Towards a Machine-Oriented Aesthetics: On the Power of Art
Levi R. Bryant
Professor of Philosophy
Collin College
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The Epic of Gilgamesh can still be read today.
~Author Unknown

1. Prosthetic Erasure

Throughout the history of philosophy the tendency has been to treat the work of art as a prosthesis; and, what is worse, an unnecessary prosthesis. Where, following McLuhan’s understanding of media, all other prostheses are treated as extending the capacities of our body and perception in some way, art is treated as an unnecessary detour that we could dispense with if only we were directly related to what it represents.

This erasure of the artwork can already be discerned as early as Plato. For Plato, the work of art is an imperfect expression of the Form or Idea of the Beautiful. It is that which asymptotically approaches the Form of the Beautiful without ever fully reaching it. As such, the work of art as Plato conceives it has a dual nature. As we’re taught in the Phaedrus-- and, to a lesser degree, the Symposium --the work of art is an element in a pedagogy of the soul, directing it towards Truth and knowledge of the Forms. Drawing on Plato’s theory of learning as recollection developed in Meno and Phaedo, we can say that the work of art is that sensible-image that awakens, in our soul, a recollection of the one and only form of Beauty. As such, it is that which draws me towards this Form. This is the artwork’s first feature. Yet, the second feature or nature of the artwork is also to draw us away from recollection of the Form of the Beautiful.
Plato outlines the elementary schema for this danger in the *Symposium* when Socrates recounts the teachings of Diotima regarding love. For Diotima, there is a wisdom in love that is also a danger as well. We fall in love with the one who is beautiful, whether that beauty be embodied in body, deed, or spirit. We love this beautiful person for his own sake, and not for the sake of anything else. The wisdom of love is thus two-fold: On the one hand, it withdraws us from our immersion in the appetites of the body. We do not wish to *use* the beautiful beloved for food, as a tool, for their labor, etc. As such, love is a first step towards a set of values beyond those of the earthly body. On the other hand, love, like art, is one of those instances that assists us in recollecting the Form of the Beautiful.

The danger, however, is that we can confuse beautiful person we love with Beauty itself. According to Diotima, what we truly desire is Beauty *itself* and *as such*. It is the Form of Beauty as such—which is the same in all instances of the beautiful, that is always identical to itself, and that, unlike all beautiful things doomed to wither and die, is eternal –that is the true object of our desire. In other words, the beautiful thing or person is but a *substitute*—and a poor one at that – for the *real* object of our desire: Beauty as such. Wise love would thus dispense with the beloved person as this is not the real object of our desire, and instead directly love the form of Beauty itself. The danger in love is that our spiritual enlightenment and development can be halted by becoming fixated on the beautiful person rather than Beauty as such.

The logic is identical in the case of art. At best, a work of art is a temporary detour on our spiritual path towards the true object of our desire, Beauty as such. At worst, the work of art bars us from access to the true object of our desire insofar as we think it’s the work of art that is the object of our desire and regard, rather than Beauty itself and as such. No doubt this is a central reason Plato felt that the poets ought to be banished from the Republic. Within the
Platonic framework, while art has the capacity to propel the senses into a higher functioning detached from the world of appearances, it always carries the danger of more deeply entrenching us in the world of the senses and the passions of the body. Best to banish the artists altogether and form an administered republic governed by those who have knowledge of the Forms.

In any event, Plato’s message is clear: If only we had access to Beauty itself we could dispense with art altogether. Art is a detour, an unnecessary prosthesis, that contributes nothing of its own, but which only functions, at best, as a maieutic device assisting in the recollection of the Forms. The artwork itself contributes nothing beyond its ability to refer or allude to something it is not. Here the artwork has a derivative place within the order of being and is treated as a mere reflection of something else. If we had access to that something else we could dispense with the artwork altogether.

