

PARADIGM CHANGE/INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE

THE ARTS OF LIVING/
EPICUREAN RAIN*



L.O. ARANYE FRADENBURG AND
EILEEN A. JOY

for Michael O'Rourke

THE ARTS OF LIVING

We are in the midst of paradigm change, brought on by initiatives like biological systems theory, post-structuralism, James Gibson's theory of affordances,¹ and neuroplasticity. Top-down or prime-mover models of change have given way to principles of creative interactivity and causal parity, in which concentrations of forces and systemic elements continue to play significant roles, but only as parts of turbulent, non-totalizable assemblages. The findings of the genome project have put genetic determinism in doubt. Today's genes do not write the scripts of our lives; they are

¹ James J. Gibson, *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception* (Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1979).

relatively passive elements in a complex field of biochemical interactions. Jesper Hoffmeyer summarizes the situation this way: “Living cells . . . use DNA to construct the organism, not vice versa.”² Many kinds of conjunctions and symbioses now appear to have significance for bio-history; these are evolutionary events that depend neither on natural selection nor mutation. The study of multi-cellularity shows that individuation and aggregation are both fundamental to living process, and are interdependent rather than mutually exclusive processes. Focus on the actions of cells has restored the importance of the life experience of the organism and its forms of relationality to evolutionary theory; bio-history is now seen to be created by mutually constitutive interactions between the genotype, the phenotype, and environmental, including social, affordances. The organism is no longer a “dead end,” and evolution turns out to be a history of ecologies rather than of anthropomorphized “selfish” genes bent on self-replication. Semiosis—communication—is a *sine qua non* of living process. The brain’s capacity for estimation and signal-interpretation is, simply, vital; only in very specific knowledge-ecologies does it require probability theory and experimental controls to act on behalf of sentient experience. Living process—including artful, real-time, improvisational activity—finally plays a significant role in bio-historiography.

Many forms of life enjoy meaning-making and interpreting; what Panksepp calls “SEEKING” is not, as some of our latter-day theorists would have it, a contemptible pleasure, but an aspect of living process.³ By “communication,” moreover, we do not intend simply “information-processing” or “de/coding of lexical messages.” We honor the joy of utterance, the intersubjectivity it sponsors, and the affective-paraverbal features of language. As Bachelard once put it, “[b]eautiful words are already remedies.”⁴ It is, of course, important that we do not idealize

² Jesper Hoffmeyer, *Biosemiotics: An Examination into the Signs of Life and the Life of Signs* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 32.

³ J. Panksepp, *Affective Neuroscience: The Foundations of Human and Animal Emotions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 24–27, 51.

⁴ Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Reverie: Childhood, Language and the Cosmos*, trans. Daniel Russell (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969),

the interconnectedness of living (as well as non-living) matter, or assume that discourses thereof cannot be appropriated by powers inimical to creaturely enjoyment, like neoliberalism. But we can say that it is not possible to prosper all alone. Epidemiological studies show that poor health in the poorer ranks of a population predicts poorer health in its richer ranks as well. To speak of thriving, we know that lab rats grow bigger and stronger when their environments are “enriched”—that is to say, when they have lots of toys, meaningful activities, and opportunities to be curious and sociable. It is the same for us. As the evolutionary scientist J.Z. Young points out,⁵ art matters to life; organisms want to live only when life is worth living. The Darwinist A.R. Wallace wrote in 1891 that “the popular idea of the struggle for existence entailing misery and pain on the animal world is the very reverse of the truth.” What it seeks, and often finds, is the “maximum of life and of the enjoyment of life.”⁶

Too many humanists think of science scientistically, and accept, and even idealize, its epistemological privilege, arguing, for example, that we should be doing science, or something that looks like it. We should take field observation as a model of descriptive reserve, when (ironically) *explication de texte* is currently being recommended as an important analytical method in the social sciences. We should also jettison *explication de texte*—as many literary historians have argued at least since the 1970s—in favor of watermark studies or the computation of geographical distribution of literary genres. Digital humanists have long insisted that if the humanities are to become competitive again, we must valorize and practice what amounts to engineering. By now, some of the results are in, and they are not impressive. In the English Department at the University of California, Santa Barbara, at least, where the digital humanities have been fostered (and rightly so) for two decades, the embrace thereof has not prevented the loss of office staff, significant FTE attrition, retention failure, and the like. We are told we must compete, but rhetoric

31.

