



**University of Dundee**

## **Signifying nothing**

Woodward, Ashley

*Published in:*  
Open Philosophy

*DOI:*  
[10.1515/opphil-2022-0239](https://doi.org/10.1515/opphil-2022-0239)

*Publication date:*  
2023

*Licence:*  
CC BY

*Document Version*  
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link to publication in Discovery Research Portal](#)

*Citation for published version (APA):*  
Woodward, A. (2023). Signifying nothing: Nihilism, information, and signs . *Open Philosophy*, 6(1), [20220239].  
<https://doi.org/10.1515/opphil-2022-0239>

### **General rights**

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in Discovery Research Portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from Discovery Research Portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain.
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal.

### **Take down policy**

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



## Research Article

Ashley Woodward\*

# Signifying Nothing: Nihilism, Information, and Signs

<https://doi.org/10.1515/opphil-2022-0239>

received December 30, 2022; accepted March 2, 2023

**Abstract:** This article explores the theme of nihilism from the perspective of post-continental philosophy by focusing on semiotics and information theory and the question of “meaning” at stake between them. Nihilism is characterised here as an avatar of the counter-Enlightenment tradition. Post-continental philosophy is defined by a positive revaluation of reason, science, and technology, which were critiqued for their nihilistic effects by key continental philosophers. Rather than critiquing nihilism, then, post-continental philosophers have tended to affirm it. This article argues that, despite appearances, such developments in fact allow a deepened response to nihilism, considered as an existential problem. It does so by using Lyotard’s critique of semiotics to show how the kind of linguistic and cultural meaning associated with continental philosophy is itself a kind of nihilism. It then examines Meillassoux’s theory of the meaningless sign and Laruelle’s idea of the secret truth of Hermes to argue that this new paradigm of post-continental philosophy allows a response to nihilism by offering an alternative to semiotic meaning. Thus freed, this new paradigm allows the embrace of information theory as a plural articulation of meanings grounded in meaningless data, which enables a superior response to nihilism in the information age.

**Keywords:** semiotics, philosophy of information, philosophy of technology, speculative realism, non-philosophy, Quentin Meillassoux, François Laruelle, Jean-François Lyotard

*Life’s but a walking shadow, a poor player,  
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,  
And then is heard no more. It is a tale  
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,  
Signifying nothing.*

—Shakespeare, *Macbeth* Act 5, Scene 5

## 1 Post-Continental Philosophy

The term “post-continental philosophy” might mean a number of things. One prominent formulation, for example, is that of John Ó Maoilearca, according to whom it is characterised by “an embrace of absolute immanence over transcendence, the tendency of previous Franco-German thought being to make immanence supervene on transcendence.”<sup>1</sup> I will take a broader perspective here, but one which takes into view the philosophers with whom Ó Maoilearca associates this move to the “post-continental”: Gilles Deleuze,

---

<sup>1</sup> Mullarkey, *Post-Continental Philosophy: An Outline*, 1. (Ó Maoilearca previously published under the name Mullarkey.)

---

\* Corresponding author: Ashley Woodward, Department of Philosophy, University of Dundee, Dundee, Angus, United Kingdom, e-mail: a.z.woodward@dundee.ac.uk

Alain Badiou, Michel Henry, and François Laruelle. On the view I will take, the term “post-continental philosophy” will be made to index a loose grouping of philosophies and philosophers who have succeeded in the reception of continental philosophy in the Anglophone world in the twenty-first century. As well as the above-named philosophers, this may include those identified in recent surveys of contemporary French philosophy, such as Bernard Stiegler, Catherine Malabou, Bruno Latour, and Michel Serres.<sup>2</sup> It should be understood also to include movements such as speculative realism, new materialism, non-philosophy, accelerationism, and so on, which have appeared or gained traction in the twenty-first century.

Having identified some specific philosophers and philosophies, is there a way of giving a general characterisation of post-continental philosophy, one which would capture some (but certainly not all, as is always the case with generalisations of movements in thought) of its essential features? I believe there is, and I would suggest that it consists in *a reassertion of the power of reason, and a reevaluation of philosophy’s relation to science and technology*. Much of what we English speakers have come to call “continental philosophy” was associated with an assertion of the independence and priority of “humanistic” concerns, methodologies, and knowledge over those of the sciences. Along with this was a delimitation of the power of reason, or at least a certain conception of reason, which broadly followed the Kantian critical project and extended it to other spheres. These humanistic and critical tendencies would seem to characterise French, German, and Italian philosophy of the twentieth century, which had a significant reception in the Anglophone world: phenomenology, existentialism, hermeneutics, critical theory, post-structuralism, deconstruction, and weak thought. In such philosophies, there is a defence of the humanities, and the quality of human life itself, again what is seen as an encroaching scientism in intellectual life and broader culture. Against such scientism, thought became centred on human subjectivity, lived experience, interpretation, and the systems of signs circulating in cultures. The critique of the limits of reason served a function in warding off this scientism, and placing the existential focus solely on unlimited semiosis, the creation of significations meaningful from the perspective of human life.

Now, all that has changed. Among the new “post-continental” pantheon, the reassertion of the power of rational thought, beyond the limits set by Kant, is frequently a key concern. This is evident in figures such as Laruelle and Badiou and is well summarised by Quentin Meillassoux when he writes:

My main concern, for some years now, has been the capacities of thought: what exactly can thought do? My thesis (which may seem bizarrely classical) comes down to saying that thought is capable of the ‘absolute’, capable even of producing something like ‘eternal truths’; and this despite the various destructions and deconstructions that all traditional metaphysics have undergone over the last century and a half.<sup>3</sup>

The resurgence of interest in Hegel – who was one of the first to challenge Kant’s refusal of the “absolute” capacities of thought and the critique of whom was a mainstay of the poststructuralist philosophers – in significant part under the influence of Slavoj Žižek, might be included as a further index of this reassertion of the powers of reason.

Concomitantly, though not necessarily with the same philosophers, with post-continental philosophy, there is in evidence a changed relationship to science and technology.<sup>4</sup> The general trend is no longer to segregate scientific and technological thought into a realm where they are independent and contained so that they cannot encroach on humanistic concerns. Rather, the “new” philosophical trends seek either to integrate science and technology *with* such concerns or to assert their priority over them. They seek to understand the scientific and technological bases of human existence or to think beyond the scope of humans to a world better accessed through scientific reasoning. This turn to science and technology

<sup>2</sup> See James, *The New French Philosophy*; and Watkin, *French Philosophy Today*.

<sup>3</sup> Meillassoux, “Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition,” 1. (I am citing, here and throughout, MacKay’s original translation, rather than the later one with Moritz Gansen, because the phrase “meaningless sign” in the former seems to me to be less unwieldy than “sign devoid of meaning,” as it is rendered in the latter.)

<sup>4</sup> Some of the philosophers of science and technology mentioned here, such as Serres and Latour, are in fact much more critical of reason than those just noted.

characterises, for example, the embrace of technologies for their liberatory potential by accelerationism; the deep interest in neuroscience of Malabou, in physics of Laruelle, or in technology of Stiegler. This revaluation of science and technology has also effected a retrieval of older philosophers neglected in their time, whose works did not resonate with the “continental” paradigm, such as those who might be associated with French *épistémologie*: Georges Canguilhem, Raymond Ruyer, and Gilbert Simondon, as well as the aforementioned Serres and Latour.

