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Assembling An End: The Aesthetic Categories of Finitude

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by

CAMERON KUNZELMAN

Under the Direction of Alessandra Raengo, PhD

ABSTRACT

Aesthetic category theory and assemblage theory are both underutilized in the context of media studies. This dissertation argues that the application of these methods to media objects can generate productive ways of understanding how those media objects address human finitude. Developing three aesthetic categories of human finitude (bleakness, post-apocalypse, and annihilation), this dissertation then outlines those categories in their material and historical contexts. These categories are argued through in a linear manner, and they progressively are characterized by a change from stasis to movement, and this argument takes them to their limit within annihilation, arguing that the only way to move beyond the limit point of human finitude would be the utter destruction of aesthetics itself.

INDEX WORDS: Aesthetics, Assemblage theory, Aesthetic categories, Finitude, Speculative

realism

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by

CAMERON KUNZELMAN

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INTRODUCTION

How do humans mediate their concerns about what continues and what ends? How do they aesthetically experience the now, their potential futures, and the speculative time after their own death? How can we best describe the process through which this mediation takes place, and how does it shift over time? These are the fundamental questions that animate this dissertation. We live in an unprecedented period of proliferating media images from every vector that is also characterized by a mounting panic about the state of the planet and the human beings who live on it. Like the Western religious apocalypticism of the past two thousand years and the secular disaster concerns about nuclear weapons since 1945, our time is one of general and low-level panic that is nonetheless specific to our exact conditions. It is my hope that I provide an analytic structure that shows how these concerns become invested in media and how those media change and alter in response to new material conditions. The angle of approach that I take to formulating an answer comes from my own disciplinary background of media studies and the philosophy of aesthetics, and it begins at the point of abstraction in the sense that I hold that there are mass processes at work in even the most insignificant media objects. In fact, the production of any single one of those media objects is the emergence of something actual out of the vast possibility space of material reality, and the very act of that production is an emanation of aesthetic categories and diagrams that are themselves made up of patterns in material reality. This methodology is a combined one following Sianne Ngai's aesthetic category theory and Manuel DeLanda's assemblage theory, and using it I perform analysis that seeks to comprehensively show how aesthetics work around the limits of the human, our finitude.

This dissertation develops three different aesthetic categories that work as diagnostic tools for understanding how we mediate the deaths of both individuals and the species within

specific objects. These aesthetic categories are bleakness, post-apocalypse, and annihilation. Bleakness centers on media objects that present our current economic and social reality as eternally stretching into the future and creating both the conditions of the recreation of the present and an attending fear that that present will never end. Post-apocalypse describes media objects that demonstrate the effects massive revolutions that change the arrangement of materials and power within the world but do not change the fundamental mechanisms that organize those materials and that power. Annihilation asserts that there could be media objects that allow us to truly consider beyond the extreme limit of human thought, experience, and our theorizations of them.

This is a necessary intervention within media studies due to the fact that these media objects are caught up in ways that humans think their own finitude. While there is a robust assortment of subfields dedicated to dystopia, apocalypse, and the destruction of humans, and I work through each of those in turn in the following chapters, there is yet no broad explanation of how questions of human finitude fit into a comprehensive media philosophy. Despite the large number of media objects that focus on humans and their destruction, there is a lack of philosophical inquiry that systematizes and considers broad frameworks of how these media objects ground and reproduce themselves before transforming into other genres or modes.

The approach that I take here depends on two fundamental claims. The first is that there is a broad, unified system at work that produces media objects and infuses them with particular meanings. For this, I turn to a composite reading of Sianne Ngai's aesthetic category theory and Manuel DeLanda's version of assemblage theory adapted from the work of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. The second is that this is fundamentally a question of aesthetics. Media objects, accessed in various ways by humans, are integral to how humans have thought about individual

and species death, especially since the first public use of atomic weaponry in 1945.[1] While there are myriad reasons *why* we think our own ending, what I am drawing together in this dissertation are modes through which we do so. The aesthetic categories that I have proposed are a way at drawing a map of *how* we think those endings.

I am addressing a set of questions that provoked the development of Raymond Williams's arguments about structures of feeling and Jacques Rancière's distribution of the sensible.[2] Like Rancière, I believe that these abstract systems are aesthetic. Indeed, they are aesthetic categories that function, to follow DeLanda, diagrammatically. However, unlike Williams and Rancière, my specific focus is on how these systems take aesthetic form and present themselves to the humans who are reflecting on their existence through them. I am interested in the *aesthetics* that make up the *categories*. This brings my own orientation more closely to Kara Keeling's arguments about how "cinematic perception" is "involved in the production and reproduction of social reality itself, [and how] these perceptual and cognitive processes work to order, orchestrate, produce, and reproduce social reality and sociality."[3] For Keeling, the cinematic names a mode of relation between people and the world they live in, "an assemblage that might also be referred to as 'twentieth-century reality' because we neither posit nor access 'reality' except via these processes, which were perfected by film."[4] I agree with Keeling that there is a mass assemblage that produces a version of social reality and consensus,

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[1] I largely agree with Warren Wagar's periodization of disaster that occurs after the first and then second World Wars. A longer analysis of this periodizing appears in Chapter 4.

[2] See Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*. Trans. Gabriel Rockhill, (New York: Continuum, 2006); Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).

[3] Kara Keeling, *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), 11.

[4] Here I read Keeling as speaking to the relationship between diagrams and their elements, not rejecting realism. Ibid, 11.

even if I don't agree that it is entirely cinematic, and the purpose of aesthetic category theory is to try to grasp this at its broadest, most abstract level in order to understand the mechanisms through which it comes to impact us. If the question is about how humans mediate their concerns about continuation, ending, and their finitude, then I hope to clearly demonstrate a way of answering that looks to the substrate process that unifies that answer across many domains.

Specifically, I develop three separate aesthetic categories that mediate the end: bleakness, post-apocalypse, and annihilation. I do so by philosophically combining aesthetic category theory with DeLandan assemblage theory and its attending diagrams. In the case of bleakness, the combined methodologies of aesthetic category theory and assemblage theory allows us to grapple with *how* the present is preserved and reproduced across an array of media objects. For post-apocalypse, it allows us to understand why certain political kernels, like anti-blackness, remain solidified across an apocalyptic divide while others perish or disappear. For annihilation, it gives us a scope for exactly *what* would need to be destroyed to change aesthetic and political realities going forward. These methodologies trace the lines of Keeling's assemblage of social reality and allow us to account for media objects in a network of affective, aesthetic, and narrative techniques rather than merely within their genre or their specific media format. By unifying these two modes of analysis, I make a claim for aesthetic categories (or diagrams) as a way of speaking across different media objects to understand not what they *are* but what they *do* and *how* they do it. This is a diagnostic tool that breaks with disciplinary boundaries to better grasp the process through which media objects come into being, operate in relationship to others around them, and then shift and transform their diagram to create conditions under which similar media objects can come into being.

While I've spoken of the usefulness of aesthetic category theory and assemblage theory, I have yet to give an account of them as theoretical paradigms. Sianne Ngai's *Our Aesthetic Categories* develops Kantian philosophy in combination with postmodern theory to produce aesthetic category theory as a method. Ngai's fundamental question revolves around how certain modes of aesthetics dovetail with capitalism to produce certain kinds of subjects who fulfill the labor demands of capital. It is a theory that is concerned with explaining the connection between media objects and subjectivation. This process of subjectivation is what I find so compelling about this work, and I agree that this process of producing subjects via aesthetic categories happens across a range of human activities, including the activity of mediating the human's relationship to its finitude. The second chapter of this dissertation addresses at length how this paradigm might be used productively to identify other aesthetic categories that produce additional forms of subjectivation. This is what justifies my own development of the aesthetic categories of bleakness, post-apocalypse, and annihilation.

However, while I agree with how Ngai's theory is constructed and applied, I also find that it does not contain enough intermediate mechanisms to satisfy my own curiosity about the philosophical link between aesthetic objects like a Hello Kitty doll and someone being produced as a subject under capitalism. Therefore, a large amount of my second chapter functions as a proof that traces Ngai's work back to Kant and compares this work to Gilles Deleuze's own rearticulation of Kant that provides the basic structure for both his philosophical innovations in *Difference & Repetition* and his reconfiguring of Michel Foucault in his *Foucault*. These are both moves that bring him to a description of the process through which relatively stable structures shift into new forms over time. The final product is a formulation of both Ngaian aesthetic category theory and Deleuzian diagrammatics that sees them as merely two different

ways of explaining the same basic process. What Ngai offers is direct language and comprehensive structure that allows us to name a process like "bleakness." What Deleuzian diagrammatics offers is a granular method of working through how that process comes into contact with people and, just as importantly, how it reproduces itself through time or comes to an end.

Methodologically, I take this a step further by configuring not just Ngai and Deleuze together, but specifically Manuel DeLanda's reworking of Deleuze into a generalizable system. DeLanda's philosophical system centers on taking the Deleuze's monadistic conception of reality and creating standardized language for how it operates across a plurality of domains. Deleuze famously wrote in synonyms, proliferating different words for the same operations, and DeLanda provides a cleaner lexicon that more clearly demonstrates the central claims of Deleuzian philosophy: the world is a monad, everything is part of one process, and the work of philosophy is addressing the bifurcations and unifications that drive that process forward. DeLanda even provides us with some strict terminology for understanding how structure is maintained or destroyed depending on the situation. It is important to understand that assemblage theory holds that assemblages are "wholes whose properties emerge from the interactions between parts."[5] For DeLanda, the critical break between assemblage theory and other forms of describing organization comes at the distinction of assemblages from totalities. Totalities have a reliance on "relations of interiority: the component parts are constituted by the very relations they have to other parts in the whole. A part detached from such a whole ceases to be what it is, since being this particular part is one of its constitutive properties."[6] Within this understanding of

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[5] Manuel DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society* (New York: Continuum), 5.
[6] Ibid, 9.

relations, totalities "possess an inextricable unity in which there is a strict reciprocal determination between parts."[7] Understanding things as totalities, whether those things be societies, films, or chemical compounds, means that we are locked into seeing them as a "seamless web" that is defined by the totalized object rather than its components.[8] In other words, totality is overdetermined by a top-down way of understanding what something *is*.

In contrast, assemblages are defined by their relations of exteriority. Describing something as an assemblage rarely tells you what it *is*, but instead it is a way of drawing a map of how something comes to be and what parts of it can be augmented while still maintaining a particular shape or function. DeLanda characterizes this as a difference between the totality's understanding of relations as *logically necessary* and the assemblage's understanding of them as *contingently obligatory*.[9] Within assemblage theory, we can never take the existence of a thing as a given and then parse out what it does and how it interacts with other objects. Rather, DeLanda is explicit that we must look at the empirical and mechanistic relations that occur between different parts of the assemblage to understand their power to interact with each other.

If we read a film as a totality, for example, we will see it in a traditional way that is best typified by Christian Metz's understanding of the relationship between a reading of a film and that film as a textual system.[10] While Metz is comfortable with a film and its meaning being split into codes and their interpretation, he still positions a film as a "totality" that is "perpetually torn apart" by the interpretive gaze.[11] This traditionalism still holds that a film is composed out of a

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[7] Ibid, 9.
[8] Ibid, 10.
[9] Ibid, 11.
[10] Christian Metz, *Language and Cinema*. Trans. Donne Jean Umiker-Sebeok. The Hague: Mouton, 1974, 120.
[11] Ibid, 120.

finite series of shots, each of which have a certain content to them. Those shots only have meaning in relation to one another, and the work of cross-referencing those shots builds to a notion of scenes, which are then all understood in relation to one another. Finally, that composition gives us a total film, and we can perform a reading of a film due to our individual reception of those different relations of interiority. By contrast, assemblage theory can only understand a film as a set of relations of exteriority; the film is not being torn apart by an experiencing subject, but it was already torn apart, and its happening to hold together via meaning or narrative is merely an emanation of how its relationships of exteriority manage to consistently maintain a shape. How does each element of each shot operate on that shot, the scene, the act, the film, the viewer, the screen, the viewing room, and so on in scale? Assemblage theory presses on a mode of media analysis that stresses not what a film *is* but what a film *does*.

In DeLanda's assemblage theory, we are given terminology that demonstrates the insight that processes as visibly different as rocks splitting under pressure and water boiling are governed by the same basic relations of interiority and exteriority. The physical properties of material extend across films and games as much as they do eggs and mountain ranges. If those processes that govern reality are isomorphic to different systems, then how might we apply that mode of analysis to the process of subjectivation under film? Video games? Music videos? It is my contention that those media objects are part of a closed circuit with the conditions that give rise to them, creating a situation where, for example, a game mediates a relationship between a human and their own death and then, when it is played, feeds back into that system by turning them into a particular kind of subject in relation to that finitude. Then that person goes on to make their own creative work, and the circuit intensifies or changes. This dissertation provides a logic for when that intensity or potential for change might be triggered.

My reason for engaging with assemblage theory is not dissimilar from Jasbir Puar's

justifications of the method in her *Terrorist Assemblages*, which uses assemblages as a basic

system through which she can the state, political economy, and cultural forms of discrimination.

Decidedly against systematicity, Puar writes that there is "no *a priori* system that taxonomizes

the linkages, disruptions, and contradictions into a tidy vessel."[12] While I disagree about the

usefulness of systems and exactly how systematic assemblage theory is, I do agree about the

possible tidiness with which we can describe the world, and Puar and I turn to assemblages for

similar reasons: "the time is out of joint: something is happening to time, not in time, revamping

an encounter with time."[13] Where Puar is concerned with the phenomenology of the present, I

see assemblages as providing a compelling internal logic for how specific formations in the

world continue, reset, or reorient how our reality is structured.[14] We are both curious about how

things happen, restart, reconfigure, or fail to do any of these things. The difference between our

approaches is that I am more interested in how media objects render this involuting roil of reality

via aesthetics. I follow assemblages to understand how a macro system of human thought

produces itself in the micro context of a film or a game that fits into a coherent, or at least

continuing, system of existence. How does *this* arrangement of the world continue, and how do

we see and hear it? How might a new one emerge, and under what conditions might it be

different? These are the sorts of questions that I believe aesthetic category theory and assemblage

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[12] Jasbir Puar, *Terrorist Assemblages: Homonationalism in Queer Times* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007), xv.

[13] Ibid, xxii.

[14] An extensive elaboration of Puar's position on the politics of assemblages can be found in Jasbir Puar, "'I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess': intersectionality, assemblage, and affective politics," *Meritum* 8, no. 2 (2013): 371-390.

theory might help us address in serious and direct ways. The next chapter and the case studies after it return to this question again and again.

This combined methodology that produces two ways of addressing the question of discipline and genre is another reason for grounding my analysis within media studies. Sianne Ngai's work is generally under-applied within media studies, film studies, and game studies, and I hope this dissertation provides some in-roads for the consideration of this robust and helpful theory by producing a discussion with the much more readily available Deleuzian camp. Readers of the following chapters will also note a general lack of engagement with Deleuzian film scholars, including those who work specifically on assemblage theory, in favor of DeLanda's theoretical innovations. While this dissertation is implicitly in conversation with scholars like Amy Herzog, Elena Del Río, and Patricia Pisters, we do not come to the same conclusions about how best to deploy assemblage theory, what objects it speaks to best, and what the stakes are for media studies more broadly.[15] Our differences largely emanate from the differences in how we consider the systematicity of Deleuze. Notoriously antagonistic to the idea of systematicity himself, Deleuze's work alone and with Félix Guattari often contains conceptual synonyms, linguistic puns, and off-shoots of ideas that are not pursued. In the pursuit of these threads, anyone who is interested in applying Deleuze's philosophy to an object must necessarily either learn to freely adapt, attempt to have utter fidelity to the Deleuze's words, or simply create a new form of system out of an attempted non-systematic thought and then carry that forward as a method. I have taken the latter path with DeLanda's assemblage theory, which puts me on a

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[15] See Amy Herzog, "Assemblage, Constellation, Image: Reading Filmic Matter," *Discourse* 38, no. 2 (2016): 215-234; Elena Del Río, *The Grace of Destruction: A Vital Ethology of Extreme Cinemas* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2016); Patricia Pisters, *The Matrix of Visual Culture: Working With Deleuze in Film Theory* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2003).

fundamentally different path from many other scholars in film and media studies working with Deleuze. We agree on the basic ideas and metaphysics, but our use cases, even when looking at similar objects, come to different conclusions using different language. What unifies us is an agreement that media objects are locations where heterogeneous elements meet and which need robust theories to describe them. We are unified by our interest in what Francesco Casetti names the recursivity of assemblages, or their capability to "return and remain in the same positions" that "leads to the creation of a stable field of action, within which components arrange themselves according to consolidated modalities."[16] As I demonstrate in each of the chapters, I believe that DeLanda's interpretation of Deleuze's assemblage theory offers one of the best in-roads for understanding how these media objects operate and how that stable field is constructed.

My adoption of DeLanda's rearticulation of Deleuze also puts a significant distance between this dissertation and Deleuze's own work on the media objects that I analyze here. You will not find significant analysis of his two *Cinema* volumes here, nor will you find extensive application or engagement with his books on the painting of Francis Bacon and the writing of Marcel Proust. Following DeLanda is, in a sense, a betrayal of Deleuze. The French philosopher's own works of aesthetic analysis are in many ways products of his system of thought and not developments in that thought. An engagement with *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, for example, through the methodological hybrid that I have developed here would not produce fruitful scholarship because it we have basic disagreements with fundamental claims about the nature of the image, what cinema is, and how we approach broader structural questions of the relation of the subject to film. I appreciate the DeLandan version of assemblage theory

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[16] Francesco Casetti, *The Lumiere Galaxy: Seven Key Words For The Cinema To Come* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 85.

precisely because it does not get bogged down in a plurality of time- or movement-images, and it cuts to the quick of analysis by constantly holding onto the non-specialness of any given object. In Deleuze's books on cinema, it seems to be the case that there is something special about cinema, smuggling in a kind of essence of the media through the back door. I have no interest in that, and I agree with DeLanda that media can tell us certain things or demonstrate certain forms of coherence, but that they are not essentially special in any way. Thus, to make the *Cinema* books lock into shape with my own project would transform it into a reformist re-reading of Deleuze via aesthetic categories and diagrams in order to "discover" Deleuze and DeLanda's consistency in articulating what DeLanda's adapted concept of the diagram. It is a much more fruitful use of my available time here to instead trace Deleuze's generative through lines, follow DeLanda when he splinters from them, and work to combine that with Ngai's work. This is not to disparage Deleuze's work on aesthetics, but merely to say that it would make the work here substantially less clean and no more helpful for the reader in understanding how assemblages and their diagrams operate.

It is with these splits in mind that I bring my specific interventions in the field of media studies. This dissertation is a demonstration of how aesthetic category theory and assemblage theory can be mobilized to speak to and across media forms to productively perform broad analysis. It is also a categorization method for the different ways that human finitude are mediated in the contemporary time period. Finally, it is an argument that takes these claims all the way to the edge of that finitude to discover where it breaks down and cannot continue.

This final point is largely worked through via an extensive engagement with scholars writing on the ontological and epistemological questions of blackness within the African diaspora. One of the insidious problems of Deleuzian media theory is that it is a theory that can

supposedly speak to everything and yet rarely speaks about race.[17] When it is used to work

through questions of race, it is often as a supplement: "Here is what assemblage theory *reveals*

about race." Following scholars such as Fred Moten, Kara Keeling, Frank Wilderson III, Stephen

Best, and others, I claim that blackness must necessarily be analyzed within any discussion of

cultural objects produced after the early modern period. It seems impossible to me that a theory

that traces a line of social coherence and decoherence should not have something to say about the

social and ontological contexts of blackness. If assemblage theory looks first to the *structure* of

existence, then any media object produced in a European or American context is inextricable

from a racializing logic that hierarchizes whiteness by placing it in conversation with a

subjugated blackness. This dissertation looks to theorizations of blackness not as a supplement

but as a critical component of media assemblages in the contemporary period. Rather than

simply providing another perspective on how assemblages and aesthetic categories operate, these

scholars demonstrate the exact limits of what these theories are capable of speaking to and what

lines of inquiry or action they open up methodologically when pushed to that limit. Indeed, this

dissertation finishes at the aesthetic end of the world, and it is these scholars who articulate the

conditions under which the world might end with finality, preventing the re-establishment of the

continual violence that structures both the eternal present and the revolutionary rearticulation of

the before.

   With the conceptual bounds of the method established, the rest of the dissertation

necessarily follows a sequence: continuance (bleakness), disruption (post-apocalypse), and

complete destruction (annihilation). These aesthetic categories of bleakness, post-apocalypse,

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[17] This is not to say that Deleuzian theory has not been used an in-road for philosophical discussions of race. See Arun Saldanha and Jason Michael Adams, eds. *Deleuze and Race* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press, 2012).

and annihilation make a linear set of claims. I will briefly introduce them here before making a short example of how each operates in relation to the film *The Grand Budapest Hotel* (Wes Anderson, 2014).

In bleakness, I investigate how social organization stretches on into the future seemingly indefinitely. The chapter opens with a discussion of the cultural criticism of Mark Fisher, who so clearly grasped how the past is continually resurrected to perform the work of the present and the future. This cyclical recycling that prevents the future from arriving is the work of bleakness as a category. My two primary media objects in this chapter are *Only Lovers Left Alive* (Jarmusch, 2014) and *Children of Men* (Cuarón, 2006), each of which highlights a valence of bleakness. *Only Lovers Left Alive* demonstrates the formal qualities of bleakness with its tableau-like still life shots and its characters for whom the past is never quite past. The film is also an opportunity to argue that the traditional divide between narrative and formal analysis is insufficient for the demands of aesthetic category theory, and I argue that it is more productive to analyze intensive and extensive qualities instead. The second half of the chapter is dedicated to *Children of Men* and its own use of stasis and movement to visualize the feeling of an infinitely extended timescale. Finally, the chapter claims that the extension of the present shown in these films is also the extension of racial categorization and violence within Western political regimes.

The third chapter takes on the aesthetic category of post-apocalypse, which conceptually picks up where bleakness leaves off. Bleakness is a mode of aesthetics in which current conditions hold indefinitely; post-apocalypse is a mode in which there is a cataclysm followed by a period of rebuilding or reorganization. It is a category focused on new beginnings with roots that stretch back to early modernity and the colonial era. I discuss the religious and secular moves that get us from that point of emergence to where the category's current form which is

tied tightly to 1945 and the fear of the earth being destroyed by nuclear fire. The media objects that I analyze in this chapter are all in conversation with this most recent form of post-apocalypse. *Mad Max: Fury Road* (Miller, 2015) centers on authoritarian control and feminist revolution in a post-nuclear world. *The Girl With All The Gifts* (McCarthy, 2016) is a plague narrative that openly questions whose image the world might be recreated in after an apocalyptic event, and I argue that it provides a basis for understanding how most post-apocalyptic media objects understand race. Finally, the video game *The Last of Us* (Naughty Dog, 2013) provides the clearest example of how the post-apocalypse as a category operates on a substrate of anti-blackness that will always remain latent within the form unless it is critiqued and addressed for what it is. In the context of this chapter, I argue that anti-blackness functions as an animating force for the resurrection of the "old world," and that any consideration of how we think the rebirth of society after an apocalypse must first reckon with this fact or risk the re-entrenchment of structural violence.

The organizing principle of aesthetic category theory and assemblage theory is that the material world and the aesthetic world will continue from any given position. Both theories hold onto an elasticity of existence that will allow the theory itself to retain viability in the face of dystopia and plagues alike. However, my argument is that these categories are predicated on human finitude or the concern with the limits of the human. Humans will die, and yet the world keeps going, and these aesthetic categories as modes of extension of the human and modes of speculating about what might continue. One of the concerning problems with these categories, however, is that their central organizing premises is their racial categorization mechanisms with which they maintain themselves. As I argue in the chapters, these two categories are deeply entwined with anti-blackness in the sense that anti-blackness is deeply embedded in the cultural

imaginary from which these categories emerge. The imagination around human finitude seems

inextricable from structural racial violence.

It is from this position that my final chapter on annihilation begins to appear necessary. If

continuance and rebirth is business as usual, then what would an aesthetic category focused on

the destruction of the very order of aesthetics that produces the world look like? What would it

mean for an assemblage to unravel and annihilate itself? Here I turn to the anti-social thesis in

queer theory and Afropessimism to problematize the theoretical foundations through which

aesthetic category theory is constructed. This is a necessary move to take the theory to its logical

end. How might things end without beginning again? How might finitude be approached with

any assurance that the violence of the past will not be resurrected in another guise? Taking

Melancholia (Von Trier, 2011) and Hot Chip's video for "Need You Now" (2015) alongside a

series of art objects that destroy themselves such as Zack Gage's *Lose/Lose* and Thijs Rijkers's

"Suïcide Machines." From there, I follow Frank Wilderson III and Stephen Best to understand

what kind of purposeful, destructive aesthetic instability would need to be evoked, and politically

pursued, in order to produce a world that would resist the resurrective logic that we find in post-

apocalypse. The aesthetic category of annihilation centers on an aesthetic that would be the

undoing of aesthetics itself and is thus both the most difficult and the most potentially liberating

of the three categories displayed in this dissertation.

It is obviously difficult to see the applied difference between these aesthetic categories in

the abstract, so here I will perform three brief analyses of *The Grand Budapest Hotel* through the

perspective of each of these categories. Importantly, none of these are mutually exclusive to one

another, and I have specifically chosen media objects that resonate most closely with the

aesthetic category they demonstrate here. *The Grand Budapest Hotel* is a film which contains

multiples genres, historical references, tones, and rhythms, and thus is it a useful way of demonstrating how this method, and how these categories, are illuminated by this form of analysis.

In *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, we are introduced to two key characters. The first, Monsieur Gustave H. (Ralphe Fiennes), is a concierge. The second, Zero (Tony Revolori), is a lobby boy. Both work within the majestic Grand Budapest Hotel, a resembling the 19th and early 20th century resorts and escapes for the European and American leisure class. Beyond these two central characters, we are find a wide-ranging cast of characters who fill out the social world of the fictional European country of the Republic of Zubrowka. The film's narrative is a story within a story within a story (a young girl reading a book written by a man interviewing an adult Zero), and as such it has a novelistic structure of clearly defined parts. For the purposes of this reading, I want to focus in on three separate clusters of scenes that each embody one of the aesthetic categories of bleakness, post-apocalypse, and annihilation.

The Grand Budapest Hotel itself, as an assemblage that spills out beyond its walls, engages with the category of bleakness by virtue of its structure. It is presented as a stalwart 19th century estate at the end of its lifespan that, somehow, continues to live on. It is paralleled by the aged Madame D. (Tilda Swinton), whose death early in the film generates a haphazard plot of inheritances, imprisonments, and arguments that are all spurred on by the reality that the hotel, and the aristocracy it serves, seem to extend on indefinitely. Despite her death, Madame D. structures the world of *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, organizing scenes and motivations around her in the wake of her death. The characters seem only able to refer back to her wealthy life and the painting *Boy With Apple* that she leaves to M. Gustav after her death. Bleakness is most clearly articulated in the scene where Madame D.'s last will and testament is read. It occurs in a large

room that contains a large gun collection and dozens of stuffed hunting trophies. Crammed between these are rows of chairs where attendees, all dressed in black, both mourn and wait in anticipation, arrested in time and space as the aristocratic legal performance happens before them.

This stasis might communicate some bleakness, but what takes the scene fully over into a form of the aesthetic category is a conversation between M. Gustav and Madame D.'s son Dmitri (Adrian Brody). The exchange between the two is an argument about whether M. Gustav should be allowed to inherit from the recently deceased, and the scene quickly cuts between a medium shot of M. Gustav, a long shot of both characters together, and a reverse shot of Dmitri's face. Beyond that cutting, however, the camera is completely still, and the produced effect is one of extreme stillness in a room of dead objects where the only animating presence is an argument about whether the living should be able to own the possessions of the dead. All of the scene's elements align around preventing the next moment from being brought into being. And while the next scenes certainly come along in sequential time, the film never seems to leave this moment. The end of the film holds onto the fact that The Grand Budapest Hotel, and the aristocratic vacationing that it stands in for and affords, can never quite move into the next era.

We can also see the aesthetic category of post-apocalypse at work in the film. It is generally the case that the post-apocalypse is spoken of in terms of a major event that causes a major break between a "then" and a "now." Classics of the genre, from the film *The Road Warrior* (Miller, 1981) to the novel *A Canticle For Leibowitz* (Miller, 1959), tend to set themselves in a time after some sort of massive event (a nuclear war, a meteor, a plague) has radically altered life on Earth and significantly diminished the population of the planet. The causes of these events, and the actual events themselves, are the apocalyptic proper, and many

scholars have written about the religious and secular traditions that have shaped and continue to govern the ways that we imagine "the end." Apocalypse concerns the world during its most anxious period during a cataclysm; post-apocalypse, as an aesthetic category, is about the world that *is* after the disclosure of a traumatic secret. Drawing on the work of Jacques Derrida, Rebekah Sheldon puts it in similar terms: apocalypse "designates that which has always already been awaiting our discovery, now at the end of the quest literally unveiled. So, apocalypse requires a self-similarity beyond duration, lurking within all the ephemera of the passing hours."[18] Apocalypse is the revealing of *something* that was always there, and post-apocalypse is an aestheticization of how the order of things reorients itself to be revealed anew again.

Returning to *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, the film is marked by the decline and attempted maintenance of the European aristocracy, as I remarked above, but there is also a strong narrative thread of breakdown and procession from those 19th century social structures into a new form of social organization. Two major plot threads in the film operate on the sudden vaporization of a marker of the order of things. We can see this most clearly in how the film depicts the decline and fall of the nation state in the early 20th century.

Early in the film, M. Gustav and Zero are riding in a train. The train is stopped and entered by a thinly fictionalized facsimile of Nazi troops. They are serving as border guards within a military conflict that is never quite rendered sensible or visible to the characters of the film, and they make their way from train car to train car checking transit papers. M. Gustav remains unworried, talking about what is happening in a casual way, and the young Zero is visibly panicking. When the soldier finally makes his way to the pair's train car, the two hand

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[18] Rebekah Sheldon, *The Child to Come* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 41.

over their papers. Zero, a barely-documented refugee, hands over a beat-up scrap of paper. The soldier looks at the paper, looks at Zero (whose brown skin stands out against the stark whiteness of the majority of the rest of the film's cast), and then demands that he leave the train. M. Gustav refuses the possibility of that happening, and the situation quickly escalates into violence, with M. Gustav putting his body between the faux-Nazi soldier and the young boy.

In this moment, it appears that the social order of old has progressed into a new stage of development. What we're witnessing is an apocalypse, although it certainly is not a flashy, overstaged, or bombastic one. It is not the apocalypse of nuclear destruction or the return of Christ, but it is the revelation of a new order of things that has neatly and violently supplanted the old order. The targeting of Zero, his brown skin, and the Nazi facsimile all point to the order that has finally overwhelmed the previous small-state and aristocratic world from before. Where there might once have been a social fiat that would allow whatever M. Gustav said to wholly determine the outcome of this encounter due to social status, the transformation that is occurring with the imposition of the political border makes it clear that the world of before and this world are not the same. The world has changed, a new order of things revealed, in the apocalyptic mode.

But I am not after the apocalyptic in this dissertation. I want to show the mechanisms of the post-apocalypse, of the moment when the governing principles or core of a previous regime or way of life or aesthetics rear their head in a new context after they have been supposedly wiped out and supplanted by a new system. For that reason, the resolution of this scene is curious. The commotion between the soldier and M. Gustav is noticed by the commanding officer, an Inspector Henckels (Edward Norton). M. Gustav and Henckels realize that they have a connection to one another; Henckels' family summered at the Grand Budapest when he was a

child, and he remembers how nice M. Gustav was to him at the time. In his infinite friendliness,

he diffuses the situation and creates a hand-written transit pass for Zero. It is a voucher of

reputation, and as I will discuss later, it only extends precisely as far as a reputation might.

If this event is a minor apocalypse, and it is also an act of deterritorialization, then the

follow-up with Henckels is the appropriate reterritorialization and recreation of order. The mode

of life of the 19th century is dissolved in front of us, replaced with a kind of nascent biopolitics

that manages bodies, their racial characteristics, and how those bodies can move within the

world. Importantly, this scene stages this movement from one regime to another in total. It is not

something hinted at or gradual. The shift from a reputation-based organization of the world to a

state-based modern political one is instantaneous. The world of reputations is ruined, and yet it is

post-apocalyptically resurrected within this new structure, fully reasserted again in Henckels'

extension of kindness to the traveling pair due to a social connection that undergirds his military

position. This is the paradox of post-apocalypticism rendered visible in this short scene: A

system is destroyed fully, and yet it reasserts itself under different conditions. The product of

post-apocalypse, the world to come, is always *this* world rewritten under new conditions. The

world that is delivered is always the utopia of the apocalyptic imagination, and this one is a

strong state-based military where bodies are tracked and managed. When one speculates about

the world to come, it is always an act of leveraging the world that is against the limit point of its

institutions and organizational strategies. It still retains the *charm* of the 19th century ruling

class, its wealth, and its reputations, but they are a supplement to the grand organizational

strategy of the biopolitical efforts of the state proper. Thus, the moments after this in the film are

post-apocalyptic; we have seen a new order asserted, and it contains the ideal qualities of the

previous age while eliminating the things that cannot be understood as compatible with the new world.

In the previous two readings of scenes from *The Grand Budapest Hotel*, I have written about how the aesthetic categories of bleakness and post-apocalypse have appeared in the film. Each of these categories has overlapped to some degree, and through this lens I have tried to show a certain set of tendencies that run through the film. Both of these categories mediate finitude (in that they are concerned with conditions of life extending forever or being resurrected) and subjectivation (they demonstrate conduct within that context). This means that I will now turn to the aesthetic category of annihilation and how the film mediates the absolute limit point of human life and what it means to transcend it.

At the end of the film, M. Gustav and Zero are in the train car again, but now Zero's partner Agatha (Saoirse Ronan) is there. They are triumphant. The film's conspiracy plot has been resolved, and M. Gustav has become the sole inheritor of a grand fortune. The wealth of old Europe has finally jumped the class barrier from the inheriting child to the lower-class service worker. The characters are happy in the train car, and things are looking up for the lower classes in a world that seems to be getting dimmer by the day. This recreated scene progresses the same way that the previous one did. The train grinds to a halt. Outside the window, we can see gruff soldiers with military equipment. Soldiers search the train, but the individual who comes to the train compartment is not the dapper 19th century-esque soldier in full regalia who is merely managing transit. His face is marked with dirt or grease. He wears a practical winter coat, and he looks to be bedraggled. He demands papers from the people in the compartment, and they oblige. M. Gustav hands over his own papers and Zero's.

Zero is still represented within this system as a beat-up slip of paper, but now that slip of paper is supplemented by the reputation of the soldier Henckels in the form of *another* slip of paper. Henckels' reputation is meant to vouchsafe Zero, and the existence of that military commander is summoned up by that paper. As the film has showed us so far, that reputation *does work* in the new order of the nation-state. However, in direct contrast to the entirety of the film so far, the soldier is not convinced by the summoned reputation of Herr Henckles. Instead, he peers at the paper before tearing it up and demanding that Zero come outside. The mode of social organization that we entered at the beginning of the film has already been supplanted by something beyond wealth, reputation, and the ability to vouch for anyone. In yet another moment of repetition of the previous scene, M. Gustav tries to put his body between Zero and the soldier. Unlike the previous scene, there is no military commander to save him. In fact, we are removed from a representational regime at all. The film cuts back to the intermediate present of the film, to the adult Zero telling this story to a young writer, and Zero states plainly what happened: "In the end, they shot him."

The aesthetic category of annihilation is reflected here in the act of withdrawal. The film cannot represent the moment of removal of this character, and it literally draws away from the events it portrays onscreen to do so. The film annihilates the aesthetic strategies that it has used throughout the film in order to demonstrate the severity of the loss of M. Gustav. It cannot be shown, because showing it would not allow the film to do justice to the gap created in this world by this central character. As I will discuss in the final chapter of this dissertation, we can fully discuss annihilation without grasping it phenomenally. We *know* M. Gustav is killed, and we can articulate that death, but the film itself cannot incorporate that death aesthetically.

If bleakness describes an aesthetic category of stasis and post-apocalypse is change-without-change, then annihilation is an aesthetic category that attempts to provide the absolute limit case of change to the viewer. In many cases, this form of change is so stark that it cannot be reconvened. *The Grand Budapest Hotel* annihilates M. Gustav in that he cannot be rescued or brought back into the representational fold of the film. The film cannot continue forward in the way that it once did, because a pillar of its mode of being was eliminated in one fell swoop.

These three limited readings that I have performed here are not meant to give an exhaustive sense of what these aesthetic categories are, but they are meant to demonstrate what aesthetic category analysis allows us to do with the media object. There is no split between formal analysis and narrative, and there is no distinction between the philosophical argument of a film and its practical moment-to-moment moves. Instead, I trace its relations of interiority and exteriority, finding what each combined element generates in the micro via assemblage theory and in the macro via aesthetic category theory. In the readings in each chapter, I will attend much more closely to the context and period in which the objects I am analyzing emerge. This has simply been a taste of what it can do.

I also want to note that the analysis that I perform in these chapters is grounded in my own experience of media objects produced in the Global North since 1945. For me, these are emblematic of a mode of thinking that extends throughout popular culture today. Similarly, the philosophies and conceptual models I adopt and speak to are from roughly the same context, and while I take a critical approach to many of them via methods skeptical of that genealogy, this is still a project that looks to a specific time and a specific place to index ways of thinking about the world. I am inevitably emplotted into a particular trajectory of rise and decline, apocalypse and heroic saving grace, that is perhaps not shared across all forms of analysis of the phenomena

of finitude that I outline in this work.[19] It is my hope that other scholars will be able to take the tools that I have begun to develop here and bend them to their own needs.

It is ultimately my goal here to philosophically intervene in media studies in three ways. The first is through demonstrating that aesthetic category theory and diagrams are useful methods for demonstrating how modes of representation or mediation operate. The second is that these are analytically two methods, but they can also be productively deployed together to achieve both a macro and micro analysis of how humans mediate their own finitude and how that mediation comes to be instantiated in shots, scenes, button presses, or any other aesthetic point of contact between a work and a human experiencing it. The third is to show that theories that claim to explain everything must, at some point, hit their limit point of explanatory capacity. I do not frame this in a Kantian way, but instead in a material one; configurations of the world are dependent on ones that come before, and even the most radical break contains the seeds of the possible rebirth of the past inside of them. As I discuss at length in the final chapter, assemblages and aesthetic categories hit their limit when it comes to a choice between continuing to exist and maintaining an aesthetic-based order which implicitly operates based on anti-blackness. This is not a problem with these theories, but rather it is a fundamental problem of all modes of figuring the ontological reality of the West and its inheritors. Following this analysis to its logical end requires us not only to make serious choices not about theoretical paradigms, but also the media objects that are produced around us day-to-day. If we care about ending, and humans *always* seem concerned about ending, then it is worth noting already that the lesson we learn at the end of this dissertation is that our regime of aesthetics is predicated on the continuation of anti-

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[19] For a discussion of this emplotting see: Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1973), 7-11.

blackness. As Wilderson notes, reconfiguring this will require the end of the world. Many of our theoretical paradigms we hold so dear might need to end with that world, and the final chapter takes us to the limit where the very concept of aesthetics might no longer hold.

We proliferate frameworks to imagine crises that end in human death and misery, and some of the most popular media from the 20th and 21st century has been around the fantasy of both individual and species death. As I have already said, I am less interested in the question of *why* than I am the question of *how*, and the dissertation that follows develops a framework for how we think finitude, how we imagine it playing out, and how even that mode of thought cannot deliver any political solace to us other than the assurance that an ending might allow some kind of closure. Continuance presents itself as a problem for existence in this work, and as we discover in the end, even our most robust theories of ending and rebirth give us as many problems as solutions. It is my goal here to present these unsettling facts in no uncertain terms.

CHAPTER 1: FROM THE AESTHETIC CATEGORY TO THE DIAGRAM

This chapter is a philosophical investigation into how aesthetic category theory and assemblage theory can be productively combined into a mode of analysis. My reason for doing this centers on my belief that each of these gives us a particular angle of approach when it comes to understanding how aesthetics produce subjects beneath them and how those subjects mediate their concerns about the world through objects that go on to either re-affirm existing aesthetic categories or create new ones altogether.

I proceed by way of a philosophical proof of the unity of two apparently distinct methodologies: aesthetic category theory and assemblage theory. I will begin by outlining Sianne Ngai's theory of aesthetic categories and making a case for why they are a useful method for media studies to engage with. Then I will backtrack aesthetic categories to their origination in Immanuel Kant's conception of judgment. I will then move to how Gilles Deleuze adapts and critiques Kantian philosophy in his own project, and from there I will show that Manuel DeLanda's reconfiguration of Deleuzian assemblage theory is the most useful version of that theory. My final conceptual claim is that the Deleuzian/DeLandan provides a crucial systematization of mechanisms that then produce what we call aesthetic categories. Metaphorically, if this combined method is a stopwatch, then assemblage theory teaches us how to understand the movement of the gears and aesthetic category theory helps us tell time. The former provides us with an adequate theory of mechanisms that make aesthetic categories work, but the aesthetic category provides us with the platform from which we can delimit and speak of the aesthetic category as a coherent whole.

This approach is in service to demonstrating that there is a unified project that already exists in these two theoretical modes and that recognizing that relationship will improve our ability to use these two theories as methods for media analysis. The next three chapters serve as application cases for the three aesthetic categories that I see as being crucial for understanding the relationship between media objects and human finitude: bleakness, post-apocalypse, and annihilation. This final category, annihilation, is both an explication and a critical intervention into this theoretical paradigm itself. After all, if human beings die and assemblages (eventually) perish, then how far can our theories go? But first I must establish what aesthetic categories and diagrams are.

Establishing Aesthetic Categories

In her 2012 book *Our Aesthetic Categories*, Sianne Ngai argues that we can best understand late capitalism through the aesthetic categories that it produces. The three categories that she chooses to focus on in the book, cute, zany, and interesting, are all intimately related to "the everyday practices of production, circulation, and consumption" that provide the scaffold for capitalism.[1] The choice of the aesthetic category as the method of diagnosing culture's relationship to capitalism is one of convenience as it is a way of naming the "feeling-form compacts" that drive contemporary aesthetic experience.[2]

While I will get into a deeper set of claims about how these categories are constructed shortly, it is worth briefly defining them so that it is easier to see how my own aesthetic categories exist within a similar structure or set of constraints. The zany, the interesting, and the

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[1] Sianne Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 1.
[2] Thomas Lee, "Too Much Fun: Contemporary Aesthetic Theory and Design," *Design and Culture* 9, no. 3 (2017), 309.

cute are not arbitrarily chosen. Rather, Ngai claims each of them is a mode of aesthetics that operates on humans as subjects under capitalism. Aesthetic categories are ways of grasping the aesthetic arrangement that brings people into contact with ideologies and the material arrangement of the world. They are the way that aesthetics order existence. For Ngai, the system of compulsion and subjectivation that keeps humanity operating under the economic regime of capitalism has a complementary set of aesthetic dimensions in which humans see optimal capitalist behavior and subjectivity modeled for them. Her aesthetic categories of zaniness and cuteness operate this way. In the case of her category of the interesting, it is the fact of aesthetic contemplation that keeps subjects locked into that economic relation mediated by aesthetics.

Ngai's focus on capitalism here might make for some confusion when it comes to my adaptation of her concepts here since my own specific use case is around human finitude. As she says on the first page of *Our Aesthetic Categories*, the three she has chosen "are the ones in our current repertoire best suited for grasping how aesthetic experience has been transformed by the hypercommodified, information-saturated, performance-driven conditions of late capitalism."[3] My purpose here is to grasp how the aesthetic experience of our finitude has developed instead of how our understanding of our relationship to capitalism has. In short, I agree fully with the process that Ngai elucidates, but with a different target in mind in the last instance. I particularly agree with her discussion of subjectivation via aesthetics. All three of her categories operate analytically to create opportunities to analyze "specific capacities for feeling and thinking as well as specific limitations on those capacities . . . that help complete the formation of a distinctive kind of aesthetic subject, gesturing also to the modes of intersubjectivity that this aesthetic

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[3] Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 1.

subjectivity implies."[4] What I borrow from Ngai here is the method and an analytic, and I take her word that aesthetic category analysis can be altered and expanded to operate in relation to abstract systems other than capitalism. Without recounting the entirety of *Our Aesthetic Categories*, which operates as a proof of the method and a set of application cases, I will quickly summarize the pieces of one of her aesthetic categories, zaniness, in order to show a skeleton of how these categories develop for her, what her analysis looks like, and how this method of analysis can be extended beyond her specific use case.