⁵ J.Z. Young, *An Introduction to the Study of Man* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1971).

⁶ A.R. Wallace, *Darwinism: A Exposition of the Theory of Natural Selection* (London: Macmillan, 1891), 40 (<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/14558/14558-h/14558-h.htm>).

about survival and competition belongs to an outdated understanding of evolution; the study of cooperation and mutual aid is now among the most vigorous sub-fields in evolutionary psychology and biology. Contemporary practitioners of the biological sciences were trained during the heydays of poststructuralism, multiculturalism and environmental theory; recall that Gibson's seminal work on affordances and the commingling of pro- and exteroception dates from the late 1970s. It is now *de rigeur* to recognize that, in work with human subjects, "human" does not mean "white middle class North American" graduate students; comparative psychology has gained enormously in importance since the days when scientists scorned multiculturalism as an attack on universals.

I hope that our interdisciplinary work will draw as much as possible, not on the exploded scientism of the past, but on the contemporary embrace of causal parity, plasticity, and real-time experimental ecologies. The humanities teach the arts of living—how to see, interpret, express, hear, and feel as richly and widely as possible. And they teach us how to practice those arts in the context of real-time, improvisational activity—the kind of thing we do every day, all day long, the significance of which must be restored as against the habituation that tempts us to take them for granted.

EPICUREAN RAIN

Speaking of habituation, this is how Isabelle Stengers describes what *she* does as a university researcher:

One way of articulating what I do is that my work is not addressed to my colleagues. This is not about contempt, but about learning to situate oneself in relation to a future—a future in which I am uncertain as to what will have become of universities. . . . Defending them against external attacks (rankings, objective evaluation in all domains, the economy of knowledge) is not particularly compelling because of the passivity with which academics give in. This shows that it's over. Obviously, the interesting question is: who is going to take over? At the end of

the era of the medieval university, it was not clear who would take over.⁷

It was not clear. Things are not clear, or they are very clear. It ain't over 'till it's over, or it's already over. We've entered an era of loving our catastrophes, of tuning them for scholarly fugues about the end of everything, where it's no longer about preparing for the end or even surviving that end, but about living on the rising waves and pandemic fumes of its temporal drag, where we cultivate and adorn shipwrecks instead of gardens.⁸

Speaking of drag, history's a real drag. It makes thinking hard, because you can't get out of it. It's always giving you headaches, especially if you work in a university of a certain Western-white-Anglo-German variety, which is almost all of them. There's no remedy for this, no over-the-library-counter medication. There's a lot of alternative histories but we call those "minor," they're at the "bottom," and there's never an alternative no-history. No blank pages. No Lucretian laminar void. The only thing to do in a laminar void is fall and bump into things, and that makes it the perfect setting for novelty and new relationalities—in fact, for history. History without laminar voids is not history; it's propaganda. Cruising is historical, or vice versa; we're speaking also of Bersani's "non-masochistic *jouissance* (one that owes nothing to the death drive)."⁹ It means we get to have our *jouissance* without demands, without insisting that someone else pay a price for it. And maybe also without always over-thinking it. Because history is a drag.

That's the tragedy of Meryl Streep as Susan Orlean in Charlie Kaufman's *Adaptation*, standing up to her waist in the Everglades swamp after her lover, the orchid thief John LaRoche, is eaten by a crocodile:

Oh my God. Everything's over. I did everything wrong. I want my life back. I want it back before it got all

⁷ "The Care of the Possible: Isabelle Stengers interviewed by Erik Bordeleau," trans. Kelly Ladd, *Scapagoat* 1 (2011): 12 [12–27].

⁸ Steve Mentz, *At the Bottom of Shakespeare's Ocean* (London: Continuum, 2009), 98.

⁹ Leo Bersani, "Sociability and Cruising," in *Is the Rectum a Grave? And Other Essays* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010), 61 [45–62].

fucked up. Let me be a baby again. I want to be new. I want to be new.