## 2 Nihilism

Given this broad characterisation of post-continental philosophy, it is not surprising that we also see a significant transformation if we ask about the status of the problem of nihilism in the context of post-continental philosophy. Nihilism, in the various forms it has taken in continental philosophy, might be situated as a species of the counter-Enlightenment tradition and the critique of reason. This is evident in the first philosophical use of the term, in Jacobi’s “Letter to Fichte,” in which he criticises Fichte’s system of transcendental idealism for enacting a kind of rational evisceration of the external world, and the restriction of our knowledge to the Ego. Jacobi claims that with Fichte everything is reduced to a rational reconstruction in the form of a representation, and this representation devalues things themselves. He writes:

For man knows only in that he comprehends, and he comprehends only in that, by changing the *real thing* into mere shape, he *turns the shape into the thing and the thing into nothing*.

Jacobi claims that if he actually believed Fichte’s position, he would be so angered and driven to despair that he would want to negate *his own* existence. He writes:

I declare that my reason, my whole inner self, flies into a rage before a representation of this sort, it shudders in horror and fright; I recoil from it just as I do before the most horrible of all horrors; and I invoke Annihilation, like a divinity, against such a Danaidic, such an Ixionic bliss.<sup>5</sup>

Nihilism, of course, received its most influential formulation in the hands of Friedrich Nietzsche, who again connected it with a critique of reason. Nietzsche posited a decline in the human capacity to affirm life through the replacement of ancient Greek tragic culture with a Socratic culture. In a tragic culture, existence receives an aesthetic justification, which can incorporate and transform suffering in life into something that can be affirmed. By contrast, the Socratic tendency to elevate theoretical knowledge as a paradigm of all understanding has a utopian tone which refuses to affirm suffering: it negates this aspect of life in relation to an optimistic ideal.<sup>6</sup> For Nietzsche, the Platonic-Christian paradigm, with its religious nihilism (the ideal of a transcendent, wholly good world negating the actual world with all its imperfections), was in alliance with the scientific and theoretical paradigm. The latter, for him, was a new form of the ascetic ideal, which negates life insofar as it still believes in truth (i.e. a “true world” beyond the world of appearance).<sup>7</sup> For Nietzsche, these nihilistic paradigms colluded in devaluing a series of essential features of our actual lived experience of the world, especially those aspects of ourselves deemed “lower” – the body, sensation, affect, and desire – in relation to rational ideals, which optimistically posit a world composed of nothing but the “higher” things. Yet these ideals are ultimately just that, inexistent ideals, and so a rationalist conception of the world is incapable of affirming life in the way that tragic aesthetics does. Nietzsche’s critique of reason is summarily indicated in the section on “The Problem of Socrates” in *Twilight of the Idols*:

<sup>5</sup> Jacobi, “Jacobi to Fichte,” 511.

<sup>6</sup> See Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, especially sections 13–5.

<sup>7</sup> See Nietzsche, *Genealogy of Morality*, especially essay III, sections 23–25.

Reason = virtue = happiness simply means: we have to imitate Socrates and produce a permanent *daylight* against the dark desires—the daylight of reason. We have to be cunning, sharp, clear at all costs: every acquiescence to the instincts, to the unconscious, leads *downward*[...]⁸

Heidegger, via his extensive reading of Nietzsche, took up the theme of nihilism in the context of his own philosophy, giving it the new meaning of the oblivion of Being.<sup>9</sup> Heidegger's philosophy is also a critique of reason insofar as the Principle of Sufficient Reason is held to be one of the causes of the forgetting of Being,<sup>10</sup> and Heidegger's gestures towards a more meaningful world indicate a pre-rational dimension involving an openness to Being and to letting beings show themselves from themselves, characteristics which are aborted by the self-assertion of reason. Moreover, it is with Heidegger that nihilism received a widely influential connection with technology. As is of course well-known, Heidegger insisted that what is philosophically and existentially important about technology is not the mechanical devices themselves, but the "essence" of technology as *Ge-Stell*, an enframing which reduces all beings by revealing them as *Bestand*, or "standing reserve": resources stocked and waiting to be used. For Heidegger, nihilism appears in its apogee in the confluence of modern science and technology, because it is with *Ge-Stell* that Being finds itself most concealed, and the meaning of our existence finds itself most impoverished.<sup>11</sup>

These features of nihilism as it appears in the continental tradition, which I have very quickly summarised here by way of some of its most prominent manifestations, stand in dramatic contrast to what we find in the texts of some post-continental philosophers. In Badiou's first *Manifesto for Philosophy*, he addresses the question of nihilism and directly opposes himself to Heidegger's condemnation of technology, denying that there is 'any relation useful to thought between 'technology's useful reign' and 'nihilism'.<sup>12</sup> He chalks up the thesis of nihilistic technology to a reactionary nostalgia for the pre-industrial form of life that Marx called "feudal socialism" and asserts that the only problem with technology is that it still remains so timid and mediocre in its inventions (i.e. the only problem with technology is that it is not yet advanced enough). For Badiou, nihilism is rather determined by the atomisation of the social bond by capitalism and can be best understood as a "desacralisation," which should actually be affirmed for its positive effects in dissolving the metaphysical assumptions of the One and Presence and in leading to a thought of the Multiple (according to his own philosophical preferences). But instead, he complains, philosophy "has clung to language, to literature, to *writing* just as to the last possible representatives of an *a priori* determination of experience, or to the preserved place of a clearing of Being."<sup>13</sup> All these features, which we might here designate to be those of the dominant paradigm of "continental" philosophy, are presented by Badiou as symptoms of reactionary nostalgia and backward-looking attempts to reconstitute, in some sense, the sacred. Nihilism properly understood, for Badiou, is a desacralisation which should in fact be embraced.

Matters are even clearer, and even more dramatically and polemically presented, with Ray Brassier's *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction*. Here, Brassier polemically embraces and asserts nihilism as a way to reverse the critique of reason and to positively reaffirm the Enlightenment tradition. In framing the justification for the book, he cites the positive views of the Enlightenment expressed in the works of Jonathan Israel,<sup>14</sup> and in the course of the argument, he critically addresses prominent counter-Enlightenment theses such as those of Adorno and Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, as well as the philosophies of Nietzsche, Heidegger, and Deleuze. Brassier's book seeks to demolish the core of much of the continental tradition by overthrowing the influence of these key thinkers and by replacing them with a new pantheon of "post-continental" philosophers: Meillassoux, Badiou, and Laruelle.

8 Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols*, 166.

9 See Heidegger, "Nihilism as Determined by the History of Being."

10 See Heidegger, *The Principle of Reason*.

11 See Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology."

12 Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, 53.

13 *Ibid.*, 58.

14 He references Israel's, *Radical Enlightenment*; and *Enlightenment Contested*.

Against the counter-Enlightenment tradition, Brassier asserts that

the disenchantment of the world understood as a consequence of the process whereby the Enlightenment shattered the ‘great chain of being’ and defaced the ‘book of the world’ is a necessary consequence of the coruscating potency of reason, and hence an invigorating vector of intellectual discovery, rather than a calamitous diminishment. ... The disenchantment of the world deserves to be celebrated as an achievement of intellectual maturity, not bewailed as a debilitating impoverishment.<sup>15</sup>

Rather than bemoaning nihilism, Brassier seeks to assert it as a necessary underside of rationality itself. According to him, nihilism is

the unavoidable corollary of the realist conviction that there is a mind-independent reality, which, despite the presumptions of human narcissism, is indifferent to our existence and oblivious to the ‘values’ and ‘meanings’ which we would drape over it in order to make it more hospitable.<sup>16</sup>

Unlike most other defenders of the Enlightenment tradition,<sup>17</sup> then, Brassier asserts neither the human benefits of Enlightenment rationalism nor the independence of scientific and theoretical inquiry from the practicalities and values of everyday life. He is heir to the continental tradition in accepting the nihilistic consequences for human life of the exclusive valuation of reason and knowledge, but he asserts that these latter are more important than human meaning. Nihilism, for him, becomes the polemical clothing of his version of speculative realism.