Ngai's analysis of zaniness centers on subjectivity. A zany character is an "absolutely elastic subject" who is "nothing but a series of adjustments and adaptations to one situation after another."[5] Her examples she develops across the chapter on zaniness include Lucille Ball's Lucy from *I Love Lucy* (1951-57) and Jim Carrey's character from *The Cable Guy* (Stiller, 1996), both examples of figures who prove themselves to be infinitely flexible in the face of the demands of capital. Notably, the word "zany" emerges less from a rhetorical register and more from a necessary one. It is not that someone is labeling these two performances zany in the press, but instead that this language is the best way of grouping a series of media objects that present a particular register of existence under capitalism as one that people should either aspire to or see themselves as working within. Zaniness is the aesthetic category that mediates the "politically ambiguous intersection between cultural and occupational performance, acting and service, playing and laboring."[6] The media objects within the category of zaniness are characterized by "action pushed to physically strenuous extremes" and "an intensely willing and desiring subjectivity" that constantly fulfills the goals set forth for it by bosses, partners, children, social

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[4] Ibid, 4.
[5] Ibid, 174.
[6] Ibid, 182.

expectations, and the infinitely proliferating unities of capitalism and the social.[7] Ngai defines

the category by what it is and what it isn't, often generating other aesthetic categories so that the

reader can convene a mental map of the exact territory zany marks out: "The zany thus has a

stressed-out, even desperate quality that that immediately sets it apart from its more lighthearted

comedic cousins, the goofy or silly."[8] This large cohort of media objects that Ngai corrals in her

chapter to show the various models of subjectivity that constitute zaniness helps her wrangle a

purpose from that aesthetic. Zaniness is "about a precariousness created specifically by the

capitalist organization of work" that "speaks to a politically ambiguous erosion of the distinction

between playing and working."[9]

Reading an episode of *I Love Lucy*, Ngai notes that the character of Lucy often operates

via a model of slippage, taking on different roles and performing different kinds of labor based

on the demands of the situation.[10] She works through how Lucy finds herself in a wide array of

situations in which the whole of her intellect and her body are absorbed in getting things done,

whether that is scheming or emotionally managing her husband or frantically attempting to

resolve the difficulties begun by some awry plot early in an episode. Lucy is a responsive

character who rises to the challenge of capitalist subjectivity, and she is a model for a person

who sees themselves within that system. Zaniness is the word Ngai gives to the aesthetic

category that generates the genre and conceptual boundaries of an episode of *I Love Lucy*, and as

an aesthetic category it follows the model that *I Love Lucy* popularizes. The media objects at the

center of analysis might range and change over time, but the aesthetically produced subject

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[7] Ibid, 184.
[8] Ibid, 185.
[9] Ibid, 188.
[10] Ibid, 178.

position that a viewer is intended to put themselves in the "shoes" of, Lucy and those like her, remains relatively stable. Things that we call zany might change over time, but zaniness as a structure has something coherent in it, and for Ngai that kernel is its focal subject position of flexibility under the demands of the market.

My interest in Ngai's aesthetic categories centers not their specifics but instead their explicit connection of the aesthetic and the social via media objects. These objects are emanations of an aesthetic category that then provokes reflection in an audience. Then new productions that influence the aesthetic category appear, pushing the category forward. Zaniness is an aesthetic that maps a relation between capitalism and subjectivity in the world. It does that work through explicit modeling. The aesthetic categories I develop here centered on human finitude *operate* in the same way, but around the limits of the human rather than capitalism. But if this short summary of zaniness is a description of the aesthetic category and how it instantiates it, then there is still an open question as to *how* it works and how exactly aesthetics line up with the social.

Cuteness, zaniness, and the quality of being interesting are modulations of the world; they are not origin points and they are not ontological in any traditional sense. In her review of *Our Aesthetic Categories*, Rebecca Ariel Porte evokes this feeling, writing that the categories of the book "might seem arbitrary and insignificant" in the face of the mass proliferation of art movements and aesthetic objects in our contemporary period.[11] However, crucially, Porte also

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[11] Rebecca Ariel Porte, "The Zany, the Cute, and the Interesting: On Ngai's *Our Aesthetic Categories*," *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, October 14, 2012. https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/the-zany-the-cute-and-the-interesting-on-ngais-our-aesthetic-categories

demonstrates how the method functions in the review, connecting Ngai's work of aesthetic analysis to political economy in a much more plainspoken way than Ngai does in the book:

> "If you buy her conviction that the way we talk about our response to art can tell us a lot about important non-aesthetic features of our culture — how we use and process information, how we labor, how we play, and how we trade, buy, and sell — then her choice of categories comes into focus. In order to talk about how the aesthetic and the non-aesthetic inform one another, we need to think about the kinds of aesthetic judgments that happen alongside the daily practices of working, consuming, and exchanging, the kind of judgments that, because we make them lightly, socially, frequently, often pass unnoticed."[12]

The work of looking to and analyzing aesthetic categories, then, is largely built around analyzing the aesthetic formation of normative assumptions about culture, and more importantly, it is about understanding the specific forms and methods that aesthetic production uses to instantiate those assumptions. To call something cute, for example, is to embrace an entire relationship with an object that blurs the line between a commodity and the self that is dependent on a mimetic relationship between the softness of the cute thing and how we talk about it.[13] There is no singular object that exists in a vacuum which we then talk about, but rather objects, the discourse around then, how the objects frame that discourse, and how we normalize those objects *as* objects are all happening concurrently and simultaneously.

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[12] Ibid, np.
[13] Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 67.

To choose the method of the aesthetic category, as opposed to a "distribution of the sensible" or simply a bundle of affects that fuels contemporary capitalism, is a swerving claim in contemporary theoretical investigations of culture.[14] A category carries with it the haunting image of structuralism, and one might think that the category provides a slippery slope into a world of strict paradigms for aesthetic analysis and understanding. This work distinguishes itself from the broad claims of contemporary structuralism, but it does have a similar goal in that it seeks to speak to a larger, generalizable condition of life. Indeed, there are even allies in the field today. For example, following the traditional pathways of anthropology, Philippe Descola opens the discipline to a pluralistic mode that accepts as real the various ways that different cultures engage with the world around them. One way of accomplishing this is via a slight redefinition of anthropology's goal as a discipline. Descola writes that "anthropology's mission is to attempt [. . .] to render intelligible the way in which organisms of a particular kind find a place in the world, acquire a stable representation of it, and contribute to its transformation by forging with it and between one another links either constant or occasional and of remarkable but not infinite diversity."[15] For Descola, the task of anthropology is no longer a sort of comparative metaphysics that Otherizes non-Western peoples, but rather as a system for parsing the material of reality. "[A]nthropology must shed its essential dualism," he writes, "and become fully monistic."[16] Parsing the monad is, for Descola, structural work, and it entails creating "structural typologies" that allow one to identify and then compare vastly different cultures who are

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[14] For the concept of the distribution of the sensible, see Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, ed. and trans. Gabriel Rockhill (New York: Continuum, 2006). For the broad application cases of affect theory, see Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, eds. *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

[15] Philippe Descola, *Beyond Nature and Culture*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013), xvii.

[16] Ibid, xvii.

themselves parsing up the monad, or at least the shared materials of the world, in vastly different ways.[17] While the work of this dissertation is not structuralist in the same way that Descola's work (and the work of Levi-Strauss) is, it shares a concern about how we parse the roiling material of the world into discrete categories that allow us to speak about them and narrativize them into our daily lives as individuals, as people in a culture, and as a species. I also find alliance with philosopher Déborah Danowski and another anthropologist, Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, who take the modes of structural comparison to the actual question of the end of the world. As they write together, "the semiotic regime of myth, perfectly indifferent to the empirical truth or falsity of its contents, comes into play whenever the relation between humans as such and their most general conditions of existence imposes itself as a problem for reason."[18] In other words, something more abstract than strict empirical storytelling enters into a cultural narrative when that culture is under duress, and these authors name that myth. While I obviously find aesthetic categories and diagrams to be more productive for my own analysis, I simply want to note that the same function that Danowski and Viveiros de Castro see myth having is roughly the same formal work that an aesthetic category does, although in slightly different ways. If a myth is a story a culture tells itself, the aesthetic category or the diagram is the organizational structure that allows that myth to exist in a particular way. More than that, it is the arrangement of reality in such a way that a cultural narrative can even emerge. This dissertation is not methodologically structuralist, but it seeks to get "under" structuralism to address some of the same concerns structuralists have.

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[17] Ibid, 392.

[18] Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, *The Ends of the World*. Trans. Rodrigo Nunes (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2017), 6.

Returning to Ngai, she takes great care to delimit the domain where her aesthetic categories are most useful, and she largely takes questions of structure or systematicity to be secondary to the core of her theorization of life under contemporary capitalism. For her, aesthetic categories are best suited for modeling and talking about the "sensuous, affective reflections of the ways in which contemporary subjects work, exchange, and consume."[19] The categories that she has chosen to analyze "call forth not only specific subjective capacities for feeling and acting but also specific ways of relating to subjects and the larger social arrangements these ways of relating presuppose."[20] In sum, aesthetic categories are ways of grasping scaled events that cannot be appropriately captured by investigating a single media object. There is no *one thing* that delivers the cute. Instead, there is a field of production, and aesthetic categories are a way of both naming that field and mechanistically determining the conditions under which is produces, reproduces, grounds, and naturalizes itself.

The work of the category is not about drawing clear lines of demarcation between different ways of experiencing the world. Despite residing under names like "the cute," it is not necessarily a typological system in which one thing is itself and nothing else. A single subject does not engage with cuteness to the exclusion of all other forms of aesthetic experience. A cute object like a Hello Kitty doll might suddenly shift registers when put into museum gallery space beside an Andy Warhol piece. It might deliver feelings of revulsion or anger in someone who does not see themselves as a part of the culture that produces or has fondness toward that object. But positive or negative, Ngai would argue, they are responding to the practiced innocence, diminutive stature, and unaggressive aesthetic that typifies the cute. Categories do not merely

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[19] Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 1.
[20] Ibid, 11.

describe a *thing*, but instead a social field of relation between a given object, the objects around it, and how a given subject experiences it in relation to that field. As Ngai writes in the afterword for *Our Aesthetic Categories*,

> "Contemporary zaniness, cuteness, and interestingness are, at the deepest level, about performance, commodities, and information. At the same time, by calling forth specific powers of feeling, knowing, and acting in relation to these ordinary, if by no means uncomplicated, "objects," they play to and help complete the formation of a historically specific kind of aesthetic subject: "us."[21]

Aesthetic categories are fundamentally about demonstrating the social dimension of aesthetic experience and presenting the critic with tools for teasing them apart and, in Ngai's case, understanding how aesthetics shepherd subjects into ever-more-extreme ways of being in service to the demands of the capitalist order. Distilled down slightly, they are ways of grappling with how aesthetics are tied to social phenomena. Ngai put it this way in an interview with *Cabinet* before the release of the book:

> "The justification of aesthetic judgments, which will always involve an appeal to extra-aesthetic judgments—political, moral, historical, cognitive, and so on—is, I think, the really interesting heart of all aesthetic discourse and experience. Aesthetics is a discourse not just of pleasure and evaluation, but of justification."[22]

In the quotation, Ngai argues that aesthetic categories are not merely bottom-up phenomena that emerge from the sense data (or, to use a different kind of technical language,

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[21] Ibid, 233.
[22] Adam Jasper and Sianne Ngai, "Our Aesthetic Categories: An Interview with Sianne Ngai," *Cabinet* 43, (Fall 2011):np. http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/43/jasper_ngai.php

affects) that individuals encounter in their day to day. Aesthetic categories are not simply what happens when phenomenal experience structures itself. Rather, they are in conversation with other processes; they emerge *dynamically* from a complicated social field that is populated by the "raw materials" of affect as well as other stronger or better-formed categories and the material conditions that make them all possible.[23] The conversation between these processes is facilitated, at least in the realm of human thought, by judgment.

Tracing Aesthetic Categories Through To Judgment

The idea that judgment might be involved in aesthetic experience is philosophically controversial. Ngai establishes this controversy as existing between two rough camps, those of Immanuel Kant and Friedrich Nietzsche respectively. For the former, "aesthetic judgment and experience are inextricable" while for the latter "they have little or nothing to do with one another."[24] The stakes of this claim of judgment have to do with the bedrock from which Ngai's theory is built: judgment provides the baseline from which we can understand the aesthetic category as something that speaks across multiple subjects in the world. It is not an emanation that comes from you or I, but rather it is a communally created amorphous set of positions toward certain aesthetics that cohere around subjects and their experiences in the world. Conceptually, judgment is what allows us to discuss *categories* at all as things that are shot through with our individual thoughts and feelings as well as the collective pooling of our judgments as a group of creatures considering the world in front of us.[25]

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[23] In the same *Cabinet* interview, Ngai argues that affects are ultimately the building blocks of aesthetic categories themselves. For a more extensive understanding of Ngai's position within the field of affect theory, see her *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).
[24] Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 235.
[25] This is not a philosophically uncomplicated claim, as we will see in the longform discussion of Immanuel Kant later in the chapter.

Ngai presents two schools, a Nietzschean one and a Kantian one, of understanding how humans experience aesthetics to set some parameters for producing aesthetic categories not just as heuristics but as a real, material conditions within the world. For her, we should reject the binary between judgment and the pure, Nietzschean unmediated waves of sense data, and instead embrace a "spectrum of verdictive force" that shoots across the aesthetic event as it relates to the experiencing agent.[26] To put it another way, any given person experiences things and then feels a certain way about them, and they are doing that *inside* of a larger system of honed judgment that surrounds them in the world. While Ngai is not using this language, I want to note that it is easy to understand this as a dynamic system. Think of any pop song that you heard, enjoyed, and then became annoyed with after you heard it too many times. The constant contact alongside the dynamic affective "charge" of the song was operated on by this verdictive spectrum. You are coming into contact with the song, but you're also coming into contact with collective judgment about aesthetics (a category) and your own negotiation with judgment inside of that larger category.

My intervention into Ngai's substantial contribution to aesthetic theory is centered on questioning how we understand the genesis and movements of these aesthetic categories. Ngai is interested in reporting how her categories of the cute, the zany, and the interesting instantiate themselves in contemporary life; I am invested in extending this line of argument into a larger apparatus that interrogates the historical ground and phenomenal impetus for the establishment of aesthetic categories in a more general sense. I do not believe it is sufficient to simply point to capitalism as a root cause of certain modes of aesthetic engagement. As Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari argued persuasively across the two volumes of *Capitalism & Schizophrenia*, capitalism

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[26] Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories,* 236.

is ultimately parasitic in that it seizes on ontological conditions of reality in a double process of naturalizing itself and making thought beyond its structures seems impossible. However, those ontological conditions are not fully subsumed beneath capitalism and they will exist beyond capitalism should it ever be abolished. This means that any theory of aesthetic categories, if they are meant to truly align with and speak to aesthetic experience analytically, must fundamentally go beyond the human's relationship to capitalism and its mode of social organization. If Ngai is correct in suggesting that there is a dynamic field of aesthetic categories and their associated judgments, then there must be aesthetic categories that are extensions of other phenomena that structure human life that are concerned about modulating humans toward behavior that is *not* consumption and production.[27] The method itself therefore demands that we take these categories beyond this initial point and into other domains.

Finitude, or the limit of the human itself, is figured in innumerable ways across contemporary media, and the *expectation* and *worry* about the final encounter with that finitude, whether it be death or the limits of human thought and experience, have just as much of an effect on the organization of human societies as capitalism does. I have no interest in a direct comparison to Ngai's categories, and I make no claims to "better access" human aesthetic experience. There are no deeper levels, no bottom to get to in the work of getting to the bottom of things. Instead, there is a dynamic field, and it is inarguable that Ngai's aesthetic categories of capitalism have both a robust explanatory power within capitalism but also an inability to speak across domains beyond that system. If aesthetic category theory can be used beyond the analysis

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[27] If the converse is true and aesthetic categories *only* exist in relationship to capital, then our situation would be dire indeed. For one thing, it would mean that capitalism and mass aesthetics are inextricable, which seems impossible given the sheer amount of mass aesthetic events and motifs that predate capitalism.

of capitalism, then the question of human finitude is a useful test for how robust this paradigm is. Not everything is commodified, but all things do die.

While Ngai's aesthetic categories are excellent explanatory devices, they do not offer much of a trajectory when it comes to the process of understanding the life cycle of a category. And yet they are not eternal, so they *must* emerge and they *must* be extinguished. My desire is to put the generative analytic tool of the aesthetic category in conversation both with process philosophy and a materialist realist philosophical paradigm that grounds aesthetic categories in what Gilles Deleuze and Manuel DeLanda call the *diagram* in order to get a sense of the movement of aesthetic categories through time.

Before we make that move, however, we must turn to the philosophy of Immanuel Kant if we are to follow Ngai down to her own sources to find some fruitful alliances between aesthetic categories and diagrams. Credited with the so-called "critical turn" in philosophy, Kant's work functions as the foundation of much of the philosophical inquiry that has appeared in the European and American contexts since his death in 1804. Philosophical investigation about the nature of aesthetics and how humans perform the very act of judgment were irrevocably changed in response to Kantian thought, and many philosophers and theorists have defined their own ideas about those subjects either in concordance or distinction with Kant's work. Steven Shaviro summarizes much of this work in his *Without Criteria*, and he highlights a crucial argument put forward by Kant's so-called Third Critique, the *Critique of Judgment*. For Kant, Shaviro writes, "a judgment of beauty is affective, rather than cognitive. More precisely, it is a feeling entirely divorced from objective knowledge."[28] Aesthetic experience, in Shaviro's

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[28] Steven Shaviro, *Without Criteria: Kant, Whitehead, Deleuze, and Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2009), 4.

reading of Kant, is "being lured, allured, seduced, repulsed, incited, or dissuaded."[29] If this evokes Ngai's aesthetic categories, it is because her aesthetic category theory is built on these Kantian foundations.

Ngai's reading of Kant also begins with the *Critique of Judgment*. "For Kant," she writes, "beauty is famously not a stylistic property of objects but rather, as the *Critique of Judgment* progressively reveals, a compulsory sharing of pleasure that refers the subject to a relation among his subjective capacities, which in turn refers him to a relation between the world in general and his ability to know it."[30] That is to say that judgment and its ability to legislate amongst the faculties is critical for a subject to understand how they get different "angles" on the world. We come to understand *how* we understand the world via judgment's function; thought can reflect on itself. However, this one-to-one relationship, the laundry list of compelled relations that Shaviro points out, are insufficient to understand the social phenomenon of the group dynamic that the concept of the aesthetic category demands. If categories are *social* and operate through an intergroup domain, then how do we account for the supposed subject-object relation that apparently subtends aesthetic experience? Ngai answers this by claiming that there is "something covert or surreptitious" about the aesthetic category itself.[31] She embraces the tricky mechanism, walking through a combination of Gerard Genette, Stanley Cavell, and J.L. Austin in order to address the rhetorical *function* of the concept of the category. What is most pertinent for us, however, is her conclusion:

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[29] Ibid., 4.
[30] Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 38.
[31] Ibid, 40.

"It is as if aesthetic discourse, often deeply pleasurable and/or wildly irritating to participate in, in its own right, were at the deepest level a discourse about its own intersubjective and affective dynamics: about the complicated new set of feelings we might feel when we make our pleasures/displeasures public and check them against the pleasures/displeasures of others in what Elaine Scarry calls acts of perpetual 'self-correction and self-adjustment.'"[32]

If judgments and aesthetic experience are in constant contact with the social, then it follows that discourse (or at least social exchange) would provide the framework for those judgments to form within. Categories are born out of the constant checking that subjects do against the social field where they test if their own concerns or modes of existence are like those of others. This checking does not have to produce a unified, singular mode of experience, though. In Shaviro's reading, "aesthetic experience is a kind of *communication without communion* and *without consensus*. It can be shared, or held in common, without uniting the ones who share it."[33] The creation of the category is the constant friction of trying to compare your mental model of the world with everyone else's and then adjusting ever so slightly for the mismeasure between the social and yourself.

Between these two perspectives on Kantian aesthetic theory, that of Sianne Ngai and Steven Shaviro, we can see some shared conceptions. In Shaviro's words, aesthetic experience functions as a lure between subjects and objects, and it is in Ngai's reading that we truly see how that luring becomes both social and siloed into categories through which individuals can check their individual experiences against the social fabric. While Shaviro holds to a more

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[32] Ibid, 41.
[33] Shaviro, *Without Criteria*, 6.

individualistic mode (and is perhaps more faithful to Kant in that way) that suggests that there is very little social mediation that occurs between subjects and experiencing objects, Ngai argues persuasively that the moment of aesthetic experience is always fully absorbed by a discourse that surrounds that aesthetic experience. Crucially, she still holds out for the *purity* of that moment; aesthetic experience is not clouded here by the social, but rather the social and the aesthetic are flattened into a plateau of objects and relations that cannot be neatly separated from each other. Ngai comes to a working definition of aesthetic judgment in a passage about its "covert aspect" that works behind the scenes of all interactions, "its way of referring our feelings of pleasure and displeasure not just to objects or even our own subjective capacities, but also the social matrix of others with whom we are compelled to share and confirm these feelings in public."[34]

A helpful and practical way of approaching this Kantian mode of judgment can be found in Jean-Francois Lyotard's book-length conversation with Jean-Loup Thebaud, *Just Gaming*, which takes up this question of the social nature of judgment. The example that Lyotard uses to explore this is the way that Cashinahua storytellers frame their relationship to the narratives that they are recounting. Rather than lead with their own name, a storyteller characterizes their tale as "the story of X (here he inserts the name of the hero) as I have always heard it."[35] As Lyotard explains, the storyteller "presents himself as having been the first addressee of a story of which he is now the teller."[36] This is an explicit recognition that the storyteller is a mediating agent within a particular aesthetic regime. For Lyotard, "an utterer is always someone who is first of all an addressee" which means that the person who speaks "has been a recipient of a prescription"

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[34] Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories*, 44.
[35] Jean-Francois Lyotard and Jean-Loup Thebaud, *Just Gaming*, trans. Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 32.
[36] Ibid, 32.

and "is merely a relay."[37] It is also critical that the Cashinahua storyteller *ends* his story with his own name, both in the colonial language of Spanish or Portuguese, and in the indigenous language which has social relations built into it. Thus, for Lyotard, "when he gives his proper name, the teller designates himself as someone who has been narrated by the social body, in a narrative that includes proper names and in which he has a place of his own."[38] All people are fundamentally relays in a system of judgment, and the storyteller is a node *who recognizes and highlights his existence as a node*. The storyteller is not unique in the world, but the example renders the stakes and process of judgment clearly: we are all the storyteller, both producing and absorbing judgment, whether we know it or not. The storyteller's *reflexivity* is what makes his performance unique, not his function *as* a storyteller.[39]

It is obvious that the social is not eternal. In Bill Readings's monograph on Lyotard, his distillation of *Just Gaming*'s argument is this: "a just politics can only consist in responding to the imperative 'be just' without claiming to know in advance what it is to be just. Politics is thus not a matter of devising strategies for arriving at goals so much as experimenting in search of an indeterminate law, the idea of justice."[40] While Readings is paying particular attention to the application layer of politics here, we can see this as being a nice summation of how judgment functions in relation to the world *and* how it can work self-reflexively. We judge, and we think

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[37] Ibid, 31.

[38] Ibid, 32.

[39] What Lyotard misses, or at least chooses to bracket, in his valorization of this function is how the storyteller's function as a relay exists in a relation with systems other than social narrative. When the storyteller says his own name in the colonial language (before the longer, more elaborate name that highlights the indigenous social relations) he is acknowledging another *given* system that is using him as a relay. Lyotard's paganism, or the pluralism of judgment that shoots through all human subjects, is a fraught system that can carry liberationist tendencies as much as it can replicate and re-ground mechanisms of colonialism and its laundry list of material and symbolic violences.

[40] Bill Readings, *Introducing Lyotard: Art and Politics* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1991), 110.

about how we judge, and this feedback loop of outputs becoming part of the inputs gives us some

Kantian and Lyotardian understanding of the ground for the social transformations that operate

alongside the transformations of ways of performing judgments.

However, Lyotard's slippage into the non-European figure as an explanatory apparatus is

perhaps the best place to address the complicated relationship between Kant, aesthetic theory,

and racism. As Robert Bernasconi writes, there is a tendency to create a specter of the "real

Kant" that avoids the moral and political failings that the philosopher embraced in certain

portions of the *Critique of Judgment* or his *Anthropology from a Pragmatic Point of View*.[41] It is

not my intention to perform a similar operation here by rescuing the morally good parts of Kant

while jettisoning the morally suspect or compromised portions. Rather, I want to do exactly what

Bernasconi suggests and engage with the way that the Kantian conception of aesthetics produces

a particular mode of existence in modernity. As he notes, Kantian aesthetics are a paradigm shift

for philosophy, and we are living within that paradigm still.[42] The emergence of that paradigm is

what David Lloyd calls an aesthetic regime of representation under which the aesthetic

"furnish[es] the very concept of the political," by which he means that Kant's move from

aesthetics to human life *in general* is also the creation of a racial ordering of the world in the

time afterward.[43] Building on the work of Sylvia Wynter, Lloyd writes that "aesthetic philosophy

has functioned as a regulative discourse of the human," fundamentally operating as a mechanism

that demarcates the boundaries between those who have the fullness of humanity and those who

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[41] Robert Bernasconi, "Will The Real Kant Please Stand Up? The Challenge of Enlightenment Racism To The Study Of The History Of Philosophy," *Radical Philosophy* 117 (2003), 16-17.
[42] Bernasconi, "Will The Real Kant Please Stand Up?", 19.
[43] David Lloyd, *Under Representation: The Racial Regime of Aesthetics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 21.

do not.[44] It is critical that I make it clear that Lloyd is not simply claiming that aesthetic theory itself does this work, but rather that the fundamental grounding claims of the *concept* of aesthetic theory, and its existence as an applicable universal model, is what accomplishes this boundary drawing. In this formulation, Kant produced racializing discourse, but he also produced a framework that racializes everything it touches like a kind of compromising poison. I don't claim that any of this is wrong, but rather that there is a kind of ourobouretic relationship that Lloyd is pointing to: if Kantian aesthetic theory is the motor that drives the racialized mode of life in modernity and after, then it does seem like a toolbox that can wrench that aesthetic theory is what's required to actually pull it apart.

Fred Moten, alongside Lloyd, dissects the Kantian aesthetic project as a means of working through the way that aesthetics, politics, and the racialized nature of both come to resonate together. A critique of Kant's "deployment of difference in the regulation of difference and the deployment of imagination in the regulation of imagination" is the pathway that Moten takes to arrive at one portion of his theorization of blackness.[45] This attentiveness to Kant, who Moten calls both an enemy and a friend, "is to be held and liberated by the necessity of alternative frequencies, carrying signal and noise."[46] Due to Kant's specificity in constructing his philosophical paradigm, it becomes a relatively straightforward task of looking to what Kant excludes from his project of aesthetic experience in order to find the racialized figure who constitutes "the very mark of the noncategorical, of the outlaw that guarantees the law."[47] To put it another way, the existence of blackness (and, indeed, all other racializations with Kant) is

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[44] Ibid, 3.
[45] Fred Moten, *Stolen Life* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 8.
[46] Ibid., 10.
[47] Ibid., 15.

something that is *accounted for* but does not *count*. It is a mode of existence, what Moten calls paraontological, that is both systematized and yet understood precisely through how it is excluded and enclosed. In the third chapter of this dissertation, I walk through how this accounting-via-exclusion is critical to the maintenance of the aesthetic category of post-apocalypse and how it figures the end of the world and what it means for society to reborn from the ashes. Following Bernasconi, Lloyd, and Moten, it seems that the most appropriate method would be to take aesthetic theory to the point of its own limits and destruction. The final chapter of this dissertation performs this work, while the intervening chapters point to the moments of arrested life and constant recreation that the aesthetic needs to replicate and re-ground itself.

In Ngai, Shaviro, and Lyotard, we have seen judgment portrayed as a social phenomenon. For these thinkers, judgment appears at the point of personal discernment in a social field of relations. Individuals do not sit at some high vantage point from which they proclaim, without influence, about the things around them. Rather, we are all surrounded by social statements, utterances, and narratives about the world around us that we cannot help but speak through and about. The social nature of judgment poses some problems for judgment itself in the Kantian paradigm. If judgment is social, it is also ubiquitous; it is happening in most moments when an individual is negotiating the world around them. It is this "unifying capacity" of judgment (its ability to come to bear on *anything*) that Lyotard finds compelling.[48] Judgment possesses no object of its own, and it exists to preside over other mental faculties so that they can determine how to evaluate the things that exist within their own domain. Judgment is the function of the *judge* who adjudicates the correct domains for all things, and Lyotard suggests that we imagine

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[48] Jean-Francois Lyotard, *Enthusiasm: The Kantian Critique of History*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009), 12.

judgment as existing like "an outfitter or an admiral" that sails among islands (domains) and transfers insights and ideas between them.[49]

I have brought several strains of Kantian thought together here. All hold to the fundamental social nature of judgment. For Ngai, this means that there is a baseline of agreement, what Lyotard calls "a bond of communicability," that helps structure judgment both in accordance or against the social fabric.[50] A question continues to linger as to the nature of where that social fabric of judgment comes from. One could obviously answer this in a dogmatic way ("the base!") or in a flippant way ("culture!"), but nevertheless it is a disturbing question if we take Kant's insights and the theories built from them seriously. If we're always negotiating this strange social phenomenon that impacts the very way that we interact with things in the world, then where does it come from?

We must ask the question that Ngai never seems to. While *Our Aesthetic Categories* is concerned with the categories that give us the best purchase on postmodernism and its relationship to contemporary capitalism, there is much less concern with the clear lines between that current regime of categories and where they came from. If the social has such an impact on the individual's capacity for judgment, then where does that social backdrop come from? What *forms* our categories? We will turn to the process philosophy of Gilles Deleuze and Manuel DeLanda to help us answer this question.

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[49] Ibid, 12.
[50] Ibid, 37.

Deleuzian and DeLandan Assemblage Theory

The question of the social nature of judgment features prominently in Gilles Deleuze's early monograph on the work of Immanuel Kant. In a preface centered on four poetic formulas that are symptomatic of Kantian thought, Deleuze opens the section on the *Critique of Judgment* with a quotation from Rimbaud followed by an interpretation of a line of poetry: "'A disorder of all of the senses', as Rimbaud said, or rather an unregulated exercise of all of the faculties."[51] Reading this poem as stand-in for Kant, Deleuze sees the third critique not simply as a follow-through on the arguments being made in the first two but instead a significant confrontation with an argumentative reality that Kant necessarily had to deal with. "We see Kant," Deleuze writes,

> "at an age when great writers rarely have anything new to say, confronting a problem which is to lead him into an extraordinary undertaking: if the faculties can, in this way, enter into relationships which are variable, but regulated by one or other of them, it must follow that all together they are capable of relationships that are free and *unregulated*, where each goes to its own limit and nevertheless shows the possibility of some sort of harmony with the others."[52]

Much like Lyotard, Deleuze respects the power that Kant gives over to judgment as the faculty which "constitutes the original ground from which derive the other two critiques."[53] Judgment's existence, and its ability to marshal the other faculties, generates a freeing effect in the way that the human operates in the world. The construction of Deleuze's sentences evoke this

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[51] Gilles Deleuze, *Kant's Critical Philosophy*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xi.

[52] Ibid, xi-xii.

[53] Gilles Deleuze, "The Idea of Genesis in Kant's Esthetic" in *Desert Islands and Other Texts 1953 - 1974*, ed. David Lapoujade, trans. Michael Taormina (New York: Semiotext(e), 2004), 69.

effect: "The various faculties enter into an accord which is no longer determined by any one of them, and which is all the deeper because it no longer has any rule, and because it demonstrates a spontaneous accord of the Ego and the I under the conditions of a beautiful Nature."[54] Judgment's ability to *undermine* is the fascinating property for Deleuze, as it is "a tempest in the depths of a chasm opened up in the subject."[55] Deleuze saves the revelatory function of judgment until the last pages of *Kant's Critical Philosophy*. Here he argues that what we experience is produced by way of a "ruse of suprasensible Nature" that fundamentally bounds the sensible within itself.[56] The contact point between the sensible and the suprasensible is what creates that chaotic storm within the subject; the work of negotiation between the two is difficult, but this is precisely the point where Deleuze tackles the specific question of the social function of this relationship between the suprasensible and the sensible.

He posits it like a riddle: If sensible nature "always remains subject to laws which are its own," then what does anything outside of that look like?[57] The world that you or I can sense is clearly disordered and unmanaged by reason, and these "pure relations of forces" and "conflicts of tendencies" clearly demonstrate that the suprasensible is interjecting into our sensible world constantly.[58] Deleuze's claim is thus that Kant's philosophical framework demands we turn away from a scenario where we believe that individual rationality somehow guides the world. Instead, it is the human *species*, with an aggregate set of conceptions and judgments about the world, that function at the edge of the suprasensible and the sensible that is bracketed off inside of it.

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[54] Deleuze, *Kant's Critical Philosophy*, xii.
[55] Ibid, xii.
[56] Ibid, 74.
[57] Ibid, 75.
[58] Ibid, 75.

"Suprasensible Nature wanted the sensible to proceed according to its own laws," he argues, "in order to be capable of receiving, finally, the effect of the suprasensible."[59]

The claims that Deleuze is making during the dense two pages that end his book on Kant are arguing for a relationship between what humans can do, perceive, or know *at this moment* and what they will be able to do, perceive, and know *in the future*. This is fundamentally social because it is determined the species level, and it is contingent on historical conditions at the time. For Deleuze, this is the only way to relieve Kant's philosophy from a pure teleology of rational structure and harmony between heaven and earth. The constant churning of the suprasensible means that we must take seriously the concept of process of the vastness of the social.

While his book on Kant is generally descriptive of the Kantian project up to and including judgment, Deleuze is much more evaluative in his later essay "To Have Done With Judgment," which holds his favored "minor" figures (Kafka, Nietzsche, Artaud, and D.H. Lawrence) and their systems of justice in distinction from Kantian judgment.[60] In this essay, judgment itself is figured as a top-down decision structure from a god. "At bottom," Deleuze writes, "a doctrine of judgment presumes that the gods give lots to men, and that men, depending on their lots, are fit for some particular form, for some particular organic end. What form does my lot condemn me to? But also, Does my lot correspond to the form I aspire to?"[61] Rendered even more explicitly: "the judgment of God is nothing more than the power to organize to infinity."[62] While the majority of the essay is spent outlining the effect of what Deleuze calls

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[59] Ibid, 75.
[60] Gilles Deleuze, "To Have Done With Judgment" in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).
[61] Ibid, 128-129.
[62] Ibid, 130.

combat (the ability for certain works to fight against judgment itself), it is plain that the organizing principle of judgment, in all of its personal and distributed ways, is a mode of rendering the possible into the finite set of experienceable things in the world. Judgment renders lots not just for you and I, but for all things, in all ways.

In this section, we have explored Sianne Ngai's aesthetic categories and followed them to their philosophical ground in the work of Kant. From there, we have investigated Kant's *Critique of Judgment* and how it was taken up by poststructuralist philosophers in the 20th century. This move was not made merely to prove that it could be done or to simply clarify how judgment functions. Instead, I have gone down the rabbit hole of Kantian philosophy in order to demonstrate the linkages between that philosophy and Deleuze's own philosophy of assemblages in a bid to, ultimately, demonstrate that Deleuzian work on assemblages and Ngai's aesthetic categories share the same fundamental philosophical framework, assumptions, and claims about the structure of human aesthetic experience. What this explanatory work delivers is a mode of framing the structural claims that Ngai makes while also investigating the *engine* that powers those claims; it delivers both a theory of the category and its effects *alongside* an account of how those categories shift over time in relation to the objects they operate on and the humans who use them as interpretive methods for understanding the world.

We can see the shape of this linkage between Kant and Deleuzian assemblage theory in the latter's *Difference and* Repetition. In the preface to the English edition of this text, Deleuze claims that *Difference and Repetition* is the first work in which he *does* philosophy as opposed to tracing the lineage of other philosophers such as "Hume, Spinoza, Nietzsche, and Proust."[63] Kant

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[63] Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, trans. Paul Patton (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1994), xv.

does not make this list of philosophers that Deleuze claims here, despite the publication of

Kant's Critical Philosophy some years before. Furthermore, in his famous "Letter to a Harsh

Critic," Deleuze makes it clear that he sees his monograph on Kant as "a book about an enemy

that tries to show how his system works."[64] In this light, it might be surprising to see a

throughline of Kantianism that extends throughout Deleuze's development of a philosophical

system that appears to retreat from Kantian positions at every opportunity. And yet it exists.

I want to draw attention to Deleuze's evocation of what he calls "the image of thought"

throughout *Difference and Repetition*. In the same preface cited above, written nearly 30 years

after the original publication of the volume in French, Deleuze suggests that the chapter on this

topic had the most lasting impact on both his ensuing work alone and that which was published

alongside Félix Guattari. While the philosophical concepts of difference and repetition are the

core focus of the book, the image of thought is developed as a mode of human understanding and

interpretation; the image of thought is a constraint "which determines our goals when we try to

think."[65] Deleuze highlights the problem that the image of thought provides, which is that it

fundamentally cannot recognize encounters, problems, or "true enemies" that exist beyond its

boundaries.[66] The image of thought sets parameters for what can be interrogated at all, and

pushing against those parameters, or "a liberation of thought from those images which imprison

[thought]," is the crucial political mission that extends throughout all of Deleuze's work after the

publication of *Difference and Repetition*.[67] What is curious is that this could be merely seen as

evolved language for the faculty of judgment, or at least an augmentation of the *function* of

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[64] Gilles Deleuze, "Letter to a Harsh Critic" in *Negotiations 1972-1990*, trans. Martin Joughin
(New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 1990), 6.
[65] Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, xvi.
[66] Ibid, xvi.
[67] Ibid, xvii.

judgment into a system that understands it as a discrete thing that has defined boundaries to it. I've already established that judgment projects through everything that humans do, and this precise universalizable function is what makes it such a useful explanatory concept for Kant; for Deleuze, it's position at the very edge of what is thought and what *can be thought* is why it is so profound as a philosophical construct. While the image of thought is not literally a visual image for Deleuze, there is no reason that this would not operate in the same way in the field of aesthetics. A shot or a scene literally images an image of thought by creating a contained aesthetic experience that contains what is sensible and accessible to the human mind and excluding what is not. As D.N. Rodowick argues, Deleuze's fascination with the image of thought as an organizing principle of aesthetics is what animated the writing of his books on cinema: "This is the most compelling gambit of writing a 'cinematic' philosophy: to take an era's strategies of thinking-through, represented aesthetically in the nature of its images and signs, and render them in the form of philosophical concepts."[68] The image is *literally* the way that a given aesthetic era considers the world around it. It is the structure of aesthetic experience and the aesthetic objects, one and the same, as well as the boundaries of what can be considered as experienceable within a given aesthetic regime.

Deleuze also proceeds to his theory of the diagram through an adaptation and criticism of Kant's concept of schemata. Spurred on by his Spinozan immanent philosophical perspective, Deleuze redefines Kantian schematics to be more compatible with his immanent theory of process. Jakub Zdebik persuasively argues that Deleuze's diagram is an analogue to Kant's schemata, and references Deleuze's own words in his monograph on Michel Foucault to make

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[68] D.N. Rodowick, *Gilles Deleuze's Time Machine* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 7.

this case.[69] It should be noted, however, that Deleuze is *bending* Kant's notion of the schemata

in that later work. *Foucault* was published in 1986, while *Kant's Critical Philosophy* and

Difference and Repetition were published in 1967 and 1968, respectively. The Deleuze of 1967

understands the schemata as operative on a personal level as a means through which

understanding legislates the imagination. It is a forming process through which experience is

structured and digested by the subject.[70] The Deleuze of 1968 is more invested in the operations

of the schema, defining it as "a rule of determination for time and of construction for space" that

it "put to work in relation to concepts understood in terms of logical possibility."[71] This digesting

power of the subject, the ability *to schematize*, is "an immense power: it can divide a concept and

specify it according to a typology."[72] This power, however, also points to the problems of

schematism. "The schema does not account for the power with which it acts."[73] When one

schematizes, one does not reflect on the actual capability of schematizing; to analyze the schema

is to peer at the contents of a bottle without ever considering the bottle itself. As Melissa

McMahon notes in her elaboration of Kant's influence on Deleuze, Kant's schematism is built

from that limitation: "all Kant can say of any possible experience is that it will necessarily be in

space and time, show unity, causality, and so on. What falls outside this domain are, in one

direction, the pure Ideas of reason, because of their *unconditional* nature and, in the other

direction, the specificity and singularity of *actual* experience."[74] Deleuze accepts this

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[69] Jakub Zdebik, *Deleuze and the Diagram : Aesthetic Threads in Visual Organization* (New York: Continuum, 2012), 114-115.
[70] Deleuze, *Kant's Critical Philosophy*, 18.
[71] Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 218.
[72] Ibid, 218.
[73] Ibid, 218.
[74] Melissa McMahon, "Immanuel Kant" in *Gilles Deleuze's Philosophical Lineage*, eds. Graham Jones and Jon Roffe (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 91.

fundamental structure while disagreeing with its application, and it is through this augmentation that he arrives at a dramatisation rather than a schematization.[75]

What if, Deleuze asks, the sensation of existence is not about schemata prehending the world and interpreting them within a pre-existing framework, but instead about a framework that shifts immanently with the world? Thinking back to Deleuze's considerations of the insights of *The Critique of Judgment*, this is not singular. It is a constantly shifting, processional, and collective movement that determines what thinkable and schematizable. It is the process of the capability of witnessing or comprehending. This is the root of the diagram. Why does this matter for our journey from Ngai back to Kant and then forward through Deleuze? Deleuze's arguments about the image of thought, and its production, provide us with a framework for not only understanding the changes that happen in thought, but also the specific process through which those changes occur. This concept of the diagram will be important through the rest of this dissertation.

In the remainder of this chapter, I will explain the lineage of the diagram out of Deleuze's post-Kantianism before turning to Manuel DeLanda's uptake of the diagram in his broader, more structural account of ontogenesis and the formation of forms. Diagrams are our macro-level structures that organize collective sensibility for any given group, and the process of the diagram is a way of tracking how shifts in the realm of aesthetic sensibility occur. We will first walk through the process of how diagrams are formed and how they shift through time before turning to the mechanics of how those large-scale diagrams are augmented and effected by (and performs augmentations on) particular media objects.

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[75] Ibid, 98.

Diagrams

Deleuze's *Foucault* is a longform engagement with the career-length work of Michel Foucault. It is also Deleuze's longest and most in-depth elaboration of the concept of the diagram, an idea that was latent in Deleuze's work yet not fully elaborated. In *Foucault*, Deleuze is exploring that thinker's work in order to discover something precisely Deleuzian, and that something is the full elaboration of the diagram. The monograph is roughly divided into two broad thematics: knowledge and power. While these themes are shot through Foucault's work, it is important to remember that the work being done here is that of warping Foucault around Deleuze's philosophy. Deleuze is demonstrating that these two philosophers, so far away from each other in tone, choice of object, and political commitment, are covering the same ground. This is readily apparent in his meta-analysis of power, specifically in the *function* of that power. "The thing called power," Deleuze writes, " is characterized by immanence of field without transcendent unification, continuity of line without global centralization, and contiguity of parts without distinct totalization: it is a social space."[76] Later, he continues: "Power has no essence; it is simply operational. It is not an attribute but a relation: the power-relation is the set of possible relations between forces, which passes through the dominated forces no less than through the dominating."[77] This image of the operations of power is familiar to those who have studied the work of Foucault, but even they might be struck by the way that Deleuze evacuates the specificity of scenarios for what appears to be an almost-metaphysics of power. It has no essence, and it is only witnessable when it passes through certain points, and yet it is the

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[76] Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault*, trans. Sean Hand (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 27.
[77] Ibid, 27.

universal force that treats all of being as its medium. Power seems to be oil in water, visible only when looked at from the angle that catches the shimmer on its surface.

It is no mistake than Deleuze evokes the work of sociologist Gabriel Tarde several pages later as a thinker who approached existence as a social phenomenon in order to investigate "the real relations between forces."[78] What Deleuze is after here is a definition of power that is analogous (or even identical) to Spinozan affect. In achieving this he enables himself to borrow the philosophical explanatory apparatus that Foucault develops for how power comes to operate in the world. The inflection points in which we *see* power are the same inflection points at which we can see affect transforming in space-time; it is where we can witness *process*, or the production of reality itself, most clearly.

One of the places we can see this operation occurring is in Deleuze's discussion of Foucault's concept of the mechanism. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault goes to great lengths to establish the mechanism as the mode through which power is applied as force. It is in that book that Foucault states most clearly states his claims about how the social field functions. He argues that there is no privileged location that explains or summarizes all of reality. Power and control does not simply emanate from the State or from biology, for example. Instead, the social field itself is structured as a series of plotted points where knowledge is being produced and power relations are being asserted. As Foucault puts it, the relations of the social "are not localized in the relations between the state and its citizens or on the frontier between classes."[79] "There is neither analogy nor homology," Foucault writes, "but a specificity of mechanism and

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[78] Ibid, 36.
[79] Michel Foucault, *Discipline & Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1977), 27.

modality."[80] This is all to say that Foucault is dismissive of explanations of the social that treat the world as a Russian nesting doll that would see the state form, then the disciplinary form, then the group-to-group form, then an inter-group form, then the individual, as a replication of the same general rules of relations. Instead, each of those sites has its own particular *mechanism* that is historically defined and delimited by the knowledge that it produces and the power relations that pertain to it, an entire microphysics.[81]

Crucially, the analysis of these mechanisms do not define what power is. A machine in a factory does not define electricity, but instead demonstrates how electricity is put to use for a purpose; a mechanism does not define power, but instead demonstrates how power is exercised. Foucault is explicit about this in his lectures at the College de France in 1978: "[The analysis of mechanisms] simply involves investigating where and how, between whom, between what points, according to what processes, and with what effects, power is applied."[82] The mechanism is the specific, historically situated vector through which power is exercised in the world. Deleuze adopts this concept wholesale and translates it into the Deleuzian language of the "concrete assemblage."[83] What is crucial to note here is that Foucault is giving us a wholly immanent concept of the production of knowledge and power, and that Deleuze is augmenting it so that we have, heuristically, a dual process that operates simultaneously. It is a plotting device that crawls, without purpose, into the future. This is the operation of the diagram.

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[80] Ibid, 27.
[81] Ibid, 28.
[82] Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the College de France 1977-1978*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (New York: Picador, 2004), 2.
[83] Deleuze, *Foucault*, 37.

