

BOOK REVIEW

UNVEILING THOMAS MOYNIHAN'S SPINAL CATASTROPHISM: THE SPINE CONSIDERED AS A CHRONOGENETIC MEDIA ARTIFACT

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Book under review: Thomas Moynihan, *Spinal Catastrophism: A Secret History* (MIT Press, 2019)

Despite the comparative impulse to posit Thomas Moynihan within the lineage of Reza Negarestani's "theory fiction," all such compulsions ought to be curbed. Moynihan, a young philosopher hailing from the UK, is a fine example of what has recently been termed "post-continental philosophy," i.e. philosophy that makes no distinction between analytic and continental divisions. Moynihan, a thinker who collectively parses through the philosophy of science and history with adroit ease, situates his discourse on cosmology and spinal trauma within the hyper-genealogical tradition of Friedrich Nietzsche, Georges Canguilhem, and Michel Foucault. However, to reduce Moynihan to the terms of archeological historiography would be folly—indeed, *Spinal Catastrophism* (2019) unfolds as an intellectual "cabinet of curiosities," its thoroughly researched medical acumen matched by the haunted echoes bridling the book's ghostly pages (which feature detached crooning skulls and inflected serpentine spines galore). Demonstrating how every cognitive prosthesis creates its own neurosis while simultaneously

wedding philosophers written out of history with esoteric biogeochemists and curious medics, Moynihan's inaugural book is at once erudite and ominous—a challenging, albeit most rewarding, read.

At the heart of Moynihan's project are occult synergies that produce a kind of deep horrorism, fascinated with alternate catastrophic forecasts. Despite what one may assume, however, this book does not simply produce a kind of enchantment properly reducible to fanciful philosophical indulgences but, instead, is a markedly political endeavor. Make no mistake, behind Moynihan's cheeky fatalism—the book resounds with a final crescendo of omnicide qua dynamite-induced implosion—is a philosopher well aware of the Anthropocene and the operant existential planetary risks that threaten the Earth's ecosystem, which creep closer with every carbon emission. Rather than participate in the perhaps overwrought literary prognostic of prediction and posthumous caretaking, however, Moynihan's altogether unique mode of “theory fiction” invigorates speculative geoengineering, terraforming, and macro-strategy¹ through the interplay of reason and intellectual magnetism. In addition, the prudent reader will notice a thread of subtle Hegelianism interwoven within *Spinal Catastrophism's* plexus, perhaps best abridged by the apothegm that “animal makes itself”.

How, exactly, does animal make itself, then? Where media studies would rejoinder that “animal makes itself” through reticulated and intermedial agential artifacts, political science might pose cultural cleavages and striated ethnic lines manipulated by political entrepreneurs. Rather than committing to an inquiry on technology and new media, Moynihan examines the spinal cord as a properly archeological media object and, consulting André Leroi-Gourhan's *Speech and Gesture* (1964), considers how “[t]he freeing of the areas of the motor cortex of the brain, definitely accomplished with erect posture [...] will be complete when we succeed in exteriorizing the human motor brain”.² Drawing from the German tradition of philosophical anthropology (a genealogy that runs from Ernst Kapp to Arnold Gehlen), Leroi-Gourhan examined the human, woefully and radically underdetermined, as the animal that necessarily externalizes itself through the implementation of “artificial organs”. (p.19) Moynihan reverses Leroi-Gourhan's

¹ Thomas Moynihan, *Spinal Catastrophism: A Secret History* (MIT Press, 2019), p. 34.

² André Leroi-Gourhan, *Gesture and Speech* (MIT Press, 1993), p. 248.

dictum that the “standards of natural organs should be applied to such artificial organs” (p. 111) by imbuing the spine with a kind of accented sociotechnical and electronic intelligence.

Thus, both following and modernizing Leroi-Gourhan’s seminal study of mechanical reproducibility and externalization, Moynihan’s book complicates a particular contemporary trend within posthumanism festering in popular science and cultural studies.³ If we parse the posthuman trajectory along Moynihan’s intellectual framework, diachronization is revealed to be relative to technization and organology, rather than bonded to any specific or discrete technology or politically socialized technological dispositif. If the spinal cord is a media object, then its erect positioning indexes its actuarial operative use. Playfully engaging in German philosopher of technology Ernst Kapp’s dictum that humanity externalizes itself, Moynihan carves a world whereby the biological human is erased while materially producing consciousness *in* itself (that is, externalization as an inflected process). Coupling Leroi-Gourhan’s description of programmed standardization with Kapp’s writing on “organ projection”,⁴ Moynihan examines “planetary autooiesis”, (p. 177) whereby a kind of accidental bio-mimicry is realized in the ways that we externalize ourselves through autonomic feedback loops, bypassing the brain. (The guileful reader will notice myriad parallels between second order cybernetics and Moynihan’s description of environmentally and allometrically scaled evolution.)

