Imagination and Potentiality: The Quest for the Real
Editorial

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Editorial for the Topical Issue "Imagination and Potentiality: The Quest for the Real"

The problem of the real has become an important issue for Continental philosophy over the course of the past decade. It is well known that the famous Speculative Realism conference at Goldsmiths in 2007 already showed major discordance between the positions of the various speakers.[1] Nonetheless, the conference succeeded in proposing an attempt to overcome the dead end of "correlationist" philosophy that dominated from Kant through the late twentieth century.[2] One can say that this intriguing debate has now attained a certain maturity. It has reached the point where the challenge of reality has provided an incentive even for those who are not direct participants in the various incarnations of philosophical realism and materialism. Within philosophy, there is an even stronger urge for revision of some of the most conventional forms of thinking, a revision carried out under the sign of the real.

It is worth noting that although such figures as Heidegger or Husserl could not be treated as anti-realists *sensu stricto*, they dismissed realism as a "pseudo-problem."[3] While these two masters set the tone for mainstream Continental attitudes toward realism, there has been a growing counterweight in the form of a realist approach to Deleuze and Guattari.[4] Generally speaking, the Continental view of realism has less to do with a "disbelief" in reality than with a mistrust of representationalism. Critical theory, poststructuralism, psychoanalysis, hermeneutics, phenomenology, deconstruction and related currents drew our attention to the possibly normative and fictional character of metaphysically charged systems of representation, laying new emphasis on the inaccessible remnant of the real beyond its formal expressions. Hence, even though Being was constituted by Heidegger as the deep background orienting the call for thinking, in epistemological terms there remained complications pertaining to the inaccessibility of this depth.[5]

Yet it is not only old-school Continentals who adhere to the sceptical-seeming limitations on the power to build adequate bridges between thought and world. The same is true even of some of the new realist philosophers in this tradition. For every Meillassoux who claims speculative knowledge of the absolute, there is an object-oriented ontologist who insists that speculation only begins when such knowledge is seen to be permanently obstructed.[6] Another way of putting it is that some of the new forms of realism and materialism place themselves in explicit opposition to "naïve" realism, if we take naiveté to refer to the

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1 Brassier et al., "Speculative Realism."
2 For correlationism see Meillassoux, *After Finitude*.
3 See Harman, "The Only Exit From Modern Philosophy," 133.
4 DeLanda, *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy*.
5 Heidegger, *Being and Time*; Heidegger, *What Is Called Thinking?*
6 A good account of the difference can be found in Young, "On Correlationism and the Philosophy of (Human) Access."

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assumption that direct access to the real is achievable. This newly conceived and elusive real would require us to step outside all forms of perception (be they empirical, objective, scientific or of any other kind) and re-orient the mind in a speculative fashion untethered to the built-in biases of human access. In this respect, the problem of reality emerges as a challenge for a new form of theoretical emancipation.

Should speculation be considered as the privileged way to free the world from anthropocentric subordination? If so, it seems to entail that we *imagine* reality beyond the system of traditional metaphysical possibilities. Can imagination then be seen as an important epistemological variation that is inevitable in the quest for the real? Stated differently, can we reformulate the quest of the real as constituting the challenge of a renewed imagination that is capable of grasping its uncanny and bizarre aspects? The latter tendency was already suggested by early representatives of the speculative turn, emphasizing that "a step towards realism is not a step towards the limitations of the common sense of desires, but rather a turn towards complete strangeness."[7]

The topical issue "Imagination and Potentiality: The Quest for the Real" could be conceived as a proposal for including imagination as a key term in the polemics between Continental realists and antirealists. What failures of imagination need to be avoided in order to free up the various "agents" of the real, meaning all those entities that intervene in, intrude upon, and transform the modalities of our engagement with reality? In any case, the following collection of texts is best seen as an attempt to incorporate the conceptualization of the imaginary into contemporary philosophical debates on the real.

Ignas Šatkauskas calls our attention to a key text of Speculative Realism with his "Where is the Great Outdoors of Meillassoux's Speculative Materialism?"[8] Šatkauskas's immediate concern is the critique of Meillassoux found in Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiro de Castro's *The Ends of the World*.[9] Although Šatkauskas concedes that his postcolonial/anthropological approach in this article does not destroy Meillassoux's specific approach to rediscovering the "Great Outdoors" outside human thought, he does argue that the latter is insufficient. For it falls short not only of addressing the "outside" manifest in climate change, but – and here Šatkauskas is more daring – is also unable to account for the notion of ancestral humanity in Amerindian myth, with its crucial practice of hallucinogenic trance.

