown paint, glue and any of the molasses we could recycle. We got the shot, though it was not nearly viscous enough. Appropriately, my attempt to re-enact the molasses disaster had been a disaster.

At Somerset House, the talk was received well. A woman in the Q&A at the end described a memory she had from her childhood of sneaking into her parents’ larder at night to steal some chocolate. Not knowing where the light switch was, she rummaged around in the dark walk-in cupboard when suddenly there was a loud bang and she felt some substance slapping itself onto her face. A can of treacle had spontaneously exploded at precisely the moment of her sinful nighttime excursion. Haunted by this apparent desire of the world to expose and humiliate her, she’d come to my talk to get some answers. I didn’t have any for her.

A City Bursts

Industrial disasters that involve foodstuffs can happen, though rarely do, in large sugar refineries, flour mills, and custard factories that are at risk of dust explosions, the rapid combustion of fine particles suspended in the air of a poorly ventilated factory spaces. The first of these was the Washburn “A” Mill in Minneapolis that exploded in May, 1878, killing 18 people which instigated an introduction of stricter regulations. The same thing happened in Banbury in Oxfordshire in 1981 when Bird’s Custard factory (now an arts center) witnessed a smaller version of such an explosion. When the firefighters hosed the flames, the unburnt powder turned into custard and began “pouring down
the streets.” These explosions are composed of a curious internal echo or prefiguring of themselves. The powder is ground down and dispersed invisibly throughout the space. Only when this dispersal is contained, when the particles are prevented from dispersing entirely, can a dispersal of a much larger and more spectacular kind take place, the sudden, explosive dispersal of the building itself.

The fact that most of our burstings, especially the food-related ones, are forbidden in public, certainly provides the molasses flood, and these other industrial food disasters, with some of its comic power. It is an absurdly amplified, industrialized, version of something that has at its core a symbol of human shame and vulnerability: the troubling of the boundaries between inside and outside that is the basis of the abject. In witnessing spectacles of bursting, there is an instant of hypnosis where we begin to momentarily forget the distinction we draw between ourselves and things. My stomach lurches mimetically, I begin to cross over with the world, sharing with these spectacles the contingency they express. Boston gets diarrhea, or we become a tank, thin-skinned and waiting to crack. In watching bubbles burst, in slamming your fist down on a jam doughnut, there is the structure of some great taboo having been broken. I find a structural continuity of the world with myself as a set of surfaces and apertures, but then I also feel a sublime detachment from it. I laugh at it—the bursting is ostentatiously not happening to me.

The spectacle of the burst, and the attention it demands, has been thrust into contemporary relevance by Peter Sloterdijk, whose epic trilogy on spherology opens with a mediation on the image of a child watching a bubble.

For the duration of the bubble’s life the blower was outside himself, as if the little orb’s survival depended on remaining encased in the attention that floated out with it.\(^7\)

An intricate dialectic of internalization and externalization is at play in a moment of inter-encasement. The child leaves itself in the attention it gives to the floating object, as if he (not only his breath) were inside it, yet believes its survival depends on it being contained within his attention. The membrane of his consciousness and the membrane of the bubble are coterminous with one another. This solidarity with things takes place, Sloterdijk says, in a “field spread out through attentive involvement.”

The joy of this activity is self-perpetuating, when the burst inevitably comes, it doesn’t signify an end, but the possibility of renewal: again! This sense of your attention spreading is something I will discuss in more detail in just a moment.

But what are the differences and continuities between bursting and exploding? This distinction is, in fact, at the core of the confusion in the pages of the *Boston Globe* in its reporting of the disaster. Although the headline of newspaper that day dramatically announces “HUGE MOLASSES TANK EXPLODES,” the actual accounts of the disaster in the following pages, describe a more unsettlingly muted progression of events. For onlooker Robert Burnett, there was

no roar or explosion. I thought it was an elevated train until I heard a swish as if wind was rushing. It didn’t rush. It just rolled, slowly, it seemed, like the side of a mountain falling into space.8

How is it possible for a disaster of such death toll to “swish”? There is an undeniable grace to the abstraction of Robert’s description. The slow unfurling of the molasses seems to have given him a sense of geological time—a landscape descending into a void.

The sonic details of the first-hand descriptions of the event are characterized by a remarkable littleness and subtlety: pings, swishes, hisses, barely audible murmurings of something approaching—whimpers not bangs. These details are wound up with the determined attempts to find someone or some group to blame for the flood. Where the boom of an explosion would signify the presence of intention and the malignant project of the Italian communists and anarchists to wipe out the American way of life, these rustles and creaks, however, signify something much harder to accept and narrativize: the presence of simple

8 *Boston Globe*, January 16, 1919, 16
human error. An accident: an event, as Catherine Malabou says, that “eludes duration.”

Although it is not the case that explosions are only ever intended and bursts accidental, the complexity of what might be their cause is perhaps distinct. Where explosions spread rapidly from a single point of ignition, some charge, burstings spread from a single point of rupture. Bursting is tied to the presence of some initial breakage through its relation to “bust,” a word with which it used to be interchangeable. The dynamics of the burst are much cruder, much simpler, than that of the explosion. Bursts are explosions in their primordial form, no chemical reaction needs to take place, only a mere deficiency of matter in the face of a sheer excess of substance that causes the world simply to let go. In this way, the explosions in industrial refineries and mills feel like they work within the logic of the processes in question, an improbable yet logical outcome of grinding things down very small on a large scale. The bursting of the molasses tank, on the other hand, carries a sense of primordiality, one that is, importantly, only possible within modern industry’s requirements for vats, tankers, silos and other structures of mass containment.

The history of how explosions have migrated between the imaginative, spectacular, bodily, and the militaristic is carefully surveyed by Steven Connor towards the end of his book *The Matter of Air*. Connor approaches explosions as an ontological structure that can transcend the distinction between the physic and physical, they are “a dangerous pleasure: always more than a physical event,” that have been, among other things, “inflected by and given accent to desire.” He suggests that technologies of explosion were first developed by the Chinese in the ninth century, not as weapons of warfare, but as pyrotechnics: forms of entertainment. The spectacle of seeing something obliterated

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10 *OED*, s.v. “bust, n.3.”
in a sudden dispersal of light and sound both satisfies, reflects, and modifies our own rhythms of desire. This desire can be, in some cases, the analogue of the means by which life propagates itself across space through the dispersals of seeds, or it can be, in a related way, the desire for total self-obliteration. Conner shows how the vocabulary of explosives has been integrated into that of identity annihilating drug use: bombed, hit, blow your mind. He identifies the explosion as an event which destroys things to the point of almost nothing, an airborne dust. “This is,” he suggests, “the ultimate reach of the death-drive, a death that not only brings life to an end, but also annuls the very time of its having existed.”

Something different is going on with the molasses flood, although part of its interest is in its promise of something similar. I want to position it as an event that contains dual forms of excitation that undercut one another. This “letting go” of matter as it slumps out over the city does not transform the bursting object into air, or dust, as Connor imagines, but lingers on, resists the immediacy from which it was born. In the spectacle of the molasses flood we have the close proximity of two contrasting kinds of excitation, one that comes from the dubious clamminess of the sugar syrup and the other from the desirous expulsions of the explosive. Time compacts and then suddenly elongates. In this crisis in the technologies of containment maybe we can find an analogue for the dynamics of modern economics, the familiar patterns of “boom and bust.” Despite many claims of this pattern’s culmination, the boom of economic excitation is only ever an incomplete explosion, the endless feasts they promise never arrive, the advances wind down, austerity tends to cling and linger. The explosion recoils into a gloopy downturn which, itself, contains the potential for an alternative excitation. But what exactly is this urban slime’s “excitation”?