### 3 The Nihilism of Information

Badiou and Brassier may be taken as two indications of a broader transformation in post-continental philosophy, which, with its reassertion of the powers of reason and its revaluation of science and technology, can no longer position nihilism as an existential problem as it was in the continental tradition. It seems then that post-continental philosophy either turns a blind eye to the problem of nihilism or asserts that it is not a problem at all but something to be embraced and deepened. Of course, these are only broad characterisations, and not every philosopher who might be identified as post-continental can be so characterised. Bernard Stiegler, for example, is a notable exception who continued to be concerned with nihilism as an existential and cultural problem, explicitly citing Nietzsche and attempting to update the relevance of his critique for the age of contemporary technologies. At the same time, he could plausibly be situated within the “post-continental turn” as I have characterised it here due to his revaluation of technology, which explicitly overturns Heidegger, as well as his strident defence of reason and knowledge. According to Stiegler, Nietzsche was remarkably prescient in identifying the “levelling” of culture, the destruction of unique individual difference, and the turning of humanity into a herd, which he believes we can now see at work on a vaster scale with the algorithms of information technologies.<sup>18</sup> For Stiegler, there is no question, as there is for a thinker like Heidegger, of retreating from technologies themselves and preparing for an “other beginning,” a new turn in Being, in a rural life where the essence of technology has not taken hold. Instead, a response to the nihilism of new technologies must take place through innovations in technologies themselves.

This possibility brings me to the point where, after this long introduction, I can lay out the argument with which I here intend to address the question of nihilism in the context of post-continental philosophy. One of the nihilistic phenomena of new technologies, Stiegler claims (and here he follows Heidegger and

<sup>15</sup> Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, xi.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, xi.

<sup>17</sup> For a recent prominent example, see Pinker’s *Enlightenment Now*.

<sup>18</sup> See Stiegler, “La grand bifurcation vers le *néguanthropos*.”

others), is the *theory* of information which subtends all our contemporary information and communication technologies. This theory, in its most influential, and still largely definitive form, was first presented by Claude Shannon in 1948,<sup>19</sup> then published in book form in 1949.<sup>20</sup> In one of his last writings, Stiegler asserted that we need to formulate a new theory of information.<sup>21</sup> While post-continental philosophy turns to new rationalisms, realisms, and materialisms, and a revalued relation to science and technology, it is this question of the persistence of nihilism *in* information, and the attempt to respond to it *from within* the scope of techno-scientific rationality rather than in retreat from it, that I wish to take up. I shall do this by first developing the relationship between information theory and nihilism, as it was originally laid out by Heidegger. I shall then proceed – for reasons that we will shortly see – through an investigation of semiotics and nihilism before arriving at a perhaps surprising conclusion with theories of the meaningless sign and of a superior hermeneutics with Meillassoux and Laruelle. What I will argue is that we can identify a kind of *retorsion*<sup>22</sup> in the trajectory of post-continental philosophy, such that what initially appears like a deepening of nihilism from certain “continental” perspectives ends up helping to address the very nihilistic problems it identified, in surprising ways. In short, I will argue that the vector of coruscating reason activated by post-continental philosophy ends up cleansing the problematic of meaning of its traditional stakes and allows us to begin to articulate more adequately the relationship between information theory and the theories of “meaning” which are the provenance of (post)“humanistic” thought.<sup>23</sup> This is certainly not the only way that nihilism could be explored through post-continental philosophy, but it has the advantage of engaging one of the most salient phenomena that shapes our world in the twenty-first century – the rapid growth of information technologies – as well as some of the most significant aspects of post-continental philosophy itself (as I have argued), the revaluation of reason, science, and technology.

A link was made between information and nihilism by Heidegger, and while this is perhaps not the most well-known part of his critique of technology, it is readily apparent as it closely follows his well-known arguments. Heidegger identified cybernetics as the latest and highest point of technological nihilism in his own era, and it is through the importance of information to cybernetics that information theory became the target of his critical scrutiny.<sup>24</sup> In short, and following Norbert Wiener, Carl Friedrich von Weizsäcker, and others, Heidegger understands information theory as a form of *language*. It is the language of engineering, of computer programming, and – through cybernetics, which attempted to universalise certain key elements of information theory to all systems, both artificial and natural – it was in Heidegger’s time being proposed as a theory which in some sense underlies all languages. For Heidegger, information is the appearance of *Ge-Stell* in language itself, which impoverishes the richness of the “essence” of language, which he identifies as “saying” (*Sorge*). Language as saying has an ontological function of revealing being in its richness, complexity, and ambiguity, a function which is best epitomised by poetry. Heidegger explains the impoverishment of saying by information theory as follows:

---

<sup>19</sup> Shannon, “A Mathematical Theory of Communication.”

<sup>20</sup> Shannon and Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*.

<sup>21</sup> “We need to develop a new model of information theory that values what is not calculable while nevertheless using calculation to do so.” Stiegler, “Covid-19,” 3.

<sup>22</sup> A technique employed by the sophists, of turning the opponent’s own argument back against them. The argument here is inspired by Lyotard’s appropriation of this technique. For an excellent study, see Crome’s *Lyotard and Greek Thought*.

<sup>23</sup> Again, this argument is inspired by Lyotard’s application of retorsional reasoning to aesthetics and the developments of twentieth century art, especially minimalism, abstraction, and conceptualism. For a reconstruction of Lyotard’s arguments here, see Woodward, “Critical Practice and Affirmative Aesthetics.”

<sup>24</sup> Heidegger briefly discusses cybernetics in various places, including “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking” and the *Zolikon Seminars*. Likewise information is discussed in a number of places, such as “The Way to Language,” where he partly responds to Weizsäcker’s earlier paper given in the same seminar series, “Language as Information.” The most extensive discussion of both, however, is to be found in the posthumously published essay, “Traditional Language and Technological Language.”

The sole character of language remaining in information is the abstract form of writing that is transcribed into the formulae of a logic calculus. The clarity that is thereby necessarily required of the signs and formulae ensures the possibility of a secure and rapid communication.<sup>25</sup>

For Heidegger, the meaningfulness of existence as he conceives it requires a certain ambiguity in the richness of potential meanings stored or held in reserve in natural (or, as he also calls it, “traditional”) language. These meanings at times unfold themselves in linguistic expression, while at the same time withholding potential meanings in secret promise, which might later be revealed. Poetry excels in drawing out never-before-seen meanings with which traditional language was pregnant, adding new meanings to the world. By contrast, information, as Heidegger understands it, determines already existing and fixed meanings with a limited binary possibility, which can be signalled mechanically by anything representing a yes or a no, such as a switch being opened or closed: these binary possibilities are represented for computers by the 1/0 alternative. The aim of this informational treatment of language is to provide efficient and secure transmission in order to facilitate the manipulation of objects understood as *Bestand* within the frame of *Ge-Stell*. In sum, Heidegger argues that “a poem does not, in principle, let itself be programmed” and that “the technological language is the severest and most menacing attack on what is peculiar to language: *saying* as showing and as the letting-appear of what is present and what is absent, of reality in the widest sense.”<sup>26</sup>