We can call this conception of art “expressivism”. Expressivism is the thesis that the work of art is, in its most intimate being, the expression of something else. Throughout the history of philosophy, expressivism will be both the dominant theory of art and will come in a variety of forms. Plato’s theory of art is only one variant of expressionism. Sometimes expressivism will take the form of meditations on an author’s or artist’s intentions. The work is seen as an expression of those intentions, such that understanding the work consists in understanding the intention. Sometimes expressivism will take the form of historicism, such that the work is understood as an expression of the historical milieu in which it was produced. To understand the work is to understand that milieu. At other times expressivism will be a question of analyzing how readers and viewers respond to the work. At yet other times, expressivism will take the form of understanding the work as an expression of the artist’s unconscious.
In each case, the intimate being of the work is treated as something that resides elsewhere: in the artist, the historical setting, the structure of language, the unconscious, the audience, the institution, discourses about art, etc. As such, there is a tendency for the work to be erased within expressivism. To be sure, the expressivist critic must engage in a set of translation operations that show how she gets from the features of the work to whatever the work is supposed to express; yet the curious feature of these operations is that they always seem to implicitly suggest that the work could be replaced by the articulation of what is expressed; that what is truly of value is the expressed rather than the expression. The work is treated as a sign stands for something else outside of itself. And just as with the sign, what is important is not the sign itself, but the meaning or referent it points to or stands for, so too with the work of art. Thus, in a paradoxical gesture, we set out to talk about the work but always seem to end up talking about something other than the work.

2. The Materiality of Art

Yet certainly the work of art is not simply a sign standing for something else that could, in principle, be expressed in clearer terms without the artwork? Certainly the work of art contributes something of its own beyond whatever it might express of its origins or its receiver. Is it possible to articulate a non-expressivist theory of art? Given how deeply sedimented expressivist assumptions are in our thought, it proves difficult to think of a work as anything but something that stands for something else. For many of us, our first question when confronted by a work-- whether in the form of a novel, painting, poem, or sculpture --is “what does it mean?” In other words, we ask what the work stands for. We look for a paraphrase to replace the work and many of us complain bitterly when there seems to be no way of replacing the work with a
paraphrase as in the case of much “modern art”. The only art that seems to sometimes escape this question is music and architecture.

If we are to escape the erasure of art effected by expressivism, we must begin by reminding ourselves of simple and obvious things. Expressivism treats the work of art as a sign to be deciphered. As Peirce taught us, a sign is that which stands for something else in some respect or capacity and is composed of three elements: the sign-vehicle or that which carries the sign, the semiotic object or that to which the sign refers, and the interpretant or relation that links sign-vehicle to semiotic object. Take the classic example of smoke. We say that where there is smoke there is a smoker. Here the sign-vehicle is the smoke. The semiotic object is the smoker. And the interpretant is that relation that links smoke to smoker in the mind of the person that perceives the smoke, along with whatever further implications follow from this linkage; for example, thoughts about cancer, second-hand smoke, various subcultures likely to smoke, opportunities to talk with a fellow smoker, etc.

A sign is that which draws us to something else beyond it. When we encounter smoke we don’t simply attend to smoke, but rather immediately think of a smoker or a fire. As such, signs function much like the spectacles Heidegger describes in Being and Time. As Heidegger writes, “[w]hen… a man wears a pair of spectacles which are so close to him distantly that they are ‘sitting on his nose’, they are environmentally more remote from him than the picture on the opposite wall. Such equipment has so little closeness that often it is proximally quite impossible to find.”¹ Our vision passes through the spectacles and instead alights on the picture on the wall. As a consequence, the spectacles become invisible or withdraw from view. This is how it is with signs and is what constitutes their “aboutness”. Even while absolutely present, the

sign-vehicle, like Heidegger’s spectacles, withdraws from view and we are drawn to what the sign is about: the thought of the smoker. Consequently, where artworks are treated or intended as assemblages of signs, it follows that they too will withdraw. We will instead focus on what they “mean”, their historical origin, what the author might have intended, how the viewer responds to them, and so on. Hence the erasure of the artwork. It belongs to the being of a sign to withdraw or erase itself. In referring to something else, the sign as such becomes invisible.