12 Ibid., 292.
Slow Beginnings

The dodgy pun I’m making with the title of this chapter is of course in reference to Terence Davis’s complexly ambivalent urban cinematic eulogy *Of Time and the City*, where the “of” acts, it feels, as a signal of loss, as if the phrase, the title of the film, has itself fallen away from something larger, leaving us only with a straggled “pertaining to…” wandering aimlessly through the streets at dusk. The title seems to mourn already some loss of what might have preceded its beginning and in this way gathers its playfully portentous mood. This mood is perhaps an odd one when placed in conjunction with slime, a substance that “doesn’t really care,” as I’ve said, or at least is not prone to extensive reminiscence, not having much, in fairness, to reminisce about. But, then again, slime is for many a nostalgic state of matter. Especially for those who grew up in the 1980s and ’90s, neon gunge was a must-have toy, one that seemed to disappear in the early 2000s only to return with force on Instagram and other platforms in recent years, transformed, for reasons I will discuss in chapter three.

But for sure—sliminess speaks of childhood, an imagined time when mess was not a problem to be dealt with, or somebody’s fetish, but an actual tool for managing the relationship between “self” and “world.” As Winnicot famously theorized, making a mess, smearing stuff on walls, rags, etc., is a crucial negotiation in infantile subject formation. Transitional objects, which often tend to be covered in mess, are neither the “world,” nor are they “me.” They act as a “resting place” in the “war waged by desire and need on reality.”13 The messy room gathers meaning through not being cleared away. The making of a mess, in this view of things, is not so much at odds with the making of meaning, but its necessary prerequisite, the thing that you must do to the world first before you are able to channel it into something that looks like “meaning.”

This punning on “slime” and “time” in my title is not particularly original, the joke is made by Iain Hamilton Grant in his essay “Being and Slime: The Mathematics of Protoplasm in Lorenz Oken’s Physio-philosophy.” And before Grant, the same joke is made by the character Ray Stantz (played by Dan Ackroyd) in Ghostbusters II. Imagining the newspaper headlines after the Psychomagnotheric slime has engulfed New York, Ray exclaims: “SLIME SQUARE!” This punning of “slime” and “time” implicates the one in the other just as, we might say, slime has been noticed to carry a timeframe within it. This “timeframe” for slime is slowness, it winds the world down, all of its maneuvers take place as matter in slow motion. For Sartre, slime is “fluidity in slow motion,” a pace of alteration that reveals, yet also just is, its dubious, transgressive, aberrant nature. There is something both over and under eager about slime, it doesn’t go quickly enough for us to want to have it. But, at the same time, whatever annoys us about it, it doesn’t seem to do it enough — it is more irritating than demonic, a menace that can’t really be bothered: “a lazy evil.”

Slime is the substance of returns. If it slides us back nostalgically to a dream of our childhood, it is also imagined as belonging to another time altogether. Its slowness contains the sensual blueprint for the popular imaginary of “another time,” a time that must somehow precede us, a dynamic totally oblivious to the crush and bustle of modern urban spaces. Slime and the city don’t fit together. Their logics feel at odds with each other, we might say.

Where the invention of photography allowed people to freeze the world into snapshots, cinema has the capacity to slow the world down. For the early cinema theorist Jean Epstein, the effect of slow motion can return our bodies to the state of “smooth muscles moving through a dense medium in which thick currents always carry and shape this clear descendent of old marine fauna and maternal waters.”

THE VISCOS

grace of a seemingly undisturbed gesture, removed from freedom and will. It has the power, perhaps, of the uncanny, that is, the return of something primordial. The fascination of the body in slow-motion maybe comes from disinterring the memory we might all somehow, somewhere have inside us, in our flesh, in our brains, of being fish. There is also, of course, the analytical pleasure of being able to see the world anew and in a detail that isn’t otherwise possible, like looking down a microscope. But, I do also feel when I watch footage in slow-motion, an obscure yearning for an impossible return, a less hostile, gloopier, material universe, for a world where I am not absolutely terrified of air travel.

But we must go further back than fish. It is the positioning of slime as the most basic and originary element of existence that Iain Hamilton Grant discusses in his essay on the 18th-century naturalist Lorenz Oken. The core philosophical problem of Oken’s work, Grant suggests, is how something issues from nothing, how to get from zero to one. But, the question is not so much whether the “real ground of existence” might “= 0,” but whether this 0 “stays the same,” whether 0 always = 0, whether, in other words, the 0 “is slimy.” Grant figures the Okenian solution to the problem of ontogenesis as a struggle between nothing and slime, which is in turn a meeting of biology and mathematics, a “mathematics endowed with substance.” For Oken, the study of life is mathematical, but this is a kind of slimy maths that trembles and shimmers. It involves “primal slime,” or in German Urschleim, and that collects in manifestations of “slime points,” Schleimpunkte. The viscous is not seen as at odds with quantities and their division, but allowed to pervade them, become part of their quality. Numbers are imagined as messy things and in this way generative. The zero oscillates gently,

16 Ibid., 292.
Oken imagines. This “wavering zero” is the generative core of being and slime.

But the complexity comes for Oken from the issue of primacy that is simultaneously invented and undercut by this slimy zero. What comes first: the slime or the zero? As Grant helps to show, slime has a contradictory function in Oken’s philosophy.

Man is the summit, the crown of nature’s development must comprehend everything that has preceded him [while] man is a complex of everything that surrounds him, namely of element, mineral, plant and animal.¹⁷

Like honey lifted out of itself with a spoon, “mankind” rises above nature through its structures of knowledge and communication and, in so doing, bleeds confusingly back into its environment. The struggle of slimy thinking is not to linearize time or progression, but to think of things in parallel. The viscous loop Oken finds himself in is that the “summit” mankind has reached is also a plunging back into the complex of everything that surrounds him. This is mirrored in his extraordinary vision of O as displaying exactly this honey-like quality of emerging from itself, only to stay itself:

[N]umbers have not issued forth from zero as if they had previously resided therein, but the zero has emerged out of itself […], and then it was a finite zero, a number.¹⁸

Quantities do not extend themselves tenuously out of O, but O churns away, emerging and collapsing, in a way that recalls Bachelard’s description of vats of molten porcelain appearing to knead themselves.¹⁹ But this is a crucial quality to viscous think-

¹⁷ Ibid., 304.
¹⁸ Ibid., 305.
ing and being — it plays with origins. It both invents and deletes them by stretching into the present the “having come before.”