That's our tragedy, too.

Becoming-new (as opposed to, say, Deleuze and Guattari's becoming-intense, becoming-animal, becoming-imperceptible, etc.¹⁰) feels practically impossible. We'll admit that we can't escape history, exactly, and that Epicurus's laminar void—through which atomic particles once “rained,” and then, through various small “swerves” (Lucretius's *clinamen*),¹¹ created our world—is no longer possible (at least, not from the standpoint of the universe being empty). At the same time, we need not only to be able to account for novelty (isn't that partly what critical studies of art, for example, are about? and also historical studies?), but to also be able to create it, and this can't be accomplished without somehow charting returns to (or reboots of) that laminar void, in order to cultivate its radical contingency, its powers for engendering material encounters that can't be predicted in advance, and out of which alternative life- and art-practices become possible.

Why does novelty matter? Because without it, everything is always set to repeat, even with overtly subversive variations—Judith Butler's thinking on drag as performative repetition “with a difference,” for example, where creative innovation is of course possible, but also always depends on iterations of the same and thus never entirely breaks free of its object of critique.¹² As Aaron Bady has argued recently, with regard to the institutional unrest within the University of California, critique “is often not very good at breaking away from its object; critique is dependent on its objects, and its objects will define the meaning and possibilities of critique.” Further, to critique

¹⁰ See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, “1730: Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal, Becoming-Imperceptible . . .” in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

¹¹ See David J. Furley, *Two Studies in the Greek Atomists* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), and Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, ed. Cyril Bailey, 3 vols. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1947).

¹² See Judith Butler, “Gender Is Burning: Questions of Appropriation and Subversion,” in Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “Sex”* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 121–140.

“can be to obey: by applying only where obedience is not required, this kind of free speech is just the flip side of power, a kind of supplementary and enabling excess.”¹³ But this is just a caution, for we will always need critique (Bady himself never stops critiquing¹⁴) and it has not, contra Latour, “run out of steam.” As long as there exist asymmetrical power relations and the capitalist-neoliberal uptake-reification of everything, we will need critique, especially if, by “critique,” we mean speaking truth to power, from within its relations, in order to insist that power account for itself, that it be held accountable (which is also a way of putting particular checks on power, from a position of “equal standing” and in full view of some sort of “commons”—at least, that’s the optimistic view¹⁵). But we have to be able to envision a possibility of change, for the university, that might mean a new university that would betray its own history, one that might even arrive from what Althusser termed “the assignable nothingness of all swerve,” situated in a no-place of aleatory encounter that Althusser imagined as being (if somewhat paradoxically) before history:

In this ‘world’ without being or history (like Rousseau’s forest), what happens? . . . What happens there is what happens in Epicurus’s universal rain, prior to any world, any being and any reason as well as any cause. What happens is that there are encounters . . . it is enough to know that it comes about ‘we know not where, we do not know when,’ and that it is the ‘smallest deviation possible,’ that is, the assignable nothingness of all swerve.¹⁶

¹³ Aaron Bady, “Bartleby in the University of California: The Social Life of Disobedience,” *The New Inquiry: Zunguzungu* [weblog], May 3, 2013: <http://thenewinquiry.com/blogs/zunguzungu/bartleby-in-the-university-of-california-the-social-life-of-disobedience/>.

¹⁴ Witnessed, for example, by Bady’s own stream of critical postings on his blog *zunguzungu* at *The New Inquiry*: <http://thenewinquiry.com/blogs/zunguzungu/>.

¹⁵ On this point, see Michel Foucault on parrhesia in *Fearless Speech*, ed. Joseph Pearson (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001).

¹⁶ Louis Althusser, “The Underground Current of the Materialism of the Encounter,” in Louis Althusser, *Philosophy of the Encounter: Later Writings, 1978-1987*, eds. Oliver Corpet and François Matheron, trans. G.M. Goshgarian (London: Verso, 2006), 191 [163–207]. All subsequent quotations of this work cited parenthetically.