The first step towards overcoming the erasure of the artwork would be to recognize that a work of art is not simply about something—indeed, many works are not about anything at all—but also is something. In other words, a realist and materialist theory of art would begin with the suspension of the signifying potentials of art and would start with the recognition that works of art are real material beings in their own right. Realism in machine-oriented aesthetics is thus not a thesis about the content of a work of art, but about the being of artwork. To be a work of art is to be something; an entity, substance, individual, thing, object, or machine. There is no work of art that isn’t materially embodied in some way or other. The novel and poem are inscribed on paper through ink. Paintings are inscribed in oil, water color, acrylic. Sculpture and buildings in stone, brick, wood, metal, cement. Music passes through instruments and is composed of sonorous blocks of vibrating air, while dance passes through bodies and is composed of motions.

This observation is so obvious that I’m almost embarrassed to make it; yet it has, I believe, important implications for how we think about art. First, drawing attention to the materiality of art, its thingliness, leads us to attend more to the features of the medium of a work. In the formal transcendental sense, art-- prior to signifying anything --is the exploration of a material medium and its powers or capacities. That medium can be sound, color, lines, bodies in motion, language, clay, stone, metal, dimension, time, image, etc. Moreover, different mediums
can be intertwined with one another. Insofar as matter is plastic, the potentialities of every medium are infinite. There is no limit, for example, to what can be produced out of the medium of clay. A great artist is, above all, an adventurer in the potentialities of a medium. A style is a singular way of exploring and actualizing the potentials of a medium. As Spinoza might put it, art explores what a medium can do.

Thus, rather than asking of a work “what does it mean?”, we should instead ask “what does it invent through and with its medium?” Deleuze, in his cinema books, is exemplary in this regard. Discussions of cinema tend to treat film in terms of its narrative function. In this way, they tend to assimilate film to the story or tale, treating its imagistic component as being of interest only in terms of how it contributes to the story. For Deleuze, however, the narrative is secondary to the being of film. Indeed, a film need have no narrative, story, or theme at all. Rather, what is proper to film as an artistic medium is the image. As Deleuze writes, “[t]he great directors of the cinema may be compared, in our view, not merely with painters, architects and musicians, but also with thinkers. They think with movement-images and time-images instead of concepts.”

To approach film as something, as a real being—to refuse its erasure—is to approach it in terms of what it does with its medium or what images it invents or creates.

In this regard, rather than treating the novel and painting as the paradigms of art by which all other art is understood and comprehended, we would instead do well to treat music without any vocal component, architecture, and language poetry as exemplars of the being of art. These forms of art draw our attention to the essence of all art insofar as meaning and narrative are largely absent from them. They expose us to the pure exploration of mediums such as sound,

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shape, and language that is at work in all art. And with these forms of art we attend to the work itself, rather than passing beyond the work to a meaning, history, author’s intention, etc.

However, recollection that the work is a material being has far more profound consequences that spell the ruin of expressivism. Graham Harman has taught us that every object is withdrawn from relations to other entities. No two entities directly relate to one another. As he writes in *The Quadruple Object*, “[t]he only way to do justice to objects is to consider that their reality is free of all relation, deeper than all reciprocity. The object is a dark crystal veiled in a private vacuum: irreducible to its own pieces, and equally irreducible to its outward relations with other things.”³ I attempt to develop arguments as to why objects are independent of their relations in *The Democracy of Objects*, so here I will take this thesis as a given.⁴ What is claimed here is that every object, in order to be an object, is necessarily in excess of any relations it might entertain to other entities at a particular time. Put differently, every object is both irreducible to whatever relations it might currently have to other entities and contains the possibility of rupture with whatever relations it happens to entertain at a particular moment.

In effect, objects have the capacity to move, breaking with relations to other entities they currently entertain, thereby entering into new relations with other objects. Were this possibility of breaking with relations not a feature of the being of every object, no movement or change would be possible. As Harman writes,

> If not for [a] basic asymmetry between an [object’s] components and its alliances, we would have a purely holistic cosmos. Everything would be defined to an equal degree by the [objects] above it as below it, and there would be no place in reality not defined utterly by its context. But this is by no means what happens. What happens instead is

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that components sometimes unite to form a new [object], an ‘emergent’ reality irreducible to its pieces. It can survive certain changes among its constituents, and even more easily survive the outer relations into which it is thrown.\footnote{Graham Harman, \textit{Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics}, Melbourne: Re.Press, 2009, p. 131.}

Part of Harman’s point here is that in order for an object to change it must be capable of moving from one place to another. Yet if it is to be capable of moving from one place to another, it must be capable of breaking with the relations it currently entertains. Were the object identical to its relations, were it the case that its being \textit{is} its relations, then this movement would not be possible; for movement entails a break from one set of relations to another set of relations. But if this is the case, it follows that objects must have some minimal being over and above whatever relations they happen to entertain.