This nihilistic aspect of information theory that Heidegger perhaps most clearly and polemically identifies was also identified by others. What he is pointing to, without perhaps fully understanding this, is at least in part what others have identified as the distinction between *information* and *semantics*. The information theory used by cybernetics was originally and fundamentally a mathematical theory for facilitating the solution to certain engineering problems, especially in the context of signal transmission over distances (Shannon developed the theory while working for Bell Laboratories, which was heavily invested in telecommunications). Shannon was himself very clear that the theory had nothing to do with “information” in the usual or broader sense, and specifically, it had nothing to do with *semantic meaning*.<sup>27</sup> However, this distinction was quickly blurred as others sought to extend the significance of Shannon’s theory for all communication. This point is already argued by Warren Weaver in the introduction to the first widely distributed publication of Shannon’s theory, in 1949. Here, he argues that while semantics perhaps has no implications for information theory, it does not then follow that information theory has no implications for semantics. On the contrary, Weaver suggests that “this analysis has so penetratingly cleared the air that one is now, perhaps for the first time, ready for a real theory of meaning.”<sup>28</sup>

The problem of the relationship between technical information and semantic meaning was taken up in a number of different ways. At least from the viewpoint of some prominent critics, this relationship was inadequately dealt with by cybernetics. According to the early French philosophical critics of cybernetics, Raymond Ruyer and Gilbert Simondon, in cybernetics itself there is typically a problematic reduction of meaning to the problems of the physical transmission of signals. In their own ways, Ruyer and Simondon each argue that mechanical systems alone are not sufficient for information in the usual and general sense, which includes some sort of understanding of semantic meaning, and that for this, human input is also required. Ruyer argues that meaning requires access by a mind to a trans-spatial realm of Ideas or significant themes, while Simondon argues that only humans are capable of generating new information for machines and of allowing them to meaningfully communicate.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Heidegger, “Traditional Language and Technological Language,” 140.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>27</sup> “The fundamental problem of communication is that of reproducing at one point either exactly or approximately a message selected at another point. Frequently the messages have *meaning*; that is they refer to or are correlated according to some system with certain physical or conceptual entities. These semantic aspects of communication are irrelevant to the engineering problem. The significant aspect is that the actual message is one *selected from a set* of possible messages.” Shannon, in Shannon and Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*, 31.

<sup>28</sup> Weaver, “Recent Contributions to the Mathematical Theory of Communication,” 27.

<sup>29</sup> See Ruyer, *La Cybernetique et l’origine de l’information*; and Simondon, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*.



Several relatively recent commentators have all attempted to situate these critical responses within the camp of cybernetics itself by pointing to the work of Donald MacKay, a British cyberneticist who attended the Macy conferences and who tried to supplement information theory with a theory of meaning.<sup>30</sup> In the relatively recent movement of Philosophy of Information also, “information” is given a philosophically relevant sense by adding semantic value to the basic theory outlined by Shannon. Luciano Floridi, the leading voice in this movement, proposes what he calls a “General Definition of Information,” in which information is defined as *well-formed, meaningful data* (while Shannon’s theory is to be understood as dealing only with uninterpreted, meaningless data).<sup>31</sup> We may also note other important attempts to deal with the intrinsic meaninglessness of information theory by adding a semantic dimension to it, including the early theory of Rudolph Carnap and Yehosha Bar-Hillel,<sup>32</sup> the epistemological theory of Fred Dretske,<sup>33</sup> and Ronald Stamper’s semiotic information theory.<sup>34</sup> While this is not necessarily the explicit intention, in the context of Heidegger’s critique, each of these theories may be seen as representing a certain way to respond to or combat the apparent nihilism of information theory: by adding the semantic dimension, so essential to natural language, that it lacks.

## 4 The Nihilism of Signs

Without here being able to address any of these semantic theories of information with any kind of adequacy, I want to suggest that, with respect to nihilism, they move in the wrong direction. That this is the case might be indicated by sketching the link of information theory with structuralism and semiotics, and the critique of semiotics *as nihilistic* by Jean-François Lyotard. This will then open the way to a superior way of thinking about information theory in relation to the problem of nihilism, facilitated by post-continental attempts to think of signs as bereft of all meaning (as *signifying nothing*).

While this fact is only rather recently coming to light as a point of interest for researchers in the history of ideas, information theory and cybernetics in fact had a significant influence on structuralism, which came to have a decisive force in the humanities in Europe in the mid-twentieth century.<sup>35</sup> To cite a few key historical points, Roman Jakobson and Claude Lévi-Strauss were in contact with Warren Weaver through the funding body the Rockefeller Foundation. Weaver strongly promoted Shannon’s information theory to them, who in turn passed it on to the others working in the development of structuralist theory. Lévi-Strauss was fascinated by the possibilities of formal modelling suggested by cybernetics and computing and applied (unsuccessfully) for funding to employ computer modelling in his research on myth. Elements of information theory, including terms such as “code,” “message,” and “information” itself, were taken up in varying ways by different structuralist theorists, and they had an important, if rather unfocused and widely dispersed, influence on structuralist theories.<sup>36</sup> Broadly speaking, the appeal of information theory and cybernetics for structuralists seemed to be this: it suggested a scientific, objective way to ground theories of meaning, which could then be divorced from the humanist and subjectivist theories with which they sought to break.

---

<sup>30</sup> Hansen situates Raymond Ruyer in this way in *New Philosophy for New Media*, and Iliadis and Hui both independently do the same with Simondon, in “Informational Ontology” and “Simondon et la question de l’information,” respectively.

<sup>31</sup> See Floridi, *The Philosophy of Information*, 83–6.

<sup>32</sup> Carnap and Bar-Hillel, “Semantic Information.”

<sup>33</sup> Dretske, *Knowledge and the Flow of Information*.

<sup>34</sup> Stamper, “A Semiotic Theory of Information and Information Systems.”

<sup>35</sup> See Lafontaine, “The Cybernetic Matrix of ‘French Theory’;” and Geoghegan, “From Information Theory to French Theory” and *Code*. By contrast, Dosse’s 2-volume *History of Structuralism*, originally published in 1991, barely makes mention of cybernetics and information theory.

<sup>36</sup> For some examples where this influence is apparent, see Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*; Jakobson, “Closing Statement;” Barthes, *S/Z*; and Foucault, “Message ou bruit?”

At the same time, with the notion of “sign” derived from Ferdinand de Saussure’s linguistics, structuralist theory added the dimension of semantic meaning that information theory lacked. For structuralism (again generalising greatly), meaning does not originate with individual human consciousness, but with systems of signs, composed of one-half material signifier (sound-image), and one-half ideal concept (signified). These systems of signs can then be used to theorise how meaning functions in any system, and so the human sciences gained a structuralist methodology that up until then was generally only applied in the natural sciences.<sup>37</sup> In adding this semantic dimension, there is a sense in which structuralist semiotics and the theory of language perhaps redress the nihilism of information identified by Heidegger and others: the semiotic sign might be seen as the point of contact, or articulation, between material systems of signal transmission and the meaningful units that circulate in cultural systems. Certainly, such a view would not be entirely without merit.