Towards the end of his life, in the early 1980s, recently discharged from a psychiatric hospital in Paris, where he was hospitalized for three years after murdering his wife in 1980, and living in a neighborhood apart from the *École normale supérieure* that had formerly provided a more socially sheltered existence (and thus, working more in the Outside), Althusser threw himself into a work never to be completed on the “materialism of the encounter,” which began simply, “It is raining. Let this book therefore be, before all else, a book about ordinary rain” (167). In this work, Althusser hoped to show that the most radical (and importantly, for him, anti-logocentric, anti-Meaning) philosophy of all would be one that takes account of the aleatory and the contingent as opposed to “necessity and teleology, that is to say, a . . . disguised form of idealism” (168).¹⁷ Philosophy, for Althusser, would then become a practice of observation and description of “crystallized” encounters, out of which the world would “open up” to us, as a sort of “gift,” “in the facticity of its contingency” (170). Philosophy would also dispense with the “problem” approach (i.e., “why is there something rather than nothing?”) by “refusing to assign itself any ‘object’ whatsoever . . . in order to set out from nothing, and from the infinitesimal, aleatory variation of nothing constituted by the swerve of the fall” (174–175).

This is not to say that one avoids history—after all, the world is filled with millions of somethings, as opposed to black voids, and history “gels at certain felicitous moments” (194)—for example, Althusser’s murder of his wife, which can never be undone¹⁸—but rather, in order for

tically, by page number.

¹⁷ But it should also be noted here that a logocentric critique isn’t—or in our view, shouldn’t be—scorn for creaturely attachment to meaning-making as creative activity and meanings as creative productions. These are life-saving activities, after all, and key to thriving in this world.

¹⁸ In a prologue to this unfinished book on “the materialism of the encounter,” Althusser wrote, “in November 1980, in the course of a severe, unforeseeable crisis that had left me in a state of mental confusion, I strangled my wife, the woman who was everything in the world to me and who loved me so much that, since living had become impossible for her, she wanted only to die. In my confusion, not knowing what I was doing, I no doubt rendered her this ‘service’: she did not defend herself against it, but died of it” (164). This strange and quasi-emotionally distant “confession” (if

anything different to happen (and that is an ethical project, we would argue), one has to figure out strategies for creating special starting conditions that “void” (or at least temporarily “stay”) presupposed parameters of thought and movement and allow one to attend to the shock and materialism of the encounter. There would never be any “final” conclusions or certainties, just a Rousseauvian forest in which “the radical absence of society . . . constitutes the essence of any possible society” (184). Ultimately, for Althusser, the materialism of the encounter “is the materialism, not of a subject (be it God or the proletariat), but of a process, a process that has no subject, yet imposes on the subjects (individuals or others) which it dominates the order of its development, with no assignable end” (190). All possible arrangements and complementarities possess a certain “readiness” for possibility, in such a world of collision (190, 192), and Meaning (with a capital “M”) is no longer about origins or ends, but inheres instead in the felicity of encounter.

Let us work, then, to build a Rousseauvian forest, or Kaufmanesque swamp, in which we can practice our tiniest deviations. We need, of course, our “arts of living,” which have a history (that we need not neglect) and which the traditional humanities has been so adept at cultivating, but this also means that the humanities is a reservoir of the sorts of creative delusions (and fuzzy thinking) that are necessary for not just surviving, but thriving. As the poet Lisa Robertson has written, “I need to be able to delude myself, for as long as it takes, as long as it takes to translate an emotion, a grievance, a politics, an intoxication, to a site, an outside.”¹⁹ We need our delusional spaces. The University, and the humanities especially, is a space, as

it can be called such) is somehow more honest than the official confession Althusser wrote later in 1985, where he claimed he was only giving his wife a neck massage that somehow went awry and which induced in him a sort of hysterical amnesia (see Louis Althusser, *The Future Lasts Forever: A Memoir* [New York: New Press, 1995]). We mention these biographical details because, in reading Althusser’s late writing on a “materialism of the encounter,” one can’t help but feel that his search for a philosophy of the radically empty, of the contingent encounter from which anything was possible, was also somehow a search for his own void from which to begin, again.

¹⁹ Lisa Robertson, “The Weather: A Report on Sincerity,” *DC Poetry* (2001): <http://www.dcpoetry.com/anthology/242>.

we've stated above, for the artfulness of living, for enriched environments, and real-time experimental ecologies—which is to say, for alternate delusions, and this means we also need an alternate delusion for the University.²⁰ We've never liked the phrase, "what's Plan B?" But honestly, what *is* Plan B?