To see this point, let us take the example of the cane toad. Originating from South and Central America, the cane toad was introduced into Northern Australia to help fight a species of beetle that was devastating sugarcane crops. Situated in this new environment, the cane toad proliferated quickly and had a profound effect on local biodiversity, causing a steep decline in native predators. The reason for this was that in Australia the cane toad encountered few predators capable of limiting its expansion. Insofar as native predators lacked immunity to the poisons secreted by glands on the cane toad’s back, it was able to quickly multiply, devouring the creatures that native predators relied on to sustain their own populations, thereby bringing about a population crash in these other animals.

Were the cane toad—not to mention, the native species of Australia—identical to its relations, this would not have been possible. First, there is the rather obvious point that the cane toad would not have been able to move from South and Central America to Australia because such a move constitutes a shift in relations. However, more importantly, second, this shift in
relations also brings about changes in all entities involved. Cane toads that dwell in South and Central America differ from those in Australia. South and Central American cane toads only reach a particular population density because of predators in their environment. Additionally, they there only reach a particular average size because 1) their life-span is shorter on average due to the presence of predators, and 2) because they have greater competition for food. By contrast, cane toads in Australia reach a larger size and have a greater life-span due to the greater availability of food and lack viable predators.Were the cane toad related to everything else in the universe in a cosmic holism, we would be unable to explain how or why these changes take place. It is only where the cane toad breaks with one set of relations and enters into another set of relations that these changes become intelligible. But this requires the can toad to have a being antecedent to—ontologically, not temporally—and in excess of whatever relations it happens to possess in a particular time and place.

Elsewhere I have argued—and here Harman and I disagree, though I’m never clear as to whether this disagreement is over terminology or substantial ontological differences—that this entails that objects cannot be equated with their qualities, but rather objects must be understood as split between a virtual dimension and actual dimension.\textsuperscript{6} I refer to these dimensions as the virtual proper being and local manifestation of an object respectively. If objects cannot be equated with their qualities or local manifestations, then this is because those qualities change while the object remains the same. In the frigid air conditioning of Texas buildings, my skin contracts and prickles. When I walk outside into the burning heat of the Texas sun, it swells, I grow flushed, and I begin to sweat. These are all qualities or local manifestations of my being. If they are manifestations, then this is because they are actualizations of a quality (prickled skin, 

\textsuperscript{6} Levi R. Bryant, \textit{The Democracy of Objects}, chapters 3 & 5.
swollen skin, etc). If they are local, then this is because these qualities are actualized under specific conditions—what I call a “regime of attraction” --or as a result of a particular set of relations to other entities such as the sun or air conditioning. Yet if I remain this person despite undergoing these qualitative changes, it follows that my being cannot consist in the qualities or properties I happen to entertain at a particular moment, in a particular place, but that my being as this being must reside elsewhere. This identity of my being that remains the same throughout shifting relations and qualitative changes is what I refer to as “virtual proper being”. My virtual proper being consists not in qualities or properties, not in local manifestations, but rather in *powers*, *capacities*, or *affects*. The being of an object lies not in whatever qualities it happens to manifest or actualize, but rather in what an object is capable of *doing*; its affects. Moreover, a quality or property of an object is not something an object *has*, but something that an object *does* as a function of the relations into which it enters. It is not that my skin *is* prickled, but rather that my skin *prickles*. In short, like stem cells that can become any other type of cell-- bone cells, muscle cells, nerve cells, etc.--all objects are *pluripotent*, such that they are capable of being creatively actualized in any number of ways.