In "The Only Exit From Modern Philosophy," Graham Harman critiques the basis of philosophical modernism in what he calls "onto-taxonomy."[10] Running from Descartes and Kant through the present, onto-taxonomy is the assumption that philosophy deals with two and only two basic types of things: (1) the human subject and (2) everything else. What is primarily excluded from philosophy today is any discussion of object–object interactions apart from any human surveillance, a restriction that might seem justified by Kant's assault on dogmatism, but which Harman argues is an impoverishment of philosophy's mission. The article argues that, although Bruno Latour comes closer than anyone to overturning modern onto-taxonomy, he ends up privileging the human actor in a way that undercuts his own more radical tendencies.[11] Harman will no doubt also spark controversy with his claim that Maurice Merleau-Ponty and F. W. J. Schelling are false openings onto the future of philosophy, given that their greatest innovations nonetheless remain within the horizon of onto-taxonomy.[12]

In his "Virtuality and the Problem of Agency in Object-Oriented Ontology," Ruslanas Baranovas turns to a different strand of Speculative Realism.[13] He begins with a close reading of Levi R. Bryant's concept of "virtual proper being," which Bryant distinguishes from Harman's own object-oriented position by elim-

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7 Bryant et al., "Towards a Speculative Philosophy," 7. See also Harman, *Weird Realism*.

8 Šatkauskas, "Where is the Great Outdoors of Meillassoux's Speculative Materialism?"

9 Danowski and de Castro, *The Ends of the World*.

10 The term first appeared in Harman, *Dante's Broken Hammer*, 237.

11 See Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*.

12 Harman, "The Only Exit From Modern Philosophy," 142. See also Merleau-Ponty. See also Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* and Schelling, *Philosophical Inquiries Into the Nature of Human Freedom*.

inating the real qualities that Harman places in tension with real objects. From there, Baranovas zeroes in on an apparent contradiction in what Harman says about Aristotle's dispute with the ancient Megarians, and by extension with Latour.[14] Baranovas concludes that this contradiction is merely an apparent one, and shifts our attention to the disagreement between Harman and Latour (who favor actuality) and Bryant (who favors virtuality). In the end, the author argues, this is a dispute between two entirely different notions of freedom and agency.

Anna Longo joins the discussion with her article "Escaping the Network."[15] It is primarily a critique of today's networked global society, whose warm allowance for a motley heterogeneity of actors nonetheless requires "the acceptance of the rules of the global game of technological information production."[16] Longo sees this situation as suppressing content in the name of process, leading ironically to an utter homogeneity in which difference becomes merely superficial. Among the authors enlisted as allies in her argument are Manuel Castells and Stuart Kauffman.[17]

Next comes Pietro Montani with "The Imagination and its Technological Destiny."[18] He begins by evoking Kant's famous discussion of the role of the imagination in the *Critique of Pure Reason*, and Heidegger's equally famous 1929 interpretation of it.[19] Montani's contribution to the much-discussed trans-historical dialogue between these two German philosophers is his adoption of a "paleoanthropological" approach. Although Kant and Heidegger are said to view human being in primarily linguistic terms, Montani cites evidence that for hundreds of thousands of years, humans made imaginative leaps without yet being in possession of articulated speech. In making his case, he stops for periodic consultations with many of the respected authorities of twentieth French structuralism and anthropology, and ultimately uses his findings to make a relevant observation about the world-wide web.

The title of Dario Cecchi's contribution is "Historical Reality and Political Aesthetics after Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler."[20] The article begins by considering Derrida and Stiegler's critical remark that "visual media, television in particular, do not just represent historical events [...] [but] also anticipate the condition through which the spectators of an event may turn into actors of the same event or of its consequences."[21] As a counterweight to the possible biases of these two authors, Cecchi turns to Hannah Arendt's view that Kantian aesthetic judgments are the best match for concrete political situations, given that they must be tailored to specific cases rather than universals.[22] The article concludes with two brief case studies from the world of cinema: Esfir Shub's *The Fall of the Romanov Dynasty* (1927) and Harun Farocki and Andrei Ujică's *Videograms of a Revolution* (1992), the latter work concerned with the end of Ceaușescu's dictatorship in Romania.