Who will take over? You know what's missing in Isabelle Stengers's comment—"At the end of the era of the medieval university, it was not clear who would take over"? The what. Who's going to take over what? The "diplomatic institution" called a university, which is already dead, or maybe just a little ruined? A little ruination never hurt anyone. This world looks beautiful in the light of a ruined moon, in the dusk of the carbon dust of a ruined world. But it might look better in the hail of an Epicurean rain. And you know what that means? We need to go outside, where it's raining.

Who's going to take over what? How about if, when they get here, there's nothing to take over? Because we dispersed, and went rogue-medieval-itinerant? We went out in the rain. We might decide, with Michael O'Rourke, to seek out "a recalibrated futurity for the humanities which recognizes that its future will always have been its end, which, more affirmatively put, is to say that its future will have been always to begin its ending again. . . . [and] we can find a certain dignity in what we are doing if we maintain absolute fidelity to the incalculable and unreckonable event of the university to-come, the university without condition."²¹ This will also mean embracing what

²⁰ On the subject of the ways in which the university, and especially the humanities, have been undermined and how they might reclaim new space(s) among the "ruins," as it were, see (among other works), L.O. Aranye Fradenburg, *Staying Alive: A Survival Manual for the Liberal Arts* (Brooklyn: punctum books, 2013), and Bill Readings, *The University in Ruins* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997). On how the university has reached its current state of troubling affairs, see Christopher Newfield, *Unmaking the Public University: The Forty-Year Assault on the Middle Class* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), and Benjamin Ginsberg, *The Fall of the Faculty: The Rise of the All-Administrative University and Why It Matters* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2011).

²¹ Michael O'Rourke, "After," *In The Middle*, November 29, 2010: <http://www.inthemedievalmiddle.com/2010/11/guest-post-michael-orourke-after.html>. This post is a transcript of O'Rourke's

Geoffrey Bennington has written, by way of Derrida, about the institutionality of the university:

The University . . . [has] a responsibility to foster events of thought that cannot fail to unsettle the University in its Idea of itself. . . . On this account, the University is in principle the institution that ‘lives’ the precarious chance and ruin of the institution as its very institutionality.²²

So let’s affirm some ruinous possibility now—that means knowing your history, but also when to let go of it, and to be willing to remain perpetually unsettled, both in terms of knowledge disciplines, but also in terms of place, or as Simone Weil once put it, “we must take the feeling of being at home into exile. We must be rooted in the absence of place.”²³ The university isn’t a place, it’s a state of mind. Wherever we are, wherever we gather, wherever we profess—that is the university, and there will never be a take-over of that situation.

But we have to get out in the rain and also learn how to make it rain. We have to go outside and join hands with the ever-growing academic labor precariat and start forming new initiatives for para-academic outstitutions.²⁴ It’s a question of the atmosphere, and how we need to be more drenched in it. And as Derrida wrote, “take your time, but be quick about it, because you do not know what awaits you.”²⁵

keynote address at the 1st biennial meeting of the BABEL Working Group held in Austin, Texas in November 2010.

²² Geoffrey Bennington, “Foundations,” *Textual Practice* 21.2 (2007): 231–249.

²³ Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, ed. Gustave Thibon (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1952), 86.

²⁴ Here we are making a nod toward new educational (and occasionally anti-institutional) and alt-cult initiatives and start-ups, such as the Brooklyn Institute for Social Research (<http://thebrooklyninstitute.com/>), The Public School New York (<http://thepublicschool.org/nyc>), *continent* journal (<http://www.continentcontinent.com/index.php/continent>), punctum books (<http://punctumbooks.com>), and The Bruce High Quality Foundation (<http://www.thebrucehighqualityfoundation.com/>), just to name a few.

²⁵ Jacques Derrida, “The Future of the Profession or the University Without Condition (thanks to the ‘Humanities,’ what could take

place tomorrow),” in *Jacques Derrida and the Humanities: A Critical Reader*, ed. Tom Cohen (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 24–57.