If the mechanism is something in the world that we can point to in order to analyze the microphysics of power, then the diagram is the thing that directs the creation of those mechanisms. The move that Foucault makes in *Discipline and Punish* when discussing the Panopticon is to demonstrate that

> "it is the diagram of a mechanism of power reduced to its ideal form; its functioning, abstracted from any obstacle, resistance or friction, must be represented as a pure architectural and optical system: it is in fact a figure of political technology that may and must be detached from any specific use."[84]

There is a disjuncture here. On one hand, the only way to ascertain how power operates in the world is to look to its mechanisms (or its concrete assemblages). On the other hand, there is an *abstracted* form of those mechanisms that haunts the material of the world. It is nonspecific and mobile. It does not seem to fit. Ultimately, Foucault makes this argument to claim that mechanisms of power can jump from domain to domain, from the family, home, school, factory, and office, and remain true to how it distributes and manages power. In this example, the Panopticon is a *mechanism of mechanisms*, a way of distributing and organizing the concrete assemblages of the world toward a particular end.

Deleuze's adopts this as the diagram. Diagrams are "the imposition of a form of conduct … by distributing in space, laying out and serializing in time, composing in space-time, and so on."[85] This adoption takes place via the same kind of slippage that I noted above. Where Foucault sees an immanent process of mechanism construction, Deleuze sees a bifurcated

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[84] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 205.
[85] Deleuze, *Foucault*, 34.

process of projection and material creation (both of which are immanent to each other). Deleuze

is clear about his development of Foucault's idea extending beyond what Foucault wrote:

"Where Foucault invokes the notion of a diagram it is in connection with our modern

disciplinarian societies, where power controls the whole field: if there is a model it is that of the

'plague', which cordons off the stricken town and regulates the smallest detail."[86] In this claim,

we are still Foucault's domain of the mechanism that manages the application of power. In the

next sentence, though, Deleuze writes: "But if we consider the ancient sovereign societies we can

see that they also possess a diagram, even if it relates to different matters and functions: here too

a force is exercised on other forces."[87]

The move that Deleuze makes here is from *power* to *force*. The Panopticon authorizes

and augments power across the social via mechanisms. The diagram organizes power across the

social and across *time*. If each era has its own diagram, and the diagram is the thing that creates

concrete assemblages in the world, then all of time and space operates due to the processional

movement of diagrams. Deleuze goes on to define these diagrams variously in *Foucault*. They

are "unstable or fluid, continually churning up matter and functions in a way likely to create

change."[88] They are "intersocial and constantly evolving" and functioning to "produce a new

kind of reality, a new model of truth."[89] Diagrams make "history by unmaking preceding realities

and significations, constituting hundreds of points of emergence or creativity."[90] In further

explanation, Deleuze writes that

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[86] Ibid, 34.
[87] Ibid, 34-35.
[88] Ibid, 35.
[89] Ibid, 35.
[90] Ibid, 35.

"The diagram is no longer an auditory or visual archive but a map, a cartography that is coextensive with the whole social field. It is an abstract machine. It is defined by its informal functions and matter and in terms of form makes no distinction between content and expression, a discursive formation and a non-discursive formation. It is a machine that is almost blind and mute, even though it makes others see and speak."[91]

The diagram is the engine of process. It is the way that reality forms itself. Diagrams push themselves ever-forward, without purpose, taking a plotted position in space-time and then using it as a leapfrog point that propels them further into the future. It is the framework within which phenomena are experienced; it is the organizing principle through which humans come to know the world around them, and it is through the diagram that Deleuze solves the problem of the image of thought that he found in Kant. Diagrams are immanent and reflexive. While they are experienced *by* a given subject, they are not beholden to that subject. The movement of the diagram is the movement of the image of thought, and grappling with how the diagram operates is the analytic through which the image of thought can begin to consider itself.

It is in the diagram that Deleuze is most clearly post-Kantian. Understanding how the diagram functions allows us to pose correct questions, and it is here that we can see most clearly Deleuze's investment in Kant's *Critique of Judgement* and judgement's capability to help legislate amongst the faculties. The diagram determines the boundary between a possible world and the world we live in; it is the mechanism that writes the virtual into the actual. As a faculty, judgment makes us capable of evaluating this experience. When Sianne Ngai returns to Kant to develop her aesthetic categories, she is fulfilling the same mission that Deleuze is when he

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[91] Ibid, 34.

returns to Kant in order to create the groundwork for the diagram. Both are parsing out the structure of a system that is both social and yet internal to a specific human. You and I can exercise judgment, but that judgment has infected us from the outside.

While I've already remarked that the diagram gives us an *engine* for understanding how aesthetic categories operate and change, I want to be clear here that the value of putting these two ideas together is in how they enable us to understand the production, maintenance, and alteration of common ways that human beings experience the world.[92] The most ontological reading of Deleuze tells us that diagrams and the assemblages they produce are the substrate of all things, from molecules to political life to the formation of galaxies, and while I find those nonhuman elements fascinating, I am mostly concerned with how the diagram gives us a way of understanding how human aesthetic experience either maintains stasis or changes through time. While media studies is quite comfortable making claims about the political ends of certain aesthetic experiences, the mechanistic process that generates those political ends is largely unremarked upon. The end point of interaction with media is either left to philosophical generalities or abandoned to empirical media effects scholarship. Looking to aesthetic categories bolstered by the specificity of diagrammatics enables us to grasp how ways of seeing and understanding media come into being and the possible actions that they afford. While this dissertation is singularly focused on the categories that manage finitude, or the limits of human life, one can easily imagine a proliferation of categories that structure, define, and delimit the ways that human beings understand the world that they live in through the things they are seeing,

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[92] It is crucial to note here that Deleuze's (and DeLanda's) understanding of how this function is not coupled to the human. Diagrams and their assemblages are produced in the world all the time. However, our access to something like "nonhuman aesthetics" is purely speculative and does not speak to the way that diagrams frame human aesthetic life, which is what I am most invested in here.

hearing, and interacting with. At the core of this lineage is Kantian judgment, but it should be clear that this Kantianism is not sufficient enough to produce a system that accounts for the production and changing of these categories; at best, Kant gives us the tools to understand how a single person fits into this complex system.

If the diagram is the engine of the aesthetic category, then the name that we give to the aesthetic category is the summation of what a diagram is *producing* in relation to a particular aesthetic experience. Deleuze's writing in *The Logic of Sensation*, his book on the artist Francis Bacon, tends toward understanding the diagram purely in relation to the aesthetic. While diagrams exist across domains and are operational at all levels of material existence, from galaxies to governments, *The Logic of Sensation* is where Deleuze seems the most invested in how the diagram integrates with aesthetics. In Bacon's painting, Deleuze writes, "the diagram is thus the operative set of asignifying and nonrepresentative lines and zones, line-strokes, and color-patches."[93] Crucially, Deleuze goes on to describe this diagrammatic function as "operative," which, I argue, is precisely the work that the diagram does. It *operates on* the visual field, both disordering and ordering particular assemblages within the world.[94] "The diagram is indeed a chaos, a catastrophe, but it is also a germ of order or rhythm," Deleuze explains. "It is a violent chaos in relation to the figurative givens, but it is a germ of rhythm in relation to the new order of the painting."[95] The diagram thus has a function as a mechanism for dis- and re-articulating aesthetics within the lifeworld of a given perceiving creature and which gives variability to what sort of images are produced successively in time. As Vlad Ionescu notes, "the

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[93] Gilles Deleuze, *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation* trans. Daniel W. Smith (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 82-83.
[94] Ibid, 83.
[95] Ibid, 83.

diagram is a force disturbing the figurative aspects, where resemblance is no longer the fundamental principle guiding the image."[96] Instead, there is an involution of what is recognized and what can come into recognition. While his book on Bacon is laser-focused on how that it happens within a very specific painter's work, we can easily extrapolate that into other images. We are coming into contact with a media object, and the diagram of aesthetic relations is determining how that encounter happens. In the same way that the diagram of the Panopticon determines the modes of interaction that a human will have with an architecture, any given diagram (or, in our language here, aesthetic category) will determine the structure of possibilities that we will have with any given work.

What remains here is to talk about the specific operations of the diagram. While Deleuze's contributions are invaluable to a general theory of the diagram and the aesthetic category, his exact explanation as to how the diagram generates assemblages in the world, and what the crawling maneuvers of the diagram look like over time, leaves something to be desired. He is willfully vague so that readers will understand the magnitude of his claims; diagrams, after all, are operating on *everything*, from geology to human thought to the evolution of species. It is the way that time happens to space and how space deforms time. While Deleuze offers us a full account of diagrams and how they function in relation to their assemblages, I think that it is valuable to work through Manuel DeLanda's analytically-inflected fork of assemblage theory in order to reach a clearer, more generally useful apparatus for interpretation. Deleuze's fondness for description of similar systems and concepts without clearly outlining or explaining how they work (or, indeed, even how they relate to each other) has meant that his work alone and with

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[96] Vlad Ionescu, "'It is as if...a catastrophe overcame the canvas': Deleuze and the Pictorial Setup" in Frederik Le Roy et al. *Tickle Your Catastrophe! Imagining Catastrophe in Art, Architecture and Philosophy*. (Gent, Belgium: Academia Press, 2011): 111-125, 113.

Félix Guattari often reads as much like a riddle as it does a serious philosophical investigation. DeLanda has honed assemblage theory into a distinct toolbox, and in the next section we will rifle through that toolbox to develop an understanding of the practical implications of the diagram and how it comes to bear on assemblages in their virtual and actual forms.

DeLanda's development of assemblage theory rests on two explicit claims. The first is that the assemblage as a concept is the core of philosophical realism, and that all things in existence are scaled versions of assemblages; all assemblages are *assemblages of assemblages*, and the work of assemblage theory is that of doing the analytic work of identifying the intensive and extensive qualities of those assemblages while parsing out its *diagram* (which manages an assemblage's relationship between its actuality and its virtuality).[97] The second is that "assemblage" is only a partial translation of the French *agencement*, a term the encompasses both "the action of matching or fitting together a set of components (*agencer*), as well as the result of such an action: an ensemble of parts that mesh together well."[98] Both of these core claims are crucial to understanding the usefulness and application of assemblage theory: assemblages are *all there is*, and the process of generating and denoting an assemblage are one and the same.[99]

DeLandan diagrams are a more honed and systematized form of the Deleuzian diagram, but the fundamental claims about what diagrams *do* remains unchanged. Rather, what DeLanda

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[97] Manuel DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 71.
[98] Ibid, 1.
[99] Another crucial claim of assemblage theory is that it is a *realist* theory, meaning that assemblages are independent of the contents of our minds. Assemblages do not need humans to consider them in order to exist, and the processes that generate they do not require the human mind to exist. See chapter 6 of *Assemblage Theory* for a partial explanation, and for further argumentation, Manuel DeLanda and Graham Harman, *The Rise of Realism* (Edinburgh, Scotland: Edinburgh University Press, 2017).

offers is an increased amount of practical clarity and a finite vocabulary for understanding how assemblages come into being. Diagrams are components of assemblages. It is "the structure of a possibility space, a structure given by topological invariants like dimensionality, connectivity, and distribution of singularities."[100] More specifically, "the diagram captures the structure of the space of possibilities associated with an assemblage's variable components, as well as the structure of the space of possible parameter values."[101] This is similar to Deleuze's description of the diagram as a germ of order in the previous section; it is the basic organizing principle that begins to generate a baseline predictability within material systems. The diagram is the function that stretches over both things that *already are* in the world and things that are *potentially* in the world, and it is the process through which those potentials are brought into what both Deleuze and DeLanda call the *actual*. The realm of these potentials is the *virtual*.

In discussing the diagram in Foucault and Deleuze earlier, I stressed the function of the diagram as a shifting set of functions that brought material conditions into the world; it is the method through which *the next thing* happens in the world. What the "virtual" and the "actual" offer us as conceptual tools is a way of understanding *how* that "next thing" appears and from where it emanates. Put simply, the actual is what exists and the virtual is what could exist from any combination of the material components in the world given variations in energy. Both are material, and both are real. Any given rock that we can hold in our hand is actual. Its virtual is all of its possible state changes (as molten magma) or augmentations (broken into bits, made into a sculpture). An operative question here is about the actual mechanism of process. It is very easy to achieve conceptual buy-in for a large but finite set of potential locations, states, and positions

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[100] DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory*, 122.
[101] Ibid, 130.

for matter in the universe; this is, after all, the very basis of our assumptions about matter and the equivalence of matter and energy. What causes one thing to become another? What causes an assemblage to transform into another? What keeps my coffee cup from spontaneously becoming a bird at any given moment, given the translatability of actual assemblages through their virtual possibilities?

DeLanda gives us two separate mechanisms for understanding the mechanical operations of assemblages (and thus, also, diagrams). The first is the existence of intensive and extensive qualities. The second is the concept of the singularity.

Intensive and extensive quantities are ways of understanding what assemblages look like, how they act, and how they maintain or lose their forms. "The term 'extensive,'" DeLanda explains, "is used for properties like length, area, or volume that can be added to each other yielding only a quantitative change; the term 'intensive,' on the other hand, is applied to properties in which addition may result in a qualitative change. Examples of these properties are speed, temperature, pressure, concentration, voltage."[102] A virtual possibility space for a rock, then, is the sum total of all of its potential changes in these quantitative and qualitative ways. This could include *its very dissolution* in the case of extracting all of the calcium from the rock with the use of some kind of acid compound. It is critical here that we differentiate the diagram from a Platonic form; it is not as if there is an ideal rock in the virtual that this actual rock I am touching tends toward or defines itself again. Rather, there are assemblages like this rock, and then there are the *potential states* that its matter could tend toward; it is a map that draws itself forward in time as matter undergoes processes with other matter. Thus the actual rock-

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[102] Ibid, 76.

assemblage has a diagram that stretches out from it in the virtual as a map of all possible

formations of its materials. Part of the possibility space of that diagram is the rock's potential to

be changed into a statue. It enters into an assemblage with a hammer and a chisel, and in doing

so its diagram becomes coextensive with the diagrams of that hammer and that chisel, and so its

extensive qualities are changed (it is now a carved head of Karl Marx) and its intensive

properties are changed (it is smaller and so heat penetrates and is stored within it much more

easily).

However, in a world of roiling matter undergoing process continually, one might wonder

why certain forms happen more often than others. Why do rocks form? Why doesn't all the

matter in the universe tend toward the shape of felt paintings of Elvis? Why do some things stay

the same, and why do other things change? What is the relationship between stasis and continual

change? In the words of Kara Keeling, what are the conditions under which the "various

hegemonic and official common sense might be exploded" to produce something new?[103]

DeLanda offers us the concept of the *singularity* to account for this.

One of the earliest mentions of the singularity as a concept for DeLanda is in his *War in

the Age of Intelligent Machines*. It is there that he proposes that singularities, a concept borrowed

from mathematics, provide a way for understanding commonalities in structure across domains.

"There is much evidence to support the idea that, in the neighborhood of a singularity (that is,

near a critical point), a set of previously disconnected elements converges into a synergistic

whole. But there is much less evidence that singularities themselves play a causal role in this

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[103] Kara Keeling, *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, The Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007), 6.

process. They seem to be intrinsic features of the global dynamics of population."[104] Many years

later, in his *Assemblage Theory*, DeLanda characterizes the singularity in a much simpler way: it

is a "critical point."[105] They are "attractors" that affect the material around them and direct the

tendencies of matter: "these singularities are surrounded by an area within which they affect

trajectories, an area called a 'basin of attraction.'"[106] In the same way that a body hurtling

through outer space will have its trajectory affected by the gravity of a planet like Jupiter, the

tendencies of a particular assemblage developing *in time* will tend toward singularities and their

structuring effects. The chemicals that make up a rock have several singularities within them:

they *change states* at high temperatures; they fracture along bonds when *force* is applied; they

are *rigid*. And all of those singularities constitute a basin of attraction that tends the diagram of

the hammer-chisel-rock assemblage toward a sculpture rather than a spontaneous transformation

into a felt painting of Elvis. The same set of basic assumptions about tendencies around

singularities applies to all of matter, and this is what generates the isomorphic-yet-disparate

formations in the world that systems dynamics theory or complexity theory finds so compelling.

Diagrams and singularities have a peculiar relationship to one another. What we call the

diagram is really a description of a stable state of the distribution of singularities within a given

set of assemblages, and what *produces* a given diagram is the process of singularities solving

themselves out in order to generate a stable balance. In the formation of a diagram, singularities

cascade through a set of "symmetry-breaking bifurcations" that split and reform a given

diagram.[107] While this is the most abstract possible way of understanding aesthetic experience,

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[104] Manuel DeLanda, *War in the Age of Intelligent Machines* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 18.
[105] DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory*, 78.
[106] Ibid, 120.
[107] DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory*, 121.

this is simply the process of overcoming or dealing with contradictions within the aesthetic field. When Steven Shaviro says that we are "post-cinematic," for example, he is pointing to a particular diagram of aesthetic experience in which the classic style of filmmaking has become destabilized and then reformed within a new paradigm.[108] When he works through the way that *Gamer* re-articulates cinematic space, he is pointing to a moment where a series of symmetry-breaking bifurcations are happening, or where what we expect based on previous experience and what is happening in front of us are two different things, and then those things are being solved out without contradiction. Film studies is comfortable with this as a psychological phenomenon, but what DeLanda offers us is a view that sees this as not just operative in the viewer-film assemblage but also in the film-film, film-industry, film-other media, and all of the other possible assemblages that put this re-diagramming function into operation. The entire universe of chaos is tending toward a form of order, and the diagram gives us a way of coming to terms with the process through which certain orders come to be stable while others tend toward failure. Singularities that cause a shattering due to incompatibility, like a wine glass resonating at the exact right frequency, tend toward decoherence. The vast majority of things hold together with some recognizable regularity. When we go looking for stable categories, what are really seeing is an order at the "bottom" of a cascade symmetry-breaking sequence, and in Deleuze & Guattari's language this is the most territorialized form of the assemblage. When we talk about the blockbuster or the modernist novel, these large categories that somehow manage to consume a great variety of real, material complexity within them, we are experiencing the end result of an

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[108] Steven Shaviro, *Post-Cinematic Affect* (Winchester: Zer0 Books, 2009).

assemblage process of autoreduction or relations.[109] To become more stable, an assemblage files all the edges off.

DeLanda offers this mathematical and chemistry-inflected way of understanding assemblages and their attendant diagrams in order to answer questions about coherence: Why does the world tend toward certain things and away from others? Why stability instead of pure chaos? The questions that I am asking about aesthetic categories emerge from similar concerns. How do we constantly create bleak and post-apocalyptic narratives and aesthetic assemblages that foreclose how human life functions in the past, the now, and the future? How do those things cohere into stable categories that manage the relationship between human life and new aesthetic products? How does something *so foreclosed* become a DeLandan basin of attraction around which so much of human life manages to cohere? These questions animate my concerns, and it is through DeLanda's abstractions that we can best access a broad set of functional parameters that give us the language to talk about contemporary aesthetics.

DeLanda's conception of intrinsic and extrinsic qualities paired with a theory of singularities gives us an understanding for how diagrams produce their assemblages, but we must also address how assemblages come to be unique historical entities. Despite the similarity of diagrammatics in the formation of any two rocks, it is crucial to note that they are both unique historical individuals. There is no diagram-assemblage process that is identical between any two assemblages, even if they are factory-made Donald Duck statuettes. Each assemblage in the world has its own genesis and its similarity to other assemblages comes from shared diagrammatic components. In some ways, the transforming matter-energy of our universe is

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[109] DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory*, 127-128.

understood by DeLanda to function like a giant Lego set. There are fundamental rules for how the different basic elements "click" together (physics; thermodynamics), and those rules generate particular forms that appear again and again. Moreover, this operates at a massive scale, so much that the way that micro elements "click" together has an impact on new forms all the way up the macro scale. It is this way that two Legos fit together determines the basic structure of a Lego Millennium Falcon.

This ability for material things to interact with and augment each other, therefore creating an assemblage, has an additional set of qualities that must be addressed before moving forward: relations of exteriority. While a formed assemblage contains all of the properties mentioned above (intensive and extensive qualities, singularities, and a diagram) they are also characterized by their capacity to be broken down and formed again. Relations of exteriority suggest "that a component part of an assemblage may be detached from it and plugged into a different assemblage in which its interactions are different."[110] In one of his more gruesome illustrations, DeLanda makes this materially real: "pulling a live animal's heart out will surely kill it but the heart itself can be implanted into another animal and resume its regular function."[111] The heart, which is its own assemblage, can enter into relations with other assemblages to empower them; removed from those relations, it is disempowered. Outside of biological examples, we can just as easily imagine this; one can remove a brick from a wall, for example, and put another brick there. Within a media object example, it becomes even more clear: Dali adding a mustache to the Mona Lisa is this kind of building of an assemblage; cutting shots out of a film is another. In each instance, the parts of the assemblage are freely able to be added and attached to new

[110] Manuel DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of* Society, 10.
[111] Manuel DeLanda, *Philosophy and Simulation: The Emergence of Synthetic Reason* (New York: Continuum Books, 2011), 184.

assemblages, fundamentally changing how that assemblage functions and operates in concert with other assemblages in the world (like, say, a human body interacting with it). Relations of exteriority are how we understand how similar assemblages can exist in the world and how those assemblages can be augmented in front of us. Without using this language, Kara Keeling's Deleuzian (and Kantian) theory of common sense functions in much the same. Keeling argues that common sense "refers simultaneously to a shared set of motor contrivances that affect subjective perception *and* to a collective set of memory-images that includes experiences, knowledges, traditions, and so on that are available to memory during perception."[112] The availability of a common set of senses or modes of engaging in sensation/perception and the archive of motor reactions made culturally available to those feelings (the smile at humor; the jump at horror) is another way of getting at the same idea of relations of exteriority in that it creates the conditions under which two humans can connect, and have some kind of basic commonality, when they each interact with a film. The very fact that two people can experience a video game and say "we played something" is dependent on relations of exteriority, and this provides a baseline for engaging with ideas of process. How these relations change and shift, particularly in the moments where two people *cannot* reliably claim they had the same experience, operate at the edge of the virtual and the actual. This informs how we see the diagram of an assemblage functioning: What parts are added to individual assemblages? What parts are removed? How does the assemblage change, and how does the diagram alter in relation to that augmentation? Tracing the developments and alterations of both diagrams and individual assemblages within certain contexts is some of the work that I am undertaking in this project.

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[112] Keeling, *The Witch's Flight*, 14.

I would be remiss here without at least addressing some of the criticisms of assemblage theory. In a long "methodological breather" at the opening of the third chapter of his *Habeas Viscus*, a book on racializing assemblages of a different kind, Alexander Weheliye explains how contemporary Deleuzianism functions. He warns against a "descent into the quagmire of orthodox Deleuzianism" that generates Deleuze as a master thinker and which elides the genuine contributions to that thought by his coauthor Félix Guattari.[113] This argument hinges on summary reading of a collection of essays titled *Deleuze and the Postcolonial*, and what Weheliye is warning against here is doctrine versus generation, or put another way, shoring up the foundations of a French philosopher versus recognizing problems for what they are. In a footnote for this argument, Weheliye references a published back-and-forth debate between Eugene Holland and Christopher Miller as to the uptake, defense, and criticisms of Deleuze & Guattari's thought in postcolonial work. In his composite book review titled "Representation and Misrepresentation in Postcolonial Literature and Theory," Holland addresses a postcolonial criticism of Deleuze & Guattari's work by characterizing it as "maniacal attack" that "ranges from minor misreadings to serious misinterpretation."[114] The essay itself is a painstaking point-by-point breakdown of any minor or major slight that Holland finds in the essay, but it is less important here to note the specifics and more to state that there is a tone that suggests the criticism itself is out of line merely for existing. Important for the work at hand is Holland's explicit contention that we understand Deleuze & Guattari as creative philosophy and not representational science.[115] For Holland, this process gives the philosophers infinite leeway when

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[113] Alexander Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 47.

[114] Eugene W. Holland, "Representation and Misrepresentation in Postcolonial Literature and Theory," *Research in African Literatures* 34, no. 1 (2003), 162.

[115] Ibid, 163.

it comes to issues of conceptual appropriation or the use of anthropological theories of the early 20th century to ground their conception of the nomad. The very idea that this concept could be "representing" anything seems laughable to Holland, and he grounds his criticism in that very distinction.[116] Christopher Miller's response to Holland's review of his book in a later issue of the same journal makes a forceful attempt to reground Deleuze & Guattari's works in the real world. Miller characterizes his own project of being one that attempts to understand the referent in Deleuze & Guattari. While Holland would rather see *A Thousand Plateaus* as a set of experiences that are not pointing to the real world insomuch as processing the real world for conceptual examples, Miller finds the inaccuracies of those real-world samplings to be "seriously compromised" through the authors' "gestures of reference."[117] While Miller's response also treads into the weeds of Deleuzianism, ultimately the disagreement is epistemological in nature, and Miller characterizes Holland's reading as one that "seeks to impose strict limits on the terms by which Deleuze & Guattari may be interpreted."[118] While Holland's piece merely exists as a means to critique Christopher Miller's interpretation of Deleuze & Guattari, Miller uses his rejoinder to drill down on how Deleuzians constantly evoke examples in the material relations between indigenous groups, colonizers, and the colonized while always retreating from being held to those references. Like Weheliye, I also find this emblematic of a certain strand of thinking from Deleuzian adherents who feel they cannot break from the master.

A similar political critique of Deleuze & Guattari is levied by Jodi Byrd, but it is instead centered on the two authors' generalizations about indigenous struggle and existence. For Byrd,

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[116] Ibid, 164.

[117] Christopher L. Miller, "'We Shouldn't Judge Deleuze & Guattari': A Response to Eugene Holland," *Research in African Literatures* 34, no. 3 (2003), 130.

[118] Ibid, 131.

the project set out in *A Thousand Plateaus* is confused in how it wants to situate the reality of

indigenous peoples toward the colonizing and imperial forces that beset them. She identifies two

poles: "Indians without ancestry" and their "Indian model," and while she doesn't characterize it

this way, these seem to be aligned with reterritorialization and deterritorialization respectively.[119]

Byrd plays out the use of the Hopi in *A Thousand Plateaus* to outline the contradiction, and in a

general sense she is pointing to indigeneity always being a vehicle of either State formation or

"an event" that ruptures the order of things in a liberatory way.[120] Byrd argues that a system

which sees indigenous culture as an interruption must be grounded in a colonial framework. If

this were not true, then the "Indian" could not disrupt that system, and indigenous peoples would

simply be one voice among many. It is only possible to see "primitive" or indigenous systems as

truly radical lines of flight if they were not accepted ways of being in the first place.[121] Citing

Brian Massumi, Arun Saldanha, and Jasbir Puar's work, Byrd points to how indigeneity is left

out of their respective projects at critical junctures, and lays those elisions at the feet of

Deleuzian frameworks. She particularly critiques Puar's "monster-terrorist-fag" assemblage that

fails to see the indigenous machinery of the post-9/11 world.[122] She concludes the section of

analysis with a grand statement: "Any assemblage that arises from such horizons is a colonialist

one, and it is the work of indigenous critical theory both to rearticulate indigenous

phenomenology and to provide (alter)native interpretation strategies through which to apprehend

the colonialist nostalgias that continue to shape affective liberal democracy's investment in state

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[119] Jodi Byrd, *The Transit of Empire: Indigenous Critiques of Colonialism* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 14.
[120] Ibid, 17.
[121] Ibid, 17.
[122] Ibid, 19.

sovereignty as a source of violence, remedy, memory, and grievability."[123] For Byrd, there is no escaping the genealogical destiny of Deleuze & Guattari's anthropological choices, and any theory developed from that source strain is necessarily a symptom of a specific colonial imagination.

I have no rejoinder to this, but instead a recognition that this theory, the theories it is in conversation with, the media objects that I analyze in this work, and the academic context that it is produced within are products of settler colonialism. There is no reason to attempt to paper over this bare fact. It is my hope that a DeLandan reconfiguration of this theory might produce productive distance between Deleuze & Guattari's examples and the concepts that are not reducible to those examples.

If this reads as an ambivalence around the application or usefulness of Deleuzian theory, then that is because I am ambivalent about both it and its ability to speak to or deal with the aesthetic categories that I am outlining here. On a fundamental level, I think that assemblage theory and aesthetic category theory dually applied operate as extremely useful tools for understanding how aesthetic experience happens and is bracketed within our contemporary context. At the same time, the fact of the matter is that if the trajectory I am marking in this dissertation is true, then these things are ultimately only "useful" until they crash upon the rocks of the limits of aesthetics themselves. The story of aesthetic categories that I am telling here must necessarily end in finality, in desolation, and in the destruction of aesthetics themselves so that something new or different can emerge that is not tied up in the same modes of violence and reproduction that our contemporary ways of understanding aesthetics are. If we can use

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[123] Ibid, 21.

assemblage theory to see how the old maintains itself and prevents the new from being born, then we can productively use this knowledge to see where interventions can happen. My hope is that this theoretical edifice shows how all the gears interlock so that we might more accurately throw our wrenches. My goal here is to provide readers with a toolbox that, in its application, makes itself useless.

We have traveled far in this chapter. We've moved from Ngaian aesthetic categories to Kantian judgment to Deleuzian and Foucauldian diagrams to DeLandan assemblage theory. While this lineage is a strange one, it has all been in service to demonstrate the shared philosophical underpinnings of assemblages and aesthetic categories. Moreover, I have traced this philosophical work in order to make a bid for an alternative system for understanding the aesthetic category beyond what Ngai does in her work. It is my argument that we should understand the aesthetic category not solely as a kind of symptom testing of late capitalism. Instead, aesthetic categories should be understood as diagrams; they are modes of organizing material in the world in relation to a possibility space that is completely determined by the things that exist. Individual films, games, music videos, and other media objects are assemblages, but the aesthetic category they fit into (their *diagram*) is what allows for these objects to have an impact on the generation of new texts in that same category. Importantly, aesthetic categories transcend genre and medium, and they allow us to understand the contagion of affective, aesthetic, and narrative techniques across vastly different domains.

The aesthetic categories that take center stage in this project are bleakness, post-apocalypse, and annihilation. These are certainly not the only aesthetic categories of our contemporary era. The reason that I am focusing on these rather than others is that these three categories are all intimately attached the media landscape's relationship to the present, the future,

and the utter end of everything. Each is, in its own way, focused on the question of human finitude and what the human's relationship is with the *time after now*, no matter when we locate that now. We are currently living through a time of accelerated capitalist production, increased precarity in all economic sectors, global anthropogenic climate warming, and a rightward swing in global politics. The myriad ways that philosophy and theory have addressed these questions are constant and expansive; the Anthropocene and a strong critique of neoliberalism are but two of the strongest modes of engaging with our current reality.

My own approach to these questions does not ground media as a simple symptom of neoliberal governance and contemporary forms of capitalism. Movies about human finitude are not the coughs of capital, something to be diagnosed as ideological reinforcement or divergence from a norm. Instead, the aesthetic categories centered on finitude are the diagram of human life; they are writing the possibility space of where humans can go, and more importantly, how we imagine that we will continue or end.

Bleakness, the category of *continuation without change*, is a particular kind of diagram that creates certain forms of assemblages in the form of media objects. Post-apocalypse, the category of *change without alteration*, and annihilation, the category of *true ending*, each generate different kinds of media objects that both index a particular social mode of thinking at their moment of creation and then continue to impact the aesthetic field they are a part of. The critical function of the diagram is its virtual component, the possibility space that it crawls into in order to instantiate things into the actual world of experience, and the individual media objects are often right at the edge of that transformation of *possible* into *actual*. In coming into actualization and interacting with other assemblages via their relations of exteriority, they change the category that they belong to on the most macro of scales.

In this chapter, I have walked through the philosophical underpinnings of aesthetic categories and diagrams in order to make an argument for how they function together and name the same process. Additionally, I have argued that this is a critical methodological move for media studies because it allows us to discuss the structures of aesthetic experience when it comes into relation with human finitude. How we understand our own limits as a species, and how those limits are reflected within our media objects, is ever more pressing in a time of ecological collapse, a global rightward swing in politics, and the now-reinvigorated threat of war between nuclear powers. The feedback loop, which depends on a dynamic system, needs to both be properly described and analyzed. It is only from the position of understanding that purposeful action and augmentation can happen, and the three aesthetic categories presented in this dissertation are three places where meaningful political action in the aesthetic realm can begin to take root. Like grass growing in the cracks of concrete, breaking it down at the molecular level, new media objects can morph current diagrams into new ones of their own choosing. It is from that position that something new will be born.

CHAPTER 2: BLEAKNESS

Bleakness is a slippery term, and that slipperiness emanates from the question of what it is. Does bleakness live internally to a viewer as a disposition toward external reality? Is it an aesthetic "fact" that one can categorize and identify in the world through a sharp rubric? Can a facet of something be bleak, or is it an all-consuming category that demands that we see bleak things holistically? For a word that is so often used, and so easily intuited, it is surprisingly vague. My goal in this chapter is to demonstrate how bleakness functions as an aesthetic category. I want to show what bleakness does as a diagram when it produces aesthetic objects, or assemblages, in the vast sea of possible aesthetic objects. Diagrams are the name we give to the productive assemblage that turns the virtual into the actual, and bleakness is the name we give to that diagram which produces aesthetic experiences that center on an understanding of human life as repetition and sameness within the roiling potential of history. The virtual contains the possibility for anything, but the aesthetic category of bleakness produces media objects that portray human existence, and the current order of things, as a grey waste that stretches out forever in front of us. It is sameness, without change, chasing the horizon.

In her *Bleak Liberalism*, a text that works to map the contours of the bleakest of contemporary ideologies, Amanda Anderson struggles to approach the term. Despite bleakness being a central concern of the book, she refrains from truly defining it, instead deferring to connotations and contexts. It is: disenchantment; reduced expectations; doubt; negative insight; disappointed political aspirations; unresolved tension.[1] This is as much a problem historically as it is today. In a 1972 piece for the *Saturday Review*, Bruce Franklin used the language of

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[1] Amanda Anderson, *Bleak Liberalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016).

bleakness to describe a certain sentiment in end of the world narratives from the 1600s through to the second half of the 20th century titled "Chic Bleak." Chic bleak is evoked but not defined, as the term "bleak" is never used in the body of the text, but the article provides an omnibus definition of the term via evocation and evidence in much the same way as Anderson's bleakness is demonstrated in her book of political analysis. Franklin critiques then-current trends of apocalyptic discourse, writing that "visions of doom have been particularly widespread in societies in crisis. Whenever a new mode of production arises, like the transition from hunting and gathering to herding and reaping, it shatters the social and political structure of a society."[2] This particular strain of concern for the end of things will be addressed in the next chapter of this dissertation, but Franklin uses this as a launchpad to critique a certain strain of intellectual endeavor that seems to exist to solely worry about the coming end of the dominant order. For Franklin (and for many writers), there is no "humanity" in a general sense: "It is not the world that is coming to an end, merely the empires of the world."[3]

Franklin lumps bleakness and post-apocalypse together in his analysis, but this act of combination is only in service of demonizing them as being rooted in the same cultural impetus. He accuses media creators of being conservative worriers more interested in saving their own skin than doing anything of substance: "As the empire's economic and social relations collapse, some of these cultured people create fictions projecting the sickness they feel and their illusion that the decay and violence around them are an eternal part of the human condition."[4] While these are a colorful set of phrases, Franklin is writing about works like Shelley's *The Last Man* (1826) and *Planet of the Apes* (Schaffner, 1968), and this analysis does not hold up to careful

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[2] Bruce Franklin, "Chic Bleak In Fantasy Fiction," *The Saturday Review* 4.4 (1972):42-45, 42.
[3] Ibid, 45.
[4] Ibid, 45.

scrutiny. Franklin seems to miss that a concern about the end of things had become a mass media phenomenon by the 1970s, and his diagnosis is that representations within that trend are functionally propaganda produced by "alienated intellectuals" who can "show nothing but pity or terror or contempt for most other people, particularly those spending their lives working to produce their cars, typewriters, clothes, movie cameras, houses, and bourbon"[5] I do not share Franklin's concern with the supposed contradiction between creator and concern, but his insight that the content of these media objects projects the now into the future is a compelling one. This projective and speculative capacity where a media object thinks the future as an extension of the now is another part of our composite definition of bleakness.

The formulation of bleakness that I pursue here is one that takes both Anderson and Franklin's positions and dispositions seriously.[6] Like Anderson, I argue that we can see bleakness most clearly through analyzing the structures that it produces. We know the diagram of bleakness by looking to bleak assemblages and working backward to the structures that they flourish within. Similarly, following Franklin, I find it productive to examine texts that speculate about the future (both near and distance) of humans to understand how bleak assemblages depict or consider the trajectory of human life. In both cases, bleakness stands as a structuring principle both for art and for reflections *on* that art, whether they are political or merely analytical.

In this chapter, I will approach bleakness as an aesthetic category with its own diagrammatical function. I am less interested in what bleakness is and more curious about what it

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[5] Ibid, 45.

[6] I am also indebted to Paul Ennis's work on bleakness in his "Bleak Theory." Ultimately the philosophical trajectories we take to bleakness are fundamentally too divergent to be compatible, but his scholarship is certainly part of the constellation that produced this dissertation. See Paul J. Ennis, "Bleak Theory," *Three Pound Brain*. October 5, 2017. https://rsbakker.wordpress.com/2017/10/05/bleak-theory-by-paul-j-ennis/

does as an organizing principle, and the cohort of objects I have selected for analysis within this chapter are meant to give us a handle on the ways that bleakness functions as a category that wrangles and controls the media objects that emit from it, enter into relation to it, and feed back into it. How does bleakness arrange a frame? How does it determine a relationship between a viewer and a media object? How does that structure spill out and beyond into other assemblages, and what other diagrams preceded it? How do all of these elements combine into an aesthetic category that we would agree is bleak?

I argue that the aesthetic category of bleakness figures human finitude as being stuck in some way: immobile, detained, unable to either go forward into the future or to regress to a place from which we might start again. This function of bleakness comes from the movement and augmentability of the underlying diagram that fuels bleakness and the kinds of assemblages that emerge from it. If the diagram is a transformation point that turns the virtual of *potential* into the actual of *material reality*, then the diagram that produces bleakness as a category is one that is invested in reproducing the same material conditions over and over again without significant difference. In the vast possibility space of the things that could be produced out of the material conditions in actuality, what is produced in bleakness is a cruel mimic of the same. In the language of the first chapter of this dissertation, the aesthetic category of bleakness is achieved when the cascade event of splitting comes down to articulating conditions that have not changed from their original state; a singularity appears in the assemblage, and it reverts back to reproduction of the same rather than an evolution on the theme.

This chapter operates as follows: I begin by considering the work of cultural critic Mark Fisher in order to get some parameters for how bleakness operates in relation to media objects. This section will establish what it means for a media object to be bleak and some formal

parameters for understanding what the reproduction of the same looks like when it appears in a media object like Amy Winehouse's cover of "Valerie." After that, I turn to two films that typify some of the contemporary operations of bleakness. The first of these is Jim Jarmusch's *Only Lovers Left Alive*. I will first examine how vampirism is tied to the compression of space and time in the film before turning to the central plot and its relation to melancholy as a structuring tendency. Tracing melancholy back to its pre-Freudian roots, I will argue that we can most productively understand how bleakness operates as a diagram by looking to the wax and wane of activity and stillness that is typified within mania and melancholy. The second object is Alphonso Cuarón's 2006 film *Children of Men*, and it is through this film that I will explore the genre and form that is the clearest distillation of the compressive, timeless affects that bleakness brings: the dystopia. Working through science fiction studies, utopian theory, and the history of dystopia, I will argue that this distillation of bleakness gives us purchase on the specific ways that a frame of a film, or that a narrative situation, is "bleak." I will end the chapter with a discussion of the political and aesthetic outputs of bleakness and the role that a reading for bleakness has in helping us describe how we understand human finitude in our contemporary period.

Mark Fisher and the Necessity of Bleakness

As an aesthetic category, bleakness is pervasive. It exists in the context of any number of cultural objects, our economic, religious, or ritualistic relations to them, and in our very feelings. If a category fundamentally depends on judgment and judgment's social function, then we should be able to see bleakness diagrammatically mapped over a large cohort of heterogeneous materials, each of which works in concert or competition with each other to produce bleakness as a category that modulates our relationship to our own finitude. To build bleakness as a category,

I will now turn to a short reading of cultural critic Mark Fisher's three major works. *Capitalist Realism*, *Ghosts Of My Life*, and *The Weird and the Eerie* illustrate a progression in Fisher's thinking about the role of capitalism, media objects, and broader categorizations in shaping the conditions of life. By reading these works in series, I claim that Fisher himself was working toward a broader system like aesthetic categories as a way of approaching what he saw as the closing-off of the future and the continual extension of the present that we call bleakness.

Mark Fisher's claims in his popular *Capitalist Realism* help to establish a ground for understanding how bleakness operationalizes itself in daily life. For Fisher, capitalist realism is "the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible to even imagine a coherent alternative to it."[7] Throughout his book, Fisher works to grapple with the terms of what capitalism realism is as a phenomenon. Sometimes it feels like emanates as a purely economic phenomenon determined by the potential for change felt by blue, white, and no collar workers alike. In other instances it seems to be a tool of singular oppression that is distributed by capitalism in order to maintain a system of world management to all people underneath it. What Fisher grasps with shocking clarity in the book is how capitalist realism functions as a tool that modulates affect within an economic system. In the language we established in the previous chapter, this is an intensive quality like heat or pressure. When Fisher claims that capitalist realism tends us toward thinking that "action is pointless" and "only senseless hope makes sense," he is establishing that the contemporary aesthetic regime of bleakness cannot imagine itself being overwhelmed by something within it.[8] There is no splitting event along a singularity that might make the aesthetic regime crack like a stone along a fault

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[7] Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* (Westminster: Zer0 Books, 2009), 2.
[8] Ibid, 3.

line. Instead, it continues in the shape that it is in unabated. Later in the book, when Fisher

describes capitalist realism as a "pervasive atmosphere," he begins to abandon the abstract in

favor of talking through the specific intellectual and emotional effects of economic policy in the

United Kingdom.[9] I want to stay with this pervasive atmosphere concept and trace it through

Fisher's thought beyond *Capitalist Realism*.

In *Ghosts of My Life*, his volume of collected essays on depression and hauntology, that

Fisher begins to think more abstractly about capitalist realism in terms beyond the relationship

between economics and affects. One of the most central claims that Fisher makes centers on how

capitalist realism determines a human relationship with the future. The infinite now is

reproduced, over and over (in a way that I would suggest is characteristic of the aesthetic

category of bleakness). *Ghosts of My Life* renders this more abstract, and Fisher spends many of

the essays and interviews in the book working through an operationalized form of Jacques

Derrida's concept of hauntology.[10] Positioning hauntology as a "successor of previous concepts

of Derrida's such as the trace and différance," it refers "to the way in which nothing enjoys a

purely positive existence."[11] Hauntology also builds on the Derridean lexicon through its specific

relationship with time. Fisher's definition tends toward Deleuzian language that is not

specifically flagged as such, writing that hauntology is "the agency of the virtual."[12] This mixing

of philosophical systems does not appear to be a problem for Fisher. Both Deleuze and Derrida

are describing a latent capability within the world to produce something within specific

constraints, and it is well within the DeLandan adaptive system that I argued for in the previous

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[9] Ibid, 16.

[10] Specters of Marx

[11] Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life: Writings on Depression, Hauntology, and Lost Futures* (Westminster: Zer0 Books, 2014), 17.

[12] Ibid, 18.

chapter to cohere around this idea. After all, all assemblages and their diagrams are historical, and what they produce in moment A+1 is dependent on what existed in moment A. If the virtual is a possibility space, then hauntology is a term we give to when moment A has an extreme amount of impact on the formation of all following structures in moment A+1 and beyond. It is a word for how thoroughly the past determines the future.

One of Fisher's most evocative illustrations of this centers on pop music. While walking through a mall one day, he heard Amy Winehouse's song "Valerie" playing over the loudspeakers. Winehouse's version of the song, recorded in 2007, is a cover of the track "Valerie" off The Zutons's 2006 album *Tired of Hanging Around*. For Fisher, hauntology enters this chronology of songs via confusion. Hearing Winehouse's voice in the mall, Fisher briefly decides that The Zutons's original 2006 song, which he is already familiar with, must be a cover of some original song from pop music's past. "The record's antiqued 1960s soul sound" emerged from some primordial past via a whole host of pre-packaged historical beats and methods in the "souped-up retro style" that producer Mark Ronson is known for.[13] This example is a way of understanding what life inside of capitalist realism looks like for the average person. It is not just the removal of potential futures economically or conceptually; the conditions of aesthetic production itself begins to be composed of a churning recycling that leaves the experiencer locked in stasis. The production of the new, whatever that is, becomes about *new* experiences of *old* sounds and styles, and Fisher's inability to place the sound in time is taken as a symptom of time being shuffled in disorienting ways.

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[13] Ibid, 10-11.

Despite *Ghosts of My Life* being a book that is tied to both hauntology and aesthetics, Fisher leaves the reader with a lack of traditional aesthetic readings. While he often explains how a work makes him feel, actual analysis of the aesthetic qualities of a given object are generally subsumed beneath that elaboration of feeling. We might get a description of "the cut-up and pitchshifted voices" on a Burial record, but he is hesitant about arguing that any one aesthetic quality necessarily produces any given set of affects. His one significant example is of a sonic marker that travels through much of the music that winds its way through *Ghosts of My Life*: the crackle, "the surface noise made by vinyl."[14] "Crackle makes us aware that we are listening to a time that is out of joint," he writes, "[and] it won't allow us to fall into an illusion of presence."[15] The crackle is the hauntological artifact that keeps on haunting, constantly, signaling the moment where the virtual potentials of the future are hammered into a particular shape by a determining actual. Fisher ruthlessly historicizes this crackle, arguing that the introduction of the sound into dance music and electronic music in general involves, in no particular order, a nostalgia for previous media formats, a lack of the possibility of futurity, and the general downward tone shift in potential affects for the people who are making the music. The people making the music seem produced by that music for Fisher, producing a model for the social qualities of aesthetic categories discussed in the previous chapter; the crackle is a part of the cosmology of the aesthetic category as much as a great work is.