“The City” Churns

If bursting is the sudden expulsion of the inside, outwards, the rupturing of the bubble’s membrane, the outline that is also everything that it is, isn’t there a problem with this “the” before “city” in my title “Of Slime and the City”? The definite article before the abstracted concept of the urban space works, perhaps, in line with a tendency in some theory, especially the kind that operates effectively within art schools, of concretizing the abstract or the quality of some act or relation — “the cut,” “the fragment,” “the assemblage,” “the inscription.” In Essayism, Brian Dillon describes his frustration with New Materialist thinking that is devoid of any actual materials, a movement that endlessly proclaims its commitment to materials and their processes, but never actually arrives to talk about any. “Materiality without materials — what good are these to anyone except the intellectually immature and overreaching […]?” This is, arguably, the effect of this definite article. It allows us to “overreach,” as Dillon would have it, eliding things that should probably be kept distinct. We keep ourselves safely and innocuously abstract, while pretending to be attentive to the peculiar, the specific. Is there something about cities that makes us want to give them this definite article? Have they tricked us into doing this to them? How does the “the” work differently between “the city” and “the fragment”? Is “the-ifying” the city like this as pointless or as misguided as proposing something like the *viscous*?

Thinking about the nature of “the” city has been epistemologically framed in this way since the urban sociology of the Chicago School, whose founders Ernest Burgess and Robert Park published their mission statement *The City* in 1925. As urbanologist Neil Brenner says, this terminology — the city — has evolved into a “basically self-evident presupposition,” something

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so “obvious that it did not require explanation or justification.” Urbanology is concerned with many different things, processes and debates, but beneath it all is a gaze placed exclusively on “city-like” “sociospatial units” whose qualities, possibilities, and problems arise from within a place that is distinct from zones that are definitively non-cities. All urban studies have been characterized by an entrenched “methodological cityism” which entails “an analytical privileging, isolation and […] naturalization of the city in studies of urban processes where the non-city may also be significant.” This is part of an emerging kind of urban sociology that looks to break the study out of its latent “cityism” to create a vision of the city “without an outside,” one that absorbs the terrestrial, the subterranean, the atmospheric, the oceanic.

This isn’t “the city” as the globalized space of flows, glistening rivers of car headlights in long-exposure photographs, but something slimier. Brenner, in trying to describe what he means by this absorptive urbanology, involves himself in a viscous vocabulary. Instead of the flows and streams between nodes, urban clusters are seen as “extended and thickened,” he calls forth Jean Gottmann’s notion of an “irregular colloidal mixture of rural and suburban landscapes;” he imagines this space as a “kaleidoscopic churning” of terrain, the urban fabric becoming an “uneven” sort of “mesh.” This slimy reconceptualization of the city does strange things to its “the.” It doesn’t deny it, doesn’t discard its tendency towards specificity, nor does it throw us out into pure multiplicity; the city is still an iterable structure. Rather, we generate a kind of specificity that is absorptive. As “the city” starts to integrate things that were not formerly thought of as part of its body, words like “churning,” “colloidal,” and “thickened” are becoming the necessary terminology for this reinvention of its space.

22 Ibid.
But this is more than just a choice of words. For nothing turns the city and its transport network slimier than an experiment conducted by researchers at Hokkaido University in Japan in 2010. The scientists arranged pieces of oatmeal in a petri dish to form a map of the Japanese railway system, each piece of oatmeal being a station. They then introduced slime mold to the dish. As the organism fed on the oatmeal, it formed a network between each oatmeal station that almost exactly replicated the existing Japanese railway map. This slime mold experiment has been repeated by researchers at the University of West of England for road networks around the world and they’ve found that motorways in China, Belgium, and Canada have the most efficiently mapped motorway systems, while the ones in the US and Africa have the least. According to slime mold, the M6 should be rerouted through Newcastle.\(^23\) Slime mold isn’t slow, necessarily. It can, in fact, grow up to a centimeter an hour in optimal conditions, but it is an extremely simple, single-celled organism.

As a result of experiments like this, there has in recent years been an increased interest in the organizational and even imaginative powers of dispersed organisms like slime mold. The organism has been found to have a kind of memory, one that is external, spatial. As it moves in the search for nutrients, it leaves a thick mat of “non-living extracellular slime,” consisting mostly of sulphated glucose polymers, which helps the organism(s) to remember where it’s been and avoid covering the same area twice. As researchers at the Centre for Mathematical Biology at the University of Sydney have discovered, this avoidance of its own slime trail, appears to be a “choice”: when all areas have been covered with its slime trail, the mold no longer avoids it and goes over the same ground. Its effectiveness at navigating

complex environments then greatly diminishes, however. This kind of spatialized memory system is being developed by researchers for the purposes of robotics. Its powers of decision-making are also being harnessed by researchers developing new forms of experimental computing.

But it is not all logical. Researchers working elsewhere at the University of Sydney claim to have discovered behaviors of irrational decision making in Physarum polycephalum. Most fascinating is the discovery that slime mold is able to anticipate future events. When plasmodia are exposed to unfavorable conditions at constant intervals, they reduce their “locomotive speed in response to each episode.” When they were then exposed to favorable conditions again, they “spontaneously” reduce their locomotive speed at a time when the next “unfavorable episode would have occurred.” Slime mold has an understanding of the perfect continuous conditional.

Slime mold’s power to make decisions troubles the very basis upon which our arguments about consciousness, in Western philosophy at least, are based. Kant considered the unity of consciousness, his “transcendental apperception,” to be a necessary transcendental condition for the possibility of experience. But as Steven Shaviro has shown in his recent book Discognition, this (dis)unity of perception might simply be a question of “latency and bandwidth,” or the pace at which signals are able to be transferred to different parts of a body. “If signals can’t be transferred quickly enough through the brain (or equivalent) then unity cannot be maintained.” Consciousness as we know it becomes a result of the speed of electrical signal; the internal pulsations of nutrition in a slime mold are too slow for it to resemble the consciousness of an animal’s brain, the speed of its synaptic firing. This means, though, that slime mold is able to

26 Steven Shaviro, Discognition (London: Repeater Books, 2016), 213.
multitask more effectively, able to “probe multiple food sources simultaneously.” The octopus, it has been speculated, may not have a unified consciousness because so many of its neurons are located “all along its eight arms and thousands of individual suckers.” Slime mold oozes about, actively probing and provoking its environment. It has a “dark phenomenology,” experience without understanding or knowing it.

Both conceptually and literally, then, slime is a tool we can use to reimagine the urban space. Slime is something we can bring in to rethink things. It allows us to counter the projects of purification, in the Latourian sense, that have determined urban planning. Outside my fourth-story window in a terraced house in East London, I see a long stretch of land that backs onto the houses on my street, miserably divided up by flimsy pieces of wood, demarcating for each ground floor flat its plot of lawn, varyingly tended to. Trampolines creak maddeningly as law-abiding children count bits of gravel. There is surely space here to land light aircraft. What if this were a forest? Viewed through a period-feature sash window as I sit at my polymer-laminated Ikea plywood table. Is there enough space to let miniature bison loose? At least remove these pointless fences. There is one word that may direct us: churn.

This churned urbanism is finding exciting application by architectural practitioners and theorists trying to develop ways in which cities might be designed as living things. Rachel Armstrong from the Experimental Architecture Group based at Newcastle University, for instance, is working on ways in which living systems might be used to design structures that heal themselves. Using protocell technology, a new strand of synthetic biology that uses cocktails of chemicals that are “half alive,” she hopes to grow a synthetic limestone base under Venice as a way of preventing the city from sinking any further into the mud. These simple metabolic systems are photophobic, turn away from the light and are drawn to the dark old wooden piles on which the city is currently built. They eat away at the wood and excrete a
limestone reef in its place. The city becomes food for things that are half alive, its structure: their waste excrecence. This would be the use, interestingly, of a material that has already been used for millennia as a building material — limestone. The difference being, of course, that the stones were grown in the city, rather than quarried, heaved, cut and piled. Part of what I want to get closer to here is the kind of imaginative work and resistances that are involved in realizing this *churn*.