It is sometimes suggested that object-oriented ontology, in arguing that objects are external to their relations, is unable to account for relations. Yet if the preceding is true then the case is precisely the opposite. From an epistemic standpoint, one of the central problems with relationism or holism is that where everything is related to everything else, we’re no longer able to understand what difference a relation makes. By contrast, by beginning from the premise that relations are external to objects, that objects have a being in excess of whatever relations they might enter into, OOO draws attention to the question of what difference relations make. When an object enters into this regime of attraction or field of relations, what local manifestations will
it undergo? What new and different properties will it manifest? Will it be destroyed? Will its powers of acting be diminished or enhanced? Rather than treating relations as pre-given and already established, OOO draws attention to the precariousness of relations and the differences they make when they take place.

If it is the case that art is not simply about something, but is something, then it follows that what is true of objects in general is true of art objects as well. Every art object will be minimally in excess of relations, such that is irreducible to its relations. To be sure, every art object will have some sort of beginning or origin—it will come into being at some time—but just as the child is irreducible to her parents, the work of art will be irreducible to its origin. Like all objects, it will have wandering and errancy built into it as an essential feature of its being. Every art object will be like Odysseus, yet without any home to return to. As a consequence, it will follow that every art object is irreducible to its context, the intention of an author, an unconscious, the institutions that house it, etc. It will necessarily be beyond any possible correlation.

While we can certainly talk about art in terms of its origin or context, this comes with the caveat that no work of art is the expression of a context or its relations to its origins. Works, like all objects, fall into contexts or fields of relations, yet can never be exhausted by these relations. Alternatively, there is no entity that is so saturated with its context that it contains nothing in reserve that could flee or rupture with this context. There is always something in reserve about the work that is in excess of its context. Insofar as the work exceeds whatever relations it might entertain at its origin, there is no particular reason to privilege that context at the origin of the work. Thus, when Heidegger writes that “[t]he work as work sets up a world [,] [and] the work
holds open the open region of the world”, we cannot agree. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger tells us that a world is a “…context of assignments or references, which, as significance, [are] constitutive of the worldhood of the world, [and] can be taken formally in the sense of a system of Relations.” In other words, for Heidegger a work is both an expression of the world or system of meanings (significance) in which it arises and that which founds a world or system of meaning. The world expressed in the artwork would then be the truth of the artwork.

Yet if artworks are objects, and objects have the capacity to break with their relations, then it follows that the worldhood of a world in the Heideggerian sense cannot capture the being of an artwork. Rather, the being of the work must reside elsewhere. This is a point Derrida makes powerfully in “Restitutions of the Truth in Pointing” when discussing the debate between Heidegger’s analysis of Van Gogh’s painting, *A Pair of Shoes*, and Meyer Schapiro’s analysis. Heidegger contends that the shoes are a pair of peasant shoes and that the painting discloses or reveals the world of the peasant. Schapiro holds that the shoes are a pair of worker’s shoes and that the painting discloses the world of the urban proletariat. Rather than entering into the debate to determine whether Heidegger or Schapiro is right, Derrida instead shows how our attempts to fix the content of the painting perpetually fails, leaving us unable to decide whether Heidegger or Schapiro is right. Alternatively, we can say that it is not that the painting does not produce meaning, but rather that it does not have meaning. The meaning of the painting—and here we already speak poorly in evoking the definite article—is an effect of the painting entering into a particular regime of attraction, not an intrinsic feature of the painting. This capacity to produce

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8 Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, p. 121.
multiple and different meanings would not be possible were the painting not minimally independent of its relations or context.

3. The Theatre and the Factory: Machinic-Art

Recognition that works are material entities with a being independent of or in excess to their relations requires us to think of art differently. Insofar as the work has a being in excess of its relations, it can no longer be thought as having a meaning. If the work were to have a meaning or express a meaning, that meaning would have to be anchored in something other than the work because the meaning of the work itself is indeterminate. That meaning would have to be anchored in the intention of an author or artist, a context, or a historical setting. Yet as a consequence of the externality of relations to the work, no intention, context, or historical setting is capable of anchoring the work and fixing its meaning or sense. Works are always capable and do break with their origins. Artists and authors will often talk of not knowing what they intended as they produced the work, how a line wanted to be this or a color that, how the characters took on a life of their own and how language ineluctably seemed to pull in a certain direction. Yet they will also talk about how the work seems to take on a life of its own upon being completed, such that it becomes alien. What writer has not had the experience of thinking, when later confronted with their own work, “I wrote that? What could I have possibly been thinking?” The artist herself is an interpreter of her own work, not the authority of her work. Just as the tool can take on all sorts of functions not intended by the craftsman that produced it, the work seems to produce all sorts of resonances of meaning never intended by the artist. Likewise, as we saw in the case of the debate between Schapiro and Heidegger regarding Van Gogh’s A Pair of Shoes,
meaning can resonate in radically different ways. Indeed, as Derrida playfully asks, how do we even know that this is a *pair* of shoes, given that they look like two left shoes?\(^\text{10}\)