A careful reading of these two works from Mark Fisher produces an effect of zooming in and out. In *Capitalist Realism*, he gives us a grand theory of psychic life and economic reality; in *Ghosts of My Life*, he provides us with a supplement to this in the form of hauntology as a kind

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[14] Ibid, 21.
[15] Ibid, 21.

of engine that drives aesthetic experience within the conditions of capitalist realism. The

condition of capitalist realism, he seems to argue in the aggregate, is a condition of hauntology's

intensification within late capitalism. A reader attuned to this attention to cause and effect within

these two works might not be surprised that Fisher's posthumously published *The Weird and the

Eerie* pulls further outward in terms of understanding the conditioning of affect within the

contemporary period. This more abstracted view of the conditions of aesthetic experience is a

move by Fisher to get a handle on something *more* than the economic determinism of his

previous two books, both of which put psychic life and affective experience "downstream" from

the economic conditions from which they arise. Instead, *The Weird and the Eerie* is about

generalizable aesthetics (one might even say categories) that determine a human relationship to a

particular experience.

The Weird and the Eerie* opens with a similar problem as this chapter: it is difficult to

know what "the weird" and "the eerie" are. They are two "modes" that exist "at the edges of

genres such as horror and science fiction."[16] They each have a "fascination for the outside, for

that which lies beyond standard perception, cognition and experience."[17] In the case of the weird,

this is mostly in the register of the combination of things that do not belong; for the eerie, it is the

puzzle of presence or even Being itself, and one of the formation questions around the eerie is of

existence itself. "Why is there something here when there should be nothing?" Fisher asks.[18] On

face, it is hard to draw a clear connection between these broader understandings of these

thematic ideas of the weird and the eerie and his more grounded economic and affective ideas in

the two previous books. However, Fisher draws an indirect connection in a discussion of the

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[16] Mark Fisher, *The Weird and the Eerie* (London: Repeater Books, 2017), 8.
[17] Ibid, 8.
[18] Ibid, 12.

eerie itself in the introduction of the book. "Capital," he writes, "is at every level an eerie entity: conjured out of nothing, capital nevertheless exerts more influence than any allegedly substantial entity."[19] If the question of why there is something in a given place is at the core of the eerie, then the problem of where capitalism is coming from animates his concern with the bundle of concerns that makes up the eerie.

I have the sense that the abstracted concepts of the weird and the eerie are Fisher's way of trying to account for the exact problems that I have turned to Ngai and DeLanda to address. His thought in *The Weird and the Eerie* turns to abstraction and broader heuristics precisely because his economic and subject-object analyses are insufficient to describe the constellation of affects, causes, and effects that produce something as ephemeral as a feeling of eeriness. Tracing Fisher's causal chain of concerns through his three books constructs a clear linkage between our human concerns about the relation of the past, present, and future in media objects. Capitalist realism cannot *just* be the output of a kind of economic determinism; hauntology is about *time* and the shape of our aesthetics, and it is not merely a product of late capitalism.

Mark Fisher's three books demonstrate the necessity of both broader frameworks and a distinct category of bleakness that he never names such. If the contemporary media landscape is dominated by the past the refuses to go away and a future that seems to merely be a recreation of that past, then Mark Fisher takes us to a formulation of bleakness without giving us the terminology for it. Unable to reduce it to a linear argument about economics or individual economic responses, continuing Fisher's inquiry into the structure of aesthetic experience in our

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[19] Ibid, 11.

time demands that we approach an aesthetic category of bleakness for the wide-ranging phenomenon that it is.

In Fisher's work, we see a constant worry about time and how time functions in the digital era. Everything seems to be looping back in on itself like a Burial track; conversations repeat themselves, songs are uprooted from their historical conditions, and time itself becomes confused. The maintenance of this system and the generalized affect that it produces is bleakness itself, and when we talk about the aesthetic category of bleakness, we are talking about the structure of the diagram that that produces assemblages that cleave closely to the ones that were produced before them. Within this repetition without significant difference, time seems to slow to a stop, churning in place. Now I will turn to the example of *Only Lovers Left Alive*, a film where time and possible human (and vampiric) action enter into a confusing and bleak relationship with one another.

Only Lovers Left Alive and Time

Only Lovers Left Alive is a glimpse into the lives of vampires. The film follows a couple made up of Adam (Tom Hiddleston) and Eve (Tilda Swinton) as they experience life across two continents. Adam, an inventor and classically Romantic vampire, is living in Detroit. He creates secretive, underground music with the help of his unwitting human assistant Ian (Anton Yelchin) while simultaneously planning to kill himself by shooting himself in the heart with an ironwood bullet.[20] Meanwhile, his partner Eve is living in Tangier with their friend Philip Marlowe (John Hurt), who is continually reliving the trauma of being denied the credit for writing the plays that William Shakespeare was celebrated for writing. In a telephone conversation early in the film,

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[20] There are shades of Burial, the anonymous artist so beloved by Mark Fisher, in Adam.

Eve intuits that something is wrong with Adam, perhaps empathetically grasping his suicidal

state, and travels to Detroit. What follows is a set of anecdotal moments in which the two are

living their lives together, occasionally interspersed with scenes in which they are shown

drinking blood, which has a heroin-like effect on them that turns them into satiated, lethargic

lounging creatures.

The back half of the film is dominated by some more traditional narrative rising and

falling action. Eve's "sister" Eva (Mia Wasikowska) arrives in Detroit and wreaks havoc on the

quiet, obscure life Adam has built for himself. This culminates in her "drinking" Ian, which

Adam and Eve respond to by throwing her out of the decaying mansion that Adam has been

holed up in. After disposing of Ian's body in a murky black bath of acid in the heart of an

abandoned car factory, the two vampires flee to Tangier with the belief that they can lay low

there in the same way that Marlowe and Eve had been doing for some years. Those hopes are

dashed. The blood supply that has been sustaining Marlowe and Eve for several years has

stopped, and in his desperation Marlowe has tried to sustain himself on "bad" blood that fatally

wounds him. After Marlowe passes away both Adam and Eve are left without a dependable

source of blood. It is at this point in the film that the metaphorical relationship between blood

and drug is at its clearest, and the two spend the last minutes of the film's runtime wandering the

streets with glassy, predatory eyes. They watch a live musical performance, and in the final

scene, select a young Moroccan couple to "drink" and turn into vampires.

Within this broad narrative outline there are several aesthetic choices that will help to

ground our understanding of bleakness as an aesthetic category that produces stasis-oriented,

immovable assemblages. First, I will discuss two uses of the painterly tableau in the film and

how they operate a returns of the same, the hauntological quality, that Mark Fisher is so

concerned with. Second, I will address Adam's melancholy as a way of grasping how bleakness asserts and re-asserts itself within the aesthetic field. Finally, at the end of the chapter, I will turn to the film's finale in Tangier as a way of articulating how bleakness as it relates to a racial and colonial project.

Only Lovers Left Alive evokes a painterly frame in several instances, and it is productive to our analysis of bleakness to discuss the moments in the film that are structured as a classical tableau. The first is a singular scene that opens the film, and the second is comprised of a number of short, imagistic bookends that divide the major scenes of the middle of the film. Each of these painterly moments gives us a sense of how the aesthetic category of bleakness structures produce the feeling of an "endless now" that is so crucial to bleakness.

The film's first scene begins with a record being placed on a turntable. The needle drops, making the requisite scratch, and a version of Wanda Jackson's 1961 song "Funnel of Love" plays. Performed by the band Sqürl and featuring Madeline Follin on vocals, this cover is a slowed-down, warped version of the original pop-country track. It moves in such a languid, irregular way that it's difficult to trace the time signature of the song. It places the listener into a morass of sound. This dragging slowness evokes the materiality of a record, and its wavering speed mimics the sound of someone pressing down on a record as it plays. "Here I go, going down down down," Follin sings as the tune warbles behind her. The effect produced in a listener is much the same as Fisher's vinyl crackle; a longer time is here, and we can hear the shape of it.[21]

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[21] Not only is the song a cover with retro-material presentation, but it also features instrumentation by Josef Van Willem, a Dutch lutist who plays medieval instruments on tracks dispersed throughout the film. The song is a compression of many different historical eras.

The visual elements that accompany the song are just as disconcerting. After being shown the needle dropping on the record, we are given images of the two protagonists of the film. Adam and Eve, each in different locations, sit and listen to music silently. It's difficult to properly describe the mise en scène: each shot is top-down, as if filmed from the ceiling, but their heads lie back on a couch and on a bed respectively so that they face out of the frame and at the viewer. Their eyes are closed. They are completely still. Adam is surrounded by instruments and the detritus of abandoned technology; Eve has her books and the North African cultural elements that one might expect of a set that is meant to visually signal Tangier. While the scene cuts back and forth between the two shots, each rotate on their axis like a record, with shots of an actual record fading in and out of the cut. While the specific tableau visuals of the scene are unique here, the collapse of sound and visuals into atypical scenes is normal within *Only Lovers Left Alive*. As Justyna Stępień writes of the film, the film's viewer is "exposed to constant audiovisual stimuli that come from different backgrounds. Raw, chaotic, bleak, noisy, and often improvised, the film's scenes quickly redefined structure-oriented conventions used by the majority of mainstream film productions."[22] This has a particular effect on the viewing audience, and in response to the same scene discussed in the previous paragraph, Amelie Hastie has noted that the scene places both Adam and Eve "out of time" before giving over to a situation where "the viewer's visual, tactile, and sonic senses are ignited" by the collapsing of sound and imagery.[23] The commitment to the images of *Only Lovers Left Alive* is notable here, because the images are diagrammatically produced.

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[22] Justyna Stępień, "Transgression of Postindustrial Dissonance and Excess: (Re)valuation of Gothicism in Jim Jarmusch's *Only Lovers Left Alive*", *Text Matters* 6.6 (2016): 218.

[23] Amelie Hastie, "Blood and Photons: The Fundamental Particles of *Only Lovers Left Alive*", *Film Quarterly* 68.1 (2014): 64.

This scene at the opening of *Only Lovers Left Alive* maps the diagram of bleakness. It is complete stasis that is set into motion. It is timelessness put into time. It is the making-mobile of something that does not have access to motion, and it is the making-static of something that appears to be in motion. This relationship between stillness and motion presents a question of how *change* appears within a context that is also wholly static and unchanging. In an essay on *Blade Runner*, Elissa Marder reads the film as mediating this relationship between photography and film. In a famous scene, protagonist Deckard (Harrison Ford) places a piece of evidence into "an incredible machine which is able to dismember the photographic image from all angles and blow up, in focus, any part of the dissected image."[24] Importantly, this is not just an enhancement and zooming device, but rather a machine that allows Deckard to slide perspectives and investigate behind objects within the frame. This is, of course, impossible: "A flat 'dead' photograph--a trace of and testament to a past event--cannot shift perspectives *after the fact*, and remain what we call a photograph."[25] Marder points to the relationship between the photo, "the smallest essential unit through which film's materiality is structured," and the film, "a collection of still photographs arranged in sequence."[26] This relationship is fundamentally one about the rate that stillness is presented to a viewer. "When they are put into a projector," Marder writes,

> "these dead stills appear to assume life--they move and speak. From *replicas* they
> become *replicants* thereby echoing the Latin present active participle *ans*. However, it is
> the very 'reality' we accord these past dead images that allows us to invest in the
> fictionality of the fiction film. Once these images are put into time we attempt to
> constitute a 'present' through them. In order to follow the narrative parade of images that

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[24] Elissa Marder, "*Blade Runner*'s Moving Still", *Camera Obscura* 3.27 (1991): 102.
[25] Ibid, 102.
[26] Ibid, 97.

make up the fiction film, we must forget any other past or present in a desperate attempt to race after the 'presentness' that appears to be unfolding before our eyes."[27]

Marder complicates the discussion of time and the eternal present by pointing out that the cinema is always an array of images that are displayed in regular intervals, and it is through that movement of static shots that diegetic time is produced; our perception of still images produces movement in the image.[28] While Raymond Bellour reads this as a scene that litigates the question of analog images versus computer-generated ones, I think that Marder opens a more generative space by pointing out that perception is always entering into the material depiction of images in sequence.[29] We are always in the position of Deckard because our perception of the cinema always produces *more* than what the cinema appears to be. It is not merely a material text, but a context, an *assemblage*, of relations.[30]

In distinction from Marder's argument, I want to hold that this relation between still images and movement within time (which produces film as we know it) and the investigatory machine in *Blade Runner* provides us with a way of understanding how the images in *Only Lovers Left Alive*, and later *Children of Men*, function as films within the diagram of bleakness. Both are investigatory machines that composite a great number of still images in sequence

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[27] Ibid, 97.

[28] There is an attending philosophical discussion that I am not addressing at length here around analog and digital images. A digital image's pixel transformation rate has led some to claim there is an ontological difference between analog cinema (discrete images) and digital cinema (pixels moving in time). I do not agree that there is an ontological distinction here simply because the position of the viewer regarding a sufficiently high-quality image does not change.

[29] Raymond Bellour, "The Double Helix," Trans. James Eddy. *Electronic Culture: Technology and Visual Representation*, ed. Timothy Druckrey (New York: Aperture, 1996): 188.

[30] See also Laura Mulvey, *Death At 24x A Second: Stillness and the Moving Image* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006) and Mary Anne Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time: Modernity, Contingency, and the Archive* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002) for additional analysis of the interrelation between images and film.

together. What distinguishes them is that being moving images does not rescue them from moments of overwhelming stillness. If we are in the position of Deckard looking into the machine for signs of bleakness as an aesthetic category, what we see are not revelatory moments that provide us with breakthroughs for the next moment of plot. Instead, we are given repetition, a denial of linear time, and the constant return of the past or previous moments in lieu of the big breakthrough. *Only Lovers Left Alive* actively prevents us from moving forward. We feel like there is active progress, but that progress is illusory in the full infinity of time where the now never transforms into a speculative then. The film demonstrates how bleakness manages to function in a single scene while providing opportunities for the creation of singularities that cascade through the rest of the film while producing a diagram that operates beyond what the individual film is doing. After all, an aesthetic category is not merely one scene, but rather one scene is an assemblage that contributes to a larger film assemblage that composites together with other assemblages to create a tendency in how the virtual (or possible arrangements of material reality) turns into the actual (the arrangement of material reality).

The compression of time happens regularly in *Only Lovers Left Alive*. For example, as Eva packs for her trip from Tangier to Detroit we are treated to the decision-making processes of an eternal creature. She does not pack clothing or any of the other things that one might expect someone to put in a suitcase for a long trip. Instead, she wanders her house picking out several books that will make the trip with her. The visual language of the film shifts during this scene. Instead of the traditional cutting that characterizes the rest of the film, Eve's actions are presented in a series of dissolves that blur the boundary between her, her books, the act of packing, and the act of reading. We see Eve in closeup, her eyes running over pages, and we see her hands quickly flipping through pages written in different languages. Later in the film it is

revealed that Eve can empathetically connect to objects in the world around her, which generally appears as a kind of carbon dating that she uses to reveal information about objects like guitars. In that context, the dissolves within the packing scene operate as a visualization of that empathic connection. Eve is packing and she is reading and she is, to some degree, experiencing these books more deeply (or on a sensorial level) that we can only grasp through the analogical capacity of the way the film is shot and edited. She is learning about their condition, construction, and their "lives" as objects. When Mark Fisher mourns the lack of a future in pop music, or at least notes the inability for pop to produce difference going forward, he is writing about what is catachrestically realized in the visual overlap of Eve, her books, and her reading. The material and conceptual history of books, overlapped with the experiencing body, is a more artfully (and yet more artificial-seeming) version of Fisher hearing Amy Winehouse's time warped cover in the mall.

The visualization of bleakness in the scene of Eve packing her books can also be productively read through Franco "Bifo" Berardi's *After The Future*. While Bifo shares Fisher's focus on the relationship between the individual and the world as passing through psychology impacted by economics, he also seems to grasp the mass media imagistic system of bleakness in a way that other scholars seem to miss. In a particularly moving passage, Bifo writes that

> "The technical mode through which we receive and elaborate images acts upon the
> formation of the imaginary. The imaginary, in turn, shapes the imagination, the activity
> whereby we produce images, imagine worlds, and thus make them possible in real life.
> The repertoire of images at our disposal limits, exalts, amplifies, or circumscribes the

forms of life and events that, through the imagination, we can project onto the world, put into being, build, and inhabit."[31]

Bifo correctly identifies that way that images circulate in the contemporary period. It's clear that the internet has had an outsized effect on the way that humans are communicating with and broadcasting to each other in the contemporary era. Without using the language of the aesthetic category, Bifo is demonstrating that the bounds of the imagination are intertwined with the a productive virtual he's calling the imaginary. However, while Bifo is making a linear causal argument for political liberation through aesthetics, the more valuable insight is that he is also illustrating the basic function of an image within an arrangement of power. I do not mean "the image" as a euphemism or synonym for the Deleuzian diagram, but literally an image as a visible element that humans interact with in space and time as a part of aesthetic objects. Eve's dissolving historical collapse and the turntable tableau both present us with the churning movement of time without any kind of visual access to a moment other than the present one. These scenes work as images that produce time-in-stasis.

In his famous analysis of Diego Velázquez's "Las Meninas," Michel Foucault suggests that the painting contains "the representation, as it were, of Classical representation, and the definition of the space that it opens up to us."[32] The painting, Foucault argues, is doing the work of showing us the system that his book is dedicated to unmasking through its staging both of the sovereign and the painter's own relation to sovereign power through its double inclusion *of* the

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[31] Franco "Bifo" Berardi, *After The Future*. Eds. Gary Genosko and Nicholas Thoburn. Trans. Arianna Bove, Melinda Cooper, Erik Empson, Enrico, Guiseppina Mecchia, and Tiziana Terranova (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2011), 133.
[32] Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. Trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1994), 19.

painter and of the royal family that designates what kind of painting can be produced in general.[33] It is a representational painting in the sense that it is a visualization of a certain organization of power that existed during a particular time in history. The power of the painting resides in its capability to represent this system, this form of organization of reality, in the frame of a painting in front of us. Foucault thus states that "Las Meninas" achieves an "unstable superimposition" because of its ability to place both the generalized structuring entity (the royal family and how it functions within the realm of politics) into a visible relationship with that which it structures (the painter and his aesthetic production).[34]

The two scenes from *Only Lovers Left Alive* that I have discussed function in relation to the diagram of bleakness in the same way that "Las Meninas" functions in relation to Classical representation. They are visualizations, or unstable superimpositions, that render the aesthetic category onscreen visually and sonically. By fading between a spinning Adam and Eve and the turntable's warbling throwback soundtrack, film provides an encapsulation of the stance that bleakness takes as an aesthetic category toward the limits of the human. Visual revolution without change meets the collapse of musical history in a scene of utter repetition. The future is coming, time is literally marching forward for the audience and the characters, and yet what is delivered is what we already have but warmed over. By putting Eve's dissolving history into conversation with Fisher and Berardi, we have a sense of how these sets of images can both be *in*

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[33] I distinguish my own reading of "Las Meninas" from the one put forward by W.J.T. Mitchell by noting that Michell relies heavily on critical context to transform the painting from one kind of object to another. In other words, whatever the painting is able to do is bracketed by whatever art discourse is able to do. Assemblage theory accepts immaterial transformations of this type, but they do not fundamentally transform what the object is or does in the DeLandan paradigm. For more information, see chapter 2 of W.J.T. Mitchell, *Metapictures: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1995).

[34] Ibid, 8.

motion and *in time* while fundamentally keeping both motion and time in stasis. These are moments of collapse and compression that keep time arrested within them, and the film does not attempt to "rescue" these scenes to put them back into causal context or history. They are singular moments that render bleakness at its most visible, but this is not the only way that bleakness emerges within the film.

Melancholy, Stability, and the Assemblage of Narrative

Bleakness is not delivered solely through the image. If it were, then any form of history-flattening stasis would be bleak, and a dissolve does not produce bleakness simply by compressing and confusing the boundary between two spaces and times. While a given image, can be considered bleak in whatever assemblage it is produced in the context of, to speak of bleakness as an aesthetic category is to look at works where the singularities being produced have a tendency to attract the elements of a given assemblage toward stasis, immovability, and production of the same. It is not an image or a narrative moment that is bleak, but rather bleakness is a metastability that shoots through the various portions of a diagram and the assemblages that it produces. While narrative and form are often read against one another, or at least as different elements of a media object, that methodological choice breaks down within the context of assemblage theory. Bleakness is a *tendency* that determines the change patterns of a set of assemblages, keeping them in the same shape and repeating the same patterns, and we can see this shape at the level of form. It is thus through an attentive, formal analysis of the image that we can arrive at what bleakness is through close attention to film form and how it affords certain patterns of intensities that we call narrative.

This is to say that we cannot leave narrative content behind in the analysis of bleakness in the aesthetic object. We cannot jettison narrative in hopes of finding an aesthetic formal logic that is not attached in time and space to some kind of phenomenal progression of events that are at least experienced in time. While the analysis in this chapter and the following ones will often look at singular images, those images are always caught up in a network of what you were shown before, what the viewer is about to be shown, and what other referential images might be summoned internally for them. This narrative theory is not that of a Bordwellian type that supposes a singular subject who "acts according to the protocols of story comprehension," but instead it is a narrative theory that does not make strong assumptions about what a *subject* does but instead about what kind of interactions a media object can *afford*.[35] Beyond a conceptual desire for this wider mode of thinking, it also seems to be the only way to actually grasp how media operates in the contemporary period. In an extensive reading of *Jason Bourne* (Greengrass, 2016), Garrett Stewart argues that a film viewer today has become incredibly comfortable with the compression of many different image forms and modes of understanding the world, including representations of computer screens, facial recognition, and traditional cinematic technique. As Stewart goes on to note, via his term screenarration, the problem of narrative in visual culture is caught up on a web of "reversible exhibitionism and surveillance, vanity and threatened constraint."[36] Whatever assumptions we might have once been able to make about cinema and narrative content seem wholly incapable of fully capturing what the cinema of today is asking of its collective viewership.

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[35] David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison, WI: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 30.

[36] Garrett Stewart, "Screenarration: The Plane and Place of the Image" in *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative Theory*, ed. Matthew Garrett (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 198.

In following DeLanda in my understanding of narrative, I am compelled by the concept of the spectator as an assemblage within a wider assemblage that is the viewing condition or the life, but I also draw a distinction between how I understand narrative here and how other Deleuzians have approached it in relation to cinema. Patricia Pisters's chapter-length construction of how bodies come to be while perceiving cinema, for example, leans heavily into Deleuzian assemblage theory as an explanatory apparatus to excavate "image types and signs" from films in order to build out her theory.[37] For Pisters, sometimes a singular image works as sufficient evidence to ground the theory. Other times, it is a narrative sequence or a thematic trope such as "the opposition of men-women," as if it is readily apparent how that exists or operates as a unit in a film.[38] In strict Deleuzian film studies, my position in closer to that espoused by Elena Del Río in her *The Grace of Destruction*, where she characterizes a logic of mainstream Hollywood cinema as one of "automatized views and reactions" packaged into a system of "self-evident, immediate recognition" grounded in "moral Manichean logic."[39] While this is situated for her in a visual logic of the cinema in which, for example, the reaction shot is used to evoke in the viewer the same shock a character feels, Del Río offers a way of thinking of narrative content as a form of intensity in the cinema. She argues that cinema must "prioritize the ongoing play of forces over punctual moments of violence."[40] In other words, she advocates for less cutting to people being surprised by scary creatures and more ambient unsettled feelings depicted onscreen.

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[37] Patricia Pisters, *The Matrix of Visual Culture: Working With Deleuze in Film Theory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003), 45-76.
[38] Ibid, 64.
[39] Del Rio, *The Grace of Destruction,* 12.
[40] Ibid,13.

I am not evoking these approaches to refute them or call them insufficient. I largely agree with them. To my mind, they demonstrate some of the value of the DeLandan re-systematization of Deleuze in that their language and their fidelity to Deleuze puts the arguments in a position where they consider the building blocks of film and not the system of maintenance that keeps films in stable positions. This is what diagrammatics affords us as a method; it gives us a way of attending to how all these things cohere together. When Amy Herzog performs an assemblage reading of film and mentions how pornography recycles narrative, the question that comes to my mind is centered on what narrative is in this context.[41] A predictable movement? Images in sequence? The wax and wane of erotics?

Following DeLanda's method, I think that it is worth considering narrative as an intensive quality rather than an extrinsic one. An intensive quality is one that does not change despite a qualitative change in an object. If I have a clay brick that I heat to 100 degrees celsius, and I cut it in two, I do not come away with two 50 degree celsius bricks. Temperature is an intensive property because it is a chemical property of the brick. It is not contingent on extensive qualities like size or shape. So if narrative content in a video game or a film or any other narrative-centered medium is intensive like temperature, then it can be dialed up or down. A film like *The Lego Movie* (Lord and Miller, 2014) is extremely plot driven, hot, with moment-to-moment plot beats that are driven by the Manichean logic of enemies that must be defeated that Del Rio characterizes above. Narrative can also be more diffuse, cool, in a film like *The Tree of Life* (Malick, 2011) which meanders its way toward knots of trouble and sideways glances at

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[41] Amy Herzog, "Assemblage, Constellation, Image: Reading Filmic Matter," *Discourse* 38.2 (2016): 215-234; 226.

resolution. The media object *has* narrative as an intensive quality, and the images and sounds we experience dial the "knobs" of that narrative up and down in intensity.[42]

All of that is to say that it matters that Adam wants to kill himself in *Only Lovers Left Alive*. His disposition toward his own death is experienced as narrative concern, but as I have shown, that narrative concern both creates cinematic time and creates a determination as to what appears on-screen. It modulates intensities. One could appropriately describe Adam as melancholic, and the film as a melancholy one, and in fact that description is more revelatory than we might perhaps first notice. To get at the heart of bleakness, it is productive for us to dive into the logic and history of melancholy for a more complete understanding of how something like a stance toward the world could rise to the level of an aesthetic category of its own.

The best place to begin understanding how the narrative content alters the diagram and the assemblages it produces is with Drew Daniel's *The Melancholy Assemblage*, a book dedicated to understanding the emergence and framing of melancholy in early modern England. Melding a strong historical understanding of texts with Deleuzian assemblage theory, Daniel makes the claim that understanding melancholy as an assemblage allows us to take away "its connotations of solitude and interior essence in favor of a model based on social extension. Put crudely, melancholy goes from being something that shows up first and foremost 'in here' to being something that is also 'out there.'"[43] To some degree, Daniel is merely describing how all things operate within the theoretical paradigm of assemblage theory; if all things are

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[42] Non-narrative media obviously complicates this, as does documentary, and they are simply outside the scope of my project here.

[43] Drew Daniel, *The Melancholy Assemblage: Affect and Epistemology in the English Renaissance* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 15.

assemblages, melancholy must also be one. However, Daniel also provides a kind of DeLandan history of how that assemblage functions.

A formative moment in the history of melancholy as a concept is when Hippocrates theorized the four humors. It is in this work that "anatomy replicates cosmology," or when operations of the body that were previously understood as metaphysical came crashing down into the management and operation of the body.[44] The four classical humors, phlegm, blood, yellow bile, and black bile, became a central concern of the human biological sciences, transmitting down through Aristotle and those who cited him. The four humors were used as a means for discussing the tendencies within human bodies and action, and melancholy is a direct result of that explanatory apparatus. Melancholy is so much a product of this that it is the literal linguistic product of this system: *melas* (black) and *khole* (bile) are the combinatorial words that produce the concept. Without rehearsing the genealogy of the concept completely, it is sufficient to say that this humor-centered idea of the human is crucial to how melancholy reaches early modern England as "the signature affect of distracted, sorrowful romantic passion. Alternately scholarly and amorous in its inflection, this civilizing Italian form of fashionable melancholy infects English travelers to the continent, who import the Aristotelian-Ficinian hybrid form of the disease into early modern London" where it is presented "as both a tragically serious condition and a comedic target of satirical exposure."[45] The reason for this history is not to provide some kind of revelation about melancholy, but to provide some context for the European understanding of melancholy heading into the Romanticisms of both Britain and Germany. As Daniel argues, "the primary benefit to thinking of melancholy as an epistemological and

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[44] Ibid, 18.
[45] Ibid, 21.

affective assemblage is that we can preserve a respect for its remarkable consistency across its own plural set of 'examples' without needing to posit an essence the governs all cases."[46]

Understanding melancholy as a tendency within a material set of assemblages, or as a diagram, is productive in that it allows us to see how this complicated history of the term gives us some insight into how the language of the structure of melancholy helps to explain the relation between melancholy and bleakness.

The logic of the imbalance of the humors ultimately produced the social discussion and context around melancholy that Daniel analyzes, but what I am interested in here is what that black bile is said to be doing to produce melancholy both in a subject and as a tendency. On one hand, we have a late 18th and early 19th century discourse centered on painting and literature that understands melancholy as a disposition, a "poetic mood of sadness and distress [that] came partially to eclipse . . . earlier meanings."[47] It is this understanding of melancholy that jumps from a description of a human temperament It becomes instead a "'mood' that can be transferred to inanimate objects. Now we find references not only to melancholy attitudes but also to melancholy scenes, miens, and states of affairs."[48] The jump that takes melancholy outside of the body and into the world is critical to note for two reasons. The first is that it makes clear that melancholy is not just an internal state produced in the phenomenological process of parsing the self and the other. The second is that this "jump" reveals an already-existing understanding of melancholy as a tendency in a structure.

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[46] Ibid, 28.
[47] Jennifer Radden, *The Nature of Melancholy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 30.
[48] Ibid, 30.

Michel Foucault's analysis of mania and melancholy in 18th century France in his *History of Madness* renders this explicitly in the medical terms of the time period. Foucault marks a moment where the pseudo-materialist understanding of the body's balance of humors was giving over to a question of the soul. Put simply, melancholy began being staged as a question of the essence of the individual in the form of qualities rather than as a question of homeostasis. One did not simply have a balance or imbalance of humors; one was predisposed to certain modes of life due to one's qualities. As Foucault writes,

> "Thus freed from the substantiating support within which they had been imprisoned, qualities can henceforth play an organising, integrating role in the notion of melancholy. On the one hand they will trace, among the symptoms and manifestations, a certain profile of sadness, darkness, slowness and immobility. On the other, they will sketch a causal support that will no longer be so much the physiology of a humor as the pathology of an idea, a fear or terror. The morbid unity is not defined on the basis of observed signs or inferred causes, but half-way between the two, above some of them, it is perceived as a certain qualitative coherence, which has its own laws of transmission, development and transformation. It is the secret logic of this quality that order the future of the notion of melancholy, not medical theory."[49]

In a typical move for Foucault, he traces how the diagram of melancholy changes as it integrates more fully into the evidence-collecting methods of modernity. It is no longer understood to be about the singular body, but instead as a potential in the individual and the social that they are embedded within. When Foucault writes of a "qualitative coherence," he is

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[49] Michel Foucault, *History of Madness*, trans. Jonathan Murphy and Jean Khalfa (New York: Routledge, 2006), 265.

talking about how medical professionals at the time understood themselves and their patients to be within a medical diagram of melancholy.

During this same period, there is an increased understanding of melancholy's relationship to movement and stasis while pairing it into a dyad with mania. Positioned dialectically with each other, melancholy and mania are mapped into a system that looks bizarrely like the physics of the 20th century. While many medical professionals seemed to shy away from proclaiming that mania and melancholy were two sides of the same condition, many still positioned them in nebulous relation to each other. In the work of Joseph Lietaud, for example, "a melancholy that lasts a long time, exhausts itself and turns into delirium, loses its traditional symptoms and takes on a strange resemblance to mania."[50] In the mid-18th century, Spengler put forth an image of the movement between the two states where one "sector alone is excited, the rest remaining in a state of sleep. This is the phase of melancholy. But when a certain degree of intensity is reached, that local charge suddenly spreads throughout the system, shaking it with considerable violence until the discharge is complete. This is the manic episode."[51] This waves and troughs model of melancholy and mania is the functional equivalent of the dialectic, and one can imagine an extension of this system that could see either of these poles of inactivity and activity as being in tension with each other and producing the subject on the other side of the switch between the two. Focusing on melancholy specifically, Friedrich Hoffman characterized it as "immobility" with "the thickened blood caus[ing] congestion inside the brain where it begins to cause an obstruction, and where it is supposed to circulate it tends to stop, immobilised by its own weight."[52] It's in this explanation that we can clearly see the dynamics of the previous

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[50] Ibid, 275.
[51] Ibid, 276.
[52] Ibid, 275.

explanation of melancholy's shifting, composite creation coming into focus. We still have liquids moving through the body, a physicalist interpretation of the condition, but the *qualities* of the body, of the liquid itself, and the individual's capacities all provide a kind of substrate through which the physical explanation takes place.

The question, then, is about how the diagram of melancholy fits into a historical trajectory of the diagram of stillness and limitation that I have been calling bleakness here. After all, Daniel stops short of calling melancholy a diagram (or an aesthetic category), but it should be clear from the analysis in this and the previous chapter that the productive wrangling that melancholy does in organizing human minds and objects in the world reveals it to be a diagram.

The medical history of melancholy helps to demonstrate the difference between melancholy as a diagram which organizes the material world and bleakness as an aesthetic category that mediates the human relationship to finitude via aesthetic objects focused on the reproduction of the same. Melancholy still has the dyad term of mania. In the physicalist version, it holds out for a new organization of the humors; in the essentialized soul medicalized version, it sees the potential for an unpredictable flip into a manic action. Melancholy is important to us because it provides a logic for how subjects ascertain their position within bleakness as an aesthetic category, but the category as a way of turning the possible into the actual cannot merely be flipped. In other words, melancholy's various versions still maintain a kind of hope. Adam's mind can be changed about the future. Bleakness, as an aesthetic category, is hopeless.

However, if bleakness is a structure that determines certain kinds of aesthetic production, then it becomes pertinent to interrogate what can be done from this position. How does the same continue to be produced, and what is produced within that sameness? In an oblique essay "The

Exhausted," Deleuze makes gestures toward an answer. He opens the piece by contrasting two figures, the tired person and the exhausted person, and distinguishes between them via a discussion of capacity: "The tired person has merely exhausted the realization, whereas the exhausted person exhausts the whole of the possible."[53] He continues: "There is no longer any possible: a relentless Spinozism. Does he exhaust the possible because he is himself exhausted, or is he exhausted because he has exhausted the possible?"[54] This is the question that Adam's relentless pessimism brings to light in relation to the production of the future. Is he suicidal because there is no future, or does the future seem impossible because of his melancholic disposition toward eternal life?

Until this point, I have avoided engaging with Freudian melancholy. Put simply, while this is the hegemonic interpretation of melancholy in the 20th and 21st centuries, the preceding several hundred years of melancholic thought should not be thrown out due to the influence of 20th century psychoanalysis. Additionally, it seems clear to me that these previous modes of thinking melancholy are still latent in and immanent to Freud's thoughts on melancholy, although they are obviously sidelined in the quest to create a coherent psychoanalytic paradigm. Freud's 1917 essay "Mourning and Melancholia" is a landmark work both for a general understanding of melancholy and in the development of the diagnostic system of psychoanalysis. Despite the confidence with which writers have echoed Freud's claims about melancholy since the essay's publication, the essay begins on unstable ground. Freud writes:

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[53] Gilles Deleuze, "The Exhausted" in *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 152
[54] Ibid 152.

"We propose to try whether a comparison with the normal emotion of grief, and its expression in mourning, will not throw some light on the nature of melancholia. This time, however, we must make a certain prefaratory warning against too great expectations of the result. Even in descriptive psychiatry the definition of melancholia is uncertain; it takes on various clinical forms (some of them suggesting somatic rather than psychogenic affectations) that do not seem definitely to warrant reduction to a unity."[55]

Freud claims both that he does not know what melancholia is and cannot be certain that it even is *one thing*, and from this position of complete uncertainty he launches into an oft-repeated set of claims about melancholy. The central claim is that mourning and grief are part of the same psychological process as melancholy. Both elicit similar symptoms and conditions in patients, and both are coextensive with feelings of loss and sadness about death. In reconstructing the production of melancholy in a patient, Freud gives us this general process: the libido attaches to an object, and then that object-relation is undermined in some way. Instead of withdrawing in the "normal" way, the subject's ego identifies with the abandoned object, causing the "shadow of the object [to fall] upon the ego"[56] This has deleterious effects on the subject, as "the loss of the object [becomes] transformed into a loss in the ego, and the conflict between the ego and the loved person [transforms] into a cleavage between the criticizing faculty of the ego and the ego as altered by the identification."[57] In other words, melancholy operates almost like an autoimmune response that weaponizes the ego's ability to be critical against itself.[58]

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[55] Sigmund Freud, "Mourning and Melancholia" in *Collected Papers*, Vol. IV (London: Hogarth Press, 1953), 152.
[56] Ibid, 159.
[57] Ibid, 159.
[58] There is a fascinating linkage between the ego's critical faculty and judgment's legislative function, but I have no idea what that linkage might produce.

I find Freud's explanation of melancholy to be unpersuasive and unproductive at least partially because it is such an overdetermining force in the general conception of how melancholy (and in the latter 20th and 21st centuries, depression) functions. Freud's psychological explanation has won out over even his *own* claims that there might be a strong somatic element to melancholy, and the tight relationship that he draws between the subject and their lost object offers very little room for more robust social and structural explanations such as aesthetic category theory or even a general theory of diagrams. In a similar direction, however, Amy Hollywood follows a Freudian line through this essay, his work on the ego and the id, and into his Kleinian inheritors in her writing on women who were both religious mystics and deeply melancholic. What Hollywood produces through her reading of both Freud and Klein is an understanding of melancholy that is grounded in Freudianism but is so warped by her fidelity to the medieval women she is reading that its relationship to Freudianism is tentative at best. "I would also suggest," Hollywood writes, "not only that inner worlds are created in childhood, but that they are created and re-created through bodily, psychic, spiritual, and mental practices."[59] While the majority of "Acute Melancholia," the essay in which she does this work, is dedicated to those practices and their aesthetic surfacing in religious life (so much that we might call this its own diagram), the analysis she combines these daily practices with the subjective explanation of melancholy offers a way of understanding the Freudian model as being fundamentally contained within the larger diagrammatic one. For Hollywood, the religious women understood their own melancholy specifically through the suffering of Christ, which in turn demanded more focusing on suffering and pain. "For Beatrice and Ebner," she explains, "not only the enormity of

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[59] Amy Hollywood, *Acute Melancholia and Other Essays* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016), 85.

their loss, but also the very qualities of the object, led to their continued desire for death."[60] Ultimately, Hollywood finds value in the Freudian perspective because "what we know of the divine we know from others around and within ourselves."[61] And yet, if this claim is true, then melancholy cannot be merely about drawing linear lines from subjects to objects in a bid to explain how each subject has come to form in the world. Even within the Freudian structure, it might be more productive to understand melancholy by the *conditions that allow it to or force it to arise* rather than by the purely ego-based analyses that hold individuals at the center of the psychological drama.

Distinguishing between the pre-Freudian and Freudian analyses of melancholy is productive for understanding the difference between melancholy at the narrative level and bleakness at the level of the assemblage. Adam is comically stuck in a classical Freudian melancholic situation where he suffers for the lack of the great artists, scientists, and their social contexts, all of which have been eliminated (and forgotten) by the "zombies" of humanity. He suffers because he cannot let go of the things that he has lost, and it drives him to creating the means of committing suicide. This model of melancholy, however, is subject-based and fully committed to melancholy as a pathology. The narrative stakes rest on the idea that it would be a bad thing for Adam to shoot himself with an ironwood bullet. What bleakness as aesthetic category allows for is a way of understanding this happening within form and aesthetics, which crucially removes it from the wax-and-wane of an individual subject. It is my argument that bleakness as an aesthetic category *does not have the same potential for reversal that post-Freudian melancholy does*. There is no paroxysm of action that can pull an aesthetic object out

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[60] Ibid, 85.
[61] Ibid, 87.

of the melancholic state or reverse it in a maniacal move. When melancholy "jumps" from humans to the image during the Romantic period, producing the melancholic landscape or statue, this is a leap from a subject position to a structuring of aesthetic objects. It is no longer about how someone feels but instead about what something enacts in relation with other beings and objects in its environment.

As we have seen in this section, melancholy has been understood as a biological organization of the body, a tendency of the soul, a relationship between the subject and the object, and as a descriptor for how humans understand loss. In these instances, it has been understood as a kind of resistor to change. If change happens too quickly, or is too radical, or cannot be dealt with appropriately, then melancholy becomes the descriptor we have used for discussing this phenomenon. If bleakness is the diagram through which aesthetic objects that are resistant to change are produced, then melancholy is both a forebear of bleakness and now contained within it. Melancholic objects, or aesthetic objects like *Only Lovers Left Alive* that are bleak with melancholy narrative tendencies, have been subsumed within bleakness in the contemporary period. Bleakness is the aesthetic category under which significant change is always kicked beyond the horizon line, with the potential for change and for hope constantly being foiled. Melancholy holds out for changes beyond the stasis of the unbearable feelings it brings; bleakness does not have that hope.

So far, I have discussed *Only Lovers Left Alive* and its relationship to bleakness in two contexts. The first was via the film's images and how they establish a relationship between space and time that prevents progress and constantly re-grounds each moment in a previous aesthetic context, robbing the viewer of the feeling of passing time through tableau imagery. The second was through a reconfiguration of narrative and a unity between a character's melancholy

motivations and plot developments contribute to the development of bleakness diagrammatically. In the latter, I provided a historical sketch that demonstrates how melancholy is a form of stasis in the subject that is part and parcel of bleakness, the aesthetic category typified by stasis, as a whole. A melancholy character is one who cannot progress and cannot contribute to narrative progression, and a narrative that cannot progress in a meaningful way is caught up in a narrative and imagistic relationship to bleakness. With an understanding of how bleakness operates in relation to both the image and the subject, I will now turn to the film *Children of Men*, which will help us more directly understand bleakness's relationship to direct questions of human finitude and the problem of political systems extending, without change, into the unbroken future.

Children of Men and the Infinite Present

A well-regarded favorite of the dystopian film genre, Alphonso Cuarón's 2006 film *Children of Men* is about the end of human history. Humans have become infertile, and despite all of our efforts as a species, there are no more pregnancies or artificial births. In the wake of the dawning knowledge that humans will have no future if no children are born, many of the world's nations collapse into chaos and anarchy. As a propaganda film that's broadcast on a bus early in the film by the violent and repressive government regime states, "only England soldiers on." It is within that context that protagonist Theo (Clive Owen) is recruited into the ranks of a rebel organization that is intent on sneaking a young refugee girl named Kee (Clare-Hope Ashitey) across the country. Partway through the film it is revealed that Kee is pregnant. Literally carrying the future within her, the drama of the film becomes centered on this revelation in its most spectacular form, and Theo becomes a smuggler who is set on delivering Kee to The Human Project, a humanitarian organization on a boat who is intent on rescuing humanity. The film

assumes that the end of human reproduction would be met with the most cynical nihilism and despair in humanity, and so Kee and her baby become a stand-in for the potential future of humans after this horrible slide into fascism and violence is over. As a species, we stand on a razor's edge, and only one heroic man can help this young woman navigate the hell of fascistic England.

Bleakness becomes visible in *Children of Men* when we take the structuring principle of the dystopian narrative and see how it is folded into the operation of the image. In discussing *Only Lovers Left Alive*, I characterized its camera movements and shot choices as formal moves that produce and are produced by bleakness. Similarly, *Children of Men* continually provides visual and auditory elements that depend on an ethereal, almost disturbing, stillness within the context of motion. These scenes and shots operate as a reproduction of the same and movement without movement, but with an additional layer of political commentary and speculation. They hold the horizon line of finitude at a stable distance so that *we move* but that horizon stays in the same place. Before turning to this, I want to produce two readings of scenes so that I might talk about them as indicative of a certain tendency in the film.

The first is the opening scene of the film. Voiceover of newscasters delivering the most up-to-date news for an English audience play over black screens and the opening titles in staccato fashion.

> "Day 1,000 of the siege of Seattle / the Muslim community demands an end to the army's occupation of mosques / the Homeland Security Bill is ratified. After eight years, British borders will remain closed. The deportation of illegal immigrants will continue. Good morning. Our lead story: The world was stunned today by the death of Diego Ricardo, the

youngest person on the planet. Baby Diego was stabbed outside a bar in Buenos Aires after refusing to sign an autograph. Witnesses at the scene say that Diego spat in the face of a fan who asked for an autograph. He was killed in the ensuing brawl. The fan was later beaten to death by the angry crowd. Born in 2009, the son of Marcelo and Sylvia Ricardo, a working class couple from Mendoza, he struggled all his life with the celebrity status thrust upon him as the world's youngest person. Diego Ricardo, the youngest person on the planet, was eighteen years, four months, twenty days, sixteen hours, and eight minutes old."

The scene is framed by this news report, but the formal choices made alongside the voice over are crucial for understanding how *Children of Men* depicts dystopia within the aesthetic category of bleakness. When the line "The world was stunned today by the death of Diego Ricardo, the youngest person on the planet" begins, the title credits cease, leaving the entire line to be spoken over an unchanging black screen. As the newscaster says "planet," the film cuts to a paralytic view of a crowd. The camera is positioned somewhere below and to the right of a wall-mounted television that everyone in a coffee shop is looking at with concern and shock. The social impact of Baby Diego's death is registered in the variety of expressions that are on display in the crowd: a woman touching her mouth in concern; a man holding a woman in consolation; a man frowning in disbelief.

Figure 1 The coffee shop patrons watch the footage of Baby Diego.