Stoned in Marseilles

I immersed myself in contemplation of the sidewalk before me, which, through a kind of unguent with which I covered it, could have been, precisely as these very stones, also the sidewalk of Paris. One often speaks of stones instead of bread. These stones were the bread of my imagination, which was suddenly seized by ravenous hunger to taste what is the same in all places and countries.

So says Walter Benjamin, when extremely stoned in Marseille. He acts, in this state of reverie, not unlike a slime mold, his mind excreting some attentive substance that he smears onto things as his contemplation probes and passes over them. There is an intriguing interplay between surface and depth, where applying contemplation over the surfaces of the city he is able to immerse himself in its material.

It is through an excessive involvement with the literal material of the city’s stones (not their function as, say, floors, walls, gutters, roads) that Benjamin is able to access a form of universalism. But this is a universalism that he finds emphatically within the specificity of the stones in front of him. This isn’t the experience of being anywhere due to resemblance. He doesn’t turn the

stones into a schema that can be indefinitely applied outwards onto everything else. He doesn’t turn them into a “ness” (hardness, flatness, coldness, etc.), nor does he reduce them to their shape, their use function, their design, which he then is able to recognize as something he’s seen before elsewhere. He is clear: “precisely as these very stones.” The unguent of his attention that he smears over the world opens it out as a complex of particularities, like a body of a *Physarum polycephalum*, specificities accrue worm-holes, a sly, hidden solidarity between every thing that is irreducibly itself.

It is also a moment when Benjamin finds what he needs. The stones covered in this unguent nourish him, satisfying, we might say, a lack. Benjamin comes close to eating a city. His nourishment results in a “taste” for more. But this is for more of the same. Benjamin feels the insatiable thirst for more of precisely this, which is paradoxically the thirst for sameness. This is what the unguent is capable of, this is its use function. It is a tool that makes things so vehemently themselves that it feels you can taste them anywhere. In this piece on taking hash in Marseille, he reports finding a newspaper he’d been carrying on the night of his session with the phrase scribbled on it, in his hand: “one should scoop sameness from reality with a spoon.” Eating is the principle mode of engagement (he is at this moment looking for an ice cream, with a pretty severe case of the munchies), the nourishing part of things being that precise piece of the environment, neatly identified with your utensil, that is the same in all places.

These kinds of thoughts are dangerous, however, there is the risk of collapsing into cliché. The passage ends with an instance of what appears to be a sense of hangover shame:

“All men are brothers.” So began a train of thought I am no longer able to pursue. But its last link was certainly much less banal that its first and led on perhaps to images of animals.  

30 Ibid., 143.
Spectacles of Indifference

A key imaginary of the slimy object is of it as one that simply doesn’t care. Its eruption into the city space is a spectacle of want whose motivations are obscure or, we suspect, non-existent, certainly indifferent to our own. We might perceive the city as an environment that encourages capitalistic exchange and difference, change that induces further change and a site whose surfaces and infrastructure seek to create an ease of monetary and vehicular flow. We might, at the same time, conceive of the city as a site that is straining towards stasis, an archive, a museum of what takes place within it. “The question in its simplest and most idealistic form,” as urbanologist Will Straw puts it, “asks whether the city is a mechanism for perpetual motion or a force for stasis and immobility.”

Whatever debates might ensue, slime does not cooperate with them either. If the city favors exchange and difference, slime is its sluggish, reluctant, clammy counterpoint. The slowness of slime in the city should not be confused with kinds of “slowness” that have emerged out of modern anxieties of going too fast: “slow food,” “slow design,” “slow industry.” Nor should it be seen in terms of psychogeographical techniques of “walking the city” and its ring roads to rediscover lost connections to urban history, places, and identity. Slime is slow, but not in a thoughtful way, its gradualness is totally non-civic. Rather than a way to appreciate things and “take more in,” slime’s slowness is its dramatization of indifference. Perhaps his most intriguing insight into the viscous, Sartre identifies a “dubious slowness” of the stuff as what “discourages” possession. Its indifferent slowness is not only change that resists itself, but something that resists the forces of ownership, the creation of private and “public” property, the means by which urban space is delineated. I have, however, become fascinated by the signs attached to viciously

spiked fences informing us that “anti-climb paint is in use.” This stuff, this canned mess, this un-dryable paint, which is smeared along the tops of fences to discourage trespassing, is a use of the viscous, its sticky, transgressive qualities, to secure rather than to corrupt the delineations of space. Tigers defecate around their territory to ward off competition. I’ve heard of people in house-shares licking their cheese. I am aware of only one other moment when the threat of mess is employed as a type of security technology like it is with anti-climb paint, as I will discuss in the next chapter.

If we return, then, to the account of the molasses flood in *The Boston Globe*, it is precisely indifference that the journalist picks up on and is forced into: “here and there struggled a form,” the “thrashing” and “upheavals” of mere life, the moment when horses and flies become indistinguishable. To say that disasters (nuclear bombs, earthquakes, tidal waves, etc.) indifferently obliterate everything in their path is something of a cliché and not, I don’t think, what has caught the journalist’s attention here. It is instead the weird visual sensation of bearing witness to a world whose forms and entities have been reduced to mere presence. The world becomes a furious slurry of motions and forces detached from identity. In the position of the viscous in the history of public humiliation — the tar in the tar and feathering ritual — the act of smearing stuff onto people brings them into social, ritualistic exposure. When the viscous engulfs, as it does with the molasses flood, there is also a kind of exposure, an exposure of indifference, a bringing of the world out into unspecified presence. The focus of this journalist’s account is not the destructive force of the molasses, nor is it the death toll, but how strangely samey everything is as it struggles and gurgles under the clinging mass of sugar syrup. Do we have, here, a journalist struck by a vision of Oken’s slimy o? A landscape where movements outwards are simultaneously a collapse back in, where a certainty of life is coupled with an indifference to exactly what kind.

What this journalist describes when observing the aftermath of the molasses flood is not dissimilar to how the philosopher
Emmanuel Levinas feels when entering a city after a long, tiring journey:

Like the unreal, inverted city we find after an exhausting trip, things and beings strike us as though they no longer composed a world, and were swimming in the chaos of their existence [...] beings and things that collapse into their “materiality” are terrifyingly present in their destiny, weight and shape.\textsuperscript{32}

When you get sleepy, the real world begins to feel like a hallucination, “unreal,” an inverted version of what it used to be. Levinas loses his ability to define and compose what he sees and the urban environment begins to dissolve, liquefy, and rush chaotically about in dark pulsations of stuff. He figures this experience as a sort of collapse, as if some entropic dispersal of energy were taking place, a fading out into darkness, but this collapse is in fact a collapse \textit{into} a greater intensity of presence. The terrifying fact for Levinas is that the more present the world becomes the more unreal it feels. This confusing oscillation between hallucination and reality, dissolution and composition is at the center of the ontological distinction that Levinas makes between existence and the existent. Existence is the fact of existence in general, the existent is differentiated, specified being. This is the difference between “being” and “beings.” Being smothers, engulfs, and sticks to beings, but is entirely indifferent to them. At moments of sleepiness after a long journey, this irresolvable separation between being and beings erupts violently into presence, the being begins to \textit{feel} like an unwelcome guest, an intruder into its own existence. At this moment, Levinas thinks, the \textit{fantastic} occurs.