Following Moynihan’s recounted archive of occult medical annals, bipedalism, the nexus of hominization, is the root of all trauma. Accordingly, Moynihan queries:

“[c]ould all observable structure, then, be some astronomically distributed and rarefied ‘neurosystem’, some Dysonian *Organprojektion?* physics itself the externalized ‘nervous array’ of computational behemoths and their ongoing interaction?” (p. 67)

³ Simply consider the wide media coverage of Elon Musk’s Neuralink and the transhumanist technofetishization colouring Alex Williams and Nick Srnicek’s branch of accelerationism, which advocates for full automation whereby “the tendencies towards automation and the replacement of human labor should be enthusiastically accelerated”. See: Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams, “#Accelerate Manifesto for an Accelerationist Politics”, in Robin Mackay and Armen Avanessian (eds), *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader* (Urbanomic, 2014), p. 109.

⁴ For further reading, see: Ernst Kapp, *Elements of a Philosophy of Technology: On the Evolutionary History of Culture* (University of Minnesota Press, 2018).

This is the collective closure between astronomer Fred Hoyle's theory of "morphological evolution"⁵ as an emancipation from anthropocentrism and philosopher of science Milan M. Ćirković's "indistinguishability thesis". As such, Moynihan writes that "intellect tends towards environmental manipulation", wherefore any "sufficiently advanced intelligence becomes entirely indistinguishable from its own environment". (p. 67) Within this belated cosmogony of the spinal cord-cum-megalith, environment and thought are enraptured in a kind of mutualist dance. Scoliosis-impacted floating spines and encephalized skulls litter *Spinal Catastrophism's* cosmic mythos, at ends with the spinal-radial axis that grounds the reader along the Earth's mold. An index for the unencumbered human, the floating spine serves as an answer to fatalist doom.

Another bridge soon appears (such ephemeral bricolage dazzles *Spinal Catastrophism*) via the Fermi Paradox, the term given to the enigma troubling theoretical arguments that indicate that there ought to be countless other intelligent species in the universe, despite all observational and empirical evidence that suggests otherwise. In contrast to the Baudrillardian hyperreal, Moynihan's writing is much closer to Ćirković's "simulation hypothesis", which describes "a simulation created by Programmers of an underlying, true reality and run on the advanced computers of that underlying reality".⁶ Moynihan's "simulation", while unaffixed to traditional computational devices (and, consequentially, freed from rationalist responsibility), is run through a permutation of Schopenhauer's notion of reality as a nervous simulation—if the Central Nervous System is a parasite, then "reality is itself the symptomology of viral invasion". (p. 254)

Fermi's paradox brings us to the Polish science fiction author and philosopher Stanisław Lem,⁷ whose mythic fabricated scientist, Aristides Acheropoulos, offers a "New Cosmogony" that breaks with metaphysical systems and natural science, offering a purely reflexive idea of the material world. Acheropoulos booms, "*Tertium non datur*, the world was created by No One, though it was created

⁵ For further reading, see: Fred Hoyle, *The Origin of the Universe and the Origin of Religion* (Moyer Bell, 1993).

⁶ Milan M. Ćirković, *The Great Silence: Science and Philosophy of Fermi's Paradox* (Oxford University Press, 2018), 122.

⁷ It was Lem who originally coined the phrase "Fermi's Paradox". For further reading, see: Stanisław Lem, *Solaris*, tr. Joanna Kilmartin (Mariner, 2002).

nonetheless'. Consequently, Acheropoulos cosmologizes ludics and Moynihan, following suite, surreptitiously marries instincts with drives.