Rita Šerpytytė's "The Problem of Reality and Modal Ontology" digs deep in the history of philosophy, touching on Aristotle and Francisco Suárez and their renewed treatment by contemporary philosopher Giorgio Agamben.[23] With rare scholarly tact, Šerpytytė begins with the difference (accepted by many) between objects and things, passing through Scholasticism to Leibniz's celebrated notion of the *vinculum substantiale*. Although this article is only ten pages long, it has the satisfying feel of an advanced seminar in the history of philosophy. With its reflections on Agamben and recently deceased Italian philosopher Remo Bodei, it also establishes a foothold in up-to-date contemporary discussions.

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13 Baranovas, "Virtuality and the Problem of Agency in Object-Oriented Ontology."

14 See Harman, *Prince of Networks*.

15 Longo, "Escaping the Network."

16 Ibid., 183.

17 Castells, *Network Society*; Kauffman, *The Origins of Order*.

18 Montani, "The Imagination and its Technological Destiny."

19 Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*; Heidegger, *Kant and the Problem of Metaphysics*.

20 Cecchi, "Historical Reality and Political Aesthetics after Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler."

21 Ibid., 258; Derrida and Stiegler, *Echographies of Television*.

22 Arendt, "The Concept of History"; Kant, *Critique of Judgment*.

23 Šerpytytė, "The Problem of Reality and Modal Ontology;" Aristotle, *Metaphysics*; Suárez, *On Efficient Causality*; Agamben, *The Use of Bodies*; Agamben, *What is Real*?

"Reality, Determination, and Imagination," by Kristupas Sabolius, takes up the aforementioned theme of imagination with vigor.[24] Quentin Meillassoux claims that his identification of the primary qualities of things with their mathematizability is not Pythagorean, since it is merely a theory of the limits of formal languages, not of being itself.[25] Sabolius challenges Meillassoux's conception, referring to the interpretation of Georg Cantor's mathematical work by Cornelius Castoriadis.[26] Making the novel argument that there are actually *three* regimes of correlationism rather than just one, Sabolius turns to remarks on imagination by J. G. Fichte and the American philosopher John Sallis to complete his argument against Meillassoux's mathematism.[27]

The subject of Daina Habdankaitė's article, "The Absolute as the Meeting Point Between Speculation and Fiction," is Meillassoux's relation to literature.[28] Although many reflections on this theme focus on Meillassoux's intriguing book on Stéphane Mallarmé, *The Number and the Siren*, Habdankaitė is more concerned with Meillassoux's notion of "extro-science fiction," for now a mostly hypothetical genre.[29] Science fiction and weird fiction have become central concerns for debates in and around Speculative Realism, and thus Habdankaite makes sure to consider Harman's reading of Lovecraft as well.[30] With the term "extro-science fiction," Meillassoux refers to a possible type of fiction in which, following his own philosophical commitment to the absolute contingency of the laws of nature, "experimental science is impossible and unknown in fact."[31] But as Habdankaitė rightly notes, "[t]he fact that Meillassoux does not provide any examples of pure extro-science fiction is particularly alarming."[32] Taking a cue from Ben Woodard's idea that madness is explored by both Lovecraft and Thomas Ligotti, if not explicitly thought by them, Habdankaitė suggests that Lovecraft's own writing is truer to Meillassoux's original project in *After Finitude* than is the latter's attempt to propose the new genre of extro-science fiction.[33]

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24 Sabolius, "Reality, Determination, Imagination."

25 Meillassoux et al., "There is Contingent Being Independent Of Us…," Q7.

26 Castoriadis, "The Logic of Magmas and the Question of Autonomy."

27 Fichte, *The Science of Knowledge*; Sallis, *Spacings*.

28 Habdankaitė, "The Absolute as the Meeting Point Between Speculation and Fiction."

29 Meillassoux, *The Number and the Siren*; Meillassoux, *Science Fiction and Extro-Science Fiction*.

30 Harman, *Weird Realism*.

31 Meillassoux, *Science Fiction and Extro-Science Fiction*, 5–6.

32 Habdankaitė, "The Absolute as the Meeting Point Between Speculation and Fiction," 356.

33 Woodard, "Mad Speculation and Absolute Inhumanism."

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