This seems to place us in an impossible situation with respect to art. What can be said of art once we think of it as detached from context, intention, and historical setting? Insofar as the art object, as Harman argues, is withdrawn from all relation and presence, it seems that we’re left unable to say anything of art at all. The project of art criticism collapses and we seem to be left with a night in which all cows are black. More significantly, this conclusion seems to stand in complete defiance to the actual facts. As Kant argued in the *Critique of Judgment*, the artwork, far from silencing us, seems to generate a sort of gregariousness, an endless talk without limit or conclusion, between people.\(^\text{11}\)

At the heart of our worries lies a basic deadlock. On the one hand, we’ve concluded that the artwork, like any object, is withdrawn from any relation. Insofar as knowledge is a relation it would follow that the artwork is withdrawn from knowledge. While, as Harman argues, we can allude to the being of these withdrawn depths\(^\text{12}\), we can never exhaust those depths or finally get at their truth. On the other hand, we have seen that the work is in excess of any possible relation to context, intention, or historical setting. As a consequence, we seem left unable to say anything of the work at all.

However, this deadlock only seems to emerge if we continue working with the expressivist thesis. It is only where we think of the artwork as an assemblage of signs that we run encounter this deadlock, for there or assumption is that the aim is to get at something behind

\(^{10}\) Jacques Derrida, “Restitutions”, p. 259.


the work. Here I find assistance for thinking beyond this deadlock in Deleuze and Guattari’s critique of psychoanalysis. In Anti-Oedipus, Deleuze and Guattari write,

The great discovery of psychoanalysis was that of the production of desire, of the production of the unconscious. But once Oedipus entered the picture, this discovery was soon buried beneath a new brand of idealism: a classical theater was substituted for the unconscious as a factory: representation was substituted for the units of production of the unconscious; and an unconscious that was capable of nothing but expressing itself—in myth, tragedy, dreams—was substituted for the productive unconscious.13

Theatre versus factory, representation or sign versus machine. Deleuze and Guattari contend that the original Freudian discovery was the productivity of the unconscious. In early works such as the unpublished Project essay of 1895, The Psychopathology of Everyday Life, Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious, and The Interpretation of Dreams, we see an unconscious where nothing is represented, but rather where energetic plays of intensities of actually manufacture or produce desire. With the introduction of the Oedipus complex, by contrast, the unconscious becomes not a production of desire, but rather a theatre in which all formations of the unconscious—dreams, symptoms, slips of the tongue, bungled actions, jokes, etc—become representations of the family drama. A factory does not mean or express something, but rather does and produces something. A factory is a type of machine.

Elsewhere, in A Thousand Plateaus, Deleuze and Guattari write that “[a] book itself is a little machine.”14 What is said here of books can be said of all works of art. Indeed, as I’ve argued elsewhere drawing on Deleuze and Guattari and autopoietic theory, all objects can be understood as machines.15 The shift from artworks as assemblages of signs to machines

significantly transforms how we approach works and the activity of criticism. Where an
assemblage of signs expresses something or refers to something beyond itself, a machine, rather,
functions and produces something. As Ian Bogost articulates it through his alien
phenomenology, a machine is something that operates.\textsuperscript{16} Put crudely, a machine is something
through which matters flow, undergoing a series of transformations as a result of the operations
within the machine, producing a particular output. If, for example, we take a machine such as a
tree, this is a machine through which flows of sunlight, water, carbon dioxide, minerals in the
soil, etc., flow. Through a series of operations, the machine transforms those flows of matter,
those other machines that pass through it, into various sorts of cells such as photosynthetic cells
and bark, while also producing oxygen.