This is a spectacle that the makers of \textit{Ghostbusters II} latch onto: the Psychomagnotheric Slime that grows from the city’s sewers, onto the streets, to eventually engulf the (fictional)

Manhattan Museum of Art, lives off the social negativity and non-civic feeling of New York's inhabitants. The city goes gooey with the physical embodiment of political indifference. Until, that is, the Statue of Liberty saves the day. Affect and materiality converge, slime turns everything into the same thing and feeds, in this film, off people feeling indifferent.

But why the neon pink of the Psychomagnotheric Slime? Much has been made of the pre-’90s B-movie obsession with slime monsters as the materialization of the Cold War nuclear threat, or the threat of pollution, be it nuclear or otherwise. The link between toxicity and the color green was established in the 19th century by the arsenic in green dyes of 19th-century hair and gown pigments, which poisoned many hundreds of women.\(^3^3\) They would vomit green water, their eyes would turn green, along with their vision. They would foam at the mouth, convulse, and then die. Luminous green then became associated with radioactivity in the early 20th century, when the US Radium Foundation started in 1911 manufacturing glow-in-the-dark paint, which they called “Undark.” The paint also contained phosphor, the chemical actually responsible for the paint’s glow, the radium only excited the phosphor to glow brighter. The paint was used for the highlights on clock and watch faces and applied by workers, all women, on 250 dials a day at one and a half cents a dial. Many of the women died painful deaths from radiation poisoning in a well-covered scandal, becoming known as the “Radium Girls.”\(^3^4\) It was from this that the imaginary of glowing radioactive waste came.

I will discuss the viscosity of radiation and light in the next chapter and will going much further into the cute, gooey gunge toy aesthetic in the third. The role of the pinkness in the film’s Psychomagnotheric slime is interesting however for another, quite simple, reason. It exhibits how slime sits in an ambivalent

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position between the flamboyant and the repressed. The substance has moved from one extreme to another, propelled itself from total obscurity to absolute visibility. This slime desires to be hi-vis. *Ghostbusters II* is interested in slime as a particular way of claiming attention, it will do whatever it takes to get it. There is an inkling, here, of something I want to develop further: the sense that the spread of indifference is the spread of pure spectacle, a form that exists for nothing but its extreme visibility.

I am not the first to link this sensation in Levinas to Sartre’s signature substance: “paste,” something that is not blurry, obscure, but of terrifying clarity. This famous moment in his novel *Nausea* is appropriate:

And then all of a sudden, there it was, clear as day: existence had suddenly unveiled itself. It had lost the harmless look of an abstract category: it was the very paste of things; this root was kneaded into existence. Or rather the root, the park gates, the bench, the sparse grass, all that had vanished: the diversity of things, their individuality, were only an appearance, a veneer. This veneer had melted, leaving soft, monstrous masses, all in disorder—naked, in a frightful, obscene nakedness.

The park environment, once you remove its false veil of diversity is soft and gooey. Sartre hates it. It makes him sick. Viscous is what the world becomes when you stop having ideas about it.

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Ecstatic Specificity

In the molasses flood, the hard streets and docks are covered in thick sugar syrup. In the experiences of Levinas and Sartre, the urban environment itself turns gloopy. Or rather, the urban environment feels as if it turned gloopy in what appears to be a moment of synesthetic transposition. This softness that Sartre describes cannot, of course, be touched, but intuited. But how is it possible for monstrous softness to be intangible? Here we have the crux of what are essentially the concluding pages of Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*, his famous meditation on the nature of the slimy, *le visqueux*. The central problematic in his delving into the meaning of the viscous encounter, the pouring of honey back into honey, is the question: How can “sliminess” be ascribed as much to a physical sensation, as to a social interaction, a handshake, a smile? The common opinion holds, perhaps, that we accumulate sensual experiences of softness, of hardness, of fluidity, etc. that we then use as symbols or metaphors which we can superimpose onto fully formed psychic attitudes. This explanation involves “projection,” the projection of psychological states, which are primary, onto material ones, which are secondary. Sartre’s hugely important and widely acknowledged contribution to material thinking is his dismantling of this psychological/material hierarchy. As he says in a statement of dazzling dialectical entanglement:

The slimy does not symbolize any psychic attitude *a priori*; it manifests a certain relation of being with itself and this relation has originally a psychic quality because I have discovered it in a plan of appropriation and because the sliminess has returned my image to me.37

The slimy is an encounter with a particular mode of being that has no life in itself, but which gains a psychic attitude through its response to the appropriative project of the subject. But this response seems also to possess an appropriative project itself, it “returns” his image to him. The slimy sticks to you, as you go to grasp it, it grasps you back. The more you try to remove it from your hand, the more of your hand it covers. This, Sartre imagines, is the revenge of the “in-itself” on the “for-itself,” the object taking revenge on the subject, the threat of things to engulf and annihilate subjectivity, to lose ourselves in objects. When honey drips off your fingers, you sense an uncanny continuity of yourself with the world. To touch the viscous, we risk, it feels, becoming viscous.

An encounter with sliminess is therefore not only a sensual one, but the revelation of a kind of ontological schema that transcends the “distinction between psychic and non-psychic” and where slimy things of all kinds can arrange themselves: be it mayonnaise, handshakes, cakes, or glances. All the things we describe as slimy share in this schema. It is a rubric for “classifying all the thises of the world.”³⁸ There is, then, the possibility of this schema engulfing all, for the whole of being to be taken over by this mode of self-relation. The viscous is a “potential meaning of being.”³⁹ To be engulfed is Sartre’s great anxiety.

One of the core dubiousnesses of the slimy is the fact that it lingers, it exhibits a hysteresis, a tendency to lag behind. Sartre finds the appropriate symbol for this in the taste of sugar that remains in the mouth after swallowing. “A sugary death is the ideal for the slimy.”⁴⁰ Honey that falls back into itself displays a strange non-coincidence with itself, a reluctance to return to itself to which it eventually and ineluctably succumbs. This image of honey falling into honey, as Catherine Malabou helps to elucidate, is an image of ontological difference at once revealed and annulled. “The genius of Sartre’s writing,” she proposes, consists

³⁸ Ibid., 606.
³⁹ Ibid.
⁴⁰ Ibid., 609.
“in the way in which it makes ontological difference exist; that is, the way in which it invites things to bear witness to the question of Being.”

Things are allowed to remain themselves in all their finite, sensual particularity, but, at the same time, ooze gradually into a wider ontological schema. The viscous schema is itself viscous.

This has got to do, I think, with how exceptionally compelling this passage in *Being and Nothingness* is to read. The writing never feels prescriptive or programmatic, but instead stylistically caught up in its own subject matter. The ambivalence of repulsion and fascination is played out by Sartre as he luxuriates in the visual and visceral possibilities of these substances—the ambivalence of repulsion and fascination is played out by Sartre as he luxuriates in the visual and visceral possibilities of these substances—honey is not enough, we move between snow, lemons, and leeches, needy dogs and breasts, glue, sweat, and children’s toys.