However, many of the philosophers who came to be called “post(-)structuralists” by their Anglophone readers were quick to see in structuralism, along with some real achievements, further problems of meaning. Structuralism, with its exclusively synchronic approach, seemed too ahistorical and deterministic, incapable of accounting for the genesis and change of meaning in structures. More pointedly, some saw in the semiotic theory of meaning itself a kind of nihilism which became the target of polemical critiques. This is evident with Jean Baudrillard, who argued that structuralist semiotics (or semiology, as it often tended to be called in France) was not so much a theory of meaning in general as it was a theory that describes how communication and the determination of meaning function in capitalist societies. For him, this meant that in the coming communist revolution, “even signs must burn.”<sup>38</sup>

It is Jean-François Lyotard, however, who directly attacked semiotics – which he characterised as an *informational* model of meaning and communication – as nihilistic. In his 1974 book, *Libidinal Economy*, he writes:

[T]he sign is enmeshed in nihilism, nihilism proceeds by signs; to continue to remain in semiotic thought is to languish in religious melancholy and to subordinate every intense emotion to a lack and every force to a finitude.<sup>39</sup>

Lyotard’s argument is, first of all, that the structure of the sign has the same structure as what Nietzsche identifies as religious nihilism: the division of material signifier and ideal signified in the former follows the same structure, and has the same relationship, as the immanent and transcendent worlds in the latter. Just as for Nietzsche, the immanent world of “mere appearance” is devalued by the transcendent world, which gives it its true meaning and value, so too the material signifier is devalued by the ideal meaning which it supposedly stands in for and to which it refers. Lyotard thus accuses the semiotician of being a kind of religious nihilist, a purveyor of the ascetic ideal: “See what you have done: the material is immediately annihilated. Where there is a message, there is no material.”<sup>40</sup>

Moreover, the theory of the sign gets itself stuck in an idealism that both annihilates the material body of the sign – the so-called “materiality of the signifier” – and sets signs to work in an infinite deferral of meaning. Lyotard suggests that there are two different paths taken by the various semioticians, both of which are nihilistic. According to the first path, there is this infinite deferral of meaning from one sign to another, in which we never arrive at a meaningful term as such: “Not only is the material commuted into a sign-term, but also the ‘thing’ which the sign replaces is itself another sign, there is nothing but signs.”<sup>41</sup> Along the other path, there is the positing of an ultimate term, a great signifier that grounds meaning as a whole. But this great signifier is a “great zero”; it is a mystery that does not reveal itself to us, like the elusive

<sup>37</sup> For a useful outline of structuralism and its relation to semiology, see Descombes, *Modern French Philosophy*, chapter 3.

<sup>38</sup> See Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, 163. This political interpretation of structuralist semiology would seem to find some historical support in the curious fact that the CIA covertly funded some aspects of the development and promotion of information-theoretic structuralism. See Geoghegan, “From Information Theory to French Theory,” 119.

<sup>39</sup> Lyotard, *Libidinal Economy*, 49.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

God who gives the sensible world meaning in religious nihilism. Lyotard concludes that “semiotics is nihilism. Religious science par excellence.”<sup>42</sup>

For Lyotard, then, semiotics (and by extension, the structuralist theory of language in general, since structuralism takes the sign as the atomic unit of meaning) is nihilism because it is idealist and rationalist, and it posits a kind of meaning which is purely conceptual. “[T]he sign,” he asserts, “is itself nothing but the concept.”<sup>43</sup> For him, the significance of this insistence on conceptualisation is that it empties the model of meaning of any role for bodily affect, feeling, and sensation. In this sense, he further follows Nietzsche. As a response to semiotic nihilism, Lyotard develops the idea of the *tensor*, which is not something other than the semiotic sign, but the semiotic sign understood from a libidinal perspective as pregnant with intensities of feeling, as meaningful primarily because of investments of libido, and as containing within it multiple possibilities for conceptual meaning in tension with each other.

I will not follow Lyotard’s theory of the tensor further here; I raise it only to point to the limitations of the semiotic theory of meaning, and its apparent insufficiency for responding to the nihilism above identified with information theory. All the above theories, which might be positioned as following in the wake of MacKay’s semantic revision of cybernetics, *add* something to information theory to give it the “fullness” needed for what is actually experienced in human, subjective, meaningful communication.<sup>44</sup> I now want to argue that what post-continental philosophy might be seen to offer to the problem of nihilism is not an *addition* to information theory, in order to make it compatible with semiotics, but a *subtraction* from semiotics, in order to make the latter compatible with information theory. This at first might seem like nothing but a deepening of nihilism, but I will argue that there is a “twist” that allows for a liberation of “meaning” in a way that might in fact respond to nihilism in a superior manner.

## 5 The Meaningless Sign and the Secret

As we have seen, structuralism attempted a theory of meaning which was more scientific and objective, yet was able to articulate the sphere of human cultural meaning. Yet we can also see that meanings themselves in structuralism are concepts and ideas that, if not anchored to a specific subject as the origin of their meaningfulness, nevertheless evince a tissue of human subjectivity: the signs and systems of signs in structuralist theory involve writing and culture, and all that is meaningful *for* human subjects, despite whatever origin it may have. Meillassoux provides a distinction that helps us to see this when he complains that while continental philosophies have frequently sought to go beyond the subject, they nevertheless end up reifying something of the *subjective*, whether that be reason (Hegel), will (Schopenhauer and Nietzsche), life (Deleuze), or in this case, we could say, the subjective, conceptual meaningfulness of the sign in structuralism and semiotics.<sup>45</sup>

What thinkers associated with that species of post-continental philosophy known as speculative realism want is a thinking of the outside of thought, bereft of anything superadded by subjectivity, and this has given rise to some theories of signs and languages as “meaningless.” This is most clearly expressed and defended by Meillassoux in his article “Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition: A Speculative Analysis of the Meaningless Sign.” Here, the development of the idea of the meaningless sign is tributary to Meillassoux’s speculative materialist (as he calls it) project of showing that “mathematics and mathematized physics give us the means to identify the properties of a world that is radically independent of thought,” such that “a scientific theory can identify a true property of reality, independently of our existing to think that reality.”<sup>46</sup>

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 48.

<sup>44</sup> What Lyotard adds, it must be noted, is not semantics; it is libido – he is supplementing not with a phenomenological or propositional theory of meaning, but with a basically psychoanalytic one (inflected through various other influences, such as Pierre Klossowski’s reading of Nietzsche).

<sup>45</sup> See Meillassoux, “Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition,” 3.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 18.

The meaningless sign is derived by Meillassoux from the formalist mathematics of Hilbert, which differs from the axiomatics of Euclid. With Euclid, *definitions* of terms precede the establishment of postulates, principles, and axioms. With Hilbert, by contrast, there is simply a *naming* of terms (which is not a definition and does not involve the ascription of any properties), which are used to establish relations: the axioms come first, prior to definitions, and the signs used to found mathematics in such a formal system are therefore *meaningless* (i.e. they are “empty” signs that designate only themselves and do not imply any definitional properties). Meillassoux explains:

It is this that we call ‘set’: a sign, itself devoid of meaning, and *a fortiori* of any reference. And this is the initial object of mathematics, in so far as the latter is ‘founded’ on set theory: the pure and simple sign that refers only to itself.<sup>47</sup>

This view of the sign as meaningless stands in contrast to the usual view of signs in philosophy and the human sciences, in which the sign must involve correlation with a conceptual meaning (in the Saussurean terminology employed in structuralism and much of semiotics, the signifier must be correlated with a signified, a conceptual meaning that the signifier stands in for). Meillassoux’s theory of the meaningless sign indicates a level of the sign *prior* to such semantic correlation:

[T]he meaningless sign is the most elementary form, and thus the most fundamental form, of the sign: the form of the pure sign, delivered in person to our attention, *as sign, before* the intervention of meaning. The empty sign, qua true sign, uncovers for us the remarkable fact that *meaning is contingent in the constitution of the sign*; that the sign has no need of meaning in order to be a sign – and that semiotics (the study of signs) intervenes before semantics (the theory of meaning), and independently of it; for it concerns a domain that is autonomous from the latter: the domain of the non-signifying sign.<sup>48</sup>