Acheropoulos' enraptured battle with Professor D.C. Barker⁸ is deeply knitted within the fabric of *Spinal Catastrophism*, mirroring Moynihan's epic clamor between the Central Nervous System and the Autonomic Nervous System. This nested antagonism, once again, reflects Moynihan's implied Hegelianism, where an ontological paradox of dialectical historicity is premised on an open Whole that is irremediably ruptured by its own absolute negativity. Professor Barker, the renegade cryptographer, is silently plucked from Nick Land/CCRU's universe (although Moynihan, devilish "theory fiction" trickster that he is, uses "in world" citations, requiring that the reader be privy to their own research)—one may recall this is a scientist who "has spent his life decoding ancient scripts, quasibiotic residues, and anomalous mineral patterns".⁹

For Barker, it is *trauma* that externalizes itself, rather than self-consciousness or technics. As Barker once quipped, "trauma is a body".¹⁰ Professor Barker, following the lineage of JG Ballard (himself a non-conformist Kantian), maps "spinal catastrophism"¹¹ along trans-organic lines, drawing topological and geometrical similarities between the human cranial vault and the Boötes void, alongside "the mammal's swollen calvarium and the concavity of the Chicxulub crater". (pp. 72) Such terrestrial parallels inform the system Moynihan slyly carves, decorated idiosyncratic and forgotten "parascience" curiosities coupled alongside genuine scientific axioms. For instance, describing a latent desire for cosmological symmetry, Moynihan lists secret morphisms and tectologies—a personal favorite is paleontologists' once-popularized idea of dinosaurs owning a posterior "second brain". (p. 76)

An excavator of hermetic mystique, Moynihan recovers German philosopher of the unconscious, Eduard von Hartmann (whom Nietzsche unabashedly censured, effectively writing out of history), so as to divulge a disquisitive

⁸ Professor Barker, himself, a descendent of Deleuze and Guattari's Professor Challenger, an inhabitant of *A Thousand Plateaus* (though appropriated, in turn, from Conan Doyle's oeuvre).

⁹ Nick Land, *Fanged Noumena: Collected Writings 1987–2007* (Urbanomic, 2011), p. 506

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 498.

¹¹ The term "spinal catastrophism" was originally coined in one of Professor Barker's publications, as noted in in *Fanged Noumena* (p. 505). In Moynihan's book, this fictitious paper is surreptitiously cited as follows: 'Spinal Catastrophism', *Plutonics*, vol. X, No. 10, Spring 1992.

physiophilosophy. By culling Hartmann, Moynihan professes the possibility of "Alien Spine Syndrome", whereby a nested assemblage of praxial junctures in the spine autonomously correlates to instinctual behavior sans brain-arbitrage or any cerebral passthrough. Uncovering how the Central Nervous System could operatively profess a kind of "spinal soul", Moynihan marries Hartmann's philosophy of the unconscious with physiologist Marshall Hall's "reflex theory", providing a cartography of integrative sensory-motor responses that require no functional participation from the brain. Thus, one stumbles upon somnabulent subjects "thinking within their trunks" (p. 198), who haunt and lumber across the pages of *Spinal Catastrophism*. It is no wonder that these littered gyrating spinal chords are so eager to lift themselves off the page.

Moynihan's disarticulated horology is central to his notion of "Spinal Catastrophism", for these parasiting spinal artifacts are the bearers of time and lost temporality, calcified heterochronic signifiers. Moynihan echoes 17th-century Danish geologist Nicolaus Steno's laws of stratigraphy, which describe the patterns in which rock layers are deposited through a tripartite mold: 1) original horizontality, 2) cross-cutting relationships, and 3) lateral continuity. Moynihan extends Steno's Law onto vertebral levels. Consequently, not only are bodies mystified, reduced to "glaciated temporality," (p. 89) but, accordingly, spinal chords are valorized as regionalized memory, indices of (a collective) neural saga.

Such is *Spinal Catastrophism's* trajectory: we begin with Kant's musing on the earth, veer towards externalizing and inflected bodies, vivisect a few cadavers, and harvest their spines. Not only do these phantom spines suggest collapse but their stratigraphic layering reminisces of the earth and its plutonic depths. Consequently, it is only appropriate that Moynihan eventually guides us, once again, back to the Earth (although not before circuiting us through a psychoanalytic lagoon, bubbling with Sándor Ferenczi's writing on archaeo-evolutionary geological inscription).