These things proliferate abundantly and then collapse into one another as Sartre returns compulsively to yet another enigmatic figuration of viscous dubiousness: “it lives obscurely under my fingers and I sense it like a dizziness.”

The viscous is positioned as a threat, but he often seems almost addicted to all the ingenious new ways he can characterize its weirdness, the elaborating viscous dialectic between peculiar mundanity and the dynamics of Being. Alongside the astute philosophical insights he offers, there is a sense, when you read and reread this piece of writing, of a mounting euphoria, a euphoria he sticks to and that sticks to him, that may indeed disturb him. He indulgences in the pleasure, a pleasure of an ecstatic kind, of his capacity simply to describe and the role this capacity has in moving things beyond themselves.

There is a drama and a showiness to how Sartre offers himself up in his writing. His intention is not only to inform, communicate, but to thrill. The viscous itself is, after all, a moment of material and existential excitation, like the “discovery of an adventure of being.” He is also caught by the status of these substances as images, not only as reflections of himself, but as substances of

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42 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 609.
pure exteriority, pure show. At a certain point, Sartre compares the reintegration of honey into honey to the image of a woman’s breast as she lies on her back. In the original French:

[C]omme l’étallement, le raplatissement des seins un peu murs d’une femme qui s’entend sur le dos.\textsuperscript{43}

This word, \textit{étalement}, which most literally translates as “spreading,” is translated by Hazel Barnes as “display”:

[A]s display — like the flattening out of the full breasts of a woman who is lying on her back.\textsuperscript{44}

The original image is, for sure, erotic, and Barnes highly interpretive translation foregrounds the implication of sexy advertisement and offering. What is the relation between spreading and display? In modern English, display undoubtedly entails a performance of surfaces. Its Latin roots, however, are in the word \textit{displicare}, meaning scatter or disperse. This then evolved into a Middle English usage meaning to unfurl or unfold. There is the word “splay,” splay-legged: limbs thrust apart. And then there’s the gendered expression that carries violent, exploitative, rapey connotations, “she spread her legs.” This association of spread with display recalls the expression “laying on a spread,” an image Gertrude Stein plays with in \textit{Tender Buttons}:

A kind in glass and a cousin, a spectacle and nothing strange a single hurt colour and an arrangement in system to pointing. All this and not ordinary, not unordered in not resembling. The difference is spreading.\textsuperscript{45}

\textsuperscript{44} Sarte, \textit{Being and Nothingness}, 608.  
“Laying on a spread” is precisely the spectacle of offering up, on a table probably, edible difference, one that works as a kind of system, “all this,” a meal? The “difference” between Sartre’s display/spreading and Stein’s is that Stein’s difference spreads, where for Sartre spreading is what cancels differentiation. The act of displaying the breast is exactly what flattens it out, destroys its image, the act that absorbs its form into the body. Or maybe it is in the moment of resistance against reintegration into homogeneity that the image reveals itself. This resistance grants the viewer a voyeuristic glimpse of momentary differentiation, a seductive unfolding of matter into singularity, an intimacy with it while it undertakes its disappearance. The excitation of the viscous is also found in this tantalizing moment of specificity it offers up to you in the moment of collapse. For there is in his experience of the slimy a sense that it wants him, specifically him, Sartre himself, if only for a moment.

The misogyny of Sartre’s evocation of his encounter with the viscous is, in many ways, blindingly obvious. The image of the writer is primarily of an intellectual white man feeling threatened in his quest for mastery and appropriation by his simultaneous fascination for and revulsion from an aberrant gooey object, one that becomes explicitly gendered—a “feminine sucking.”46 Maybe this sense of thrill that I just identified in the text is a result of my own illusions of masculine heroism, a secret and repugnant complicity I feel with my white male predecessor, whose “signature substance” just so happens to be the subject of this book. But I will offer an alternative analysis, one that requires much less identity-based soul-searching and feels much more adventurous.

Sartre is never actually essentialist about the aberrance of the viscous. The viscous only ever takes on its threatening properties in its encounter with a mode of being that has at its core a project of appropriation. The viscous is only base in relation to a world that has as its dominant mode of being one that seeks mastery. Any reference to morality is qualified as culturally spe-

46 Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, 609.
cific, specifically European. Sartre’s fear is real, but it is never presented as one that transcends the structure of the specific encounter. In the battleground of these pages, in the antagonism between the in-itself and the for-itself, there is a recurrent acknowledgment of a revenge that ought to be undertaken against the mode of being that Sartre himself represents. In its threat, in the threat of his engulfment, the viscous contains, for Sartre, a promise of something else, an adventure of being that saturates the work but which also lies beyond what he is actually able to think. This constitutes the ultimate thrill of this writing.

I think we can safely assume that Sartre had no knowledge of the molasses flood. Not only was he fourteen when the event occurred, but, to my knowledge, it was not reported in any French newspapers. It is, however, interesting to speculate about what he would have made of it. It is, after all, the literal occurrence of what he explicitly dreads and longs for: to be engulfed and to drown in thick, slimy, sickly sweetness. What if he had been there? Philosophy begins to feel like something that can be catastrophically forced upon you, burst out from the world, rather than intuited from it through sensual encounters with things at your fingertips in domestic locations.

But most importantly: Sartre’s viscous writing never paints the material state as “originary” or “primordial.” It is, for him, a set of ontological structures, which are always seen more as possible futures than some indifference that preceded us and that we emerged from. In fact, his viscous writing, I want to suggest, has more in common with walking down Oxford Street, or through duty free, than it does with gradually sinking into a Lovecraftian slime pit. Sartre’s famous viscous passage is not normally associated with the city or its ways of trying to sell you things, but there is certainly an almost consumerist compulsiveness to his joy in synonyms, the uneasy friendliness of the objects of display, gently accumulating. The stuff the viscous makes him do is all a performance of its state.
THE VISCIOUS

Worming through the Aperture

Composed, as they are, of extremes in sound and motion, explosions have a very special affinity with the history of the moving image, most famously exemplified, perhaps, in the climax of Michelangelo Antonionis’s Zabriski Point. Bursts too, however, have their place in the history of cinema, Ghost Busters II being part of a long line of B-Movie slimer films that are intriguingly foreshadowed by the molasses disaster. The earliest and most famous of these films is perhaps The Blob from 1955, remade in 1988. In both films, a gelatinous mass makes its way through the city streets, absorbing people indifferently into itself. The films are composed such that the viewer is only permitted glimpses of the form, slowly swelling until the great climactic moment, where the blob bursts out of the projectionist’s apertures at the back of a cinema. Screams and panic ensue as the thing flops around ingesting its prey. This is, in many ways, a standard horror movie technique: placing the film’s climax and scariest moment in the viewers’ location. But it is also a moment where Sartre’s flamboyant viscous is dramatized. The viscous is so desperate to be seen, it literally worms its way into the mechanics of the cinematic image like a cat flopping itself down on your keyboard when you’re trying to write an email. In The Blob, the viscous forces itself into the channels that have been assigned for light as if demanding you give it the same kind of attention. The burst is jealous of the explosion, goo envious of light. This is the viscous as monstrous, obsessed with demonstration. It is that which always wants from you what you do not feel prepared to give. It treats “attention” as something not unique to its object or as a relational moment, but as an object in itself, one that can be traded, picked up, and repurposed.