Crucially, there are no close ups to register individual reactions. There are no performative moments of individual mourning for the death of the youngest person on a planet without a future. Instead, the shot makes it clear that this is a *social* phenomenon that is not atomisable into the implications that it has for singular individuals. The loss of Diego is a *global* loss. The camera is also resistant to movement for several seconds, only changing with the introduction of protagonist Theo to the scene. He pushes his way up through the static group of people to order coffee, and as he approaches the camera it begins to waver and pull backward. In a classic move of focalization and identification of the camera with the protagonist, Theo's actions influence the camera movement. It is a subtle but purely formal operation that slides the *global* mourning into a *personal* framework, and it is when Theo finally reaches the counter and looks up that we are able to get a reverse shot of the screen that we have been listening to since the scene began over a minute before.

Figure 2 A point of view shot of the news footage.

The newscast quoted above is playing over the entire scene, and this reverse shot happens alongside the discussion of Diego's "celebrity status" appears. We're shown footage of him struggling through crowds, fighting against the people, before his photograph as a baby fills the screens. "Baby" Diego's global value is as a baby and therefore a signal of the last vestige of a potential future within this dystopia.

Figure 3 Visualizing Diego as a universal baby.

It is on this shot that the scene cuts back to Theo and the camera begins to follow him out of the coffee shop. The enumeration of Diego's exact age down to minutes can be heard from various diegetic audio sources, and the soundtrack swells as Theo walks out onto a London street dominated by beaten-up futuristic vehicles, motorcycle cabs, and screens that dominate the sides of buildings. Taking a note from the lived-in feeling of *Blade Runner* or *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977), the future of *Children of Men* is one in which technology is invented, is used by people, and then sticks around far beyond its use-by date. Our introduction to this world and its moving camera is interrupted several moments later when Theo stops to pour alcohol from a pocket bottle into his coffee. As the camera pulls around him and faces the path he just walked, the coffee shop he left mere moments before is bombed, exploding outward into the street.

Narratively, this is a film that depicts a world on a timer. Humans are coming to an end; human life on Earth is tending toward zero, total immobility, and total extinction. From this

perspective, our picture of people arrested in time and space by the recognition that the youngest person on the planet is dead is, in fact, a rendering of the future of human life. Humans, frozen in time, all of their accomplishments behind them, with no possibility of change. The future of this planet is merely an extension of the present. I will return to this shortly.

The second scene I want to discuss is at the middle point of the film. Theo, Kee, and her midwife Miriam (Pam Ferris) are betrayed by the rebel group that brought them together. Upon learning that the group plans on stealing the baby and using it as a political tool, the trio escape the rebel compound and make their way to the home of Theo's friend Jasper for advice and aid. The scene in Jasper's home contains the last moments of levity available in the film, and it is also one of the final opportunities for the audience to learn about Theo's life before the film. From a screenwriting perspective, this is a final moment of giving context to Theo's actions. Why would he choose to help Kee and her child get to the coast so that she could be rescued by The Human Project? If he believes, as he says to his cousin earlier in the film, that everything has gone to shit, then why have any hope in the future?

In the scene, Theo stops in the kitchen to refill his pocket bottle of alcohol. He can hear Jasper, Kee, and Mariam laughing in an adjoining room. As he pours, he is in the foreground of the shot on the left side of the screen while Jasper and Kee are on the right side. He is in focus, and they are in the blur of the camera lens's shallow depth of field. Not knowing that Theo is in the room and high on his special strain of "Strawberry Cough" marijuana, Jasper begins telling a story about Theo and his former wife Julian.

Jasper: Julian and Theo met among a million protestors in a rally by chance, but they were there because of what they believed in in the first place, their faith. They wanted to change the world, and their faith kept them together. But by chance, Dylan was born.

Kee: This is him?

Jasper: Yeah, that's him. He'd have been about your age. Magical child. Beautiful. Their faith put in praxis. He was a sweet little dream, he had little hands, little legs, little feet, little lungs. 2008 along came the flu pandemic. And then by chance, he was gone. You see, Theo's faith lost out to chance. So, why bother if life's going to make its own choices?

Kee: Baby's got Theo's eyes!

Miriam: But you know, everything happens for a reason.

Jasper: That I don't know.

Figure 4 Theo pours while they laugh.

Figure 5 Theo begins to listen to the beginning of Jasper's story.

Figure 6 The final camera location at the end of Jasper's story.

This is a scene that is fundamentally structured around the relationship between motion and stillness. We have two vectors of movement present here. One is narrative, and thus it is about a certain tendency of the film-assemblage that we are watching. The backstory being delivered by Jasper is a way of more formally structuring the viewer's relationship with the film, tightening our understanding of the logic of movement that the characters are going through in the film. Kee is the age that Theo's dead child would be if he had lived, and that similarity unlocks a paternal relationship between Theo and Kee. This is also mixed up in narrative threads that encourage us to read Theo as the symbolic father of the unborn child, as well as a reading that makes Theo the "father" of all of humanity to come. Whatever your preferred interpretation of Theo's actions in the film is, the ground of that interpretation is set here, and it is facilitated through narrative moving backward in time. The movement is such that is provides a causal logic

for action in the film; this thing is trundling along at this moment because it was put in motion at that moment.

The second vector of movement is the camera itself, and it is directly in relation to the uncomfortable stillness that Clive Owen portrays with his body while listening to the story. The camera slowly pushes in on his face over the roughly 40 seconds that it takes for Jasper to tell his story. While this happens, the camera shakes slightly due to the film's signature handheld style. What is visually produced is a quaking visual field that pulls closer and closer to a face that serious and haunted while the other figures, although lively and actively *doing* things, are rendered more and more out of focus until the film cuts to a semi-reverse shot and Theo storms out of the room.

These two scenes both rely on the same relationship between stillness, movement, and narrative development. They are scenes in which the difference between history and the present, the then and the now, becomes confused. In the first scene, that confusion is facilitated by the stillness of the crowd and their investment in Baby Diego, who is alive in historical footage while also being reported as dead to that rapt audience. In the second scene, it is through the extreme presence of Clive Owen and the camera's hyper-focus on him that is matched by a monologue invoking a deep past of despair and tragedy. In both, what we see is a stasis that is a byproduct of a collapse of the past and the present that cannot reconcile itself with a future. The figures of the world in front of us cannot move because their motion is precluded by the overanimating presence of what existed before them. The past overrides the present and prevents the future, and that capacity is made available to the film due to the static-making capabilities of the aesthetic category of bleakness. In these shots, we know why we are *here*, and we know where we *were*, but we don't know where we're going or even what the point of continuing on

from here might be. The fact that both scenes end with a cold break (the explosion; the storming out of the room) demonstrate an inability for the narrative to progress from this moment. At best, it can restart from its last known position. While these two scenes give us aesthetic handles for understanding this film's relationship to bleakness, we have yet to explore how bleakness uniquely interacts with the future in the context of this film. In the next section, we will turn to the concept of the dystopia to understand the intersection between the impossibility of the future and the diagram we're analyzing here.

The Bleakness of Dystopia

Children of Men is useful as an object for understanding the relationship between bleakness and the genre of fiction that most often produces it in our current period: the dystopia. If bleakness is a way of describing a way of producing an assemblage that manages human finitude and makes us perceive our current period as *ongoing* and *static*, where the horizon line of potential change continually moves forward without ever getting closer, then dystopia is the melding of a structural tendency (narrative) with the visual and sonic elements that constitute the core of an aesthetic category. If bleakness is distributed because it is a diagram that produces assemblages, then dystopias are the works where we can most clearly see the singularities cascading to create coherent statements about the world. The dystopia is the most coherent and cleanly rendered assemblage created by the aesthetic category of bleakness.

Dystopia first emerges as a concept in 1747 in an anonymously published work called *Utopia: or Apollo's Golden Days*.[62] Constructed from the Greek words *dus*, meaning bad or

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[62] In this original work, dystopia is actually misrendered as "dustopia" due to a decision to translate the Greek δυς as "dus" rather than the more accurate "dys." See V.M. Budakov, "Dystopia: An Earlier 18th Century Use," *Notes and Queries* 57 (2010), np.

unlucky, and *topos*, or place, the dystopia shifts into its contemporary meaning and spelling in a

1748 poem in praise of the Earl of Chesterfield's political work in Ireland published in *The*

Gentleman's Review.[63] Glossed as "an unhappy country," dystopia is directly contrasted to the

utopia in that work, and since that time period it has entered into a cluster of terms that seek to

define and delimit the conditions of desirability for fictional and nonfictional places. The utopia,

generally understood as a positive fictional place, is contrasted with the dystopia, the bad

fictional place; alongside them we have the eutopia (an ideal society), the anti-utopia (a society

proving utopia cannot exist), the critical dystopia (a reflexive form of dystopia that has the

reparative possibilities latent within it), and the critical utopia (a work that functions to

implement utopian ideals in the world.)[64] Each of these dispositions toward potential social

organization and forms of life is committed to a form of speculation about the human and its

finitude. Humans will live, and they will form societies, and those societies will have structures.

The exact form is the product of a contest of ideologies, and the scholarship dedicated to these

topoi anxiously addresses the relation between those ideologies, what they can imagine, and

what they will produce in the world.

Without reproducing the history of dystopian thought here, it is perhaps best to begin

with the dyad of the utopia and the dystopia as it appears in the 20th century.[65] A place to begin

is in the commentary on dystopia by Marxist cultural critic Fredric Jameson. Long committed to

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[63] Ibid, np.

[64] See Gregory Claeys, *Dystopia: A Natural History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 273-274; Constance Penley, "Time Travel, Primal Scene and the Critical Dystopia" in *Alien Zone: Cultural Theory and Contemporary Science Fiction Cinema*, ed. Annette Kuhn (New York: Verso, 1990), 116-127; Tom Moylan, *Demand the Impossible: Science Fiction and the Utopian Imagination* (New York: Metheun, 1986).

[65] For a full account of the history of thought surrounding dystopia, including the compression and distinction of anti-utopia and dystopia together, see Tom Moylan, *Scraps Of The Untainted Sky: Science Fiction, Utopia, Dystopia* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2000).

analyzing the forms of utopia that artistic works advocate for explicitly and implicitly, Jameson

sees our 20th and 21st century fascination with dystopia as an augmentation occurring due to the

unfulfilled project of modernity and the ungrounded, speculative form of life that postmodernism

has brought with it in late capitalism. Jameson identifies postmodernism and the economic

conditions in which it thrives with an endless churning backed by the flow of capital. "The

persistence of the Same through absolute Difference—the same street with different buildings,

the same culture through momentous new sheddings of skin—discredits change, since henceforth

the only conceivable radical change would consist in putting an end to change itself."[66] Our

contemporary condition is one of roiling Sameness for Jameson, and therefore the artistic works

that we create that might focus on that (our science fictions or our projections of the future) are

hopelessly bound up in our failure to imagine what might come after. Indeed, the introduction to

the same collection of lectures contains the quotation, later adapted into Slavoj Žižek's much-

quoted aphorism that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of

capitalism:

> It seems to be easier for us today to imagine the thoroughgoing deterioration of the earth
>
> and of nature than the breakdown of late capitalism; perhaps this is due to some weakness
>
> of our imaginations.[67]

It is not merely the "end of the world" of Žižek's reduction that is at stake in Jameson's

original thought. Instead, he depicts a world that would imagine itself running down like a clock

and grinding to a halt with all resources consumed and given over to entropy. In the diagnosis

from Jameson, there's no spectacle of the end of the world, no bombs, and no Reaganite

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[66] Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 18.
[67] Ibid, xii.

nightmares. Instead, it's an eternity of water over stones, shaving them away and diminishing them so imperceptibly that it's hard to verify that change is happening at all.

Put beside these claims from Jameson, the linkage of dystopia and bleakness becomes more realized. As an aesthetic category, bleakness gives us the ability to *grasp* the broader set of conditions that produce these works while seeing the dystopia as the clearest and most clearly rendered form. The political imagination of *Children of Men* demonstrates this. As discussed above, the massive expansion of the security state and the government-produced propaganda in the film set a tone for an overreaching totalitarian governing apparatus that manages the refugees and citizens that exist within it. The film points to refugee internment camps in its most shocking images, but it also prefigures the more recent discourse of the 99% versus the 1% in a rarely acknowledged scene when Theo travels to meet his wealthy relative who is attempting to "rescue" the world's fine art. Upon making his way into the palatial grounds of the English elite, Theo witnesses a utopia of exotic animals, garden parties, and *fin de siècle* food and finery in which the wealthy have buried themselves. The transition scene lasts for less than 20 seconds, and in that time we see a Victorian troop formation riding horses, a zebra, a small orchestra being conducted, a camel, and two large and well-groomed dogs, all of which are positioned in the context of a massive park where people seem to be walking around without fear or worry. The contrast of this scene to the previous ones cannot be understated. Already at this point in the film we've see a bomb explode in a cafe, people locked in cages, housing complexes being raided and belongings being thrown out of windows in ways reminiscent of the persecutions and violences that led to the Holocaust, and doomsday cults exalting God in preparation for judgment. Following Gregory Claeys, we can say that this is a standard dystopia in which a particular utopia "of opulence and consumption" formed at the supposed end of human futurity is

"generating a dystopia of scarcity and environmental degradation."[68] In discussing dystopia, we must always be asking the crucial question of who is experiencing a particular historical moment or arrangement *as* dystopia and who is seeing it as an ideal arrangement of the world.

To think back to earlier in this chapter, what we're seeing here is the visual version of what Mark Fisher described when he heard the Amy Winehouse track in the shopping mall. If *Only Lovers Left Alive* created scenes of movement-without-movement, involute instances that churned time and left us displaced from changing time, then *Children of Men* is using its visual field and the relation of utopia to dystopia in order to pose a question about the conditions of progress in the contemporary liberal state. *Only Lovers Left Alive* is about immortals and the flattening of time into an eternal present; *Children of Men* is about mortals and their inability to conceive of a future, mournfully living out their lives. They hold out for something, a utopia, in the face of the overwhelming knowledge that the future is a ruin that decays more each moment and what they are experiencing as new is really the old dressed up in new clothes. Jameson notes that this is a feature, not a bug, of dystopian thinking and is what distinguishes the written form of utopia from the dystopian novel:

> "The dystopia is always and essentially what in the language of science-fiction criticism is called a "near-future" novel: it tells the story of an imminent disaster—ecology, overpopulation, plague, drought, the stray comet or nuclear accident—waiting to come to pass in our own near future, which is fast forwarded in the time of the novel (even if that

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[68] Claeys, *Dystopia: A Natural History*, 6.

be then subsequently disguised as some repressive society galactic ages away from us)."[69]

Jameson's comparison here helps us understand his concept of utopia as an engine the produces a work around it. In his model, utopia is a specific desire for a shape of the world that exists at the core of a media object, and the unfolding of that model within space-time is what Marxist literary theory is best at analyzing.[70] Strangely, Jameson also provides an alternate explanation that complicates this dualism that the sets up between the narrative dystopia and the engine-like utopia. As he explains in the final lecture of the triad that makes up *The Seeds of Time*, the utopia must necessarily carry within it an understanding of the catastrophe of human experience that is being avoided through the instantiation of the utopia: "If one wishes to avoid thinking about suffering and misery, one must also avoid thinking about the Utopian text, which necessarily carries their expression within itself in order to constitute the wish fulfillment of their abolition."[71] This is starkly illustrated by the wealthy class utopia that exists behind the royal, security-laden walls in *Children of Men*; the nightmare dystopia is spatially excluded and the best, most delightful parts of human history are placed into a never ending static age of wonder. When Theo asks his relative about how he reconciles this utopia with the fact that "the world went to shit," the man turns to him and lightly delivers the damning statement that closes the first act of the film: "You know what it is, Theo? I just don't think about it."

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[69] Ibid, 56.

[70] While nothing in my own work on aesthetic categories and diagrams necessarily contradicts this, I must note that the ontology that I am advocating for must necessarily be the site of producing the Jamesonian model and not the other way around; for me, the utopian desire is "inside" of diagrams and not the other way around.

[71] Ibid, 102.

Before turning to a more direct relationship between bleakness and dystopia, I will note that Alphonso Cuarón, the writer and director of the film, has always been open about the politics of the dystopian "what if?" of the film. In a 2016 interview near the anniversary of the original release, Cuarón is emphatic about how the fiction interrelates with the world that we live in.

> "This thing was not imagination," he says, jabbing his index finger into the tablecloth. By Cuarón's estimation, anyone surprised at the accuracy of his movie's predictions was either uninformed or willfully ignorant about the way the world already was by 2006. "People were talking about those things, just not in the mainstream!" he says. He was reading about refugees, know-nothing reactionaries, and eerie disruptions in biological processes during the early '00s. If *Children of Men* can be said to have a message, Cuarón encapsulates it: "What's really relevant now," he tells me, "is to stop being complacent."[72]

Cuarón's emphasis here allows us to understand both how *Children of Men* uses the dystopia as a structure to comment on the world, and the aesthetic category as a heuristic for understanding the production of that structure. *Children of Men* is here, right now; the pieces from which it is assembled, the material conditions that make a projection of this possible dystopian future possible, were present in 2006. As Fisher and Jameson help make clear, the bleakness at work that constructs our understanding out contemporary time period and the media that makes it up is always present, assembling our visions of the future into media objects. Within Jameson's characterization, the dystopia is the extension of the current human

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[72] Abraham Reisman, "Future Shock", *The Vulture*. December 26, 2016.
https://www.vulture.com/2016/12/children-of-men-alfonso-cuaron-c-v-r.html

catastrophe into the future. In a move that feels more Benjaminian than Jameson is letting on, both utopia and dystopia carry within them the assumption that the awful things that humans are doing and experiencing are going to carry on in the same way that they are now unless interrupted by a messianic utopian moment or a cataclysmic dystopian one. In either case, the argument seems to be that something needs to happen in order to radically interrupt the trajectory the species is on. While this by definition does not happen within objects that characterize the aesthetic category of bleakness, these radical interruptions have their own aesthetic category in the post-apocalypse, which I will discuss this at length in the next chapter.

The Return of the Same for Eternity

What unites both *Only Lovers Left Alive* and *Children of Men* is the form aesthetic category of bleakness. Mediating between the virtual and the actual, it operates via repetition, taking the conditions of the present, projecting them forward in time, and then re-grounding them as sameness, without the hope of change. As I have discussed in this chapter, these films produce a stuck-ness in time via their images, the way they produce cinematic time, the narrative pathways that they take, and their projective capacity about the state of the world in the future. Crucially, none of these are essences of the category of bleakness, but rather they are modes through which bleakness grounds and maintains itself. These are not whys but instead different modes of how, and they are not exhaustive. When a media object taps into the ever-receding horizon of human finitude, it is in contact with the reality-arranging device that is the diagram of bleakness, the assemblage process through which the present stretches on, eternally, without substantive change in the material arrangement of things. To bring this back to the terminology established in the previous chapter that emerges from the work of Manuel DeLanda, from a technical standpoint we can say that bleakness emerges from a situation in which a diagram has

little potential to make a stratified assemblage into a less stratified one. In other words, it is a way of demonstrating the *strength* of a arrangement of things.

To briefly sum up what I have argued about these films. In the case of *Only Lovers Left Alive*, I looked to the way that the film deploys the tableau to understand how it reframes our understanding of time and the image. Time becomes compressed within the film, and still images are put into motion with time-augmented music to create an immortal time that nonetheless holds both the viewer and the film's characters in stasis. By walking through melancholy's transition from bodily to essential to subjective to social issue, we traced how melancholy's hopeful paroxysms of change are fundamentally inaccessible within the hopeless, futureless condition of bleakness. In the case of *Children of Men*, I analyzed other uses of time and stasis as a mode of aesthetic production. Where *Only Lovers Left Alive* uses its scenes as a way of collapsing and generating a film where time cannot be properly known or ascertained, *Children of Men* uses its moments of collapse and stasis to make us *pointedly* aware of how much time is passing and the difference between a then, a now, and a potential future that cannot be delivered. Where the former collapses time without thinking about a future, the latter fixates on that collapse to mourn the fact that the future cannot possibly emerge. The virtual becomes the actual, but without the hope of something new. The same things, produced for the same people, until life fades from existence.

The films I have discussed here are ways of mediating that very act of assemblage transformation. Much like Sianne Ngai's image of Lucille Ball, the films are ways of working through the structure of things through aesthetics, and the specific analysis of scenes that I have performed in this chapter have been toward the goal of showing, via cinema, how diagrams and assemblages function in concert to create a *bleak* aesthetics that reproduce the same conditions of

existence over and over again without the potential for escape. DeLanda is particularly fond of using the metaphor of "knobs" when talking about how assemblages function (notably one of his few uses of traditional metaphor), but this metaphor simply stands in for talking about degrees of parameters in a given assemblage's structure. He reminds us that the two critical parameters are coding (the degree to which something is highly structured) and territorialization (the degree to which the components of an assemblage have been homogenized).[73]

In both of the films I have discussed, the mediation of human finitude is taking place via a diagram where both of those parameters are set to their most rigid, most homogenized forms. This is happening in regard to visual content, narrative, and the formal camera work that unites those two in the films. The way things *are* is the way that they will *be*, on and on into eternity, interrupted only by plot contrivances that ultimately reproduce the conditions that began the film. From the perspective of assemblage theory, the singularities that might produce some kind of change simply roll back into a repetition of the same. The record player keeps turning around and around, never transforming into something else, and pulling the world into its shape. Theo stares into the camera, the vibrating camera pulling into his still visage, until he leaves the frame. Interruption is too much to ask. These forms of human experience and life spill on over the horizon, and this is what we call bleakness.

I will end this chapter by looking to the finale of these films. If the future is the past repeated when operating within the aesthetic category of bleakness, then the actual endings of these films are instructive for showing what about the past reasserts itself in the possible and speculative future that follows the final shots of any film.

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[73] Manuel DeLanda, *Assemblage Theory,* 3.

Only Lovers Left Alive ends with Adam and Eve wandering Tangier in a blood-deprived haze. Their friend Philip Marlow drank bad blood, and he's dead. Their connection to their own life-sustaining fluid is cut off, and they stumble the streets in a deprived state like drug addicts hunting a fix. Two scenes serve as the finale. In the first, Eve wanders away to find Adam a new musical instrument after he was forced to leave all of his possessions behind when they fled Detroit. While she's gone, he leans in the doorway of a small club, and the film morphs into a pseudo music video for Lebanese artist Yasmine Hamdan. The song she performs, "Hal," is a plaintive and mournful one about separation and loss. Eve returns, Adam walks away from the performance, and they find a young Moroccan couple to feast upon, their otherworldly addict's eyes filling the final frames of the film.

Children of Men ends on a similar note. Kee has her child in the immigration camp at Bexhill, and Theo helps her navigate through the chaos that follows. The rebel group they fled earlier in the film have broken into the camp in pursuit of Kee; the immigration officer who smuggled them into the camp wants to take her child hostage; the military is planning to bomb Bexhill as a last-ditch maneuver to quell rebellion The action comes to a head in several scenes where Theo runs from cover-to-cover, avoiding gunfire while escaping the various people pursuing him before rescuing Kee and her child and fleeing the camp via rowboat. As the boat floats out toward the sea and the buoy where The Human Project will pick her up. Theo bleeds to death from a gunshot wound sustained during the fighting shortly before a massive ship cuts into frame to rescue Kee and her baby.

If bleakness is about the repetition of the same and the experience of being trapped in an assemblage that recreates itself in its same image over and over again, then what do we make of these endings? The vampires' lives are threatened in a way that seems to bring them back into

history, and The Human Project has the potential to restore human futurity. It seems as if these finales "undo" the work of sameness and collapsed history that dominates the rest of the runtimes of the films in question.

While both mark transition points in the narratives that the films center, it is crucial to note that both are desperate narrative bids to recreate the conditions that opened the film. The vampires are looking generate normalcy again. The Human Project wants to extrapolate Kee's reproduction to the rest of humanity as a way of "saving" the rest of the species, functionally turning the child into another Baby Diego. Bleakly, both are instances of the past repeating in the present. After all, Eve tells us in *Only Lovers Left Alive* that she's survived much worse things before, and Theo makes it clear in *Children of Men* that all of the things that mark humanity as a species, our cultural artifacts and commitments to ideals, have been fundamentally eradicated by nuclear weapons, the breakdown of society, and the rise of fascism. These are not losses easily regained.

These are obviously racialized moments for anyone viewing the films. Hamdan's performance is played as an exoticized moment that suggests an outside to the Western historical trajectory that Adam finds so defeated about. It is not an exaggeration to say this encounter with a racial other literally gives Adam a will to live and feed in the following scene. There is still some life, some power of music, beyond the delimited space that Adam has grown so weary of. When the vampires consume the couple in the next scene, making sure to "turn" them instead of killing them, it is the complementary moment of consumption. As Steven Shaviro writes about the film, "the film becomes an allegory of the dead end of white Euro-American culture, which can only live so long upon its no-longer-active cultural heritage of Elizabethan poetry and vinyl

45s."[74] Within this racial moment of consumption, one could make an argument of transcendence. A viewer might be tempted to construe violence as progress or at least a way of breaking out of stasis. And yet we have evidence that all of the war, all of the cultural interconnection, all of the power of art and transformative capability has done nothing to alter the fundamental composition of these Western European vampires. If anything, this is a moment of the proliferation of stasis in yet another bid to accomplish what bell hooks terms "eating the Other."[75] There is nothing in the film to suggest a cultural reversal or the true transformation of their mode of life. We have no evidence that watching Hamdan creates a condition under which "we are ourselves altered when we look."[76] It might have been more invigorating for Tangiers to have killed them.

Children of Men performs a similar move by choosing to make the mother of the future of the human race a black woman from the African diaspora. Kee is raced as a black woman but is not given a specific ethnicity or original nationality. Instead, she is elevated to the level of a universal "fugee," or refugee, who is positioned Madonna-like as producing the possibility of future grace for the human species from enshrouded history and circumstances. As Sarah Trimble argues, this unsettled history "threatens to undo the nationalist rhetoric of a united England 'soldiering on' in the midst of global chaos."[77] And, as Trimble goes on to point out, we do not know what rights and privileges Kee will need to trade to guarantee a future on board the ship that will emerge from the fog. The future that emerges from the finale of the film is

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[74] Steven Shaviro, "Only Lovers Left Alive," *The Pinocchio Theory*. April 10, 2014. http://www.shaviro.com/Blog/?p=1205

[75] bell hooks, *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), 22.

[76] Anne Anlin Cheng, *Second Skin: Josephine Baker & The Modern Surface* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 21.

[77] Sarah Trimble, "Maternal back/grounds in *Children of Men*: Notes toward an Arendtian biopolitics," *Science Fiction Film & Television* 4.2 (2011): 249-270, 256.

necessarily one in which her position as a fecund, productive black woman is taken as her sole

benefit to offer the rest of the species. It is obvious that a racial logic, specifically one that is

oriented to the relationship between blackness and the State, is being worked through here. On a

fundamental level, the aesthetic category of bleakness's unchangeability is lent stability by the

film's unquestioning "soldiering on" of a position of blackness that changes context but does not

change social position.

In her chapter on the film in her *Where No Black Woman Has Gone Before*, Diana

Adesola Mafe implicitly argues against this position by looking to moments, such as the

ceasefire late in the film, where Kee "imagines and invents herself" and "expresses creative

resistance to her own overdetermined role as object and fetish" in order to "arguably find her

own agency."[78] Mafe reads the final scene of the film as one in which Kee is "finally her own

keeper" in the aftermath of Theo.[79] In the context of what the film tells us about movements,

their leaders, and the constant attempts of groups to control the future, I cannot come to the same

conclusion. Like Trimble above, I can only see these final shots of Kee as a heavy moment in

which she is anticipating the next assemblage that will emerge to attempt to consume her and her

child into a system of biopolitical management of a miracle.

The ending is made even more unsettling, as Nicole L. Sparling notes, by the audio of

giggling children that plays over the end title, which places the moment after the film either in a

lost past or in an undepictable future.[80] No matter which we choose to follow, we find ourselves

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[78] Diana Adesola Mafe, *Where No Black Woman Has Gone Before: Subversive Portrayals In Speculative Film and TV* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2018), 87.
[79] Ibid, 92.
[80] Nicole L. Sparling, "Without a Conceivable Future: Figuring the Mother in Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men*," *Frontiers* 35.1 (2014): 160-180, 167.

back in bleakness and Mark Fisher's experience of "Valerie." The eternal rearview mirror is the eternity that stretches in front of us, and that eternity is undergirded by a racial paradigm that, as we've see here and as I will explore much more fully in the next chapter, is difficult to destroy or interrupt.

The "hope" of both of the ending scenes of this films, so insidious within bleakness, is that the social can constantly recreate its founding moment. As an aesthetic category, bleakness generates circularity and repetition without difference. No lessons are learned. The same is produced again. When Adam and Eve feed on the Moroccan couple, they decide to "turn" them, fundamentally recreating themselves and their eternal romance over again. The Human Project's goal is not to create a brave new world wholly different from the one that people live in. Instead, their entire purpose is to extend *this* world, fundamentally pushing the horizon line further along into the future. And, of course, both scenes are ones in which white people give over part of themselves (in Adam and Eve, their "gift" of vampirism; for Theo, his life) in order to put the future into the hands of nonwhite bodies who are, nevertheless, bound up in the worlds produced for them by whiteness. Both films seem to gesture to this as a promise of a multicultural, panracial future; neither seem to take seriously the weight of history and the repetitive power of bleakness as an aesthetic category, and it is precisely because of this that bleakness is able to so easily manipulate and assert itself in these moments of false change.

In the next chapter, I will discuss the aesthetic category of the post-apocalypse in order to think more fully about aesthetic objects that try to work beyond the eternal now of bleakness.

CHAPTER 3: POST-APOCALYPSE

In the previous chapter, I discussed bleakness as the aesthetic category that mediates the human relationship toward finitude when it comes to a sense of the *now* stretching out toward eternity. Media objects that arrest the present and make it stretch onward and outward over the horizon, both in a formal and narrative sense, are how the diagram of bleakness operates on material reality and reorients it to repetitious shapes. What, though, about transformation? In this chapter, I will discuss the aesthetic category of post-apocalypse to show how humans mediate their finitude via objects that center on radical transformational moments in planetary, political, social, and personal life for both individuals and the species. As an aesthetic category, post-apocalypse hinges on existence as after-ness, of being beyond a boundary and yet still having coherent aesthetics and politics, while speculating about the relationship between human experience and its utter limit in the period after a radical break in human existence. It is the "post" of post-apocalypse that is important for what I want to discuss here. I am not concerned with the moment of apocalyptic crisis. Post-apocalypse focuses on the reflex of how humans must live in the time that remains after a major break, and the media objects that I discuss in this chapter center on the work of reconstructing social formations in the wake of that major break. When humans mediate their own finitude, and they focus on the shattering of the world, what do they end up creating in order to salvage the world? The aesthetic category of post-apocalypse addresses this resurrective capacity.

Before diving into demarcation lines and historical framing, I want to reiterate how post-apocalypse fits mechanistically within DeLandan diagrammatics. Assemblages are produced by diagrams, and they maintain themselves based on the guiding principles of that diagram. They also possess intensive qualities (which determine how they function) and extensive qualities

(which determine how they connect with other assemblages). The diagram of bleakness is both highly territorialized and highly coded, meaning that its structure and its function are kept in a relatively similar shape consistently, no matter what other assemblages it interacts with. The previous chapter demonstrates how that functions both through formal and narrative means in relationship to cinema. Assemblages also have singularities which, when crossed, are truly transformational for the assemblage. For DeLanda, the diagram itself is "a set of universal singularities that would be the equivalent of a body-plan, or more precisely, that would structure the space of possibilities associated with the assemblage."[1] The constant maintenance of the assemblage by its diagram, across a number of these universal singularities, means that there is a latent capability for a swerve in the actual assemblage.[2] The history of a diagram, the story of its life and death, is bound up in how often those singularities produce assemblages that are either similar or different from the ones produced before it. When it comes to the production of media objects that mediate human relationships with abstractions like their own finitude, that similarity or difference appears materially within the assemblages that come into existence. In the case of bleakness, the diagram's singularities tend toward the same coding, the same territorialization, and the utter reproduction of sameness. In contrast to bleakness, post-apocalypse is characterized by a brief interruption of internal consistency followed by a re-assertion of the structure that governed and assemblage before that interruption. The world ends, but then it is reborn, and it is my argument that that *re*birth is always the reassertion of a diagram that governed the previous arrangement of materials of the world. Rebirth is always in reference to what existed before, and as I will show in this chapter, the political stakes for what is reborn into a decimated world is

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[1] Manuel DeLanda, *A New Philosophy of Society*, 30.

[2] Gilles Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, trans. Mark Lester (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), 269.

significant. In post-apocalypse, we no longer have the infinite now that characterized bleakness. We instead have a before and an after with the possibility of a transformed future. This future is not an eternity of unchanging stasis or a grave. Instead, it is potent and ripe for transformation, but that transformation is bracketed in specific ways due to what the future inherits from the past. This chapter is about media objects that take up the presentation of the time-after-transformation and the tendencies of re-territorialization in media objects. This is post-apocalypse, the revelation of a break with the past that nonetheless re-asserts that past. It is a diagram that produces shattered assemblages that tend back toward codified and stratified structure that existed before that shattering.

I also want to re-iterate here that these media objects perform a both/and function when it comes to aesthetic categories. By virtue of being assemblages that emanate from diagrams, they tell us the shape of those diagrams. Their existence as media objects means that they are fundamentally experienced aesthetically, and this means that they are both produced by an aesthetic category and that our responses to them are folded back into that aesthetic category. The aesthetic category of post-apocalypse is certainly more volatile and less static than bleakness, but as I will discuss in the historical section to follow, we must understand diagrams as historical entities that are grounded in a time and place. I argue that post-apocalypse is best understood to be a product of modernity that then accelerates in specific ways after the development and use of the atomic bomb in 1945. While latent in form in European and American culture before, it enters into its own distinct form after the detonation of that weapon. The media objects that I will discuss in this chapter literalize this break-then-reform through their subject matter. I will look to post-apocalyptic films and video games to elucidate how they

literalize this struggle between the assemblage that was, the assemblage that is, and the diagram that operates as a shattering and reconstructing operation in-between.

This chapter begins by tracing the diagram of apocalypse through religious tradition, the secularization of that tradition, and then the media objects that are created at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century that show a shift from apocalyptic to post-apocalyptic thinking. I argue that the major breakthrough that fully brings the diagram of post-apocalypse into being in the detonation of the first nuclear weapon, which ushers in mass amounts of literary and filmic speculation about what might happen if most of humanity is destroyed by an apocalypse and yet some people are left to live in the post-. From there I will use this historicized aesthetic category of post-apocalypse to read three media objects that are emblematic of the capacity of post-apocalypse to speculate about the endings and rebirths of human lives, social systems, and ways of being. These works both demonstrate the radical potential for a break with the past while implicitly showing that the past is almost impossible to eliminate. I argue that anti-blackness is a constitutive element of the diagram of post-apocalypse, and it is my claim that our media objects that focus on a liberatory breaks from the past still cannot imagine a context where that break might sever the racist structure that underlies our contemporary political structures.

The first media object is *Mad Max: Fury Road*, an apocalyptic road film that follows a lone wanderer named Max who comes into contact with Imperator Furiosa, a woman living in an oppressive regime who steals her warlord's War Rig tanker truck in a bid to free his wives from sexual slavery and forced breeding. Often celebrated as a powerful tale of political liberation, the film is both a powerful story of political alliance and one that ignores the actual political realities of contemporary life. I argue that the film's universalizing message of liberation against oppression in a world where there's nothing to lose and everything to gain rests on an explicit

inability to recognize racial categorization and oppression. In the final calculus, the film abandons the violent structures of the pre-apocalyptic to create a liberated utopia, but it does so at the cost of reinstating pre-apocalyptic anti-blackness as a constitutive element of social relations.

The second is *The Girl With All The Gifts*, a British film adaptation of the novel of the same name. A zombie narrative about children who are born infected with a fungus that makes them "Hungries," the film takes a similar tack to *Fury Road* in that it takes us through an oppressive regime to a liberatory end. The difference is that its protagonist Melanie is a Hungry herself, and the radical break at the end of the film is the establishment of a world where Hungries completely replace humanity. I claim that the film gives us additional parameters through which we can understand how the "world without humans" that rebuilds itself in an image devoid of the values of the human world still, inevitably, mimics the violence of Western society that created the conditions that killed humans to begin with.

The third and final media object that I analyze in this chapter is the video game *The Last of Us*. In the previous two examples, I treat anti-blackness as a kind of building block or plank that the diagram of post-apocalypse uses to maintain stability in the destruction and re-creation of the social. In this final example, I focus on how that brick is formed, shaped, and corralled into particular uses by the diagram itself. In deep conversation with the scholarship of Fred Moten, this section digs into the specifics of how blackness is produced through the narrative and visual mechanisms of the video game. By demonstrating the exact parameters through which this common aesthetic category thinks blackness, I open this method up to the autocritical final chapter of this dissertation in which blackness demonstrates the limits of what aesthetic categories and mediation of finitude can accomplish.

A History of Post-Apocalypse

The term "apocalypse" emerges from the Greek *apokalypsis*, or a revealing, which itself

is formed through the combination of *apo*, or "off," and *kalyptein*, or "to cover." Apocalypse is

best understood as a revealing or a disclosure, and in the Christian tradition this has gained

purchase and been understood as "the 'revelation' of God's will, purpose, or plan, either through

prophecy or events themselves."[3] Indeed, the apocalypse is the transformational moment in

which humans learn something critical about the state of things in the world, and as John Hall

has so artfully expressed it in his *Apocalypse*, this is often focused on moments in which humans

become oriented toward the "Present Crisis" rather than "the final and absolute end of the

world."[4] It is difficult to discuss the apocalypse and its afters without addressing Christian

theology. After all, the Biblical Revelation of John of Patmos is perhaps *the* core text in the

cultural heritage of Western media production when it comes to figuring what happens during

and after the end of the world. Producing a vision of the end of things as well as a concept of

what happens *after* the end of things, the Revelation exists as a significant node in the lineage of

concerns about human finitude, and it provides a blueprint for how apocalypse is figured in

cultures developed around Christianity. In this prophecy of the end of things, a whole host of

horrors is wrought upon the world, and in the finale a Last Judgment takes place followed by the

era in which the "new heaven and the new earth make their appearance."[5] As Hall notes, the

prophetic nature of the Revelation was vague enough in its time to ground both pacifistic and

militaristic interpretations that were mixed in heavily with disagreements about the immediacy of

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[3] John R. Hall, *Apocalypse: From Antiquity to the Empire of Modernity* (Malden: Polity, 2009), 2.

[4] Ibid, 2.

[5] David Ketterer, *New Worlds For Old: The Apocalyptic Imagination, Science Fiction, and American Literature* (Garden City: Anchor Press, 1974), 7.

the fulfillment of that prophecy.[6] It is only in the work of Augustine three centuries later that the apocalypse is settled into a kind of horizon line of potential in which it is "contained by its delay to a distant future, after the millennium."[7]

This delay and the focus on the millennium is a critical inflection point for understanding how apocalypse and post-apocalypse work in tandem with one another. If the apocalypse is the triggering event that collapses this world, then the post-apocalypse is the world that is to come. In the Christian theological tradition, that is the Kingdom of God in which the creator establishes an eternal order of justice without pain or suffering. From the perspective of the aesthetic category analysis I have done throughout this dissertation so far, this is a particular diagram that governs the human relationship to finitude. As the religious diagram would have it, beyond the absolute limit point of human life and knowledge there is a supreme God with infinite power that, ultimately, will place the universe into a rigid structure full of meaning.

If diagrams are born and die, meaning that they appear, exert influence, and then become extinct or change, then the diagram of Christian apocalypticism is the ancestor of many of the diagrams the deal with human finitude in contemporary media objects produced in the United States and Europe. Christian theology casts a long shadow over the cultures of both regions of media production, and to disavow that would be foolish at best and incomplete at worst, and that theological structure has shifted in significant ways over the past 2,000 years.[8] However, the

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[6] Hall, *Apocalypse*, 32-34.

[7] Ibid, 35.

[8] It is also quite clear to anyone immersed in American religious culture that the Christian eschatological diagram is alive and well in the contemporary United States. Many people believe that we live in the Biblical end times. A longform analysis of this is obviously beyond the scope of this dissertation, but it provides additional evidence for the overlap of aesthetic categories around similar concerns about abstract problems.

transformation point between the Christian apocalyptic diagram around apocalypse and the more

secular visions and versions of the concern accelerated at the end of the 19th and through the

20th century, with the Second World War being a significant moment of transformation from

one regime to the other, and I largely follow John Hall's argument that the secularization of

apocalypse that took place over the last few centuries created a fully parallel tradition to the

Christian one that nonetheless emerges from the same concerns about human finitude. While

Christian theology has had a weighty effect on the creation of diagrams centered on human

catastrophe and death, I do not want to discount the worldwide context over the past four

thousand years in which the Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions arose and developed in the

Middle East, Europe, and North America. Cultural intermingling and the long legacy of both

peaceful and violent communication, heavily influenced in the past several hundred years by the

dual realities of capitalism and colonialism, mean that the apocalyptic diagram has taken many

different shapes as it encountered different material contexts.[9]

There are a set of universal singularities and break points in which the diagram of

apocalypse can appear and shift, all of which are instantiated in specific material and historical

contexts. For example, Richard Brodhead argues for a reading of Nat Turner's slave rebellion as

an instance in which someone identified the potential deterritorialization of apocalypse and then

worked to realize that deterritorialization in the world, creating a set of singularities that

produced destabilizations in the highly coded assemblage of American slavery. Turner's uprising

in 1831 produced breaks in the diagram that managed the institution of slavery, and, historically,

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[9] See *Imagining The End: Visions of the Apocalypse From The Ancient Middle East to Modern America*, eds. Abbas Amanat and Magnus Bernhardsson (London, UK: I.B. Tauris, 2002) for a discussion of comparative apocalyptic traditions. While I am interested in a particular strain of diagram here, the volume makes an interesting case for the precise lineage of how the diagram of apocalypse became internationalized from its origination point in the modern Middle East.

that assemblage worked to violently reterritorialize and heavily code any possible outliers that could be seen as creating friction within that system. This assertion of power and territorialization came in the form of terror and violence: "As news of the uprising traveled through the South, it touched off panicky reprisals in which over one hundred slaves (possibly many more) were killed—slaves who had no contact with Turner except the fact that *as* slaves they could be suspected of harbouring his revolutionary intentions."[10] From the perspective of assemblage theory, this is an assemblage based on racial capital performing extreme violence to maintain self-consistency in the face of the destabilizing effects of abolition.

A diagram manages the production of certain assemblages within material conditions. The apocalyptic diagram produced Nat Turner's relation to his own finitude, like it has done for people stretching back to early millenarians. The diagram of slavery, which organizes material reality at that intersection of racism and capitalism, also produced Nat Turner. In his experience of the diagram of the apocalypse, which mediated his relationship to his own finitude and the future, Turner made the choice to rebel against the organizing principles of the diagram of slavery, activating the universal singularities latent in that diagram that could cause it to shatter like a fault in a stone. In the case of the diagram of slavery, the assemblages it produces are highly focused on the physical ordering and placement of slaves while brutally extracting a mass amount of labor power from them. Turner's rebellion was carried out by looking to these organizational points, these singularities, and overloading them. Field tools like knives and axes became weapons. The distance between plantations became a boon for a rebellion that worked

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[10] Richard H. Brodhead, "Millennium, Prophecy and the Energies of Social Transformation: The Case of Nat Turner" in *Imagining The End: Visions of the Apocalypse From The Ancient Middle East to Modern America*, eds. Abbas Amanat and Magnus Bernhardsson (London, UK: I.B. Tauris, 2002), 219.

on violent resurgence and guerilla tactics. In short, the diagram of slavery and the way that it shaped material reality to create the assemblage of "the plantation" could be undone via a radical deterritorialization followed by a reterritorialization of the material elements in a rebellious army via the diagram of apocalypse.

Yet this is about the diagram of apocalypse proper, which centers on the possibility of radical change in a system, and not the post-apocalypse of the aesthetic category that I have claimed I am after in this chapter. That aesthetic category is focused on a "time after" the apocalypse. So when did this diagram form, and how did it emerge from apocalypse proper?

The Secular Shift in Apocalyptic Thought

Frank Kermode's lecture-turned-book *The Sense of an Ending*, originally published in 1966 and re-issued in 2000, provides a basic structure for understanding how apocalypse secularized in conversation with the arts. Despite only discussing works from the Middle East, Europe, and the United States, Kermode makes a broad claim about the unity established between Jewish and Christian apocalyptic rhetoric and the basic concerns of humans as a species. He argues that the unity of eschatological concerns across the religious and the secular are accounted for by humanity's fear of death and the lack of clear patterns for life. "St. Augustine," he writes, "speaks of the terrors of the End as a figure for personal death."[11] This is systematically accelerated to a societal level through a Christian tradition, and Kermode claims that "in St. Paul and St. John there is a tendency to conceive of the End as happening at every moment; this is the moment when the modern concept of *crisis* was born—St. John puns on the Greek word, which means both 'judgment' and 'separation.'"[12] Through the veneration of these

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[11] Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 25.
[12] Ibid, 25.

particular suggestions about how the Christian apocalypse functions, a particular focus formed on the "time between one's moment and one's death."[13] The final output of this is a dominant Christian apocalyptic paradigm that places the horizon line of the apocalypse in the near future, or even in the midst of the current moment. In Kermode's formulation: "No longer imminent, the End is immanent."[14] This line of thinking should be familiar to anyone who reads the news during our time. The advent of the 24-hour news cycle in the 1990s and the acceleration of that model across additional platforms with the invention of social media has allowed us to fear both for our own life and the general well-being of humanity constantly, with new and invigorating ways of being concerned appearing almost daily. Similarly, the creeping reality of climate change and its ongoing shifts in global conditions for humanity and nonhuman animals follows the same logic. Like those early Christians, we are in the crisis, and our discourse seems almost giddy about the idea that one day a switch will flip and a reckoning will occur. Surely these are political concerns with political stakes.