"How gentle and soothing, if death were really nothing but ceasing to be, but is there such a thing as 'mere death'?"¹² Recall that the "post-Kantian School's" point of contact with theology qua eschatology almost always produced cosmogenic traces. In this tradition, neurosis, musing over death, unfailingly

¹² Nick Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation: Georges Bataille and Virulent Nihilism* (Routledge, 1991), p. 128.

leaves a script, a last vestige of fractured idealism. In Schopenhauer's thought, for instance, we see that a philosophy of redemption relies upon our pure extinction, although there *is* a caveat: how can we be certain that this process won't simply repeat itself? Thus, following Schopenhauer, von Hartmann¹³ claimed that the cyclic world process is doomed to sputter out yet another humanoid species and therefore, we must break the cycle by creating an absolute universal negation of the world (thus begins his arcane metaphysics). It is, therefore, our duty to die. Moynihan writes that, in order to ensure a universal annihilation, "[w]e must remove the potential for any other future nervous systems—anywhere". (p.267)

This is where Moynihan's final chapter places us, virtuously planted within superlative extinction, a Stygian universal negation where we must all become what Jean Paul Richter contemporaneously called the coming "Dead Christ".¹⁴ This is the most sublime of all omnicide: supernovae's heliotrope plasma-clouds besmirch the sky and fractured spines finally falter in unison, pattering like hail while betraying their once-remarkable erect verticality. Following Moynihan's hyperstitious hysteria, the spine becomes an aesthetic media object; much like art, the spine traps the jouissance of fragmentary "time in a pure state",¹⁵ the chronogenetic artifact par excellence. Riffing on HG Wells' pitch-black pessimism, Moynihan concludes that "[m]ind may well be at the end of its bony tether". (p. 267) Ergo, it is the duty of the autonomous spine, the clandestine recorder, keeper of all grammatization and humanity's tragic chronicler, to destroy the universe—or, conversely, the spine is the universe's articulation of the ethical duty to self-destruct. (p. 268)

While *Spinal Catastrophism's* disquietude is steeped in the protracted heritage of "theory fiction", Moynihan's appropriation of Leroi-Gourhan's externalization also recalls Bernard Stiegler's recent work on technics and the exosomatized body, through which the transdividuated subject "becomes intrinsically fetishistic and whose instincts become drives".¹⁶ Furthermore, both Moynihan and Stiegler complicate zoological accounts of noetic cerebral organs that are veritably

¹³ Notably, von Hartmann considered the spine to be "the seat of the unconscious"; see Thomas Moynihan, *Spinal Catastrophism*, p. 88.

¹⁴ J.P. Richter, "Speech of the Dead Christ from the Universe that There is No God", in *Jean Paul: A Reader*, tr. E. Casey (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), pp. 179-83.

¹⁵ Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time*, tr. C.K. Scott Moncrieff (Marcel Proust, 2012), p. 2621.

¹⁶ Bernard Stiegler, *The Age of Disruption* (Polity Press, 2019), p. 274.

immersed in a libidinal economy of *différance* vis-à-vis the brain and the brain, alone.¹⁷ Where we, once upon a time, had Galls' phrenology, in which "spirit is a bone", today we see the unabashed dominance of a new kind of "soft phrenology", whereby spirit is blithely cofounded with thought and reduced to gelatinous cognition as a synonym for causality. In response to this proof of plasticity as the epigenesis of reason, both Stiegler and Moynihan propose an organological condition, albeit most distinctly. While Stiegler focuses on digital protentions as pharmakon, parsing automation and algorithmic governmentality for how they incur proletarianization, Moynihan's hypergenealogy recounts an imperative of naught, where the subtraction of responsibility becomes self-reflecting. Nonetheless, *Spinal Catastrophism* basks in a kind of restrained sanguine buoyancy, which the Postscript so acutely reveals, recounting a narrative of nature's history outstripping the human so as, quite possibly, to frame "entropy's dark laughter"¹⁸ as our epochal moment, whereby the full scale of planetary risk and ruination is near impossible to fully imagine.

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¹⁷ This is, in fact, why Stiegler admonishes Catherine Malabou's work on (neuro)plasticity as erroneous, remarking that "this noetic organ is constituted through identification, idealization, sublimation and the super-ego, which are not, properly speaking, cerebral even though they pass through the brain. This is what Catherine Malabou fails to understand..." See: Bernard Stiegler, *The Age of Disruption*, p. 257. Similarly, Moynihan instrumentalizes psychoanalysis to bridge neuronomic antagonism with topographical scales, the stratigraphic earth and its plutonic depths refracting the weighty brain's incumbrance, which the spinal cord is forced to buttress (once again, it is no wonder that these spinal cords seek to wrest themselves free). Both Stiegler and Moynihan engage with autonomic processing and its environmental feedback so as to move beyond accounts of artifactual externalization/media as "organ projection", recognizing how these artifacts are readily engaged in reorganizing *Umwelt* (tying operative media as that which is both libidinal/drive-based and insensate/espoused to instinctual relay).

¹⁸ Moynihan, *Spinal Catastrophism*, p. 276.