In her book Animal Capital, Nicole Shukin unearths a gelatinous underbelly to the efficiency of 20th-century industrial processes and to the flow of the cinematic image. This slime monster does not disturb from outside cinema, but from within its industry. Henry Ford’s famous system of auto assembly at Highland Park, usually traced back to 1913, had been in action, she
explains, since at least the 1850s in the vertical abattoirs of Cincinnati and Chicago. Ford visited one of these abattoirs and was reportedly deeply impressed by the way “animal matter” kept flowing, suspended from hanging chains, continuously past stationary laborers occupied by highly repetitive, simple work. Ford, inspired by what he saw, devised a similar method with, as Shukin says, “a crucial mimetic twist: his automated lines sped up the assembly of a machine body rather than the disassembly of an animal body.”

Fordist assembly of machines found its prototype in the ways animals were torn apart in abattoirs. The sites of these early industrial abattoirs were also, in the mid-19th century, treated as spectacles, places of sensory stimulation that you could buy a ticket to experience. Unlike today, perhaps, where the space of the abattoir is secreted away, a shameful place of our over consumption and greed, largely invisible save a few gruesome clips distributed online, the site of mass slaughter in the 19th century opened its doors to the general public, offering popularly attended tours of its processes. In 1893, 1 million people visited the Chicago stockyards, witnessing cattle cascade off elevated landings, hung on chains, slaughtered and dismembered. People would respond with a mixture of horror and delight at the sight of the blood, the flesh, but also the intense olfactory and auditory stimulation. The stench of blood and guts was accompanied by a cacophony of clanking chains, the squealing of pigs. People took pride in witnessing the efficiency with which their country was able to manage its material production, as well as feasting voyeuristically on what was a kind of pre-cinematic moving image experience. Abattoirs made sure to capitalize on the visual drama of their technology.

Shukin evokes these guided tours of abattoirs as a material “negative” of what was taking place on the other side of the river in Chicago at the same time, the World’s Columbian Exposition of 1893, where Eadweard Muybridge’s Zoopraxiscope was being exhibited alongside Edison’s Kinetoscope motion picture

camera, both of which sought to capture life in its animation, its spontaneity. “The mimetic media were,” Shukin says, “for a brief historical instant, dangerously contiguous with their material unconscious.” For it was, after all, from the slaughterhouses where the film manufacturers acquired their gelatin for the production of film stock. In 1873, a gelatin emulsion made from the skin, bones, and connective tissue of animals was first used for photographic purposes. Shukin considers this gelatinous matter to be the repressed material history of the cinematic image, one that is shrouded in the mystique of the so-called “magic of cinema.” Gelatin, for Shukin, “marks a ‘vanishing point’ where moving images are both inconspicuously and viscerally contingent on mass animal disassembly, in contradiction with cinema’s framing semiotic of ‘animation.’”

“Friendly” Spaces

But is this anxious need for attention and transaction for, it seems, solely the sake of attention and transaction not one of the defining features of how it feels to live a life in modern urban spaces? This viscous neediness has seeped into the dynamics of city space itself where, rather than being a horrifying, nauseating underbelly, its tendencies are to be felt everywhere openly operating within day-to-day commerce. To put it simply — where better to find an example of Sartre’s hysteresis of honey than a group of people on the bus all wearing the same trainers, all the same yet bought to fulfill the specific desire of each wearer? Difference becomes, like Oken’s slimy o, some reachings out that plunge back into an indifferent whole. Where better to find this completely unwelcome, calculating friendliness than in a pile of avocados sitting in Tesco, each one bearing a sticker addressing you personally: “Eat me, I’m tasty”? Avocados and trainers: there might not be anything slimier than hipster culture.

48 Ibid., 93.
49 Ibid.
Might it be possible for this ontological structure of the viscous to become a design strategy, a kind of infrastructure? For the architect Rem Koolhaas “each square inch” of airports, shopping centers, casinos, trash modern commercial space is a grasping, needy surface dependent on consent or overt support, discount, compensation, and fund-raising.50

These spaces are defined by excessive and relentless friendliness that oppresses as it excites, like being condemned to a “perpetual Jacuzzi with millions of your best friends.”

This piece by Koolhaas I’m referring to on so-called post-modern architectural spaces, his extraordinary “Junkspace,” is obsessed with the texture of space, the heterogeneous scrambling of surface materials in airports: “concrete, hairy, heavy, shiny plastic, metallic, muddy—alternate randomly as if dedicated to different species.”51 But it is also obsessed with the viscous textures of how junkspace behaves. Though the word “viscous” never occurs in the work, its operations are everywhere. Junkspace is what “coagulates while modernization is in progress,” if its movements become “synchronised it curdles,” it is a malleable substance, which can “engulf an entire city,” or may contain fountains that ejaculate out Stalinist buildings, “hovering momentarily, then withdrawing with amnesiac competency.”52 Koolhaas’s vision of junkspace is one that morphs wildly from form to form—Disney stores become meditation centers—is continually contorted as an expression of domination, and yet has a lameness: a place out of which space is “scooped […] like a soggy block of icecream.”53 This is the “fuzzy empire of blur.”54 Junkspace advertises itself as a “space of flows,” where it is in fact the opposite. Where “flows depend on disciplined

51 Ibid., 181.
52 Ibid., 175, 180, 186.
53 Ibid., 182.
54 Ibid., 176.
movement,” direct passages of movement from A to B, junkspace absorbs, entraps, curls you round, disorientates. Think of the ways in which duty free spaces in airports make you think you’re being led to wherever you need to go, where in fact you’re being taken on some intestinal voyage past every mass-produced piece of tech, fashion item, or beverage on the planet. This is an example of viscous space, one that uses your desire to get somewhere to its own advantage, to make the interminable transaction more inevitable. This kind of space of course feels smooth to move through from its virtuosic use of all technologies of spatial seamlessness—escalators, travellators, air conditioning, hot air curtains, sliding doors, sprinklers. But this is in order to maximize the grotesque-ness of your journey past ever more “insistent perfumes, “asylum-seekers, building site, underwear, oysters, pornography, cell-phones.” Any instance of actual flow leads to disaster in junkspace, as Koolhaas says:

department stores at the beginning of sales; the stampedes triggered by warring compartments of soccer fans; dead bodies piling up in front of the locked emergency doors of a disco.

The portals of junkspace appear welcoming, but are in fact too tight. Any attempt to simply leave, arrive, get from there to here, escape or deny its thickened, gloopy logic, results in an unraveling of its simulated order.