For Meillassoux, the meaningless sign acts as a way to distinguish between natural and formal languages and to ground a speculative form of thought – one denuded of the thinking subjectivity that colours it in correlational thinking<sup>49</sup> – which can think the absolute and, as we have seen, via the logical and mathematical formal languages they employ, allows science to think the real, the world as it is in itself independent of human subjectivity. This provides a sharp contrast with hermeneutics, the theory of interpretation, which, broadly conceived (beyond simply the Gadamerian specification), governed continental philosophy in various ways. Meillassoux writes:

It is precisely because hermeneutics has access only to the regime of ordinary meaning that it cannot accede to any speculative absolute; only a philosophy capable of thinking formal meaning and its crucial non-signifying aspect can hope to extract it from a thinking of finitude.<sup>50</sup>

This idea of thinking that which is itself without thought is approached from a different angle, but also in relation to hermeneutics, by François Laruelle in his short article “The Truth According to Hermes: Theorems on the Secret and Communication.” Here Laruelle expresses some of the basic contentions of his non-philosophy in terms of truth, communication, and meaning. He characterises philosophy in general as a type of hermeneutics, an approach to interpretation and communication, which he calls simply “meaning.” Meaning in this sense is an avatar of what Laruelle calls the philosophical “decision,” itself roughly equivalent to Meillassoux’s “correlation.”<sup>51</sup> Laruelle identifies what he calls the decision as the structural invariant of all philosophy. It consists in an initial separation of the real and the ideal, then the

---

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>49</sup> As is of course well known, Meillassoux uses the terms “correlation” and “correlationism” to characterise all those forms of thought that speculative realism seeks to move beyond: “By ‘correlation’, we mean the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other. We will henceforth call *correlationism* any current of thought which maintains the unsurpassable character of the correlation so defined.” *After Finitude*, 5.

<sup>50</sup> Meillassoux, “Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition,” 23.

<sup>51</sup> Brassier effectively makes this identification in *Nihil Unbound*, in drawing together Meillassoux and Laruelle (along with Badiou) as treating common problems he seeks to address in developing his own form of speculative realism.

mixture and hierarchization of these two such that philosophy is taken as a self-sufficient mode of thought for grounding and governing all thought of the real, and the relation between the real and ideality itself. Laruelle's philosophical decision thus appears similar to Meillassoux's correlation insofar as any thought of the real is always already "contaminated" by thought (ideality), with no possibility of apprehending the real itself beyond this mixture. Like Meillassoux's speculative materialism, Laruelle's non-philosophy aims at a thought that would break with the philosophical decision and be adequate to the real as it is "in itself," without ideality being superadded.

In "The Truth According to Hermes," Laruelle distinguishes two forms of hermeneutics, which he calls hermetology and hermetics (characterised by two figures of Hermes, the Greco-Western or authoritarian Hermes, and "another" Hermes). Philosophy is identified with the former, and non-philosophy with the latter. He describes philosophy here in terms of "the Hermeto-logical Difference," which is

the indissoluble correlation, the undecidable coupling of truth *and* its communication. It postulates that truth needs meaning, that meaning and presence—as differentiated and sought after as they may be—belong to the essence of truth, that the secret and the *logos*, the secret and its manifestation are reciprocally necessary and are mutually determined.<sup>52</sup>

Truth on the one hand and meaning and communication on the other are presented as having the same structural relation as, elsewhere in his works, the real and the ideal in the philosophical decision: from the perspective of hermetology, truth can only be approached along the path of meaning, as something to be interpreted and communicated. Here, invoking phenomenological hermeneutics, truth is presented as having a dual structure, of presence and absence, where presence is the revealing of truth in the light of meaningful interpretation. The truth of the first (Greco-Western) Hermes is the one of philosophical hermeneutics of all kinds, in which truth must be uncovered through interpretation, and is nothing without it. (In Heidegger, of whom we might be reminded here, truth is the presencing of Being *to* Dasein.) Hermetology assumes a necessary alliance between truth and meaning, just as the philosophical decision assumes a necessary alliance between the real and ideality, the thought that thinks it.

Laruelle opines that the "textual and signifying critique" within hermeneutics will never get us anywhere and that it is beginning to become tiresome (we can imagine that he has in mind Derridean deconstruction as well as Gadamerian hermeneutics, and more broadly speaking, semiotics and all the continental philosophical concerns with language, signs, and meaning in general). He then posits a second notion of truth and of hermeneutics, which would be their non-philosophical versions. He calls the second version of truth "the secret," which signals that truth is something of the real which is self-sufficient, which is the ground or cause of interpretation, meaning, and communication, but which is closed to any possible uncovering or revelation by hermetological methods. For Laruelle, the "other" Hermes

defines the essence of truth as a secret, but as a secret that in order to exist and to be made known needs none of the light of *logos*, none of the tricks of meaning, the strategies of interpretation, the horizons of the World, or the transcendent forms of appearance. Truth as secret exists autonomously *prior* to the horizontality of appearance. The secret enjoys an absolute precedence over interpretation; it is itself the Uninterpretable from which an interpretation emerges.<sup>53</sup>

The secret is identified by Laruelle with the real, the One, and radical immanence, all mainstays of his non-philosophy. In contrast to the philosophical hermetologists, he proposes hermeticians, who will think the secret in a non-philosophical manner, allowing their thought to be determined in the last instance by the real and resisting mixing the real itself with their thought.

Marking a point of similarity with Meillassoux's meaningless sign, Laruelle asserts that the secret gives no meaning beyond a simple self-reference: "The secret is *index sui* prior to any indication."<sup>54</sup> Moreover, while a little obliquely, Laruelle displays an awareness of the potential nihilism of the endless deferral of meaning that Lyotard describes in his critique of semiotics, as we saw above. Laruelle writes:

<sup>52</sup> Laruelle, "The Truth According to Hermes," 19.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*

To avoid charges of inconsistency and non-reality, of *real* nihilism, hermeneutics and (in general) hermetology postulate, without knowing or while denying it, the hermetic essence of truth, an absolute or finite experience of truth. They postulate it as something other than a simple limit of indivision or indecision to the strategy of meaning and to the play of interpretations, a limit that would be indistinguishable from the conflict of interpretations.<sup>55</sup>

In other words, hermetology posits a real “referent,” or limit, to avoid an infinite regress of interpretation. Hermeneutics, like semiotics, never arrives at meaning as a “full term,” but needs to posit such a term in order to avoid the “real nihilism” of either an infinite deferral of meaning, or the grounding in a meaning equivalent to God, the great signifier, which makes everything else meaningful, but whose meaning is not known.<sup>56</sup> Laruelle’s positing of the secret as the real, which determines (in the last instance) all meaning and interpretation, seems *prima facie* close to Lyotard’s great zero, but it resists this in refusing the play of presence and absence, of disclosure and closure. The secret is not something which might, even in principle, be revealed: it is the real as forever, in principle, foreclosed to thought. Laruelle explains this difference when he specifies that hermetology leaves truth indeterminate or unthought because “it considers the secret from the perspective, or through the prism, of meaning.”<sup>57</sup> Hermeticians, by contrast, consider the relation between truth (as the secret) and communication to be unilateral and irreversible: the secret, independent of all meaning, determines communication.