Before proceeding, it is crucial to understand two additional features of machines. First,
we must take care not to understand the relationship between machine and flows as a relationship
between unchanging forms and unformed matter such that there is a unilateral forming of the
matter that passes through the machine. All matter that passes through a machine is itself a
machine, itself has structure, and itself engages in its own operations. In her book \textit{Bodily
Natures}, Stacy Alaimo has introduced the important concept of trans-corporeality to articulate
the manner in which bodies or objects that interact with one another modify one another.\textsuperscript{17}
When machines are coupled to one another they reciprocally operate on one another and change
each other. It is not simply that the tree gives form to sunlight, water, nutrients, etc., forming
them into cells, but also that the sorts of encounters the tree has with other objects will play a key
role in what form the tree takes. Both the tree and the other matters that it couples with undergo

\textsuperscript{16} Ian Bogost, \textit{Unit Operations: An Approach to Video Game Criticism}, Cambridge, MA:
\textsuperscript{17} Stacy Alaimo, \textit{Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self},
changes in this interaction. A machine is an entity that affects other entities, but that is also affected by those other entities it affects and interacts with.

Second, and this point is crucial, machines are pluripotent. Unlike Aristotelian potentialities, the powers of a machine are not teleological in the sense of having one destination in a process of actualization, but rather powers or capacities can be actualized in a variety of different ways—and always creatively and in surprising fashions—as a result of their encounters with other machines or the couplings they enter into. The claim that a machine is pluripotent is the claim that it has no fixed function or purpose that defines its being. Functions of machines often become rigid or typified, yet there is always an indeterminancy of functions haunting any machine holding open the possibility of the machine taking on different functions. Examples of this are rife in both the biological and technological world. Indeed, we should here think in evolutionary terms of coaptation, where an organ of an entity takes on a very different function than the one it previously served. Thus, for example, biologists tell us that those organs that became lungs were originally inflated bubbles that organisms used to float. Likewise, the Chinese invented gunpowder, yet used it for fireworks rather than military purposes. In his book Connections, James Burke recounts how the mister on perfume bottles was coapted to produce the fuel injected engine. Function or operation and use are distinct terms. Use is always open and comes after the fact. Every machine is thus haunted by a machinic-freedom in which it is capable, in principle, of taking on different functions or operations. If this point is so crucial, then it is because it underlines the manner in which the artwork is inexhaustible or why it carries within itself a power to endlessly produce.

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Understanding artworks as machines puts an end to what Ricouer referred to as the “conflict of interpretations”\(^\text{19}\) because the work is no longer understood as expressing something that the critic must decipher, but rather as an entity that affects other entities producing something else. To interpret is not to decipher what is expressed, it is not to get at the meaning that is expressed in the work, but rather to couple one machine to another producing something new as a result. Interpretation is not act that gets at the veiled and disguised meaning expressed in a work, but is rather a creative act through which the work is made to operate on some material, some other machine, whether that machine be the life of the viewer or reader, the social world, history, the author of the work, etc. To interpret is not to uncover, but to produce. We thus see that machine-oriented aesthetics reverses our ordinary understanding of criticism. Where expressivist criticism sees the work as a product of whatever it expresses, as an effect, machine-oriented aesthetics approaches the work as operating on the world around it through a machinic-coupling that produces something new. When, for example, the new historicist approaches the novel, reading it in terms of the historical context in which it was produced, the historicist is not discovering the *truth* of the novel—its historical context—but is instead using the novel as a machine for organizing the chaos of historical data for the period that the critic investigates. It is not the context that organizes the reading of the novel, but the novel that organizes how the historical time period is related to. Yet above all, the historicist reading is not significant so much for what it tells us about that time period, but rather for what it tells us about the present. The reading becomes a lens for apprehending the present and modifying our relations to the present. In this regard, one of the most important functions of criticism and the work of art is not that—as Heidegger suggested—they reveal or disclose our world, but precisely