However, this line of argument isn't *enough*. Apocalypticism draws a connection from Jewish and Christian traditions to the contemporary period, but my intent here is not to elucidate the long *durée* of the apocalypse as an aesthetic category. Rather, I am interested in how this diagram of human finitude that has existed for two millennia has transformed in the last century and formed an aesthetic category wholly focused on what happens *after* the crisis. Post-apocalypse is the place where, following Malcolm Bull's summation of apocalypse theory, "telos and terminus" coincide.[15] Or, more specifically, it is the exact moment *after* the telos of

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[13] Ibid, 25.
[14] Ibid, 25.
[15] Malcolm Bull, "On Making Ends Meet" in *Apocalypse Theory and the Ends of the World*. Ed. Malcolm Bull. (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1995), 2-3.

humanity and its eschatological destiny have erupted in fulfillment. This is the diagram of post-apocalypse, and it's from Kermode's thinking that we can derive an instantiation point of the diagram.

There are two moments in *The Sense of an Ending* that are instructive for us when it comes to constructing a distinguishing split between a *general* diagram of apocalypse and a more specific diagram of post-apocalypse that operates on our thinking about our finitude as a species. I will summarize both of them here and then discuss them after. First, in the fourth lecture, Kermode speaks about the modernization (or secularization) of apocalypse:

> "It seems doubtful that our crisis, our relation to the future and to the past, is one of the important differences between us and our predecessors. Many of them felt as we do. If the evidence looks good to us, so it did to them. Perhaps if we have a terrible privilege it is merely that we are alive and going to die, all at once or one at a time. Other people have noticed this and expressed their feelings about it in images different from ours, armies in the sky, for example, or a palpable Antichrist; and these we have discarded. But it would be childish to argue, in a discussion of how people behave under eschatological threat, that nuclear bombs are more real and make one experience more authentic crisis-feelings than armies in the sky. There is nothing at all distinguishing about eschatological anxiety; it was, one gathers, a feature of Mesopotamian culture, and it is now a characteristic, often somewhat reach-me-down in appearance, of what Mr. Lionel Trilling calls the 'adversary culture' or sub-culture in our society."[16]

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[16] Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending*, 95.

Nearly forty years later, Kermode wrote an epilogue for the edition of *The Sense of an Ending* that was published in the year 2000. In that piece, he reflects on the reaction to the above statement when it was delivered in lecture form:

> "I well remember a faculty member at Bryn Mawr taking issue with my remark that our fears, concentrated on nuclear war, could hardly be more acute than those of our ancestors, for they too experiences of expected terrifying manifestations, dreadful omens, armies in the sky and so forth, and were repeatedly warned, on authority that they were unlikely to question, of the inescapable terrors of the Last Days. My friend at Bryn Mawr insisted that there was an important and obvious difference between us and these medieval persons: our fears were real; Okinawa and Nagasaki had been destroyed, far more devastating bombs had been successfully tested, and we had seen something of what they could do. In short, we all had an informed and horrifying idea of the consequences of a nuclear attack, whereas their terrors, backed by no such hard evidence, were only fantasies."[17]

Kermode is staging his own position against the unnamed faculty member in order to leverage an argument about the general versus the specific. For Kermode, the diagram of apocalypse is a general way of grappling with human finitude, and it has been churning away as a critical part of the Western social assemblage for thousands of years.[18] It's clear that he thinks that the master narrative is a way of wrangling many different individual discourses and his apparent deference to psychology suggests that he believes that the apocalyptic concern is based

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[17] Ibid, 182.

[18] Kermode never uses this language, but this is an argument he defends time and again when revisiting the argument. See his chapter "Endings, Continued" in *Languages of the Unsayable* and "Waiting For The End" in *Apocalypse Theory and the Ends of the World*.

in the biology of the human body and how it extrapolates fear. For Kermode, to be human is to be extremely concerned about your own death.

And, well, that might be true, but it seems to me that the faculty member at Bryn Mawr raises an important point when it comes to recognizing that specificity matters. If we hold that assemblages come into being and end, then it might benefit us to do the kind of explicit parsing of the contemporary period that the anonymous faculty member asks. While the general terror of nuclear weapons might be the same as that of the Biblical apocalypse in the sense that both are *modes* of terror, then the landscape of media that thinks about how those events play out and what happens after them are quite different. For Kermode, it is enough to point to the immanentization of the crisis in order to demonstrate a shift in the Western stance toward apocalypse; everything else is just shifting pieces.

Warren Wagar, however, asks a pertinent question of Kermode's work. Where is all of the apocalyptic speculative work that science fiction fan might recognize? For Kermode, the intersection of modernity and apocalypse happens in Yeats, Eliot, Sartre and their peers.[19] Wagar explains this as a general distaste on the part of Kermode for actual apocalyptic literature, writing that Kermode is emblematic of critics who "make their case with scant reference to the overt doomsdays of speculative literature" and see them as "no more than an anachronistic nuisance, a throwback to the 'naive' apocalypticism of antiquity."[20] The task of Wagar's *Terminal Visions*

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[19] W. Warren Wagar, *Terminal Visions: The Literature of Last Things* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982), 10.

[20] Wagar, *Terminal Visions*, 11. Jacques Derrida's speech on nuclear criticism, "No Apocalypse, Not Now" shares a similar distaste for actual apocalypses, instead preferring to discover nuclear ideas in Modernist writing and in a generalized fear of finitude.

is, in fact, to apply a critical eye to such "naive" works in order to explicate how they operate in the post-nuclear era.

If diagrams begin and end, then the origination point for the aesthetic category of post-apocalypse is born out of the singularity of the first nuclear detonation on July 16, 1945. With the invention and use of the nuclear weapon, speculation about the future of humanity fundamentally changed. Wagar notes this shift in his painstaking summary of wartime and postwar speculative fiction:

> "Thanks to the dislocations of war, the 1940s were an era of diminished literary production throughout the Western world. Writers were too busy surviving the horrors of the historical apocalypse to have much time left over for inventing terminal fictions. But [the burst of speculative work that] happened in the 1920s, happened in the 1950s, even more strongly. Once peace had returned, memory and fear worked on the imagination to generate a heightened sense of the imminence of Last Things. The British inventory of I.F. Clark cited above indicates that the output of stories of the future was about twice as great in the 1950s as it had been in the 1930s. Nor has the boom showed any signs of slackening. The number of titles of speculative fiction doubled again in the 1960s, and doubled once more in the 1970s. Almost as many novels of the future are now published each year as in all the years before 1900 combined."[21]

There's a clear acceleration of speculative work in the 19th century, and it only grows more acute after the World Wars and the development of nuclear weapons.[22] While the secular

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[21] Wagar, *Terminal Visions,* 26.
[22] Obviously this acceleration of production and readership is an effect of the post-war economic growth in the United States and Europe, but I think we must take seriously that speculative work

vision of the apocalypse (and Wagar's book) is not devoted to nuclear weapons specifically,

there is a particular form of apocalyptic imagination that appears after World War II that centers

on "the idea of the end of the world, not as a restatement or exegesis of Biblical eschatology, but

as a creative act of the secular imagination."[23] In other words, the speculative work that came

into being after the Second World War takes seriously the human creative element when it

comes to human finitude. With the advent of the nuclear weapon, it becomes feasible that

humans could destroy themselves without the effort of any superhuman intelligence or force. We

no longer needed a God to perform divine judgment and mass destruction.

I want to briefly provide some context for the shift in speculative thought when it comes

to how artists in the United States and Europe thought about apocalyptic events that could

happen to humans. As a part of the secularization project of apocalyptic thought, the apocalypse

spread and began to constitute its own distinct genre of work across different media. Part of this

secularization comes in the form of a transformation in the means through which mass numbers

of humans either day or pass through into the world of the post-apocalypse. Rather than a

messianic event, the 19th century largely produced narratives of natural events that nevertheless

ravage the human species. Within these natural disasters that nonetheless produce the apocalypse

are Mary Shelley's *The Last Man*, published in 1826 and largely recognized as one of the

progenitors of the apocalyptic novel genre, and Richard Jefferies's *After London* from 1885. The

central apocalyptic agent of these works are plagues, hearkening back to the European plagues

that decimated the population of the continent. The bubonic plagues of the late 1600s and their

massive body counts are functionally plucked from history and put into a new context in each of

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was such a significant part of this growth when it could have been simply realist drama or
Westerns.

[23] Wagar, *Terminal Visions*, 5.

these texts, but they are bigger, meaner, and eliminate the vast majority of humans that populate their worlds. These secularize apocalypses and others like them thus consider the *post-* because they cannot defer to the resurrection of Christ, the Kingdom of Heaven, or any of the other theological transformations of space and time that the Christian imaginary might have provided. Instead of streets of gold, there are ruins, feral animals, and a humanity reduced to a minimal force in the vast machinery of nature.

Some of the mainstays of natural apocalyptic fiction emerge in the years around the turn of the 20th century. M.P. Shiel's *The Purple Cloud* was published in 1901, telling the story of a manichean universe of good and evil in which an intrepid human explorer unleashes a vast purple cloud that extends across the earth and almost every living being.[24] 1912 featured Jack London's *The Scarlet Plague*, yet another disease narrative, and Van Tassel Sutphen's *The Doomsman* rehabilitated the narrative of *After London* in the context of the United States during 1906. In the estimation of Wagar, "between 1890 and 1914 alone, almost every sort of world's end story that one finds in later years was written, published, and accepted by a wide reading public."[25] "Floods, volcanic eruptions, plagues, epochs of ice, colliding comets, exploding or cooling suns, and alien invaders laid waste to the world."[26] It was an eventful time for speculation about the dangers that humans faced from the world that surrounded them.

There is an easy slippage that can occur when one begins to speculate or fantasize about the end of the human species. The question of this ending is generally posed as a "how?" that elides the fact that the end of the world is always an ending for a particular section of humanity.

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[24] The vast majority of Shiel's writing beyond *The Purple Cloud* had a focus on race wars that killed millions, so there is obviously a latent race element to this picture of mass death.
[25] Wagar, *Terminal Visions*, 20.
[26] Ibid, 20.

Post-apocalypse, through its central function of drawing a world that is "post-", demands that there be some form of remainder that must re-build in the shadow of the world gone by. There must be someone there to report about the world gone by. The secularization of the apocalypse still manages to sneak the central theological problem of the religious apocalypse through the back door: Who are the elect and who are the damned in a process that seemingly kills without distinction? The cloud of gas, the plague, the comet; all of these have no discretion when it comes to the lives they take and the lives they spare, and yet the post-apocalypse must always be written into a particular shape.

When Wagar demanded domain specificity of Kermode in that he posed the question of the apocalypse in apocalypse narratives themselves, we might also push on Wagar to produce a specificity about this question of the elect and the damned. Rebekah Sheldon's *The Child To Come: Life After The Human Catastrophe* advances the argument that the apocalyptic event is often placed in a dyadic relationship with futurity via the figure of the child that will transcend that apocalyptic event. While much of the rest of this chapter will look specifically at ways that the pre-apocalyptic transcends into the post-apocalyptic, Sheldon provides a compelling schematic demonstrating that the post-apocalyptic is acutely focused on the management of bodies and the productive capabilities of those bodies; reproductive futurism is at the heart of much post-apocalyptic anxiety. While I will return to both Sheldon and futurity in the next chapter, here I want to note that Sheldon's reading of post-apocalyptic best seller *The Road* shows a specific mode in which the diagram of post-apocalypse is working. If each diagram comes into being, exists, and then dies, then our current form of post-apocalypse, then *The Road* signals a particular formation in which women are eliminated so as to create conditions in which "only the Man gets full access to the [world-ending] Event, while the woman merely acts and

reacts within in."[27] In *The Road*, a Man and his son travel a decimated world, and through flashbacks it is revealed that the boy's mother simply could not accept the conditions of the world and killed herself. This absent-making on the part of author Cormac McCarthy is one that provides for an intensive focus on "the problem of proper reproduction" in the form of heteropatriarchal continuity.[28] All of this is in service to transforming the post-apocalyptic Earth into a place where that continuity is restored. As Sheldon states: "the sacred child, the fruit of the binding of necessity as errant cause, comes to restore a lost proper order, to obscure the beginning before the beginning, that kind that isn't a kind, and to turn Earth back from matter to [child-bearing] matrix."[29] What we are asked to consider through this reading of *The Road* is what, specifically, is ending and what does that ending produce? What is the re-constitution, the "post-" of post-apocalypse, resurrecting when the matter of the world recoheres? For Sheldon, this is gendered and focused on future-making biological activity so that it might produce some kind of coherent, teleological narrative for the planet. "[T]he sacred child and the apocalyptic story," she writes, "are all technologies of predication designed to obscure the irreparably contingent whatever being of Earth."[30]

W.E.B. Du Bois's short story "The Comet" (1920) demonstrates the post-apocalyptic diagram in the pre-nuclear period in which the natural destructive event was still the most efficient way of imagining human death on a mass scale. In the story, a messenger is sent down into the sub-basement of an unnamed bank to find some documents at the same time that Earth is

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[27] Rebekah Sheldon, *The Child To Come: Life After The Human Apocalypse* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 89.
[28] Ibid, 92.
[29] Ibid, 97.
[30] Ibid, 112.

going to pass through the tail of a strange comet.[31] When he emerges, he finds that everyone in

the city has perished. A newspaper printed mere hours before and apparently missed by the

messenger explains: "Warnings wired around the world. The Comet's tail sweeps past us at noon.

Deadly gases expected. Close doors and windows. Seek the cellar."[32] This is fundamentally a

natural disaster in the same way that the other stories I have highlighted have been, and the

messenger continues about his life in much the same way as Shelley's last man. What

distinguishes "The Comet" from these others works, is that it explicitly positions the post-

apocalyptic condition of the messenger protagonist within the context of his being a black man.

The story treats race as a kind of mystery that is revealed during the halfway point.[33] Until then,

we are given the messenger's social context without specific racialization: the messenger is sent

down in the basement because it is dangerous, waterlogged, and full of spiders and rats; when he

emerges into the world of the dead, he has this thought: "If they found him here alone—with all

this money and all these dead men—what would his life be worth?"; he whispers the words

"yesterday, they would not have served me," while eating in a fine restaurant. But a racial

identifier, a narrative declaration of race made from either the narrator or the author's descriptive

language, is not made until an encounter with a white woman who is trapped in a building. Their

encounter literally summons the name of race into the story:

> "They stared a moment in silence. She had not noticed before that he was a Negro. He
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> had not thought of her as white. She was a woman of perhaps twenty-five—rarely
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> beautiful and richly gowned, with darkly-golden hair, and jewels. Yesterday, he thought

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[31] W.E.B. Du Bois, *Darkwater: Voices From Within The Veil*. Project Gutenberg, 2005. https://www.gutenberg.org/files/15210/15210-h/15210-h.htm
[32] Ibid, np.
[33] A reader who is in the final chapters of a W.E.B. Du Bois book during 1920 would probably be keyed into this fact contextually.

with bitterness, she would scarcely have looked at him twice. He would have been dirt beneath her silken feet. She stared at him. Of all the sorts of men she had pictured as coming to her rescue she had not dreamed of one like him. Not that he was not human, but he dwelt in a world so far from hers, so infinitely far, that he seldom even entered her thought. Yet as she looked at him curiously he seemed quite commonplace and usual. He was a tall, dark workingman of the better class, with a sensitive face trained to stolidity and a poor man's clothes and hands. His face was soft and slow and his manner at once cold and nervous, like fires long banked, but not out."

The dual recognition in this context sets the stage for how the racial encounter functions in the post-apocalypse. There is historical thinking of "yesterday" and the recognition that today, after the event that has extinguished so much life, is fundamentally different from that time. It is fundamentally a hopeful moment in that it is the first time that the messenger can be seen as a *person* who does, in fact, live in the same world as the white woman. Removed from racial history, Du Bois suggests, the color line might possibly be crossed or abolished altogether. This is not something to be "read into" the text, but it is the core of the story. After establishing that, in fact, everyone in the city and probably everyone on the planet is dead, the two sit down for a long conversation about the racial and class differences. Together, they claim that death is the "leveler" and the "revealer." The racial difference between them is eliminated in a moment of apparent full recognition of the universal humanity that unites both characters. Taken on its own terms, this first half of the story is a kind of pseudo-utopia in which structural racism and the economic disparities it entails are simply wiped away so that something new can be made. The implication is that this world could be remade without recourse to the past; in the language of

assemblages, the world becomes unstratified and decoded along racial lines where it was *extremely* so before.

Yet Du Bois's fidelity to material reality, to historical depiction of the highly racially coded diagram under which he lived, means that this is merely a limited suspension of social rules. The woman's father, a rich white man, drives into the story with her fiancé Fred, revealing that only New York has been destroyed and that the rest of the world remains alive and well. Universal humanity is revealed to be impossible. The introduction of these new characters is the reproduction of society, which Du Bois produces by turning the messenger and the woman into Jim Davis and Julia via the proper nouns that the rest of society uses for them. Before his name is spoken in the text, Davis is declared a "nigger" and is accused of sexually assaulting the white woman. Yesterday comes crashing back in with its codifications and stratifications. The story ends here.

"The Comet" helps construct some of the limit points for thinking about the aesthetic category of post-apocalypse and how it interacts with the different populations who mediate on their own finitude. It is crucial that the short story centers on a *natural* disaster that destroys, if only for a day, the *unnatural* system of American racism that Du Bois spent decades outlining and explaining. This exists in distinction from, but still holding same assumptions of, many other African-American science fiction stories of the time. In her analysis of the Bannerkeradian story format, in which a black technological genius overcomes speculative problems, Lisa Yaszek explains that "early African American SF authors insist that if systemic racial oppression goes on, black technoscientific genius with not be squashed; rather, it will be perverted into hate into

something that threatens the entire human race."[34] In these stories of genius and justified racial

warfare, the *unnatural* racism produces a *natural* response from those who are oppressed, and

the apocalyptic conditions that are visited upon the planet are the direct result of that antagonism.

Du Bois puts the causal actor into the natural world, away from humans. This distinction will

rear its head in the transformation of the natural post-apocalypse to the nuclear one.

The Birth of the Post-Apocalypse

As I stated earlier in this chapter, the detonation of the first nuclear weapon is a

singularity, or a transition point, for most of the diagrams that operated across human life. In

DeLanda's earlier work, he describes singularities as "critical points in the flow of matter and

energy" such as when "the random flow of moving liquid gives was to the intricately ordered

patterns of turbulence."[35] He argues that singularities are when "new processes are unleashed."[36]

What is unleashed by nuclear weapons are a whole host of new diagrams that begin to operate on

human life. Warfare obviously changes. Nuclear weapons swiftly end the Second World War

with the destruction of the civilian population centers of Hiroshima and Nagasaki; they

inaugurate the Cold War, and they provide the horizon line of military escalation up through the

present period.[37] Additionally, they altered the lifestyles and locations of many people in the

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[34] Lisa Yaszek, "The Bannerkerade: Genius, Madness, and Magic" in *Black and Brown Planets*, ed. Isaiah Lavender III (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2014), 21.

[35] Manuel DeLanda, *War In The Age Of Intelligent Machines* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), 7.

[36] DeLanda, *War In The Age Of Intelligent Machines*, 10.

[37] Indeed, as I write this, the President of the United States has recently "negotiated" with North Korea in order to minimize their nuclear capability. The last several months have been dominated by nuclear discourse, and many people are fearful that a limited nuclear conflict will occur, which is positioned as the literal end of the world. It is worth noting that the 45th President of the United States already deployed the MOAB conventional bomb in Afghanistan earlier in his presidency, which is equivalent to a nuclear weapon in power and contains the ability to rupture the eardrums of civilians in hundreds of miles of diameter due to air displacement.

United States. The suburbs were conceived as a plan for distributing the population more widely in the case of nuclear attack, and this system also intersected with "white flight" and other exurbanization movements. I am interested in the way that aesthetic objects transformed in relation to the detonation of nuclear weapons. Those texts of the future that Wagar writes so beautifully about are overwhelmingly intersecting with the revelatory power of the nuclear weapon.

In other words, it is the criticality of a nuclear explosion in a very particular time and place which inaugurates a substantial change in the diagram of human life in 1945. It is quite literally a transition point between a pre-nuclear concept of war and a post-nuclear one, and that shifting reality has an aesthetic component that is delivered alongside it. At that singularity, the point of shift, an aesthetic category of post-apocalypse develops in order to manage the relationship between material conditions of life before mass nuclear detonations and the possibility forms of life that might come *after* those detonations. While that after is not necessarily nuclear in all instances after 1945, it seems impossible to deny that the transformation of aesthetic thinking happens in the wake of that nuclear event. Stephen Joyce argues that the shift in cultural focus on nuclear weapons in the post-apocalyptic mode is a general fear moving to a very specific one:

> "I think the bomb also provided concrete expression of a general fear about the pace of technological and industrial change. The more power technology gives us over nature, the more we worry about technology's power over us, because we are also a part of nature. Hence, a key motif in the post-apocalyptic genre is ambivalence about technology, with characters desperately seeking the remains of our industrial civilization (searching for

bullets, tinned food, scanning radio channels, etc.) even as the causes of disaster are often things like AI or genetic engineering.[38]

For Joyce, the "post-apocalypse" names a certain form of speculation about the order of things. In distinction from this point, Jerome Shapiro argues for the existence of what he calls "atomic bomb cinema," which also emanates from the use of nuclear weapons against Japan in 1945. However, Shapiro is much more measured when it comes to discussing their effects on the media landscape. He differs from the "standard scholarly strategy of looking at these [atomic] films as evidence of nuclearism, a vast break in public consciousness, or covert political and religion propaganda, and thus a distorted representation of some nuclear reality."[39] In his estimation, the claim that there is some kind of broad effect of nuclear weapons across a culture or cultures is a false one and have nothing to do with general concerns about what humans can do to one another, and he implicitly follows Frank Kermode's claim that nuclear weapons do not have unique purchase on human fear of their own death.

I stand on the side of Joyce and Wagar. It seems apparent to me that while specific awareness of finitude is not unique to the contemporary period, and that the atomic weapon and other modes of producing mass human death demonstrates a different form of concern than, say, a giant purple cloud that consumes the living across the planet. I agree with Shapiro that one cannot speak of the post-apocalypse as merely the emanations of a bad imagination or as propaganda. Where we diverge is his specific claim that "the bomb has not created a new Kantian category, but given new energy to ancient ways of speculating about the human

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[38] Mahshid Mayar and Stephen Joyce, "The Post-Apocalyptic and the Ludic: An Interview with Dr. Stephen Joyce," *The Journal of Inter-American Research* 11, no. 2 (September 2018): 62-63. http://interamerica.de/wp-content/uploads/2018/09/joyce.pdf

[39] Jerome F. Shapiro, *Atomic Bomb Cinema* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 9.

condition."[40] Like Kermode, Shapiro claims that the fear of death is the fear of death, and that

the specific historical context does not matter in the long chain of human history. It seems

apparent to me that the nuclear weapon, and other methods of mass destruction, provide a

sufficiently different set of concerns than the traditional religious apocalyptic events. The

mutant, the marauder, the power-monger, the looter, and the violent establishment of new

societies are all specific figures that make their presence known in the "post-" of the post-

apocalypse. As Joyce acknowledges in the same interview quoted above,

> "In the religious apocalyptic narrative, it makes no sense to talk about a group of
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> survivors after the Last Judgment. God isn't going to forget anyone and leave a few
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> random people wandering around on Earth afterwards. It's only with the emergence of
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> industrial civilization that we get the post-apocalyptic and I think that's because industrial
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> civilization is so complex it makes people wonder if it's possible to survive anymore in
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> its absence."[41]

The very formulation is different here, and this is why the category I am interested in

here is centered on the "post-." The current conditions of death and the fear of that death were

always accounted for; that is not the case in representations of the post-apocalypse, where the

horror is derived not from the event but the realization that some of us might have to live after it.

The aesthetic category of post-apocalypse produces a stance toward the finitude of the

human that is produced through aesthetics. An aesthetic category does not just require a new way

of thinking or a new form of mass ideology. It also requires the production of new media objects

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[40] Ibid, 15.
[41] Mahshid Mayar and Stephen Joyce, "The Post-Apocalyptic and the Ludic: An Interview with Dr. Stephen Joyce," 64.

that demonstrate that the way material reality is being organized is different from the way it was previously. The creation of a new aesthetic category is a break in how humans are able to think and produce the future via the media objects they create. For me, the aesthetic category of "post-apocalypse" does not name a fixation; it names a machine that produces other machines. As discussed in Chapter 1, the mechanism independent quality of assemblages is fruitful for media analysis precisely because it gives us the ability to talk about the nuclear weapon as a singularity that directly generates an aesthetic category. There are many diagrams that were functioning in 1945, and the singularity of the nuclear weapon was so extreme, and put so much pressure on those diagrams, that the apocalyptic diagram that was latent within Western culture split and became more dominant and centered around nuclear weapons and other technologies that might fundamentally impact the survivability of the human species. I call that the aesthetic category of post-apocalypse.

In *War In The Age Of Intelligent Machines*, DeLanda carefully demonstrates his argument about how diagrams function by showing how ballistics-based warfare shifted over a 600 year period. He pays close attention to how geological processes created specific forms of metal and how metallurgists and then military engineers observed the properties of those metals to create, augment, and perfect conventional weapons. In an argumentative move that he later replicates in regards to simulation technology in his *Philosophy & Simulation*, DeLanda traces the creation of military technology through several scales of assemblage with different singularities: propulsion, ballistics, impact, tactics, strategies, and logistics.[42] He draws a direct line from a system of ejecting a bullet from a gun to the grand system of management of armies.

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[42] DeLanda, *War In The Age Of Intelligent Machines*, 24.

For him, they are all related, and what unifies them is a scalable diagram that governs how they function from the most basic materials science to the organization of bodies and infrastructure.[43]

Overlapping and Contested Post-Apocalypses

While the atomic bomb is certainly the major organizing event that I am concerned with here, there is also the "apocalypse" of settler colonialism and its aftermath. There is the post-apocalypse of chattel slavery.[44] There are major events that control the conditions of human life and death, and the humans who live through and beyond them live in the "post-" in fundamentally different conditions than the ones they experienced before. What unites these and other situations of complete social upheaval is that they force their subjects into reflecting on their finitude and their own existence within a "post-" that comes with living after that fundamental upheaval. If the detonation of the first atomic weapons in warfare inaugurates the easily-found diagram of post-apocalypse that can be found in 20th and 21st century media, then I follow Gerald Horne in relation to the other. Horne explicitly declares that 1688 is "the year that marks the onset of the dawning of the apocalypse," by which he means that the allied forces of capitalism, white supremacy, and the settler colonial framework allowed Great Britain to accelerate all three of those qualities while dominating other colonial powers.[45] Post-1688 becomes code in Horne for unfettered increases in slave capture, sale, and the divestment of even the most basic rights from ethnic and religious minorities. Like the atomic bomb, 1688 is a year

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[43] Early in his career, DeLanda uses Deleuze & Guattari's term "machinic phylum," developed first in *Anti-Oedipus* and then built upon in *A Thousand Plateaus*, rather than Deleuze's term "diagram" which he develops alone in his book on Michel Foucault. These terms are different, but they describe the same concept.

[44] Christopher Winks, "Black Apocalypse, Tonight At Noon" *The A-Line* vol. 2, no. 1-2 https://alinejournal.com/politics/black-apocalypse-tonight-at-noon/

[45] Gerald Horne, *The Apocalypse of Settler Colonialism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2018), 179.

that draws a line in conduct between a pre- and a post-, the only thing dividing them an event we call "apocalypse."

It is crucial to distinguish here that these are not simply two ways of thinking about or looking at the aesthetic category of post-apocalypse, but rather that these are two actual forms of the diagram that are instantiated at different times. The historical and material conditions of the world since the initiation of colonialism and capitalism that we call modernity have contained the elements that could produce a diagram that mediates the human relationship to finitude after an apocalyptic event. After all, the religious history that we have walked through during this chapter demonstrates that this tradition is an old one in Europe and North America. When we talk about diagrams of post-apocalypse, we are discussed an intertwined set of mediations that allow people to understand living in the "after" of an apocalyptic event.

In an interview about dystopia, but making a statement I find much more compelling when put into relationship with apocalypse, author China Miéville wrote that "it is not as if the world has not long, long been one in which vast numbers live in dystopian depredation [. . .] To repeat something I have said elsewhere, we live in utopia: it just isn't ours."[46] At risk of repeating a claim, and with a very qualified "us," after a certain moment in modernity, someone has always been living in a post-apocalypse. Or, to put it the way Sun Ra did, don't you know it's the end of the world?[47] It is just a question of whose post-apocalypse, whose "post-," we are

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[46] "A Strategy of Ruination: China Miéville interviewed by *Boston Review*." *Boston Review*. Global Dystopias. 2017. 182.

[47] This is from *Space Is The Place*, the 1974 film directed by John Coney and written by Sun Ra with performances by the latter.

discussing at a given time. The work of this chapter is about being attuned to the aesthetic category of post-apocalypse in its plurality.

In some ways, this is confusing. After all, this is an aesthetic category that creates assemblages that present the possible future of other assemblages in the form of media objects. But this is precisely the work that the method of assemblage theory grants us: diagrams are assemblages that produce assemblages, and so they produce fiction as much as they produce material structures in experienceable reality. The aesthetic category of post-apocalypse, then, both produces *Mad Max: Fury Road* as a media object *and* my understanding of my own finitude in the immediate aftermath of any given apocalyptic event. This is not mere ideology or the creation of a certain imaginary; the winnowing tool that brings reality into existence, the diagram that turns virtual potential into material actual, *does this work in both ways*.

The nuclear age, and its attending aesthetic category of post-apocalypse, instantiates a moment when our media objects tend toward meditating on what life might be like after the end of life as we know it right now. Warren Wagar names this the "dead end," the "least eschatological of all ends imagined by writers of terminal fiction" because it "seems to foreclose hope."[48] However, the trouble that we have to analyze is here as well: "the upshot is not so much destruction as a desperate clinging to the life being destroyed."[49] I will now turn to *Mad Max: Fury Road* to discuss what forms of life are clinged to in the post-apocalyptic media object.

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[48] Wagar, *Terminal Visions*, 186.
[49] Ibid, 186.

Mad Max: Fury Road **and the Spectacle of Liberation**

While there are formal differences between the written works that I have discussed

previously in this chapter and the film *Fury Road*, a benefit and curse of the post-apocalypse film

is that they are often plot driven. While *Fury Road* was often praised for its strong visual sense

during its theatrical release and after, there are very few moments in the film where I think it is

possible to say that the audiovisual elements are doing more than merely moving the plot along.

This is not unique to *Mad Max: Fury Road*. It often seems that the apocalyptic event and the

living conditions of the post-apocalypse merely provide a framework to allow astonishing and

brutal things to happen. In a film like *I Am Legend* (Lawrence, 2007), the shock of a New York

City completely abandoned by people as a visual and narrative conceit does the work of

generating meaning. For the criticism that emerges around these films, individual shots or scenes

of that spectacle are rarely remarked upon as significant; instead, it is the mass spectacle of total

abandonment that comes to matter.[50]

There are three scenes that we can productively analyze from *Fury Road* that will give us

some purchase on the specific aesthetics of the aesthetic category of the post-apocalypse. The

first is the opening of the film in which Max's car is forcibly flipped by pursuers. The second is

the journey of the powerful War Rig into a giant sandstorm. The third is the repeated

hallucination that Max sees that the viewer of *Fury Road* witnesses through point of view

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[50] This is easily seen in edited collections about apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic cinema. Otherwise excellent collections like Ritzenhoff and Krewani's *The Apocalypse in Film* that take film as their central objects while remaining mostly concerned with how the plot intersects with or informs theories of the apocalypse and post-apocalypse. One rarely gets the sense of what cinema does *differently* than other media in these collections. Peter Labuza's *Approaching The End* makes a similar move, often including screenshots to ground claims that are really about the stakes of narrative and storytelling. When specific images are analyzed, it is always in service of proving that the post-apocalypse is producing *something else*. It is rare in the book to see how the formal qualities of the cinema do something.

throughout the film. I will briefly describe these scenes before providing a larger overview of *Fury Road* and discussing it in relation to the diagram of post-apocalypse.

Fury Road opens with a montage that evokes the apocalypse event. Much like the work in this chapter, the film is not really all the concerned in what the apocalypse was. Gas wars and nuclear weapons are hinted at, as well as a general global breakdown of order, but the "what happened?" is not at the center of the film. Short of some stock footage of trees rocking in a shockwave, we are prevented from seeing the end of things. Instead, the film restages the "end of the world" as the end of "Mad" Max Rockatansky's world. As Mad Max narrates his life in the post-apocalypse, including information about the hallucinations that haunt him, we see him break camp, gets in a high-powered vehicle, and drive into the background of the frame. Shortly afterward, pursuers drive through the same frame, very close behind him. The next shot is extremely wide. Mad Max's vehicle is slowly surrounded by his pursuers, and they maneuver in such a way that his car flips and tumbles at high speed. Dust kicks up around the vehicles as they blend into the landscape. In the following scene, he is captured and tortured by the clannish War Boys who live in the desert Citadel of the totalitarian warlord Immortan Joe, which then sets up the rest of the film. The wide shot where Max is overcome and his car is flipped is the restaging of the apocalypse that the opening of the film denies us. The characters of *Fury Road* cannot grasp the time that was before—in one scene, characters discuss a satellite and the fact that "everyone had a Show" in the Old World—so instead the apocalypse is reconfigured into a cycle of procurement and divestment. Mad Max has a car and independence, violence is done to him, and then he has none of these things. This is a micro event for how *Fury Road* conceives the macro event of worldwide apocalypse. The time before was a place where one could have safety and possessions. The post-apocalypse is a place where your things are regularly taken from you.

The second scene appears during the end of the first act of the film. Imperator Furiosa is driving her stolen War Rig away from pursuers from the Citadel, and she makes the choice to drive directly into a massive superstorm. This is shown via a sidelong shot of the long War Rig that slowly zooms out to reveal the immensity of the storm and the absolute tininess of the humans involved. The storm is full of multiple tornadoes and explosive lightning. To enter it would be suicide, and yet she drives directly into it without hesitation, and it helps to sell the absolute desperation and drivenness of Imperator Furiosa to escape the Citadel and Immortan Joe. Much like the personal apocalypse scene I just mentioned, this scene, with the long wide shot specifically, that grounds the violence and grandeur of the post-apocalypse. This post-apocalypse is full of churning, natural danger that is the product of the human impact on the environment before and during the apocalypse. Human beings, the film implies, have created these massive existential threats, and the storm as a visual effect has the look and feel of Anthropocene fiction.

The third scene is a repeated motif of a young girl appearing to Mad Max in a hallucination. Unnamed, the young girl appears mostly in point-of-view shots superimposed over the environment or people that Max is seeing. She throws he hand into the camera, and we're shown a reverse shot of Max recoiling with his hand on his forehead. After this process plays out several times, we eventually see Max's life saved through this process; an adversary fires a hand crossbow at him and he recoils from the imagined girl, "catching" the bolt that goes through his hand and only barely pierces his skull. It is difficult to see this child hallucination as anything more than the manifestation of regret for allowing the child to die at some point before the events of the film.

In these last two scenes, the film formally produces evidence of culpability. In the superstorm scene, it is the culpability of humanity itself and the constant environment reminder of the things they did to ravage the planet and render much of it into inhospitable desert. The child hallucination is merely an individual version of that same thing; the figure of the child specifically holds Max accountable for his inability to secure the future by securing the safety of a child. He carries this around with him, and it is one of the very few insights we have to the inner psychology of Max.[51]

Formally, then, *Fury Road* follows a pattern that is familiar to anyone with a passing idea of post-apocalyptic media. The apocalypse is made personal in some way, the "time before" is presented nostalgically, and the reality of existing in the "post-" is given as a psychological problem as much as a material one. The post-apocalypse is a state of mind, a recognition that an apocalyptic event has occurred, and even a film that visually stages a wasteland, resource scarcity, and oppressive feudal regimes needs to make sure that the audience is properly focused on the mental machinery grinding away and producing the conditions of the post-apocalypse.

However, this is also the *promise* of the post-apocalypse. Without speaking specifically about *Fury Road*, Barbara Gurr highlights how a down-the-middle post-apocalyptic work like this film operates on a conceptual level. Working through the different ways that the post-

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[51] It is also worth noting here that securing "pure" children is what animates Immortan Joe to embark on a tyrannical mission and an oppressive program of sexual slavery where he uses his "wives" as "breeders" to create genetically pure children. The film does not disentangle these two things, but instead presents Max's support of Furiosa and her liberatory project as the "redemption" he has been looking for. The problem of futurity, and the racial politics implicit in that problem, are not addressed.

apocalypse can be marshalled toward conservative ends, she ultimately comes to a positive conclusion:

> "Yet despite the general reproduction of race, sex, and gender narratives which simply reinstall the current dominant paradigm, there are also moments of resistance, subversion, and reinvention to be found in even the most conservative of these texts. [. . .] They also potentially point us toward a new future, shaped by new possibilities. This is what speculative fiction is so very good at: potentiality."[52]

Fury Road, like other speculative texts, builds itself on potentiality, and the thin plot is wholly consumed with attaining its end. The world is in an authoritarian shape, but it does not necessarily need to be that way, and Furiosa is the agent of change who might transform the latent democratic potential into reality. Immortan Joe, his sons, and his business partners are all symbols of masculine violence tied up in the violence of Joe's citadel, Gas Town, and Bullet Town. They all share a literal army, the War Boys that provide the battle fodder for most of the film. This structure of power and trade bound up between a small number of aristocratic men both produces and is dependent on a system of gendered enslavement. We see this first in the form of a vast milking facility that turns human women into dairy production facilities, which provides one of the critical trade commodities for Immortan Joe.[53] This is back stage in the film, though, compared to the second form of gendered enslavement: Immortan Joe keeps a stock of "wives" who are supposedly going to produce unmutated, "pre-war" babies for him. The

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[52] Barbara Gurr, "Introduction," *Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Post-Apocalyptic TV and Film*. Ed. Barbara Gurr. (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 2.
[53] It is worth pointing out that this depiction of dairy production is clearly meant to be reflexive; this is a horror when visited on human women, so why is it acceptable when it is performed on dairy cows?

majority of the plot of the film is concerned with the liberation of these women from the hold of Immortan Joe. That liberation has been read largely as the exact kind that Gurr mentions above: Mad Max, Furiosa, and a coalition made up of older women, a War Boy, and the escaped former wives stop fleeing Immortan Joe, turn around, face him, and destroy him. They return to his citadel and dump his dead body on the ground, upending the oppressive society. This is the power of potentiality that Gurr lauds speculative fiction for: we get the conservative, brutal future of war of against all, and the film is about how one might destroy that in order to produce something better.

We can come to a different conclusion about the broad plot strokes of *Fury Road* if we look at it through the lens of assemblage theory. The general structure of the post-apocalyptic plot, which *Fury Road* indexes, presents us with a stable society which is then thrown into a state of upheaval by the apocalypse. Then it recoheres into something stable again. The apocalyptic event *deterritorializes* the world before *reterritorializing* it based on a particular diagram. *Fury Road* holds out for a kind of dialectical relationship after the end of the world where there is always the potential for an antagonism to appear and revolutionize things. What assemblage theory forces us to realize is that while the apocalypse of nuclear explosions is spectacular, the basic process of de- and reterritorialization is happening constantly. The reason that society can collapse due to a massive nuclear explosion has nothing to do with nuclear explosions in an essential way, but rather that the nuclear explosion interrupts the moment-to-moment maintenance of the assemblages that make up society by the diagram that constructs them again and again. It is not that they break the world, but that they prevent the material maintenance of the world. In the absence of that maintenance, chaos ensues.

To consider aesthetic category theory and diagrams in relationship to *Fury Road* means that we have to recognize that the violence that typifies this oppressive speculative future is normal. Like Alfonso Cuarón's comment about *Children of Men* that I quoted in the previous chapter, it is imperative that we recognize that the organization of society around violence and oppression in the speculative future of *Fury Road* is simply an extension of the diagrams that govern our own reality right now. This is what allows us to read the film symbolically as a film with liberatory film in our present moment. But our ability to recognize it as isomorphically related to our own society means that it also reproduces the assumed violence of our own social order. The sexual violence that Immortan Joe inflicts on the women he controls is not something produced by a new diagram of relations. The conditions that allow it to occur are operative in our own world, they just take a slightly different shape in the post-apocalyptic world. In other words, the rules do not change when the apocalypse occurs. There is an unwillingness to carry through the pessimism of Du Bois in "The Comet" into *Fury Road*. It holds out for hope, but a structural reading reveals that diagrams do not shift. They just begin to operate with different kinds of power.

The aesthetic category of the post-apocalypse is one in which a diagram that structures reality shatters and reforms. In *Fury Road*, global patriarchal capitalism in the pre-apocalypse is broken by some cataclysm, but it re-asserts itself in the figure of Immortan Joe and his allies. The film holds out of the potential of the apocalyptic one more time with the victory of Furiosa, and we have no reason to think that this will not produce a less oppressive world for the people within these regimes of power. The aesthetic category of post-apocalypse, however, analytically asks us to consider what does not change. The relations of resurrected capitalism and patriarchy are wiped away with Immortan Joe, but what remains?

One answer is anti-blackness. *Fury Road* has aims on being a "post-racial" film that portrays a universal project of struggle against oppressions of class and gender. The film is allied with much of sf in its failure to address race. There are three characters of color shown in *Fury Road*. One is Toast (Zoë Kravitz), one of Immortan Joe's "wives" who escapes with Imperator Furiosa on the War Rig.[54] Another is a dark skinned man who stands in the crowd of the liberated people at the end of the film. The third person, the one I want to speak about briefly here, has no lines. Since the film is set in Australia in the post-apocalypse, he is probably Aboriginal. He has dark skin, a wide nose, and dreadlocks; his visual signifiers are *raced*. He is unmistakably a black man. Like many of the characters of the *Mad Max* franchise, he has visible deformities that are implicitly a byproduct of whatever process that ended the world. Pustules and tumors drip down the left side of his face, his nose looks as if it has been broken, and he's missing a number of teeth. He looks upward, his mouth agape, ready to be lifted from the abjection of the ground to the grace of the towering Citadel.

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[54] My intention here is not to undermine Kravitz's racial identity by suggesting that she does not embody blackness. Rather, the film sublimates her being black within a unilateral tableau of pure equality in her position as a "wife." Her blackness is purely epidermal and never a lever of politics within the film.

Figure 7 The liberated man.

Formally, this character is one who we are meant to ally with. He stands in for the masses of oppressed who are storming the gates of heaven to get their just due. As the universal liberation story would have it, he is symbolically us, and it is through him that an audience is meant to see how this fictional world sees Imperator Furiosa as a savior. It is strange to me that this person we are meant to identify with should be so profoundly excluded from the rest of the film. This lone figure, who carries this one single shot of the rise of the oppressed against their oppressors, becomes the proof of victory. Blackness does not have a role in the film but is part of its essential uplifting message at the end. *Fury Road* seems to commit to an intersectional view of liberation without really digging into the reality of intersectional oppression. Race exists in this world, but it does not seem to *matter*.

Isiah Lavender III calls this the "blackground" of science fiction, or the "embedded perceptions of race and racism—intended or not—in Western sf writing and criticism."[55] In the

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[55] Isiah Lavender III, *Race in American Science Fiction* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2011), 6-7.

language of assemblage theory, the blackground is that which does not change within the diagram over time; it is a set of assumptions about race and racialization that remain concrete and emanate through both the diagram and the assemblages that it produces. Lavender uses the term "otherhood" to discuss specific formulations of racialization against the given blackground and the landscape of science fiction in general, claiming that it "begins with thinking race along the black/white binary. With this type of thinking, we can locate the historical consciousness embedded in sf in imagined events juxtaposed with real events in the space-time continuum."[56] To put these two terms into the context of *Fury Road*, the post-racial sf setup of the film's universe produces a blackground in which racism cannot even be considered, much less examined in a continuum with other forms of oppression. While the film convincingly produces the trauma of oppression and violent domination via militaristic struggle and religious zealotry, it fails to consider that a key marker of domination since the opening of modernity has operated on racial lines. As Lavender notes, "sf writers depict futures of conquest, power-mongering, hegemony, greed, and the like. Race and racism are no less a constant than human greed or the desire for dominance."[57] Likewise, the gendered slavery of the women who escape and eventually liberate The Citadel is discussed in terms of reproductive futurity. Immortan Joe desires "healthy babies," or children that are not impacted or afflicted by the environmental poisons that produce the tumors, growths, lesions, and disabilities seen on many of the characters in the film. Through extreme violence, Immortan Joe is attempting to produce a lineage that can do the work of ruling after his death. Of course, this also has a racial tone to it. On one hand, "healthy babies" has a tinge of racial purity to it, and all but one of the women enslaved by

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[56] Ibid, 8.
[57] Ibid, 53.

Immortan Joe are white. On the other hand, the enslavement of women is prefigured by the

actual conditions of American chattel slavery, in which slave owners raped their slaves, and in

doing so produced both progeny and enslaved laborers who they owned. The blackground of

Fury Road is thus dependent on specific racial histories while disavowing the reality of race;

Western racism is made to do the work without getting the credit.

To remove us from the context of the science fiction text, the thought that one can

jettison race in the context of a post-apocalyptic event is ludicrous. In 2005, Hurricane Katrina

ripped through New Orleans, and in its wake the people in that city and the surrounding area

were abandoned by the American government. Living in the ruins without the immediate

possibility of recovery, people survived however they could, and these modes of survival were

immediately racially framed. A photograph of a black man with a case of soda and a floating bag

is "looting a grocery store," while a depiction of a white woman in similar conditions is "finding

bread and soda in a local grocery store."[58] The very *mode* of survival is immediately raced, and it

becomes almost impossible to see how jettisoning race as a serious social motivator in post-

apocalyptic fiction does anything other than obfuscate real-world racial violence. As Lavender

argues, perhaps the best way of addressing this in science fiction is by "deliberately remaining

aware of how race is buried in the genre."[59]

It is not only buried in the genre. A racial imaginary fuels the American conception of

what the end of the world would look like and who would be able to live on after a nuclear event.