## 6 Signifying Nothing

From communication in general, we can now return to information and communication technologies and the themes of nihilism and information which govern this article.<sup>58</sup> What I want to take from these brief rehearsals of Meillassoux’s meaningless sign and Laruelle’s secret is only a broad characterisation of some important strands of post-continental philosophy, which allows an overturning of the hegemony of “meaning,” understood in a primarily linguistic and conceptual sense as signification and hermeneutic interpretation. This constitutes a claim at a very high level of abstraction;<sup>59</sup> it is a broad generality; but this is appropriate to a discourse attempting to outline some general features of “post-continental philosophy” and the statement of the position of the problem of nihilism within this field.

Throughout the twentieth century, and within the paradigm of continental philosophy, information has typically been interpreted on the basis of the linguistic turn, as an (impoverished) theory of linguistic and semiotic meaning. What these theories of the meaningless sign and the secret do, for the philosophy of information, is suggest a new paradigm that allows the assertion of the primacy of information (understood as grounded in data<sup>60</sup>) over language (especially natural languages).<sup>61</sup> The usual way of receiving

---

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

<sup>56</sup> Incidentally, Meillassoux also expresses the nihilism of the semiotic sign quite well in the following terms, which demonstrate the analogy with the metaphysical dualism Nietzsche critiqued as nihilistic, and which, as we have seen, Lyotard sees in the sign: “[T]he suggestion is that the immaterial part of the sign resides wholly in its meaning, and that if this meaning is removed from the sign, the latter is reduced to its physical part alone – like a body deprived of its soul.” (Meillassoux, “Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition,” 25).

<sup>57</sup> Laruelle, “The Truth According to Hermes,” 21.

<sup>58</sup> Galloway has taken up Laruelle in such a context, but in order to explore very different themes than those I am treating here. See his book, *Laruelle: Against the Digital*.

<sup>59</sup> A term drawn from Floridi’s philosophy of information. A “level of abstraction,” in simple terms, is a set of features specific to and relevant for a particular problem. It is a model built by selecting some information and ignoring other information. See Floridi, *The Philosophy of Information*, chapter 3.

<sup>60</sup> On the meaning of “data,” see Floridi, *The Philosophy of Information*, 85–6.

<sup>61</sup> As is typical, the claims I am making at this high level of abstraction (the distinction between “continental” and “post-continental” paradigms) are generalities to which there are exceptions. An important one here is Félix Guattari’s theory of a-signifying semiotics, important both because of its explicit relation with information theory and the fact that Deleuze and Guattari’s work, which already challenged the linguistic turn, was an important point of transition between the paradigms. For an overview of Guattari’s theory, see Chapter 1 of Genosko, *Critical Semiotics*.

information for its philosophical significance can then be reversed: information is no longer subordinated to the linguistic turn, but language (and the semiotics of the signifying sign), it turns out, turns on information, rather than *vice versa*. Data – or the datum, to use the singular – is itself a meaningless sign, since it is only the bare difference or distinction that may be registered as such in order to *become* the bearer of meaning.<sup>62</sup> In themselves, data are meaningless (contrary to some popular uses of the term, such as “Big Data,” which tends to refer to massive amounts of *information*, i.e. data that are already meaningfully interpreted, at least at some minimal level.)

Now, this results in the remarkable fact that information itself no longer needs to be understood *philosophically* as either grounded in or supplemented by semantics: information theory can be granted its proper place as a theory of communication *in general*. What can be communicated involves not just conceptual meanings, but materialities and sensations, considered independently of the philosophical-semiotic insistence that such things are only to be treated as signifiers for signifieds. In this way, the nihilism constituting the semiotic sign, identified by Lyotard, is broken. This is in fact quite faithful to information theory itself: originating in mathematics and engineering, it is the philosophers, linguists, and semioticians who have added the insistence on *semantics*: the examples of what is to be “communicated” given in the founding texts of information theory are, as often as words or linguistic messages, radio or television signals, or simply material “impulses” that constitute meaningless, asignifying data.<sup>63</sup> From the perspective of the problem of nihilism, in breaking the alliance of information with semiotic meaning, information can be understood just as well in terms of sensations and affects, of libidinal intensities and bodily desires, which – given the right senders and receivers – can be communicated with data transmission technologies just as well as can conceptual meanings.

While this is not the intention of its major representatives – and is even quite the opposite, for thinkers such as Brassier – I want to argue that the post-continental paradigm frees information theory from nihilism. It allows us to think about the connection of information with meaning in more pluralistic terms, incorporating aspects of meaning – the body, intensity, sensation, affect – which tended to be subordinated to, and repressed by, linguistic and conceptual models within the continental paradigm. This possibility is indeed quite tangential to many of the post-continental philosophers’ projects, but I claim that it may be exploited as such for the information philosophy project and the continuing problems of nihilism. In a kind of *retorsion*, the new emphasis on the critical, demystifying power of reason cleanses philosophy of its previous stakes, which revolved around the defence of humanistic, cultural, linguistic, and signifying forms of meaning. This “cleansing” then allows a rethinking of what can be thought as mattering philosophically in a world increasingly dominated by information technologies and can include materialities and affects, previously denigrated within the old paradigm, but long defended as integral to life and its affirmation by Nietzsche and his successors concerned with existential nihilism.

In his *Manifesto for Philosophy*, Badiou writes that “[t]he true question remains: What has happened to philosophy for it to refuse with a shudder the liberty and strength a desacralizing epoch offered it?”<sup>64</sup> In the present context, this desacralisation might be read as the meaning-independence of information theory, and the refusal of desacralisation as all the attempts to subordinate information to “humanistic” meanings within the purview of the philosophical paradigm of the linguistic turn. What I have argued for here can be understood as one way in which post-continental philosophy can allow an acceptance of this desacralisation, by reversing the priorities of information and linguistic signs, allowing a broader, more plural account of meaning on the basis of data as a neutral, meaningless point of articulation between modes of meaning.

---

<sup>62</sup> In the context of a discussion of Meillassoux’s theory, Roffe remarks that “an adequate ontology of data” would require the concept of the meaningless sign. “Meillassoux and the Identity of Material Inscriptions” (no page number).

<sup>63</sup> For example, Shannon, in specifying that the message may be of various types, mentions telegraphy, radio, telephony, and both black and white and colour television. Messages specific to these various media include not only sequences of letters but also variables of space, time, sound, and light. Shannon and Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*, 33. Weaver, moreover, specifies that the general sense of *communication* the mathematical theory covers “involves not only written and oral speech, but also music, the pictorial arts, the theatre, the ballet, and in fact all human behavior.” *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>64</sup> Badiou, *Manifesto for Philosophy*, 59.

If we follow this retorsion, then, the phrase “signifying nothing” does not need to mean the existential vacuity it signals in Shakespeare’s famous phrase, but the emptying of a theory of meaning as signification which, as we have seen, itself harbours a certain nihilism. In challenging the focus on meaning as it has been understood in the continental tradition, then, post-continental philosophy might be understood as ushering in the opportunity for a deeper response to nihilism and the possibility for a new kind of affirmation of life, as we are learning how to live it in our developing informational networks.