that they *interrupt* our familiar lifeworld and natural perception. Works draw us beyond our familiar lifeworld, our spectacles that are so close that we cannot discern them and which thereby create an effect of obviousness, drawing us outside of ourselves to mineral worlds, animal worlds, quantum worlds, the rumbling of language, the storms of color and form, points of view no human can comprehend, and, above all, other cultural and subaltern worlds. Works do not have a sense nor express a sense, but are sense-making machines that disrupt lived experience and familiar semiotic fields of meaning. And it is perhaps for this reason that there has historically been such a hostility to art, for it is not simply that the world is a “semblance of reality”, a simulacrum, that competes with reality, but rather that works are full-blown entities within the world that challenge our ability to assimilate all experiences in familiar frameworks of worldhood. Heidegger gets things exactly backwards. The work is not that which grounds and expresses the worldhood of the world, but which draws us beyond the lived experience of Dasein and our being-in-the-world. It is for this reason that there is a deep connection between art, events, and revolutions.

A machinic-oriented aesthetic is thereby able to capture something of the difference that the artwork makes. When, for example, we listen to the new historicist or Marxist critic, we often get the sense that he has things backwards. We are told that the work is an expression of its historical milieu; yet in making this claim we lose the manner in which the work operates on its historical setting. We notice, for example, that *The Jungle* by Upton Sinclair fundamentally transformed butchery practices in the United States. Here the work wasn’t simply an expression of its context, but rather exceeded its context and acted upon it. As we watch the phenomenon of *Twilight*, we get the sense that these novels form a technological of desire for young women raised in evangelical contexts that emphasize abstinence. *Twilight* does not *express* love in a
sexually repressive, patriarchal, Christian framework, but rather creates or produces a form of love marking a line of flight or path of escape in that context. And returning to the debate between Heidegger and Schapiro, the question we ought to ask is not whether Van Gogh’s shoes are peasant or proletarian shoes, whether they are rural or urban, but rather how the machinic couplings that produce these resonances operate on the world of the present beyond these readings. The question of whether van Gogh intended rural peasant or urban proletariat shoes or whether this painting expresses one or the other is largely irrelevant. What is interesting in a machinic-reading is how one or the other of these couplings operates on the present world allowing things that were hitherto invisible to be revealed. Indeed, we can imagine other readings. Following Derrida’s question of how we even know that this is a pair of shoes and not two left shoes, we can imagine a reading that sees this painting as an indictment of the early years of the Soviet Union, notorious for their shoe production. One will object that Soviet production post-dates van Gogh’s life. Irrelevant. The painting can function as a machinic-thread that allows us to organize the Soviet experience. We can imagine another reading where the painting is not about shoes or worlds at all, but rather the phenomenon of entropy and how entropy set in as articulated in Bryant’s ontology. They are rather shabby after all, are they not? We can imagine yet another reading where the painting is about the properties of light, that most ephemeral of all matter, and how it interacts with other forms of matter.

The only criteria is whether the machinic-coupling manages to function. Can the work be coupled with another machine in this way to produce effects of one sort or another? This is a question that can never be answered in advance. We can only try and see what happens. Graham Harman has created an interpretive machine that resembles Husserlian free variation where we are to take the style of an author and see what that author’s work would be like in a
radically different context. What would Lovecraft’s work, for example, look like situated in Egypt or the Amazonian rain forests, rather than the arctic? We can always suggest that the work of Shakespeare was actually a form of science fiction—and in suggesting this, both Shakespeare and science fiction would be changed—but if we are to attempt such a machinic coupling we must make it function. As we have learned from biology, functioning is always a messy affair where the parts never quite fit together and the machines always break down. Evolution always builds on prior platforms, makes due with what’s available, and must find a way to navigate these tensions among the machines that make up any machine. Our digestive system is built on an earlier primate digestive system that used the appendix to digest food. Now the appendix serves no function for us and can kill us. Our ancestors had smaller heads and as a result, children born of *homo sapien* women must twist in peculiar ways during the birthing process to navigate the narrow hip bones of the woman because their heads are so big. All sorts of things can go wrong. Everything is jerry rigged. There’s always something slipping away in any machine and in any machinic coupling. Yet there are always machines that break down the moment they’re put together, and others that manage to somehow function while sputtering and jerking, despite being composed of parts that never quite fit together. All one can do is try.

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