This is apparent in the plans developed in the postwar period by James Bryant Conant, a research

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[58] IVC Editorial Board, "Introduction," *Issue 16: The Cultural Visualization of Hurricane Katrina*. March 20, 2011. https://ivc.lib.rochester.edu/introduction-the-cultural-visualization-of-hurricane-katrina/
[59] Lavender, *Race and Science Fiction*, 53.

chemist and President of Harvard University who became a nuclear strategist and an architect of

the American public school system. Dean MacCannell persuasively argues that the strategies of

survival that Conant developed as a nuclear strategist strongly informed the way that he

conceived of the management of racialized populations through the apparatus of educational

policy. MacCannell reads Conant's 1961 book *Slums and Suburbs* as a "rhetorically brilliant text

that aims to block the investment in ghetto schools of any post-Sputnik federal money for

education" as well as a work that argues for keeping "the big city black."[60] MacCannell claims

that this is a move that, when taken in the context of a wide array of nuclear defense policy

positions, creates a defense strategy that positions cities as absorption points for nuclear

weapons. The implicit goal of this organizational principle is creating a post-nuclear world in

which the educated and white suburbs and the rural areas of the United States are spared behind

the shield of mass urban black death. Writing from within the Cold War, MacCannell presents a

clear ideological landscape:

> "By aligning class, urban, and ethnic structures, we have developed a situation within
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> which, from the standpoint of the national system, enemy bombs that behave in the way
>
> nuclear strategists believe they will behave, that is, bombs which kill cities, not
>
> agriculture, are no longer viewed by our readers as a threat; on the contrary, they have
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> taken on a potentially positive prospect. The city will absorb the impact, and in doing so
>
> also cure itself of our officially designated 'social problems': crime, poverty, disease,
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> high infant mortality rates, etc."[61]

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[60] Dean MacCannell, "Baltimore In The Morning...After: On The Forms of Post-Nuclear Readership." *Diacritics* 14, no. 2 (1984): 42-43.
[61] Ibid, 45.

In light of this historical racialized strategy, the overwhelming whiteness of a post-apocalyptic film like *Fury Road* is not an aberration. The whiteness, or at least the anti-blackness, is the point. The work of postwar biopolitics in the United States was such that it generated a buffer against the destruction of the organizing principle of American, the preservation of whiteness, in the form of black Americans. The nuclear attack never came, but the policies of organization and educational divestment from inner city areas were implemented. In this way, the nuclear weapon still *did the work* of anti-blackness despite never exploding.

The disavowal of the role of race in the post-apocalypse puts pressure on claims like Gurr's. Radical change, like victory over long standing oppressions, must be considered in the context of what does not change. The aesthetic category of post-apocalypse is made up of media objects that hold out for the resuscitation of order in the world, but what *Fury Road* shows is that anti-blackness as a paradigm was never actually broken. In the theoretical edifice of science fiction analysis that Lavender develops, we might say that *Fury Road*, alongside much other post-apocalyptic science fiction, fails to provide a properly critical ethnoscape for its world. Adapting Arjun Appadurai's term to science fiction analysis, Lavender defines the ethnoscape as the "socio-spatial environment in which to tell a story" that contains a number of assumptions about race, the way the social functions, and a number of "tensions, contradictions, and connotations beyond the author's control and in which the reader can discern the text's ethnoscape."[62] Much like the term blackground, Lavender gives us language to discuss the ways that certain things shift in the way of supposedly radical change in the post-apocalypse, and it is clear that the ethnoscape of *Fury Road* is one in which the hierarchy of intersectional issues, which is to say the interrelated violences and oppressions handed down from the ruling classes of

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[62] Lavender, *Race in American Science Fiction*, 158-159.

The Citadel, places race at the very bottom in its order of concern. In a revolutionary moment that deploys a pseudo-libertarian rhetoric of "a rising tide lifts all boats," *Fury Road* simply cannot properly address racial subjugation at a level that takes seriously that many oppressions *begin* from a point of racialization.

A combined approach of close reading and fidelity to assemblage theory as a method means that it becomes difficult to read post-apocalyptic media objects as presenting us with some realization of hopeful potential. Like Lavender, I am interested in what, somehow, manages to remain unsurfaced or unspoken, and therefore *unchanged*, in moments of de- and then reterritorialization in regards to a diagram. I am interested in what the diagram of post-apocalypse covers over. Far from an apocalyptic revealing, post-apocalypse as a diagram often feels like a re-covering.

With a basic reading strategy for post-apocalypse established, I will not turn to two other post-apocalyptic media objects that address blackness and racialization more directly than *Fury Road* in order to demonstrate the contours of how anti-blackness is constitutive for the diagram that rebuilds the world. The first is the film *The Girl With All The Gifts*. The second is the video game *The Last of Us*. By looking at these media objects from the perspective of contemporary black studies, I will argue that the reterritorializing impulse of the post-apocalypse is afforded by a pervasive anti-blackness that provides a reterritorializing and highly coded framework for our conceptions of who gets to experience full human life in the time after the destruction of our own social organization. In Lavender's language, I argue that this blackground has such a profound effect in our media culture that it literally modulates the production of the actual out of the virtual, stymying potential change while animating subjugation.

The Girl With All The Gifts **and Resurrected Anti-Blackness**

The Girl With All The Gifts has the basic core logic of most post-apocalyptic films. A major event has destroyed large portion of humanity, and a small group are struggling to maintain the species in the face of absolute annihilation. Instead of the nuclear and climate horrors of *Fury Road*, *The Girl With All The Gifts* depicts a world in which a biological agent has infected the vast majority of humans and turned them into "Hungries." Hungries are zombies, but they are unique in the wide field of zombie fictions for two reasons. The first is that they track humans predominately by smell. The second is that they are created via a fungal infection that tends them toward a second-stage life form that produces a giant tree with infectious seed pods. At a plot level, the film concerns itself with the relationship between a small group of scientists, military troops, and the children they are experimenting on to determine how to cure or reverse of simply manage the biter infection. Near the end of the film, it is explained to us that these children were sourced by the military during an excursion into the city for supplies. In a move of horror film exploitation, the lead scientist Caroline Caldwell (Glenn Close) explains that the children are byproducts of fetuses that were infected with the biter agent in the womb. In a psychoanalytically fertile move, the children ate their way out of the womb, and upon being brought back to the military base it was revealed that they were a unique form of biter who could suppress their urge to bite in order to appear "more human," therefore making them exemplary experimental subjects.

When the film begins, the students are locked into rows in which they are "taught" in a traditional classroom format. Strapped into wheelchairs to limit their movement, they are treated as a cross between kids and biological weapons. The early film is dominated by these classroom scenes and the relationship that builds between teacher Helen Justineau (Gemma Arterton) and

biter child Melanie (Sennia Nanua). The former is burdened by the fact that she knows that these children are more-than-human and destined to be vivisected and experimented on; the latter is radically unburdened because she knows literally nothing other than her brutal, experimental, highly disciplined existence. The emotional abuse that Melanie has experienced her entire life at the hands of military personnel becomes apparent when she tells a story in her class and calls a character in that story a "friggin' abortion" as if it is a perfectly normal descriptor. As the viewer knows, this is a piece of abuse that is hurled at the children by Sgt. Eddie Parks (Paddy Considine). Overwhelmed by sympathy for this abuse, Justineau lightly touches Melanie's hair, prompting Sgt. Parks to enter the room and rub his arm vigorously to remove the "blocker gel" that all of the personnel use. The sudden introduction of human smell to the room triggers the biter response in the children, turning the room of kids into chattering zombies.

It is crucial at this point to note that Melanie is black, and that marks her as starkly different from the majority of the rest of the cast. Much like *Fury Road*, this film does not have space for discussing the impact of race on the post-apocalyptic future, preferring instead to discuss the big questions of the future in terms of the species. What will become of us? Will the Hungries win? In the traditional post-apocalyptic mode, the question of *how* we will rebuild and recreate a version of the world gone by is the overriding concern of most of the characters. These are the traditional zombie and horror tropes that dominate the discussion, despite the obvious racial difference between Melanie and the rest of the principle cast.[63] This moment of apparent "post-racial" casting, however, runs into the same problem as *Fury Road* in the sense that the

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[63] There are two other characters who are black. Both of them are privates in the military, and they are the spectacular grist for the horror mill in the latter half of the film. The first is bitten and brutally executed; the second is killed and eaten by a group of biter children in a well-devised trap. The film's plot produces thrills and chills by repeatedly killing black secondary characters, which is difficult to say the least.

film centers on questions of mimicry, duplicity, virality, and difference, all of which are most operative in our real-world discussions of race. This is a moment of what Adilifu Nama calls the structured absence of blackness.[64] While Nama is specifically speaking to the actual absence of black people in science fiction, *The Girl With All The Gifts* takes this structured absence one step further by voiding any possible discussion of race within the world and asserting blackness as only blackground. Tt is a film that presents a world with black people but not blackness because it has no way of contextualizing the operations of race.

One of the ways that the film relies heavily on a racialized coding of its universe is its focus on blood and the contagious nature of the biter fungus. In a reading of *The Thing* (Carpenter, 1982), Nama argues that the film's concern with the truth of blood reveals a racial logic at its core. In that film, a nefarious entity that can fully replicate a human being has begun to infect the crew of an Antarctic research base. To suss out who is a person and who is The Thing, the crew takes blood from each crewman and subjects it to a hot needle test. The blood of an alien being will react in some way; the blood of a true human will simply sizzle. For Nama, both the fear that animates the film and the actual focus on blood is attached to a long history of racial science: "*The Thing* is deeply inscribed with the paranoid logic of racial eugenics--that just below the surface of white racial appearance may lurk the 'impure' and dangerous black racial 'other,' and, as a result, 'experts' are required to test and measure 'bad' black blood and to locate its carriers."[65] Crucially, Nama reads *The Thing* as a form of racial allegory that ends with the character Childs (Keith David) and MacReady (Kurt Russell) squaring off in the snow, neither knowing if the other is an imposter human being. For Nama, "the final scene reads as a racial

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[64] Adilufu Nama, *Black Space: Imagining Race in Science Fiction* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 10.
[65] Ibid, 53.

standoff between the two and dredges up acute racial antagonisms fueled by fueled by rivalry in the American economic order during the 1980s."[66] Following from this argument, *The Girl With All The Gifts* is performing similar ideological work for the post-racial era with its complete adoption of all of the same racial concerns around blood and fluid yet the total inability to stage or discuss them in any significant way. Rather than become narratively surfaced, the racial assumptions and assertions that the film brings to bear simply operate as distinct singularities that operate at crucial moments of change in the film.

The first of those singularities has to do with mimicry. A critical component of the film's handling of Melanie is along the axis of personhood. It is asserted, time and again, that Melanie and the other biter children are merely mimics. Because they are infected with the biter fungus, they are definitionally not human, and Caldwell repeatedly claims that Melanie is just a clever recreation of human behaviors. Over the course of the film, it is revealed that this is precisely what the classroom sessions were meant to ascertain: Can the biter children learn and create novel things in the world, or can they only mimic? Melanie's story discussed above illustrates the dilemma well. She can create a narrative, but fills that narrative with the Sergeant's insults instead of her own words. Is this simply the mimicry inherent in all children who are learning, or does it demonstrate an incapability?

This question lingers through the film through an end point in which Melanie purposefully sabotages the military mission and strikes out on her own, answering the question of the children's humanity in a positive (they are not merely mimics) and negative (they are a new species that no longer needs humans) way. After the trials and tribulations of escaping an

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[66] Ibid, 55.

overrun military base, navigating through an infested London, and solving various genre film problems, Melanie encounters a group of feral Hungry children and usurps their leader for control of the group. Caldwell, humbled in the face of Melanie's creative sabotage, finally recognizes her humanity. Melanie then sets fire to a "tree" of fungal seed pods, unleashing the fungus into the atmosphere and assuring the infection of any uninfected person on the planet. The contagion is no longer a question of blood transmission and purity, and is instead in the very air. Meeting a choking Sgt. Parks in the moments after starting the fire, he tells her, incredulously, that "it's over, it's all over." Melanie simply responds that "it's not yours anymore." At first glance, we could see this as an apocalypse that follows the apocalypse, a second sea change in a short time period, but in reality this is merely the fulfillment of the previous one. The world is no longer for humans. Instead, it is for Melanie and the posthuman Hungry children that existed both in the military base and the wilds of run-down London. As the viewer bathes in this information, Sgt. Parks asks Melanie to help him commit suicide so that he can avoid becoming a Hungry. She takes the gun, cocks it quickly, and hands it back to him. "Where did you learn that?" he asks, to which Melanie replies "I watched you." The question of mimicry, in these moments, appears to be solved and yet lingers.

The final scene of the film begins with a close up on Justineau's face as she wakes up in a hermetically sealed chamber. A single tear rolls down her face, and she gets up to begin the day's lesson for the assembled Hungry children and Melanie. In a cruel reproduction of the classroom scenes that begin the film, it is revealed to us that Justineau is a prisoner who can never leave her bubble for fear of being infected and stripped of her pre-apocalyptic humanity. She begins to teach spelling to the children who sit in rows on the lawn in front of her window,

each bullied into submission by Melanie's growls and threats. This is the fulfillment of the post-apocalypse.

The question of reproduction haunts these few scenes that I have discussed here. Melanie tactically eliminates the possibility of human life on Earth. She creates the conditions under which only her new species, the symbiote human-fungus with Hungry tendencies, can exist. Caldwell's assertion that Melanie and the other children are mere mimics, and then her emotional recanting of that statement, is a confusing structure for the film until we recognize that the film itself is arguing that to be human is to mimic. Melanie has simply mimicked all of the social situations around her: an us-vs-them mentality; a knowledge of military tactics and might-makes-right ideology; a total lack of compassion. Like any child, Melanie is a product of the social conditions that produced her, and this leads her to a place where she sees the replacement of all humans who do not share her fungal characteristics as wholly acceptable.

The film's argument about systemic mimicry that produces the Hungry society functions in a similar way to the argument that Homi Bhabha makes in his classic essay "Of Mimicry and Man." By reading through the history of both colonial management by colonizing forces and the literary productions of those cultures, Bhabha concludes that a frictional subjectivity is produced in the colonial subject. The colonized person is tasked with, and is disciplined into, the role of replicating the subject position of the colonizer, but the task cannot come to fruition because of the inherent antagonisms of colonialism. Bhabha then claims that a state is produced in which

"instances of colonial imitation come. What they all share is a discursive process by which the excess or slippage produced by the ambivalence of mimicry (almost the same, but not quite) does not merely 'rupture' the discourse, but becomes transformed into an

uncertainty which fixes the colonial subject as a "partial" presence. By 'partial' I mean both 'incomplete' and 'virtual.'"[67]

This produces a colonial situation in which the potential for change is always immanent to any given scenario at hand precisely because colonialism is effective at producing colonial subjects that are producing scenarios in which they are both mimics and menaces to that very colonial order.[68] To read *The Girl With All The Gifts*' claims about mimicry though Bhabha is to understand that the film is literalizing and surfacing fundamental structural issues that are dependent on racial and colonial framings that they text itself cannot address. This is yet another symptom of the film's absolute inability to confront its racial element, but it is precisely through its post-racial framing that it brings to the forefront the central issues of racial contamination and colonial containment. It's inability to present its racial frameworks means that it allows them to speak and set the terms of engagement constantly and consistently through the film.

When the film returns to the classroom at the end of the film, it is revealing that Melanie's novelty as a person is still infected with the social systems that produced her as a human being. Her aggressive power politics with the other children is a cruel reflection of the Sergeant. They are learning the same lessons as in the previous world using the same classroom dynamics. The world is for the Hungries now, but Melanie cannot think outside of the paradigm that she is comfortable in. The post-apocalypse here is the complete recreation of what ended the previous world, a system which we saw fail in front of us in spectacular fashion as it was overrun

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[67] Homi Bhabha, "Of Mimicry and Man: On The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse." *October* 28 (1984): 125-133, 127.

[68] Ibid, 127.

by Hungries. In the final calculation, the world the Melanie has made is merely a roundabout recreation.

We could pessimistically call this universal liberation in the same register that *Fury Road* takes in its final moments. There is a level playing field for all people who live, and there is no dystopian military bureaucracy to control the lives of the civilians. But just like *Fury Road*, the inability to address race as a significant social operator means that we are left with an implicit structure of the world that has remained resilient and solid in the face of the complete eradication of every other social stratification mechanism. The condition of the aesthetic category of the post-apocalypse is precisely that these singularities tied to race and blackness in particular do not shift in the supposed transformation moment from pre- to post-apocalyptic. If this aesthetic category is about change that does not change, then what does not change are the structures of personhood and recognition that figure non-whiteness, specifically blackness, as fundamentally Other in a system of social organization.

When we discuss diagrams, we are discussing a method of gaining purchase on the roiling change of material conditions. Diagrams are the assemblages that produce assemblages, and embedded within those diagrams are the fundamental material conditions of the possible and the probable from which emerge the actual, historical conditions. Since these diagrams, these aesthetic categories, are produced also by the material world, then they bear the mark of that material world. It is from this perspective that we will complicate the theory of assemblages by uniting the work on race discussed so far in this chapter with the ontological arguments about the formation of blackness in the scholarship of Fred Moten. From this angle, I will attend to the *The Last of Us* and the fundamental problem of post-apocalyptic assemblages.

The Last of Us and Ontological Blackness

The aesthetic category of post-apocalypse gives us a way of understanding how, paradoxically, change produces sameness. It is through the very structure of change, and the production of the actual from the virtual, that an entire category of material process can appear to radically re-orient itself before, in the end, simply producing the conditions which existed before the interruption. The apocalypse interrupts, and the post-apocalypse finds the structures that can be salvaged so that it can bolster and mold them back into a shape that resembles what came before. From the perspective of finitude, this is a main of alleviating the problem of the future. The post-apocalypse is an assurance that things will all work out. In this chapter I have discussed this in relation to a major structure that the post-apocalypse often re-grounds and cannot eject: anti-blackness. Through the highlighting of blackness, and formulating new worlds in ways that smuggle in the structures of anti-black racism, the diagram of post-apocalypse performs the "regulatory and reactionary" work of the violent oppression that it on-face purports to disperse.[69]

The two previous readings in this chapter have centered on post-apocalyptic films. *Fury Road* provides a post-racial liberatory post-apocalypse that cannot bring true intersectional questions into view. *The Girl With All The Gifts* makes a similar post-racial move while constantly reproducing a regime of racialized anxiety. In this final section of this chapter, I will consider the video game *The Last of Us* to address the ontological implications for the position of blackness within the context of assemblage theory as a method. If the two previous films are about narrative content (a tendency in an assemblage) and formal qualities (the building blocks of the assemblage), then *The Last of Us* will help us understand how blackness operates at the level of the diagram itself, partially determining the contents of the assemblages that are

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[69] Fred Moten, *Black and Blur* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), xi.

produced from that diagram. It is from this position that we can turn a reflexive critical eye not only to assemblages like films *but to the ontological process that produces those assemblages*. If the diagram of post-apocalypse produces assemblages in which anti-blackness constitute an inescapable structuring principle, then perhaps we should take seriously that this is happening at the level of ontology. While the two previous sections might suggest that anti-blackness is an unfortunate inclusion in the diagram that could be intentionally divested by a savvy media creator, this section argues that the very diagram of post-apocalypse produces a structure that makes escaping racialization impossible within this framework.

Before we address this at the philosophical level, however, it is productive to address it at the textual level. *The Last of Us* presents a world gone to ruin in the wake of a zombie uprising from so-called "infected." The infected are human beings who have been overcome by a fungal infection roughly equivalent to *Ophiocordyceps unilateralis*, or cordyceps, which infests host ants, overrides their minds, and places them in positions where they will best allow for the fruiting bodies of the fungus to propagate in their environment. The fictional cordyceps fungus that creates the zombies of *The Last of Us* overrides human brain function and amplifies aggressive behavior, which includes biting. As is the standard for zombie media, the cordyceps fungus spreads via the bite. Atypical for the genre is that it can also spread through the sprouting bodies of dead or late-stage infected. Like the real fungus, the fruit of the cordyceps is a critical part of the life cycle of the infection. This means that the vector for infection has an ambient potential. One might breathe in one too many of the spores that litter the world. Like the finale of *The Girl With All The Gifts*, the atmosphere itself has the potential to reduce the thinking human to something-other-than.

The broad narrative of the game is that a white man must take a white teenager across a treacherous nation full of zombies, cannibals, and the damned so that her body can be used to create an immunization to the cordyceps fungus. The man, Joel, is gruff and brutal and does what must be done and wrestles with his past failures, including the death of his teenage daughter on the night of the initial outbreak. Following him is Ellie, who has an immunity to the cordyceps infection and an intense need to belong in a world that has fundamentally ungrounded from security, safety, or acceptance.[70] The story that plays out is a well-acted, well-animated story of the post-apocalypse that borrows liberally from the canon of concepts and works that I have discussed in this chapter, from the basic articulation of the state of nature to the idyllic beauty of a world without human civilization. What I find compelling about the game, however, is that it takes stages the relationship between the post-apocalypse and blackness specifically through aesthetics. The blackground of the game does not stage race as a metaphor or as a simple process of Othering, in-groups, out-groups, and a dialectic of race theory as proposed by the theory of the liberal subject. Instead, blackness is staged qua blackness with revealing results as to the potential for blackness in the post-apocalyptic condition.

To grasp how blackness is operating in *The Last of Us*, I feel that it is insufficient to merely look to representations of characters of African descent and how, and under what conditions, they seem to possess or enact agency. While this is an important marker for representational discourse, I follow Fred Moten and his assertion that the paraontological quality

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[70] Much of the writing about *The Last of Us* centers on the "Left Behind" downloadable prequel in which we learn how Ellie learned that she is immune to the fungus. The story centers on her friendship with another young girl named Riley. This relationship slowly is also a romantic one, and many find this significant as a blockbuster game depiction of queerness. Importantly, Riley is black, which makes their coupling an interracial one. My focus here is not on this DLC, despite it being interesting.

of blackness often exceeds strict delimitations that words like "representation" often signal. As demonstrated in my reading of *The Girl With All The Gifts*, blackness appears in the world in such a way that it is not self-same with black people, despite the two being inextricably linked. Across his *In The Break* and the three volumes of *consent not to be a single being*, Moten pulls the reader again and again toward a recognition of how blackness operates. On one hand, it is an "ontological totality," an object of study, that is often evoked in an essentialist way to ground claims about the shared lived experience of blackness.[71] On the other, it is an always-shifting set of juridical, cultural, and social conditions defined by its difference. From this position as "normativity's condition," blackness emerges as a phenomenal and ontological excess, a something-more-than through which the Enlightenment subject defines itself (against).[72] These are two ways that Moten talks through the question of blackness, but not the only two, and he is often explicit about the hellish demands that defining blackness puts on the individual responsible for doing so. This is precisely because origins, the space from which a definition might emanate, is the absence that generates the definition. He writes in a section on Olaudah Equiano that it is precisely the knowledge of the inability to return to a previous condition before the "decalage" that is the break from Africa, that generates a necessity for both black radicalism as a way of being and the term of blackness itself.[73] Blackness is both lived and felt, activated and latent, in excess of its particular social situation and diminished in its presence. Blackness can be an essence, and it can also be produced in the moment of recognition between an origin and the current moment. As Moten puts it, the history of enslavement is involved in the production of a history of blackness, but it is also cannot be the full foundation for understanding

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[71] Fred Moten, *Stolen Life*, 156.
[72] Ibid, x.
[73] Ibid, 59.

black sociality: "For this, I guess, we ought to be thankful. But fuck anyone and everyone that says so."[74] He means that the radical productivity, the generativity, the groundless-yet-improvisatory condition that produces blackness is obviously full of *potential*, but that potential is delivered with a black lived experience of "vicious, brutal negation."[75] The capacity of blackness to be *more than*, to exist in the expansive zone of the paraontological, comes at a terrible cost when it is instantiated in social relationships predicated (and dependent) on violent oppression that appears in myriad forms.

Moten's willingness to work through these many instantiations of blackness explains how blackness is held as part of the diagram of post-apocalypse. Assemblages are all historical; they live and they die. Diagrams are assemblages that produce other assemblages, gateways from the virtual to the actual, and so they must also live, change, and die. As I argued through this chapter, while the diagram of post-apocalypse comes into being with modernity, its current particular form is bonded to 1945 and the deployment of the nuclear weapon. In my reading of *The Girl With All The Gifts* I claimed that a core, constitutive piece of that diagram is how it constrains and frames blackness in the moment after the world falls apart as something that is so fundamentally a part of the pre-apocalyptic world that we cannot even speak of it on its own terms. Moten provides a critical analysis missing within other versions of assemblage theory, specifically when it comes to the emergence of race as a phenomenon that both names particular objects and people in an assemblage and which structures the assemblage itself. In other words, Moten's work presses on the claims of assemblage theory being a content-agnostic systemic analysis by pointing to fact that systematicity itself has built-in claims about race, and blackness

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[74] Ibid, 59.
[75] Ibid, 59.

specifically. Blackness operates as a kind of constraining force on how diagrams are produced and maintained out of the material conditions of the world, and to discuss this I will make a short digression through Moten's broad system of interpretation before ending with *The Last of Us*'s presentation of lived blackness.

While Moten's scholarship takes on a wide range of objects, and therefore a wide range of shapes, to approach blackness, here I will be looking to a particular cluster of concepts that emerge as equivalencies across the that scholarship and those objects. Philosophically, there are threads that unite Moten's work across domains: he is committed to a critique of Kant that places Kant at the heart of a racist philosophical apparatus that works to exclude blackness as the very precondition of the existence of intelligent or rational Man; he is focused on moments in the black radical tradition where both vernacular and academic theory undo the specific exclusions of blackness that happen as a result of philosophical modernity; he is interested in highlighting moments in which a sociality of blackness open up political possibilities, and he is troubled by the 20th century philosophical turns that continually work to reground the inability of black people to theorize their political and philosophical condition related to the violence done against blackness.[76]

As I noted above, Moten's project interfaces with the concept of the assemblage in interesting ways, but the ones I am most invested in here have to do with his conception of

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[76] These are broad statements to make about Fred Moten, but these also largely describe the work of three volumes of his *consent not to be a single being*. There are moments of rigorous philosophical critique of the apparatus of white supremacist philosophy, and there are moments of complete abandonment of that critique in which the philosophy of the black radical tradition is able to speak and set the terms of blackness and black life. The see-saw behavior here is without traditional Hegelian or Marxist negation, and yet he tracks this double process of production and reduction at every turn.

continuing/ending and connection/disconnection. I see this happening in Moten's work around

ideas of the material and his concept of the animaterial that links into his theorization of the

ensemble. These are ways that Moten produces a materialist realism similar to the kind the

Manuel DeLanda is so committed to.[77] This is not to reduce Moten to a DeLandan thinker, but to

say that both are working through similar issues, and that there is a line of alliance between

DeLanda's materialist realism that looks for isomorphic systems of material operation and

Moten's production of forms of material that are operated on by those systems unequally. Put

another way, Moten is highlighting a category of person, object, and person-as-object that has a

different set of extrinsic properties than others, and those extrinsic properties ripple out into the

shape of the social and conceptual systems that connect with them. For Moten, the history of

assemblages that have governed European and American life since the 16th century have a

(black) box on the inside that is produced through violent inputs and whose outputs are not

conceived of as equivalent or even recognizable to that assemblage.

In a chapter of cinema and blackness with a healthy critique of Adorno and a strong

defense of jazz titled "The Phonographic Mis-En-Scene," Moten ends with a flourish about

blackness itself. Moten writes that "blackness, which is to say black femininity, which is to say

black performance, will have turned out to be the name of the invaginative, the theatrical, the

dissonant, the atonal, the atotal, the sentimental, the experimental, the criminal, the

melodramatic, the ordinary."[78] Shooting through everything, blackness *is the flourish*, the

"animating absent presence."[79] Continuing his thought, he ends the chapter this way:

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[77] Obviously these are not the same, and there's a strong incompatibility on the philosophical level between Moten's deep attachment to the work of Jacques Derrida and DeLanda's absolute inability to consider it.

[78] Fred Moten, *Black and Blur*, 133.

[79] Ibid, 133.

"[Blackness] is and bears an aesthetic of the trebled (troubled, doubled) seer's voice disturbed by being seen and seeing up ahead where escape, crossing over, translation will have meant the continual reanimative giving--unto the very idea of freedom---of the *material*" (italics in original).[80] To work Moten backward, we have to ask ourselves the question of what it means to speak of the "giving over of the material." Moten clearly identifies it through its effects, but it crucially is not reducible to either matter or to some version of the Lacanian Real, felt in its effects but never ascertainable on its own. When Moten later writes that the *Gramsci Monument* is "gone, into a more+less than material part of the matter it reminds," he's making a claim for the interstitial category of "material," of undelivered potential, of presence and facticity. In other instances, he writes of the "material spirit"[81] or the "material interplay between writing and speech,"[82] but these are instances in which the material is seen as a site of transformation. More directly, we can see the claims that Moten is making about material when it comes to situating people in particular moments and locations, such as when he argues that when "we understand race, class, gender, and sexuality as the materiality of social identity, as the surplus effect and condition of production, then we can also understand the ongoing, resistive force of such materiality as it plays itself out in/as the work of art."[83] While Moten never gives us an extensive definition of materiality, we continually get partial views, such as the sections I've quoted above or a moment in *Stolen Life* where he claims that the animation of the commodity in the figure of the slave occurs at a "marriage of meta/physical substance and bare materiality."[84] What unifies all of these discussions about the material is a claim that the material itself is something that is

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[80] Ibid, 133.
[81] Ibid, 1.
[82] Ibid, 4.
[83] Ibid, 35.
[84] Moten, *Stolen Life,* 86.

produced and immediately caught up in other systems that sometimes capture it. Other times, the material interlocks with a system and destabilizes it. This is the potential for the material, although Moten does not seem interested in claims about material that border on the edge of New Materialism. The implicit critique across Moten's body of work is that the material is always defined backward through what it is *not*, and the existence of the slave, at the edge of object/person, inhuman/human, unspeaking/speech, produces ample opportunities for traditional Western epistemologies and ontologies to tactically address the question of personhood through the analysis of material. To break with this tradition, Moten develops the terminology of the animaterial to discuss the analytic and phenomenological overlap between the discourse of objects and the lived experience of those who are considered objects.

The opening of *Black and Blur* is a re-articulation of Moten's own arguments about Aunt Hester's scream that take place in the first chapter of his previous book *In The Break*, and what concerns us about those two chapters here is the transformation of his argument about speaking objects into a claim about intersubjective animateriality. Put as plainly as possible, the Moten of *In The Break* is interested in putting pressure on the Marxist understanding of material commodities by demonstrating that many of the Marxian "what ifs" are actually put into play in the context of slavery. What if the commodity could speak? What if the material object could have a say in its own exchange? Frederick Douglass's account makes it clear that these are bad questions that come from a particular racial perspective; as Moten writes, "what is sounded through Douglass is a theory of value—an objective and objectional, productive and reproductive ontology—whose primitive axiom is that commodities speak."[85] When *Black and*

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[85] Fred Moten, *In The Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 11.

Blur is published 14 years later, Moten begins by re-reading his own claims about Aunt Hester, and this re-reading produces a new terminology of "the ani*mater*ial ecology of black and thoughtful stolen life as it steals away."[86] Animateriality appears several times within *Black and Blur*, and it is the term that Moten seems to reserve for the moments that the elision between bare materiality and life is discussed within the context of an ecological relationship. Later in the same volume he remarks that "blackness is the name that has been assigned to difference in common, the ani*mater*ial inscription of common differentiation, which improvises through the distinction between logical structure and physical embodiment."[87] Still later:

> "Can we speak of the materiality of 'an individual life'? If portraiture assumes an answer in the affirmative, then showing otherwise responds. To say that this or that life matters, that is has value, is to speak, finally, of a radical animateriality as the source of that value and as if it were that value when to attend to value, or to what is said to have value (in its distinctness), is to forget its source. And so we act as if distinctness forgets where it is coming from even as its troubled, troubling experience can only ever occasion the question, what is that *an*imateriality? What if the animateriality that makes so-called individual life matter is, precisely, that there is no individual life?"[88]

This quotation renders it most clearly, but animateriality is the term that Moten uses to distinguish the knot of individuality, the commodity, and the ecological relation.[89] Putting this quotation into relation with the former one suggests that this is one valence through which we

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[86] Moten, *Black and Blur*, xiii.
[87] Moten, *Black and Blur,* 162.
[88] Moten, *Black and Blur*, 239.
[89] One could make a compelling case that this is the core of his critique of individuality and the liberal subject that extends across *consent not to be a single being* as a trilogy.

can think through blackness itself. When we talk of *that* animateriality, a location in an assemblage, we are pointing to an ecological crossroads in which material relations are impacting with value (economic and social), questions of individuation, and the idea of a common experience of violence and alterity in relation to the valorized social. This shared experience, the "exhaustive celebration in and through our suffering, which is neither distant nor sutured, is black study."[90]

To bring Moten's black study to bear on assemblage theory is to pose animateriality as a question for that theory. Isomorphic systems operating on materials producing assemblages is a useful explanatory device, but if it cannot account for the problems that Moten poses to European and American philosophy generally, and the systems of value that those philosophies place on reality, then it will always be a partial system that is fundamentally unable to speak of race at the level of both ontology and phenomenology. It is my claim that assemblage theory has the capability to augment itself with the help of Moten's conception of black study, and it hinges on two premises. The first is that Moten is already writing about animateriality, and therefore blackness, as an ecological relationship between elements in a larger assemblage. Assemblage theory would discuss these in terms of singularities and relations, but the fundamental claims about the structure of the social and the role of the individual and the collective ring true across both assemblage theory and black study. Second, Moten is already using language that is very close to that of "assemblage" to discuss the relationship between the individual and the world around them.

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[90] Moten, *Black and Blur*, xiii.

To briefly attuned to the resonances in that second confluence of description of the world, we can look to moments across Moten's catalogue where assemblage theory and black study seem to already be speaking to one another. *In The Break* introduces Moten's concept of the "ensemble" as a description of what jazz *does* when we spin it up into a phenomenological organizing principle. In that book, the ensemble is evoked as a gathering of musicians as much as it is a descriptive term for the coming together itself.[91] Ensemble becomes a way of understanding the relationship between individuals and groups. Getting to this moment through the what an aesthetic of montage can cause, Moten writes that "montage renders inoperative any simple opposition of totality to singularity. It makes you linger in the cut between them, a generative space that fills and erases itself. The space is, is the site of, *ensemble*: the improvisation *of* singularity and totality and *through* their opposition."[92] While Moten would have us pass through Derrida to truly deliver the profundity of this insight, I don't think we need to go that far down the philosophical path. In fact, when Moten returns to this argument in *Stolen Life*, it is slightly reframed as "the generative cut between description and prescription," a kind of distinction that analytic philosophers might regard as the difference between the would and the should.[93] If this articulation of the ensemble regards action, then the follow-through argument is about the theory's descriptive capability in a broader sense: "the theory of ensemble," Moten writes, "is enabled by the tradition of singularist and differentiated thinking of the whole it extends and improvises."[94] The ensemble allows Moten to work through questions of repetition and difference within the same paraontological conditions. The ecology of ensemble gives him a

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[91] This brings to mind the translation of *agencement* that is rendered into assemblage in English translations of Deleuze & Guattari. It is the noun and the verb.
[92] Moten, *In The Break*, 89.
[93] Moten, *Stolen Life*, 44.
[94] Moten, *Stolen Life*, 44.

descriptive apparatus for talking through the shape of the way the world repeats itself, or what he calls the "in/security" of repetition.[95]

While Moten's larger theoretical interventions in contemporary philosophy do not "boil down" to his concept of the ensemble, it is a critical part of his philosophical apparatus because it works to dispel clear lines between singularity and totality. While Moten doesn't make this argument in exactly this phrasing himself, it seems clear to me that this is his way of hedging against claims about both monoliths and singularities of experience; there is no explicit site of blackness, no demarcation for the method of black study. This is yet another place where there is a productive confluence between assemblage theory and Moten's philosophy. There is nothing in the ensemble that does not agree with assemblages other than certainty about ontology. The paraontological condition of blackness would not be "para" at all in the estimation of assemblages. As a conditioning part of the diagram that produces assemblages, it is fully ontological in the sense that the system that produces being has tendencies that, in the current material reality of 21st century production, contains both structures of blackness and portions of assemblages that are committed to the stark policing and violation of that blackness.[96] Again, I am not making this move to simply suggest that Moten's philosophical work is simply inside the paradigm of assemblage theory, but rather to point out that assemblage theory contains a specific failure in not attending to the fact that blackness, which is figured as that which reason and Man

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[95] Moten, *In The Break*, 69.

[96] The connections between Fred Moten's work and the building blocks of assemblage theory are more extensive than I have space to argue here. In a note in *Stolen Life*, Moten specifically works through how the ensemble critiques Fredric Jameson's hope for a Third World "outside," and assemblage theory's dismissal of a messianic outside is functionally very similar to assemblage theory's critique of totality (274). *Stolen Life* also speaks of a "black dispositif" that functions similarly (110). Additionally, the longform elaboration on the idea of "fabrication" in *The Universal Machine* is a repetition in new terms of similar concepts (243).

is defined against, must necessarily function as a structuring principle for the diagrams that are produced in a period that is so hotly focused on blackness and its philosophical, aesthetic, and political existence. I take Moten's claim that "the black radical tradition is in apposition to enlightenment" seriously.[97] Rather than following Moten's own trajectory into a "detour of Kant onto a Heideggerian path," with healthy help from Derrida, I read Moten's own conceptualization of the black radical tradition as a productive intervention in systems that make claims about ontology more generally. Heidegger is not the only game in town, but the black radical tradition's implicit and explicit critiques of capital-P Philosophy still resonant when applied to a DeLandan framework. The sound still rings. We return to *The Last of Us* to hear that ringing.

The position of blackness in *The Last of Us* has not gone unremarked upon. TreaAndrea M. Russworm has looked to the game as part of a dyad with Telltale Games' *The Walking Dead* to investigate how blackness functions in "digital simulations of the end-times."[98] Identifying a post-apocalyptic condition similar to the ones in *Fury Road* and *The Girl With All The Gifts* as discussed above, Russworm argues that the four black secondary characters that appear in *The Last of Us* are there to satisfy "an uncritical multiculturalist imperative to merely include diverse characterizations in game worlds."[99] Put another way, these characters are not here to be full-fledged people of African descent with their own cultural differences. Rather, they exist in the plot simply to be *non-white* in skin tone as a demonstration of liberal diversity. For Russworm,

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[97] Moten, *Stolen Life*, 41.
[98] TreaAndrea T. Russworm, "Dystopian Blackness and the Limits of Racial Empathy in *The Walking Dead* and *The Last of Us*" in *Gaming Representation: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in Video Games*. Eds Treeandrea T. Russworm and Jennifer Malkowski. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2017), 112.
[99] Ibid, 112.

blackness operates in *The Last of Us* "unimaginatively and unprogressively" despite appearing in a "dystopian narrative frame that is so primed for social and political commentary."[100] To use Lavender's terminology, Russworm demonstrates that the blackground of *The Last of Us* contains the same paradox as other media objects discussed here: after the apocalypse, it is possible to *see* race but not to speak of qualities of race or ethnicity. Marlene, the leader of the resistance group that hopes to produce a vaccine for the fungal infection that has zombified much of the world, is a black woman. The end of *The Last of Us* requires protagonist Joel to kill the resistance members in a selfish ploy, and he ruthlessly guns down Marlene as she is making her case for the future of the human species. The visual politics of a rugged, masculine white guy shooting a black woman who is promising to save the world are loaded with racial significance. However, Russworm notes that this demonstrates the racial horizon of the game, as the decision that Joel makes between the futurity presented by a black woman and futurity presented by a white teenager is not considered to be a decision at all.[101] Against this, Russworm suggests that the mode of critical race dystopia be adopted against "continuing to demand 'more' or 'better' representations in games."[102] Instead, there is a possible fullness of black life, or at least a depiction of black sociality that engages with race in a substantial way.

Soraya Murray has also discusses *The Last of Us* specifically through the lens of race in general and blackness in particular. Presented in the context of what Murray calls an "aesthetic of ambivalence," *The Last of Us* is emblematic of a video game type which depicts "whiteness in crisis" and dystopian ruination as the setting for that crisis.[103] While the bulk of Murray's chapter

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[100] Ibid, 113.
[101] Ibid, 115.
[102] Ibid, 126.
[103] Soraya Murray, *On Video Games: The Visual Politics of Race, Gender, and Space* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2018), 90.

has to deal with the construction of whiteness in both the culture of the United States more generally and video games more specifically, it all lands in a reading of Joel's actions in the game.[104] While Murray does not discuss blackness *qua* blackness in the chapter, her claim is ultimately that *The Last of Us* produces a site of remediation of whiteness that ultimately justifies whiteness, and I would argue by extension and corollary, anti-blackness. All of this is, as she says, in service to understanding "the power at play in these pervasive images,"[105] a perspective which can afford an estrangement in which "it becomes possible to see . . . a trauma narrative of whiteness that repeats itself unendingly in the innumerable fear-based narratives of contagion, besiegement, apocalypse, and the crumbling of civilization."[106]

I want to take both of these perspectives into account to finally work through the potential actionable moves that post-apocalypse makes available as an aesthetic category. Following TreaAndrea Russworm's call to "better integrate the scholarship from African American studies, literary studies, and film and media studies" into the study of games, I will make a move across assemblages, the philosophy of Fred Moten, and *The Last of Us* to explore the actual *output* of a diagram of post-apocalypse that reproduces itself within a strictly delimited racialized (and racializing) paradigm.

There are four black characters in *The Last of Us*: Marlene, a leader in the resistance group called The Fireflies; Riley, the love interest who appears in the game's prequel; Henry and Sam, two brothers who recently fled the Hartford safe zone after the military abandoned it to the infected. Marlene and Riley are significant figures, both haunting the game in various agential

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[104] Curiously, in the analysis of whiteness, Murray performs a similar glossing over of the racial significance of Marlene's death that Russworm critiques in her chapter.
[105] Ibid, 137.
[106] Ibid, 138.

ways. Henry and Sam don't have this longevity in the plot. Instead, they exist in a very specifically delimited way that places them as the end cap for the game's first act. These two characters function as a mirror for Joel and Ellie. Like Joel, Henry is the older, protective person in a pair that features a younger, less-experienced survivor in the post-apocalypse. Like Joel and Ellie, they attempted to pass through the American city of Pittsburgh and were waylaid, then hunted, by the highwaymen cannibals who live there. Unlike Joel and Ellie, however, Henry and Sam are brothers, and the age gap is less pronounced. Henry is perhaps a decade older than Sam, and acts as a kind of hybrid brother and parent for him. And, much like Joel and Ellie, they are presented as "good" people in the time after the end. They are not cannibals, they were recently in a safe zone with its security and final vestiges of governmental presence, and they have a sense of decency and honor. Henry studiously tells Sam that he cannot take toys from the long-rotting toy store that the group stops in for a moment, and the scene feels like a long-dead moral order that has been kept, flame-like, in the hearts of people that cannot give up their decency lest they give up whatever vestiges of civilization remain. In the few scenes where *The Last of Us* presents us with these windows into the lives of Henry and Sam, some categories of life in the post-apocalypse are scaffolded. With these two characters, the game presents a hierarchy of persons: good survivors who function like good citizens even in the absence of a state; bad survivors who have given into power politics and violence; and the infected, the lowest rung, who have lost the possibility of choice and are self-same with the natural world itself.

The difference that makes a difference between Joel and Ellie and Henry and Sam is a racial one. The former two are white, the latter are black, and how the game presents the finality of blackness gives us a way of working through how Moten's formulations about the paraontology of blackness itself operates in the game's production of a post-apocalypse.

Because, at the end of things, Henry and Sam die. They are not unique in this. The majority of characters in *The Last of Us* die. But the way they die is important, because it produces an image of a horizon line when it comes to blackness and black people that is not shared across all of the characters who die in the film. They might all die, but they do not die equally.[107]

It is worth briefly discussing the significance of video game play here as opposed to film form. While a longer discussion about the differences in affordances between films and games will appear in the next chapter, I ask you to trust me here that the wax and wane of game and film that takes place in *The Last of Us* is not unique in games but it is productive for discussing how blackness is positioned. Like many narrative-heavy games, *The Last of Us* is based on a back-and-forth movement between gameplay segments where the player controls a character and narrative "cinematics" in which they watch motion capture scenes of characters. These cinematics often show major scene transitions that don't have a gameplay equivalent, such as jumping from a bridge and tumbling down a raging river. They also allow for more traditional film segments in which moveable cameras compose "shots" that are legible to the cinematic apparatus an average viewer might be used to, which is then used to hone in on motion capture acting on par with a film. While a game engine could literally do anything a programmer would want it to when it comes to the placement of cameras within a 3D space, *The Last of Us* adheres closely to traditional filmmaking style in order to deliver an end product with the *je ne sais quoi* of a prestige film product. The novelty (which has not been novel for two decades) is that this is a film product that you can also play.

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[107] This is a paraphrase of Ian Bogost's claim the objects exist, but that they do not exist equally.