All this clinging nonsense “spells the end,” Koolhaas confidently claims, “of the Enlightenment.” But, despite his exasperation at the violent lameness, the overwhelming docility, of junkspace, it doesn’t seem to be the Enlightenment that he wants back. Instead, we have a writing not unlike Sartre’s on the viscous, if more erratic — one addicted to synonyms, lists, end-

55 Ibid., 179.
56 Ibid., 185, 181.
57 Ibid., 180.
58 Ibid., 175.
less returns and reformulations, a love of all the different and increasingly excessive ways you are able to describe the same thing. One place, for sure, to feel the cacophonous intestines of a shopping center is in Koolhaas’s own writing. We have then the strange spectacle of a writing that seems to perform exactly what it loathes, a block of text without paragraph break that, once we’re inside, could elaborate endlessly, no structure, just membranes with flimsy ellipses taping together the modular patchwork. As the text (thankfully) stifles close analysis, we might feel it better to simply wait for (as in a departure lounge) and indulge in its moments of colossal beauty:

    Railway stations unfold like iron butterflies, airports glisten like cyclopic dewdrops, bridges span often negligible banks like grotesquely enlarged visions of the harp. To each rivulet its own Calatrava.\textsuperscript{59}

Indeed, like Sartre’s viscous writing, we have the feeling of a writing that is so passionately involved with what it claims to hate, we start suspecting it doesn’t hate it at all. Or maybe it is in love with how much it hates, how much it is able to hate. Fredric Jameson, reading Koolhaas’s writing, finds in its mime-sis a new kind of writing, one not only of euphoric repulsion, but also one where space itself is being performed by language. This isn’t architectural theory, but a show exhibiting a “language of space which is speaking through these self-replicating, self-perpetuating sentences.”\textsuperscript{60} This text-performance emerges out of a time when not only the contemporary city, but also “the whole universe,” is on the point of “fusing into a kind of all-purpose indeterminate magma.”\textsuperscript{61} But this mimesis is, just maybe, the way out, in Jamesian fashion, the death knell of the post-modern:

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 187.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 73.
The sentences are the boom of this repetitive insistence, this pounding on the hollowness of space itself; and their energy now foretells the rush and the fresh air, the euphoria of a relief, an orgasmic breaking through into a time and history again, into a concrete future.⁶²

This spatial writing is, then, the activity that predicts the moment the city will burst, breaking through into a state that is made of “fresh air” and “concrete.” The writing is a signal that monstrous displays of corporate space are no longer terrifying, but euphoric, a euphoria that remains to be explained. But it seems to me that we also have here a thinking and a writing that bursts. It is a writing that gives itself to the explosive possibilities of thinking, but stays with what is there at hand. It combines the dual excitation of the burst, the excitation of the sticky and the explosive. It seeks to obliterate the world while simultaneously staying with things as such. I find, here, a writing that denies

⁶² Ibid., 77.
how things are, but which lingers with them, a letting go, a giving up, of the world combined with an obstinate desire to stay there.

Let’s look again at an image from the Molasses Disaster aftermath (fig. 8). What is noticeable is the incompleteness of the destruction, like, as Sartre says on the viscous’s power to destroy, “a retarded annihilation” has taken place, one “that has been stopped halfway.” It is a vision of a city blurred and twisted out of normality, caught, it feels, just on the brink of collapse in a state of incomplete sublimity. These mutilated forms give rise to pareidolia: some huge submarine beast raises its head from the city streets. From its gaping mouth reaches a tongue on which eels writhe and entangle. A discarded overcoat. Some hats. Sugar syrup. For it also seems to me that these examples of viscous writing—Sartre, Koolhaas, and, by extension, Jameson—all find huge power in something apparently very simple: description. “Criticality,” in moments of all-consuming viscous encounter, is no longer possible. What can be practiced, however, is description, a smearing of ones attention again and again over the surfaces of that which surrounds you, eating away at them from within. The power to describe is figured as a viscous involvement with the world, being the power to make things malleable, form and reform what you experience. “Practice description,” as Lisa Robertson says in “Soft Architecture: A Manifesto,” as “the truly utopian act is to manifest current conditions and dialects.” To be able to describe things accurately as they are is the most futuristic act. And by description she means something moist, something dreamy, something to do with form, something contingent, yet posing as something else:

63 Sartre, Being and Nothingness, 608.
mostly critical dreams, morphological thefts, authentic registers of pleasant customs, accidents posing as intentions. SA makes up face-practices.65

Primordial Flamboyance

The history of slime’s encounter with the city is multiple. This is because it is a force that enters into the space as a means to rethink it. What the residents and journalists witnessed in the Boston Molasses Disaster was a singularly uncanny event, one where the excitations of the explosive and gooey came into large scale, industrialized companionship — the burst. Thinking that bursts is a thinking that is at once explosive and slimy, it seeks to obliterate how things are, while simultaneously attempting to stay with them, linger awhile longer.

Slime colliding with the city causes the parameters by which we define and imagine the urban space to become blurred, expanded, and increasingly absorptive. Viscous dynamics are becoming the core processes whereby an exploded, planetary vision of the city is being theorized. Words like “churned” and “colloidal” are becoming the necessary terms to reimagine the urban, terms that involve an integral mess, an imperfect and indeterminate conjunction. But this is not only metaphorical, sliminess is not only a useful tool for describing processes that are otherwise un-slimy. The primordial powers of slime mold are, it turns out, closer than we thought to the infrastructural powers of modernity. This interest in the organizational powers of the slime mold is part of an interest in the intelligence of these organisms. These dispersed consciousnesses have, for instance, kinds of memory that works by smearing — they smear a trace of substance over the places they’ve been so that they don’t return to the same spot twice. Were our own powers of memory once a very fine film of viscous matter laid over the surface of our environment? In the writing of Walter Benjamin, when trying to describe the experience of being stoned, we find an in-

65 Ibid., 21.
triguing wormhole into this intensely material, spatialized kind of attention. He smears his imagination onto the stones of the pavement, he finds nourishment there, but also a very particular kind of “anywhere.” This is an anywhere based on extreme material specificity, rather than indifferent mass production.

But from slime’s encounter with the city, we also learn of slime’s flamboyance. Sartre, whose protagonist in Nausea famously encounters the slime at the heart of things when walking in the park, is by far the most famous theorist of sliminess. From his formulation of sliminess not as a metaphor, but an ontological structure, a potential meaning of being, we also experience the exhilarating drama and adventure of the slimy encounter. If slime is an apparently primordial kind of attention to space, its substance is also weirdly attentive to us, attentive of the attention we display to it. Slime seems, as Sartre so vividly describes, to want him and, it feels in that moment, nothing else. Out of this attentiveness comes an addiction to the increasingly elaborate and striking ways he is able to figure its existence. As the slime thrills Sartre, he thrills us, feeding us more and more of the images the substance brings to him. That this is an immensely compelling text to read is at the heart of its philosophy. It revels in the powers of description to burst things beyond themselves.

The euphoria, the “dizziness” that Sartre feels as he contemplates the viscous sets it apart from the creep of the primordial. It gestures towards another kind of slimy attention, or rather the need slime has for attention and the excursions it undergoes to keep it. Slime’s weirdness is its manic attentiveness to our attention, while completely misunderstanding the processes whereby attention is formed. It mistakes attention for an object in itself, one that can be moved around. Slime forces its way into the channels and mechanisms of attention. This is the work of neediness.

Slime and the city has revealed, then, how the viscous bends in two seemingly opposed directions, towards the indifferent on the one hand, and towards the needy, the showy, the flamboyant, on the other. We see Sartre’s “overwhelming docility” of viscous matter creeping into Rem Koolhaas’s writing on com-
mercial space, a writing that is, like Sartre’s, addicted to the wild play of the synonymous. Slime’s dynamics, rather than being totally at odds with those of the urban space, start to feel as if they emerge from within its space, the grasping neediness of commercial centers. But with this we are also brought into the presence of a particular approach to writing, one that doesn’t object to the slimy, but works its way into it, it feels the obligation to describe, to cling on, to mold.
Fig. 1. Mud volcano at Binəqədi, Azerbaijan. Photo by the author.

Fig. 2. Tar lake at Binəqədi, Azerbaijan. Photo by the author.