**Conflict of interest:** Author states no conflict of interest.

## References

- Badiou, Alain. *Manifesto for Philosophy*, translated by Norman Madarasz. Albany: SUNY Press, 1999.
- Barthes, Roland. *S/Z*, translated by Richard Miller. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990.
- Baudrillard, Jean. *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, translated by Charles Levin. Candor, NY: Telos Press, 1981.
- Brassier, Ray. *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.
- Carnap, Rudolph and Yehosha Bar-Hillel. “Semantic Information.” *The British Journal for the Philosophy of Science*. 4:14 (Aug., 1953), 147–57.
- Crome, Keith. *Lyotard and Greek Thought: Sophistry*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.
- Descombes, Vincent. *Modern French Philosophy*, translated by L. Scott-Fox and J.M. Harding. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981.
- Dosse, François. *History of Structuralism*, vols. 2, translated by Deborah Glassman. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998 [1991].
- Dretske, Fred. *Knowledge and the Flow of Information*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1983.
- Floridi, Luciano. *The Philosophy of Information*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011.
- Foucault, Michel. “Message ou bruit?” In *Dits et écrits, 1954-1988*. Vol. 1. Paris: Gallimard, 1994.
- Galloway, Alexander R. *Laruelle: Against the Digital*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014.
- Genosko, Gary. *Critical Semiotics: Theory, from Information to Affect*. London: Bloomsbury, 2016.
- Geoghegan, Bernard Dionysius. “From Information Theory to French Theory: Jakobson, Lévi-Strauss, and the Cybernetic Apparatus.” *Critical Inquiry* 38 (2011), 96–126.
- Geoghegan, Bernard Dionysius. *Code: From Information Theory to French Theory*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2023.
- Hanson, Mark N. *New Philosophy for New Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2006.
- Heidegger, Martin. “Nihilism as Determined by the History of Being.” In *Nietzsche*, vols. 3 and 4, translated by David Farrell Krell. New York: HarperCollins, 1991.
- Heidegger, Martin. “The Question Concerning Technology.” In *Martin Heidegger: Selected Writings*, edited by David Farrell Krell. New York: HarperCollins, 1993.
- Heidegger, Martin. “The Way to Language.” In *Martin Heidegger: Selected Writings*, edited by David Farrell Krell. New York: HarperCollins, 1993.
- Heidegger, Martin. “The End of Philosophy and the Task of Thinking.” In *Martin Heidegger: Selected Writings*, edited by David Farrell Krell. New York: HarperCollins, 1993.
- Heidegger, Martin. *The Principle of Reason*, translated by Reginald Lilly. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996.
- Heidegger, Martin. “Traditional Language and Technological Language,” translated by Wanda Torres Gregory. *Journal of Philosophical Research* 23 (1998), 129–45.
- Heidegger, Martin. *Zolikon Seminars: Protocols – Conversations – Letters*, translated by Franz Mayr. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001.
- Hui, Yuk. “Simondon et la question de l’information,” *Cahiers Simondon* 6, ed. Jean-Hugues Barthélémy (2015), 29–47.
- Iliadis, Andrew J. “Informational Ontology: The Meaning of Gilbert Simondon’s Concept of Individuation,” *Communication + 1* 2:1 (2013): Article 5.
- Israel, Jonathan. *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650-1750*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- Israel, Jonathan. *Enlightenment Contested: Philosophy, Modernity and the Emancipation of Man 1670-1752*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006.
- Jacobi, Friedrich Heinrich. “Jacobi to Fichte.” In *The Main Philosophical Writings and the Novel Allwill*, edited and translated by G. di Giovanni. Montreal: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 1994.
- Jakobson, Roman. “Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics.” In *Style in Language*, edited by Thomas A. Sebeok. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960.
- James, Ian. *The New French Philosophy*. Cambridge: Polity, 2012.



- Lafontaine, Céline. "The Cybernetic Matrix of 'French Theory'." *Theory, Culture & Society* 24:5 (2007), 27–46.
- Laruelle, François. "The Truth According to Hermes: Theorems on the Secret and Communication," translated by Alexander R. Galloway. *Parrhesia* 9 (2010), 18–22.
- Lévi-Strauss, Claude. *The Savage Mind*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1966.
- Lyotard, Jean-François. *Libidinal Economy*, translated by Iain Hamilton Grant. London: Athlone, 1993.
- Meillassoux, Quentin. *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, translated by Ray Brassier. London: Continuum, 2008.
- Meillassoux, Quentin. "Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition: A Speculative Analysis of the Meaningless Sign," translated by Robin MacKay. [www.spekulative-poetik.de](http://www.spekulative-poetik.de).
- Meillassoux, Quentin. "Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition: A Speculative Analysis of the Sign Devoid of Meaning," translated by Robin MacKay and Moritz Gansen. In *Genealogies of Speculation: Materialism and Subjectivity since Structuralism*, edited by Armen Avanessian and Suhail Malik. London and New York: Bloomsbury, 2016.
- Mullarkey, John. *Post-Continental Philosophy: An Outline*. London: Continuum, 2006.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Birth of Tragedy and Other Writings*, edited by Raymond Geuss and Ronald Speirs, translated by Ronald Speirs. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *On the Genealogy of Morality and Other Writings*. 3rd Edition, edited by Keith Ansell-Pearson, translated by Carol Diethel. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2017.
- Nietzsche, Friedrich. *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*, edited by Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman, translated by Judith Norman. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005.
- Pinker, Stephen. *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress*. London: Penguin, 2018.
- Roffe, Jon. "Meillassoux and the Identity of Material Inscriptions." *Paper Presented at the Australasian Society of Continental Philosophy*. University of Western Sydney, 2013. [https://www.academia.edu/5498241/Meillassoux\\_and\\_the\\_Identity\\_of\\_Material\\_Inscriptions](https://www.academia.edu/5498241/Meillassoux_and_the_Identity_of_Material_Inscriptions).
- Ruyer, Raymond. *La Cybernétique et l'origine de l'information*. Paris: Flammarion, 1954.
- Shannon, Claude E. "A Mathematical Theory of Communication." *The Bell System Technical Journal* 27 (July, October, 1948), 379–423, 623–656.
- Shannon, Claude E. and Warren Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1963 [1949].
- Simondon, Gilbert. *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*, translated by Cecile Malaspina and John Rogove. Minneapolis: Univocal, 2016.
- Stamper, Ronald. "A Semiotic Theory of Information and Information Systems." In *Proceedings of the Joint ICL/University of Newcastle Seminar on the Teaching of Computer Science, Part IX: Information*, edited by B. Randell, 1–33. University of Newcastle, 1993.
- Stiegler, Bernard. "La grand bifurcation vers le *néguanthropos*. Exceptions et sélections dans la noodiversité." In *Pourquoi Nous Sommes Nietzschéens*, edited by Dorian Astor and Alain Jugnon, 87–108. Brussels: Les Impressions Nouvelles, 2016.
- Stiegler, Bernard. "Covid-19: Philosopher Bernard Stiegler's Insight from the Angle of Memory," translated by Daniel Ross. 10 April 2020. [https://www.academia.edu/42827840/Bernard\\_Stiegler\\_Covid\\_19\\_Insight\\_from\\_the\\_Angle\\_of\\_Memory\\_2020\\_](https://www.academia.edu/42827840/Bernard_Stiegler_Covid_19_Insight_from_the_Angle_of_Memory_2020_).
- Watkin, Christopher. *French Philosophy Today: New Figures of the Human in Badiou, Meillassoux, Malabou, Serres and Latour*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016.
- Weaver, Warren. "Recent Contributions to the Mathematical Theory of Communication." In *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*, edited by Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1963 [1949].
- Weizsäcker, Carl Friedrich von. "Language as Information." In *The Unity of Nature*, translated by Francis J. Zucker. New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1980 [1959].
- Woodward, Ashley. "Critical Practice and Affirmative Aesthetics." In *Lyotard and Critical Practice*, edited by Kiff Bamford and Margret Grebowicz. London: Bloomsbury, 2022.