This matters because *The Last of Us* often uses gameplay to deliver plot development and traditional cinematic techniques, particularly voice acting and facial animation, to deliver character development. Henry and Sam exist in both gameplay and cinematic moments while only truly existing as characters who change, adapt, and react in the latter portions. They live in the orbit of Joel and Ellie for a brief period of time: they meet while fleeing cannibals, hide from those same people in a safehouse that Henry discovers, and they make a break out of the city together. There is a pause when Henry and Sam abandon Joel and Ellie in a moment of need, but after the latter jump into a river and tumble downstream, Henry and Sam fish them out and they continue as a group of four. Ironically, this abandonment is what finally allows Joel to trust Henry. By saving Sam and leaving Joel and Ellie to be killed by cannibals in a humvee, Henry "proves" that he will do whatever is necessary to protect his brother, completing his mirroring of Joel.[108] Afterward, they make their way through a former outpost where children and adults were slaughtered by infected, and it is here the dyads of Joel and Ellie / Henry and Sam are transformed into Henry and Ellie / Joel and Sam. Still later, Ellie and Sam become paired while Henry and Joel fight off the infected. The splitting and pairing process is, in fact, one of equivalence and integration. Henry and Sam are made of the same stuff as Joel and Ellie. The liberal specter of the universal human subject explodes out of these scenes, implicitly working through both gameplay and cinematic moments in which Henry and Sam are pure reflections of the values, goals, and beliefs that Joel and Ellie share. In a final optional moment between the infected battles and a long (and thematically illogical) fight between Joel and a cannibal sniper hiding in a safehouse, Joel even clues Henry into the long plot of the game. He explains that they are traveling across the country to unite with the rebel group called The Fireflies, and Henry

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[108] Toxic masculinity is a hell of a thing.

eagerly joins. Later that night, all sitting around a fire and eating, the two talk about what it was like to ride Harley Davidson motorcycles before the apocalypse. The two men seem destined to be friends. Mere moments later, however, this is shattered. As the motorcycle conversation continues, Ellie leaves and the camera follows her into an adjoining room where Sam is cataloguing the supplies. They have a conversation, and Sam reveals that he has a fear of becoming infected. He's afraid that the infected still have some kind of humanity trapped down inside of them. After the conversation, Ellie leaves, and we stay with Sam, who pulls up his pant leg to reveal a bite wound.

To briefly take stock of the situation: Henry and Sam are the only black characters in the game that we spend a substantial amount of time with. They provide the model of the good survivors who Joel and Ellie can compare themselves to. They also help create a hierarchy of existence in the post-apocalypse: the good survivor, the bad, and the natural infected.

When Sam is infected and begins to express his fear of slipping from the good survivor directly to infected, he is voicing a fear of falling from the category of the human into a deep void that contains everything else in the post-apocalypse. In *The Last of Us*, this black kid teenager is placed on the precipice between humanity and the absolute negation of the good survivor with full humanity. It is in this context that, the next morning, Ellie re-enters the same room to find Sam changed into an infected. He attacks Ellie, pushing her to the ground and trying to bite her, while Henry and Joel watch. Joel runs for his backpack and his gun and Henry fires a warning shot at him. "That's my fucking brother," he yells while holding Joel at gunpoint. The latter scrambles across the floor anyway, muttering "screw it," and while the camera is focused on Joel in the foreground Henry swings his weapon around and kills his own brother off-camera. The slight delay of the pan over the slumped body of Sam that Ellie is pushing off of her

is specifically aligned with the point of view of Joel, who comes to recognize what has happened at the same time that we do; the camera follows his perception.

Joel moves to comfort Ellie as Sam convulses on the floor of the room. Henry is in extreme duress, intoning his brother's name and idly pointing a gun at Joel as Joel quietly tries to disarm him. "It's your fault," Henry cries. "This is nobody's fault," Joel responds, and Henry repeats his own statement with more force. "Henry, no," Joel pleads. This is a moment that is full of potential, and we can imagine any kind of scenario. There is a plausible world in which Henry kills Joel and Ellie, where he kills Ellie in retaliation, or where he flees to become a running villain through the rest of the plot. Any of these are well-worn genre ground that could be activated in this story. What actually happens, though, is that Henry turns his gun on himself, committing suicide.

Until this moment, the scene had been following a shot-reverse shot rhythm of framing the speaking character. Joel pleads and we see Joel. Henry speaks and we see Henry. In the moment of Henry's death, however, the scene breaks from this tried-and-true storytelling form. We see Henry bring the gun up to his head, but the camera cuts with the trigger pull and the report of the firearm. Instead of seeing Henry's action, we are returned to a medium shot of Joel. The formal move here is to align *Henry*'s death with *Joel*'s perception. The camera moves as if the sound of the gun is Joel speaking. Quite literally, on a formal level, Henry dies so that Joel can perceive it. And if Joel's perception is aligned with ours in gameplay and in most game cinematics, then what we are really seeing in this scene is a performance of black death to appease an assumed white perception.

What I am arguing here is not simply that a "proper" representation failed to appear in the game, but rather than the game makes a choice about how to portray black life and death. That choice is to re-assert the way that the divide between whiteness and blackness is *meant* to work as a technology of subjugation by way of denial of personhood within the liberal order. I see *The Last of Us*'s choice as analogous to the one that Fred Moten critiques when he discusses Linda Williams's *Playing The Race Card*. Moten writes that

> "Williams's conceptual apparatus is this: no reasonable person committed to a mode of citizenship or personhood based on the abstract universality of reason could have found Simpson not guilty. That he was found so by some black people who constituted the majority of the jury, that some black people celebrated that he was found so, indicates something like the *general* descent of black people into the irrationalism of racial melodrama."[109]

The same logic of presentation is put into service by *The Last of Us*: When Sam turns and Henry shoots him, the "good survivor" of the post-apocalypse is pushed to the edge of what it is capable of doing. The "good survivor" is someone who exists in pursuit of an ideal, who perseveres through disaster, and Henry cannot do so. He shatters in response and he kills himself. The lesson here, of course, is Henry is the perfect mirror of Joel. Henry loses Sam and his will to live. The player is meant to follow through through by speculating about what Joel would do without Ellie and, indeed, the game turns Joel into mass murderer in its final chapter to prevent that from happening. Following a similar line of thought, Soraya Murray reads *The Last of Us* as an extended missive on the existential crisis of whiteness. For her, it is built on the edifice of "the

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[109] Moten, *Stolen Life*, 101.

ideological construction of whiteness as ineffectual" which is highlighted by characters who "stumble about the ruins of a patriarchal order that is defunct and deathly."[110] She continues:

> "Joel is forced to repeatedly place his own body between this overwhelming terror and the innocent Ellie, and he does so grudgingly. It is the binary opposition between whiteness and radical otherness - and particularly the repeated trauma narrative of declining white masculinity - that comes to the fore and reconfigures Joel as victim."[111]

This broad strokes account of the game is brought into focus when we consider Murray's explanation in the context of the deaths of Sam and Henry. The game is not merely thematically about beleaguered whiteness in a thematic sense. It literally aligns the player's perception of the world with a white perspective that cannot perceive black life and cannot prehend black suffering and death. In the moments of gameplay that put us in contact with Henry and Sam, we only experience them as talking head commentators of the world around us or as allies in fights that are, mechanically, identical to all of the fights we have done before and those that we will do after. In the cinematic cutscenes, we recognize their humanity in the sense that they are sounding boards for the reproduction of whatever enlivens and drives Joel and Ellie.

These moments of life and recognition, of "they are just like us," are diagramatically moments in which anti-blackness maintains itself as core to the assemblage that is the media object. While race never appears *narratively*, it is visually apparent and racial difference appears as a structural condition. This is to say that *The Last of Us* is yet another instance in which anti-blackness is baked into the operations of the world and yet racial difference cannot be spoken,

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[110] Murray, *On Video Games*, 102-103.
[111] Ibid, 103.

cannot be *reflected on*, by the game. The blackground overwhelms and fundamentally sets the trajectory for how the game coheres and maintains itself. It is also worth noting here that blackness becomes important in *The Last of Us* because of how Henry and Sam exist as both arbitrary and non-arbitrary figures. In some concept art released for the game, it seems that Henry and Sam were, at some point, white.[112] This produces a similar effect to the "post-racial" post-apocalypse discussed previously in this chapter. On the other hand, this was obviously purposefully changed during development, and it seems that this happened at the concepting stage since the concept art of Henry and Sam does not look much like the final versions of their characters who appear in the game.[113] The portrayal of blackness in *The Last of Us* is fueled by both arbitrariness ("they could be anyone") and purposeful decision making ("these characters are African American.")

Earlier I wrote that Fred Moten helps us understand not only the outputs of the aesthetic category of post-apocalypse but also the way that anti-blackness operates at the level of the diagram to augment what is produced in the assemblages we call media objects through that diagram. In the context of the game, Henry and Sam exist in the way that they do in *The Last of Us* because post-apocalypse as a productive category cannot conceive of them as having full ranges of life within the assemblage. The strict control over how black life can be presented, how black people can be seen, and what situations blackness can be seen to exist within is strongly controlled in post-apocalypse simply because the diagram itself is predicated on the dissolution of blackness into metaphors and allegories of difference that re-center whiteness within an

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[112] A video reel of all extant concept art for the game makes this argument, as does an uncited claim on the game's unofficial wiki.

[113] In fact, in distinction from many of the characters in the game, Henry looks remarkably similar to Brandon Scott, the actor who voices and motion capture performs him.

assumed white viewer. Crucially, the extensive qualities of an assemblage which connect with a viewer might have assumptions built into them that are or are not activated, but a lack of activation does not mean the lack of existence.

To show Henry and Sam living well after the apocalypse would fundamentally rupture the racial assumptions that are built into post-apocalypse as a diagram, which requires that a racial position be erased and abstracted into "universal" stories around questions of humanity. To show Henry living on after the death of Sam would mean to rupture the dyadic pairing and allegorization of Joel and Ellie in Henry and Sam. The moment that Joel cannot look at Henry and think "there but for the grace of God go I" is the moment that blackness can be summarily dismissed from the equation of the game. Once blackness does not function as something for whiteness to both measure and define itself against, it must be excluded. And I have specifically been using the word "show" here because this is all happening at the level of narrative, of form, and of the ontological conditions that produce these things. We cannot see Henry shooting Sam because that would require us to *see* Sam, to recognize him as more than an allegory for the protected Ellie, and Henry's own death is eliminated for the same reason. The moment that the structuring of what the "correct" position of interaction with the diagram of post-apocalypse is troubled, it has to be excluded for the health of the structure itself.

Post-apocalypse is a processing mechanism to present change and then re-assert structure, and the final point I wish to make about *The Last of Us* is about the immediate aftermath of Henry and Sam's death scene. Henry shoots himself, and we see Joel react. The screen immediately cuts to black before presenting us with a title in the bottom right of the screen reading "Fall." When the image returns back, we're treated to a colder, greener location on the road near a forest. This is not the Pittsburgh suburbs, Henry and Sam are not there, and the

previous scene clearly happened months or weeks ago. These chapter breaks demarcate the

various acts of *The Last of Us*, and here it is used to formally jettison any consideration of what

just happened. One can imagine a different game in which Joel and Ellie reflect or consider the

lives and deaths of two people who they came to know, and befriend, in a short amount of

time.[114] Instead, the possibility of these protagonists, and the viewer, sitting down to reflect on

these deaths is literally portrayed as impossible. Considerations of black life must happen in the

margins, the between spaces, and must be always in the blackground rather than the

foreground.[115] Because of the strict managerial nature of the diagram and how it controls the

shape and presentation of a media object, *The Last of Us* has to shatter its form, the very way that

it communicates space and time to the player, in order to foreclose reflection on blackness's

place in post-apocalypse.

Conclusion

This chapter has moved through several arguments related to the aesthetic category of

post-apocalypse. All of them have been in service of describing a media phenomenon that

emerged since development of the nuclear weapon and the ideological, material, and aesthetic

shifts that appeared in the wake of that media phenomenon. What aesthetic category theory has

given us purchase on here is a recognition of a diagram that creates media objects that speculate

on the potential of what gets recreated after a shattering event. This is fundamentally a problem

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[114] There are a few moments later in the game when Ellie reflects back on her own dyadic
relationship with Sam. In an optional dialogue, Ellie regrets not putting a toy robot on Sam's
grave, and Joel tells her to leave the past alone. In another, she regrets her final conversation with
him. These moments of dialogue are of questionable importance.
[115] This is especially noticeable after the repeated reflections on the death of the character Tess,
Joel's companion, only a few hours earlier in the game. She is appropriately mourned and her
death is at the center of several scenes of blame and angst.

of (re)production, and the media objects produced by the diagram of post-apocalypse constitute the horizon line of the imagination about what happens after the "end."

As I have argued, the post-apocalypse produces a fantasy of the "after" in which the frictions of the liberal project are extinguished in order to reproduce the fundamental questions of that liberal project in their base form: Who gets to rule? What is property? Who deserves to be free, and what will they do in order to assure that freedom?

The winnowing project of using the post-apocalypse to present a question of what "really matters" politically does not mean that these frictions go away. Rather, sf simply produces them as abstractions in what Lavender calls the blackground of the media object. We can pose questions of race to *Fury Road*, for example, but we have to read the broad narrative of oppression and freedom as an allegory for the racial question; it cannot simply be posed on its own terms because the diagram of post-apocalypse drains out complexity and produces an iron assemblage centered on what is lost, what remains, and what is to be regained. In reading *The Girl With All The Gifts* and *The Last of Us*, I have shown what that diagram also sustains in order to serve up its matrix of conflicts from which the liberal project can be rebuilt. The exclusion of blackness is the foundation upon which post-apocalypse builds its scaffolding of life-after-the-end. The very ontological structure of assemblage theory, with its need to retain materials from the past to build the future, must therefore carry the structuring principles of the *before* into the *after*.

This is obviously a critical problem for assemblage theory and the aesthetic category theory which versions itself from the same root explanations of existence. If the potential of the post-apocalypse is always predicated on the pre-apocalypse and its attending exclusions and

productions of violence, then it seems that the future is foreclosed entirely. One is either left with

the eternal now of bleakness and its slow involution of power and resurrections of the past or one

is given the spectacle and eradication of post-apocalypse with its poisoned groundwater and their

structuring violences.

In the final chapter of this dissertation, I will look to the aesthetic category that I call

annihilation and how it might produce a productive void that dismantles both aesthetics and the

mechanisms that build aesthetic categories.

CHAPTER 4: ANNIHILATION

The end of *Melancholia* is the end of human existence. The planet Melancholia smashes into Earth, and humans are no more. In the moments before the event, we're introduced to this destruction through the perspectives of the human characters that we've followed through the previous two hours of the film. Sisters Justine and Claire sit with Claire's son Leo in a "magic cave" made of sticks in the middle of the golf course housed on a grand estate. The three of them hold hands. Justine, a depressive who has become strangely calm in the face of the oncoming destruction, holds it together better than her sister, who weeps at the inevitability of her own death and the fact that Leo's life will be extinguished with all other life on Earth. The camera cuts back and forth between them, each reacting in their own way, each slumped in resignation about the approaching end of things.

As Melancholia makes its way toward Earth, the light of the space changes. It's brutally bright, and the color of the film shifts into the blue portion of the spectrum. An antidote to our yellow sun, Melancholia dominates the visual space of our planet in the final moments before the fatal crash. When the camera finally pulls back into a wide shot of the three people and their cave, we can see Claire is reacting in horror to the truly massive presence of Melancholia in the background. It looms, immense and imposing, dominating the widescreen cinematic apparatus. It grows larger by the moment. As it comes closer to our planet, a kind of ripple emanates from its center as its atmosphere smashes into our own. A few frames later the sound of an explosion occurs, followed by a massive shockwave that wipes out the trees that had flanked the frame on the right and the left. A few more frames and the figures in the center of the screen are annihilated by fire and quickly replaced by a black screen.

This black screen ends the film, and it serves as an entrance into the aesthetic category of annihilation. It is an aesthetic category that reconfigures much of what I have claimed to far in this dissertation, and it puts aesthetic category theory and assemblage theory under scrutiny. If bleakness is a category that produces an infinite horizon and post-apocalypse produces change-that-isn't, then annihilation is the name I have given to media objects that work at the very limit of human finitude. It is the aesthetic category of non-continuance, where the stability of the diagram that produces media objects and our reactions to them decoheres into nothing. It is the label we can give to the dissolution of experience itself. In bleakness, the end can never come. In post-apocalypse, the end comes but it is really a beginning that resuscitates what came before. In annihilation, nothing can continue. Instead of the diagram shifting, it simply stops. The expenditure of production that is meant to be recouped in re-grasping the media object simply does not occur. Things come to a screeching halt.

The ideal form of an annihilative media object would be something that forced matter to decohere when it was experienced. If there was a film that, when watched, caused all of the atoms in the viewer's body to disperse into subatomic particles, that would be the true experience of annihilation. However, that does not seem likely or possible, and as I have shown in the previous chapters, it is very difficult to get rid of the structuring principles of aesthetics that generates the context for any given media object. The material of the world shuffles around, and as the two previous aesthetic categories show, what lingers in moments of the production of the new is hard to scrub out. Additionally, it is difficult to talk about perception after the elimination of perception or about existence after all human life has been extinguished. The aesthetic category of annihilation, which undoes aesthetics, is hard to wrangle. This is not a problem that is easily worked through.

This chapter functions as a form of autocritique for the methodology that I have set forth so far in this dissertation. If human finitude is mediated, then there have to be media objects that are at the furthest limit of that finitude, and there has to be an attending philosophy that argues for how those media objects might effectively work. While this chapter features case studies in the form of the film *Melancholia* and the music video for Hot Chip's "Need You Now," these function less as proofs and more as illustrations of the incapability of aesthetic theory to speak to the absolute limit of finitude.

At the same time, by looking to several art objects that "end" themselves and by reading through authors like Quentin Meillassoux, Claire Colebrook, and Ray Brassier on speculative realism, Lee Edelman and baedan on the anti-social thesis in queer theory, and Frank Wilderson III and Stephen Best in Afropessimism, I argue that aesthetic category theory can at least provide a categorization for the things that cannot be accounted for, not as a radical outside but as a kind of black box that understands what kind of inputs and outputs would be necessary to take aesthetic categories to their very limit in the destruction of aesthetics themselves. As many of these authors argue, finitude is not a hard limit point for thought in the Heideggarian mode. Rather, we can absolutely think the condition of the death of all consistency between our lives and whatever comes after us, our form of life, and our phenomenological world. Indeed, as I demonstrate at the end of this chapter, this willingness to project a future where our *sensis communis* and universalizable judgment has gone extinct might be the only place for a positive politics to emerge. We the previous two chapters of this dissertation have been structured around the hopelessness of dragging the past into the present and the future. The media objects that gesture toward the aesthetic category of annihilation have a paradoxical hope in eradication.

Before turning to those philosophical moves, though, I will return to *Melancholia* for to flesh it

our more fully.

Who dies in *Melancholia*?

The black screen at the end of *Melancholia* lingers for more than ten seconds. Following

the destruction of the characters, we experience the destruction of the camera, and as Peter

Szendy argues, the destruction of the viewing subject. He finds this moment to be emblematic of

something that he calls "apocalypse-cinema," a phrasing and conceptualization which I think

misnames the phenomenon that is occurring. In his *Apocalypse-Cinema: 2012 and Other Ends*

Of The World, Szendy argues that in the case of *Melancholia* that "the end of the world is the end

of the movie."[1] The fact that the end of the film coincides with the end of all life provides a kind

of poetic base from which Szendy suggests that *Melancholia* uniquely, within the field of film,

produces the true sense of ending: "that the last image be the very last image, that is, the last of

them all—of all past, present, or future images."[2] By making this claim about *Melancholia*,

Szendy is able to write a book in the comparative and which puts a number of apocalypse films

up against what he sees as the "true" apocalyptic film which has unified the annihilative form

with its destructive content that is full of pathos.

While I have sympathy with Szendy, the argument also rests on the idea of "world"

which Szendy produces from a combined reading of Martin Heidegger and Arthur Schopenhauer

that eventually plays out in a Derridean way. When argued via the Heideggerian route, Szendy

suggests that we can understand "the worldliness of the world" through the explanation of tools

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[1] Peter Szendy, *Apocalypse-Cinema: 2012 and Other Ends of the World*, trans. Will Bishop
(New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 2.
[2] Ibid, 2.

in *Being and Time*.[3] He depicts the world through a series of interconnective capacities, including the capability to be seen: "[the tool's] way of adjoining, assembling, or inserting itself into the network of ustensility is always to be in view of. This is in fact why the tool as such disappears; it melts and dissolves into the infinite reticulated references in the lacework of things."[4] In a later chapter, argues for world through Schopenhauer's claim that "the existence of the whole world still remains dependent on the opening of the first eye, even if it only belonged to an insect."[5] The line that Szendy is able to draw from this claim through to Heidegger allows him to make a move that aligns death with perception itself. "We need to think that the world goes out, that it is the end of the world every time and eyelid closes forever, every time that the ultimate fade to black takes place," he explains.[6] While this has been a quick sketch of Szendy's position, this is a sufficient summary from which I can address why his model of apocalypse-cinema seems insufficient for analysis of objects that mediate human finitude. From the perspective of the aesthetic category of annihilation, what Szendy is outlining is a kind of polite fiction that exists at the heart of perception. The quick elision that he makes between *seeing* the end of things and *experiencing* the end of things is afforded by his willingness to address the texts he is analyzing at their own level.[7] What Szendy produces is what Deleuze & Guattari might call a "state science" in the form of a deconstructive method that can only see films like *Melancholia* in metonymic relation with the perceptual apparatus that affords human perception of life and death.

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[3] Ibid, 25.
[4] Ibid, 25.
[5] Ibid, 81.
[6] Ibid, 81-82.
[7] I use "text" here specifically because of Szendy's attachment to deconstruction.

Szendy thus produces a deconstructive mathematics when it comes to the relationship between media objects, human perception, and human finitude. *Melancholia* is categorized as good because it creates a unity between how it closes the door on perception, which destroys "world" as the diegetic world is also annihilated. Yet this is obviously reductive. No one's world is destroyed. The black screen at the end of the film is not death. And, to push further, the material of the Earth continues to churn with or without human perception of it, wholly divorced from any way that we might try to wrangle it within a perceptive form. What Szendy produces in his model is a clever game for evaluating how close a film might come to demonstrating the event of death as deconstruction considers it, and this is without holding the theory accountable for the assumptions it makes when it comes to who has access to a shared world and under what conditions.

I am not dwelling on Szendy's book here to score cheap points, but rather to argue that a theory of media that stays within text and within concepts like "world" fails to take into account the churn of material, the system of reality, that is also barreling toward annihilation. Horrifyingly, while "world" might end with the last eye closing, *the world* does not end, and the violence of actual eyes closing forever between now and then is not merely an analytical tool for further uncovering the potentials of Jacques Derrida's deconstruction.

Without delving deeply into Derrida's philosophy here, I want to pause briefly to consider his short book *Cinders*, which is his elaboration of the French phrase "il y a là cendre" and has the dual potential translation of "there are cinders there" and "cinders there are."[8] The essay itself is a polyvocal, strange thing, and it dials into Derridean deconstruction's fascination

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[8] Jacques Derrida, *Cinders*, trans. Ned Lukacher (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 3.

with language and the philosophically resonant differences between languages, the written word,

and speech. For Derrida, the cinder does the work of the trace or the commodity in other words,

being both present ("there are cinders there") and existent ("cinders there are.") For Derrida, this

is nearly paradoxical, since the fact of the actual cinder is its fleeting nature, its dispersal, its

existence on the limit of perception. It is an object that also contains a secret, and as he writes, *il

y a là cendre* is "what is destined, by the fire, to dispersion without return, the pyrification of

what does not remain and returns to no one."[9] To summarize into a less poetic form than Derrida

delivers, the cinder is indicative of a set of conditions, some future-facing and some retrojective,

that cannot help but find the past in the present, the center in the displaced, the différance in the

conditions of things, the hauntological quality produced by a time that is fundamentally out of

joint.[10] While these are all philosophically interesting points, they are also arguments that elevate

language and human reception of that language to a first principle of philosophy. To put it

frankly, something literally being reduced to cinders has no relation to Derridean analysis of the

term in the same way that the actual destruction of an experiencing agent has nothing to do with

the black screen at the end of *Melancholia*.

Where I agree with Szendy (and therefore Derrida) is the starting point for conceiving of

an aesthetic category of annihilation. If assemblage theory is a way of describing the

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[9] Ibid, 21.

[10] I am not attempting to be reductive here. Derrida writes in *Cinders* that "that is just what he calls the trace, this effacement. I have the impression now that the best paradigm for the trace, for him, is not, as some have believed, and he as well, perhaps, the trail of the hunt, the fraying, the furrow in the sand, the wake in the sea, the love of the step for its imprint, but the cinder (what remains without remaining from the holocaust, from the all-burning, from the incineration the incense" (25). I do not want to dismiss that this is the way that Derrida is attempting to grasp hold of the "all-burning" within his philosophical paradigm, but I also want to suggest that his philosophical path does not take us *beyond* the phenomenon he is attempting to address. For specific information on hauntology, see *Specters of Marx*.

metaphysics of arrangement that produces certain isomorphic structures across scales, then there must be moments where that description fails. Or, to put another way, as a form of description it must necessarily run into moments where it cannot proceed. For instance, the heat death of the universe, the moment where the processes that began during the big bang and have been entropically spinning down to absolute zero and the absolute divestment of energy from the universe via entropy. This is still predictable by the system, and it is possible to scientifically describe this system, we cannot phenomenologically or aesthetically express what that might be like. It will be such a completely different arrangement of energy that whatever we might use to describe it will fundamentally not match up to the materiality of that moment. It will not even be experienceable in any way we might normally use that term. While the timescale is long and the results are fundamentally annihilative for every atom in the universe, assemblage theory (through DeLanda at least) can still grasp and describe this due to assemblage theory's commitment to realism and to materialism.

At the end of *Apocalypse-Cinema*, Szendy references the work of Quentin Meillassoux as a way of creating a conversation between what Szendy calls the "the ultracatastrophic philosophical landscape—one that projects us after, or *beyond* the catastrophe" and the "ultratestimonial" that speaks to things beyond the possibility of human experience.[11] For a book that is concerned with the end of perception, and therefore the end of the world, it is easy to see why Szendy would necessarily need to engage with the Meillassoux's speculative materialism and the philosopher's claims that one can, in a mode that overcomes Kant, engage in speculation about that which a human being will never and can never experience. For Szendy, this ultratestimonial quality of Meillassoux's philosophical program makes it the equivalent of a

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[11] Szendy, *Apocalypse-Cinema*, 132-133.

post-apocalyptic film; a camera can present a world in which humans have gone extinct in the same way that Meillassoux's speculative materialism (as a branch of speculative realism) can make claims about that same human-less universe. But Szendy's Derridean sensibility prevents him from accepting that this equivalence is a full one. He claims that Meillassoux's theory "is missing a cinefied point of view in which, through a cinematics that in advance reduces every subjective gaze to ashes, the real steps away from itself to make an image."[12] Szendy's formal equivalence between extinguishing sight and therefore perception and therefore life means that Meillassoux's descriptive mode is insufficiently *aesthetic*. The implication made in the final pages of *Apocalypse-Cinema* is that a properly Derridean analysis combined with an attachment to realism might help us produce "a filmic arche-trace," that thing which we can speak of but which is fundamentally inhuman, a cinematic eye on the nothing.[13]

I remain unconvinced that we can properly work that cinematic eye. When I watch the end of *Melancholia*, I watch it on my couch, in my body, and not from the end of the world. When I speculate about a universe without human experience, I don't project myself in that space. I don't align my perceptions with that place-that-is-not. The speculative world without the human is a space the does not exist, and one that I can perhaps understand but have no experience of. When Szendy writes of the end of *Melancholia* that "I am in front of a black screen. In the black screen. I disappeared at the same time the last image did. I melted into darkness. I, too, exploded, and my remains have been dispersed into universal night," he is

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[12] Ibid, 134.
[13] Ibid, 135.

giving into a romanticism of destruction and death that makes is merely one more position for potential subjective empathy.[14]

The aesthetic category of annihilation exists in opposition to Szendy's formulation. Media objects that mediate finitude through annihilation do not do so by offering characters or subjectivities that can be identified with. The diagram produces media objects that annihilate, and in doing so, fundamentally break with the idea of diagrams, aesthetic categories, and continuity itself. One cannot continue from their position. They produce the negation of production itself. Where I am in agreement with Szendy, then, is on the work of Quentin Meillassoux and the questions that it forces us to ask about our media. I also agree with Szendy that finding media objects that truly produce annihilation, the *actual* end of perception, is profoundly difficult. Where we diverge is what those objects look like, what the burden of ending is, and a shared image of success when it comes to destruction.

It is within this context, and in response to the overwhelming presence of textual reading without philosophical speculation of which Szendy is merely one part, that I am proposing the necessity of thinking through the aesthetic category of annihilation. It is the diagram which undoes, the mode of producing reality that destroys itself and cannot be reconvened into something again. This is the nihilistic, the inhuman, or the extinctionist impulse.

The question of annihilation has undeniable political allies and enemies. Within discourse on the Anthropocene, or whatever word you want to give to a world that is fundamentally augmented by anthropogenic climate change, there is an element of wondering what will happen to who and under what conditions. Which species will be annihilated and extinguished? Who

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[14] Ibid, 1.

will follow suit, and under what biopolitical regime? Annihilation is a "pop" enough that, while I was writing this chapter, *The New York Times* published an op-ed from Todd May titled "Would Human Extinction Be A Tragedy?"[15] In what follows, I will identify what I see as the significant strains of annihilative thought in order to speak to the bounds of what kind of inquiry I am after when engaging annihilative media.

But first, before those thinkers, I want to briefly note why Quentin Meillassoux is beneficial for us here. While his anti-correlationist thinking in general is informative for the broad set of Realist philosophies that I will engage with in this chapter, what is immediately useful for us is his conception of facticity. Meillassoux produces a system of inquiry that places contingency up against its more radical version facticity, or the contingency of contingency itself. As Meillassoux himself explains in his *After Finitude*, "contingency expresses the fact that physical laws remain indifferent as to whether an event occurs or not—they allow an entity to emerge, to subsist, or to perish."[16] Contingency is the name with give to processes in the world working according to the given constants that exist: the laws of thermodynamics, the basic process of physics, the operations of molecular bonds in conditions. This is the platform upon which systems such as DeLandan assemblage theory can be built; if the universe is systemic, then we can speak of isomorphic systems. We can speak of diagrams. We can speak of aesthetic categories.

All of those things are dependent on the fact that contingency, the great operation of controlled chaos in the universe, sits on that stable platform. Meillassoux takes a logical axe to

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[15] Todd May, "Would Human Extinction Be A Tragedy?" *The New York Times*, December 17, 2018. https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/17/opinion/human-extinction-climate-change.html
[16] Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency*, trans. Ray Brassier (New York: Continuum, 2008), 39.

this notion and claims that if contingency exists in a general system then there must be a *contingency* of *contingency*. That stable platform must also be contingent, must be chaotic, must be as unstably ordered as a human body or a jar of mayonnaise. He calls this facticity, which "pertains to those structural invariants that supposedly govern the world" and that "provide the minimum organization of representation: principle of causality, forms of perception, logical laws, etc."[17] Through some logical operations that don't need to be reproduced here, Meillassoux comes to the conclusion that our ability to think a world-that-isn't is what produces the "mark of our essential finitude"[18] due to the fact that facticity forces us to face a "world with an absence of foundation whose converse is that nothing can be absolutely impossible, not even the unthinkable."[19] Summed up, this creates an interesting catch phrase: "it is unthinkable that the unthinkable be impossible."[20]

When we consider annihilation and how it mediates human finitude, this is what we are doing. We are working through the possibility of the unthinkable. Because the laws of thermodynamics have not changed overnight does not mean that that they could not, just that they have not, and the bet that theories like assemblage theory makes is that this will not happen. But this is the horizon of thought and the case that must be considered through the elaboration of extinction that that I will make through the rest of this chapter. If we take assemblage theory seriously, as I have in this dissertation so far, then the abolition of the production of the actual through the virtual is much like a law of the universe failing to continue. The interruption of

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[17] Ibid, 39.
[18] Ibid, 40.
[19] Ibid, 40.
[20] Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 41. For an additional discussion of facticity in the context of Kantian and post-Kantian philosophy, see Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound: Enlightenment and Extinction* (New York: Palgrave-Macmillan, 2007), 63-69.

assemblage theory and its churning historical trajectory is as if gravity stopped existing tomorrow. And yet this is the scenario that the diagram of annihilation sets up: the conditions of the destruction of that which makes it possible. In contrast to scholars like Andrew Culp, whose *Dark Deleuze* hones in on parts of the Deleuzian corpus to find moments where theoretical cataclysm can potentially produce "a new dawn worthy of our highest expectations," I am on a search for moments that truly prevent the assemblage project from continuing to *produce*.[21] No dawn.

The snag here is a perspectival one. It is difficult to avoid falling into the trap that Peter Szendy does, which is to take a singular death or a species extinction and blow it up to the size of the universe, or at least our capability of understanding the universe. After all, as I have repeated many times, assemblages are born, live, and then die. A moment of apparent failure or collapse is often not one: heated sugar that crystallizes and becomes candy instead of smooth caramel is both a failure and yet merely a transformation. It is not an annihilative moment. The death of a singular human being and the extinguishing of its perceptive apparatus, and the decay of its body, is a similar transformation, no matter how tragic we personally find it. No, what we are after here are media objects that formally produce the conditions of not only their own destruction but of the possibility of understanding.

To ground the theoretical apparatus here, I will look to a music video that exists at the edge of the aesthetic category of annihilation. While it certainly does not go *all the way*, it should be apparent that media objects that *do* go all the way are exceedingly rare, and it is sufficient for an explanatory apparatus to be built up around it.

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[21] Andrew Culp, *Dark Deleuze* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 60.

"Need You Now" and the Depiction of Annihilation

The music video for Hot Chip's "Need You Now," from their 2015 album *Why Make Sense?* is a story about time travel. Directed by the collective Shynola, lead singer Alexis Taylor plays a character caught in a kind of time loop that centers on a broken relationship. The video begins with a former partner, maybe a spouse or a girlfriend, tearfully packing up a van. She watches Taylor walk into his house, close the door, take off his coat, and recede into the interior. She drives away, and inside of his house is a psychedelic video that melds a black woman's (Joy Leah Joseph) vocal performance of the hook, a tight exhortation of "I need ya now" sampled from Sinnamon's 1983 song "I Need You Now," with morphing and shifting images of members of the band.[22]

In following shots, Taylor is despondently sitting in his home, and this despair is interrupted by someone in a red jacket breaking into his car and then rifling around in his glove compartment. Taylor puts on a blue jacket before chasing the red jacket down the street and follows him out into a sandy, washed-out hinterland. What follows is a time-paradox narrative in which Taylor meets several versions of himself, all of whom are in different parts of the "plot" of the video, and the whole narrative pays off in a scene where we learn that the red-jacketed thief is a version of Taylor who was looking for a picture of he and his girlfriend (wife? partner?) to give her in order to remember the good old days. It is a clever video that is framed around a tried-and-true sci-fi plot, but what is compelling to me about it is the way various versions of Taylor exits the time paradox of the video.

[22] https://www.instagram.com/p/BgD4CIKjUbx/

At two points in the video, versions of Taylor diverge from the central plot and ends up in the margins of the blown-through world. In the first, Taylor wonders at his own hands as he is digitally erased from the image. In the second, a depthless black circle emerges from the horizon and encroaches until it encroaches on his face and the video cuts away to the "plot" of the video. I take these moments to be truly annihilative. They are instances in which the extraneous characters of the sci fi plot are literally being eliminated in front of the viewer so that the "plot" can survive, and they induce a speculative impulse in me. What could be happening? What is the process through which this is happening? What are the *rules* of this universe?
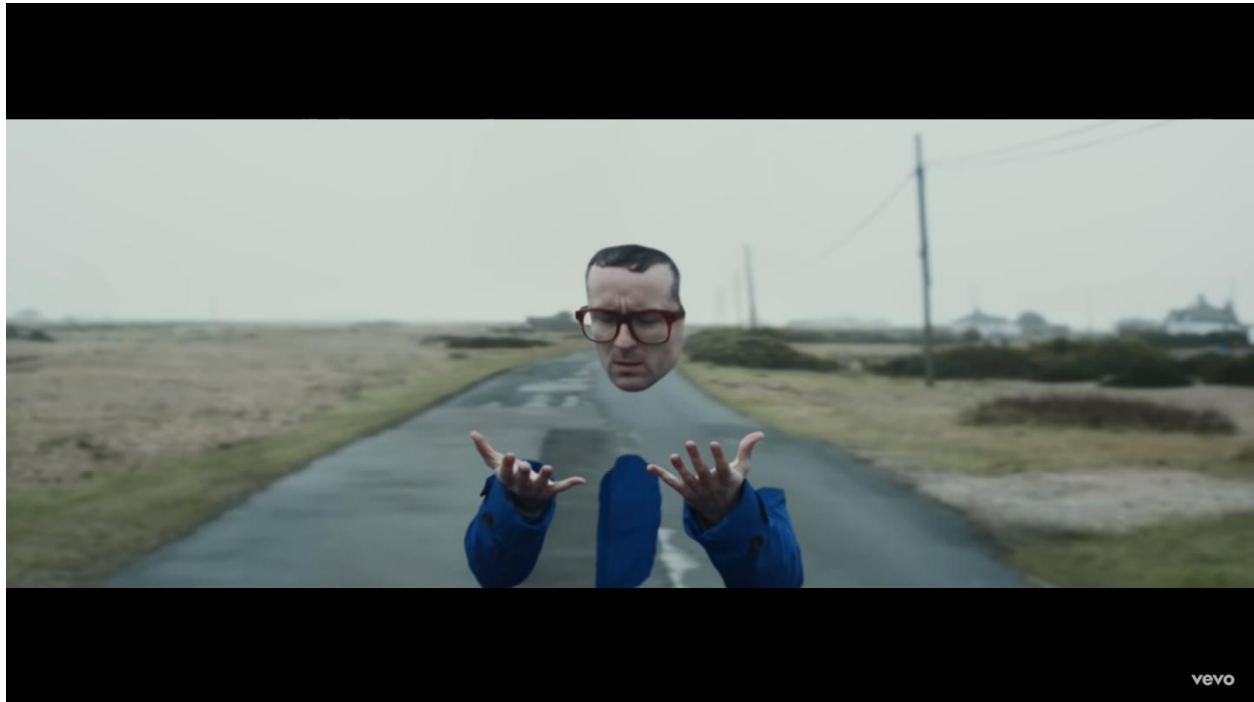
Figure 8 Taylor being erased from existence.

Figure 9 A large blackness emerges from the horizon.
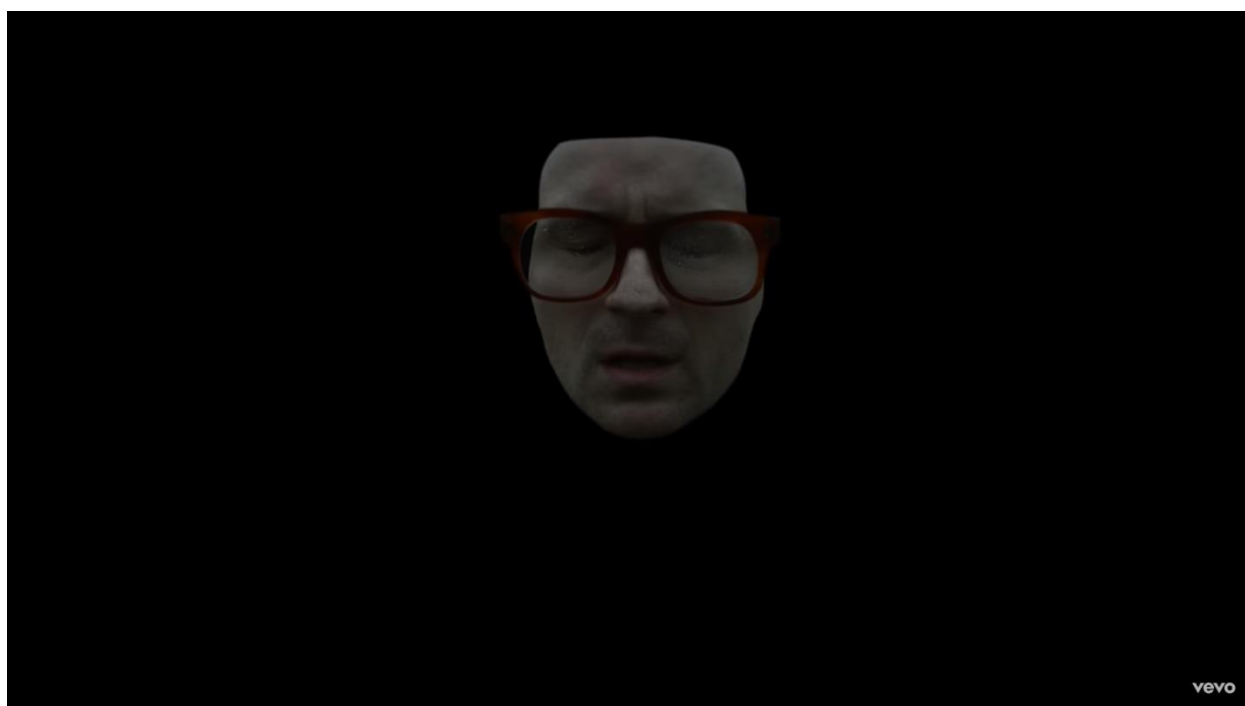
Figure 10 The blackness swallows Taylor up.

Annihilation is the word that we give to complete destruction without remainder. Like all

aesthetic categories, it is a cluster of different stances, but this one coheres around the utter

elimination of characters, experiencing beings, structures of power, and anything that can be

epistemically or phenomenologically reconvened into something that produces something new.

In the video for "Need You Now," the versions of Taylor who are swallowed by the flat

blackness of *something else* are followed as far as the cinematic apparatus can go. At the

moment of unrepresentability, without metaphor or artifice, the video merely cuts away.

The Anti-Social Thesis and Afropessimism as Annihilation Theory

Meillassoux's thought provides us is a way of considering the double edge of the world

beyond or without the human that we're visually presented in "Need You Now," and the music

video stages a dual set of thoughts that Meillassoux demands from those of us who would

speculate about annihilation: we must be able to think our own nonexistence, and yet we're still

forced to *think* it, to represent it, to conceptualize it in human terms. Within that thought there is

the threat of turning annihilation into a mere post-apocalypse, a place where something new

might emerge that is contaminated with the old.

A place to begin thinking through this problem is with Lee Edelman's landmark 2004

book *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive*. Developed from Lacanian psychoanalysis,

No Future takes the figure of the child as its central object, aligning questions of biological

reproduction with social reproduction and the concept of the future itself. Edelman works to

align negativity with queerness in a bid to leverage them against the "perpetual hope of reaching

meaning through signification" and the political liberalism that that hope produces.[23] For both

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[23] Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 5.

methodological and analytic reasons, Edelman holds the psychoanalytic death drive in high

regard as a way of working through a refusal of the future, writing that "the death drive names

what the queer, in the order of the social, is called forth to figure: the negativity opposed to every

form of social viability."[24] In a reading of P.D. James's novel *The Children of Men*, Edelman

lays out the stakes of embracing this absolute negativity of queerness: If "there is no baby and, in

consequence, no future, then the blame must fall on the fatal lure of sterile, narcissistic

enjoyments understood as inherently destructive of meaning and therefore as responsible for the

undoing of social organization, collective reality, and, inevitably, life itself."[25] Aggressively

pursuing what has come to be called the anti-social thesis in queer theory, Edelman wants to

distinguish, and decouple, mere negativity from the queer pessimism that he advocates for. In a

roundtable published in *PMLA* in 2006, Edelman lays claim to something beyond an "internal

antagonism, on the self-constituting tension of negativity that forms of liberal utopianism,

oblivious to their own particular ways of reproducing reproductive futurism, fittingly locate

nowhere."[26] The horizon of negativity that Edelman demands that we chase, then, is requires a

commitment beyond registering our displeasure about the future in the moment. Rather, we must

be wholly critical of how it is delivered. Edelman is careful to caution us against approaches

such as Jack Halberstam's, telling us that we cannot confuse "the abiding negativity that

accounts for political antagonism with the simpler act of negating particular political positions"

so that we can avoid "a reformist approach to authority that hammer[s] new idols out of their

good" instead of "hammer[ing] them into dust."[27] Bracketing his method of psychoanalysis and

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[24] Ibid, 9.
[25] Ibid, 13.
[26] Lee Edelman, "Antagonism, Negativity, and the Subject of Queer Theory." *PMLA* 121, no. 3 (2006), 821.
[27] Ibid, 822.

the specific arguments about the liberal political order, I want to note here that Edelman explicitly diagnoses some steps toward thinking an annihilative theory. By looking to "the child" as a figure of not only social reproduction but of futurity itself, Edelman points to what social levers must be pulled to truly think through human finitude as a species. Without the production of perceiving subjects in the future, what future can there be?

As Rebekah Sheldon argues in her *The Child To Come*, Edelman's grand argument in *No Future* takes several forms. For her, his book indexes all of these: "the conjunction of the figure of the child with the trope of the future; the promise—infinitely deferred—that there will be a time in time that won't be the present; the imperative to replicate the present into the future in the hope that the future won't come."[28] In the final output, *No Future* operates as a kind of equivalence machine, aligning the "clean future of descent" with "the dead future" in that both share "a refusal of those disorienting flows that characterize open systems."[29] And yet Sheldon also makes a move that suggests that Edelman has insufficiently thought through the implications of the practical implications of his sinthomosexuality, or a set of queer lived practices that function as an move "against futurity, against its propagation, insofar as it would designate an impasse in the passage to the future and, by doing so, would pass beyond, pass *through*, the saving fantasy futurity denotes."[30] While Edelman might see the horizon of this as a mode of refusal that produces conditions that are *better* than what we have through nonproduction, Sheldon sees the productive capacity of the child and the refusal of the sintholme as a dyad or "the twin poles of catastrophic narratives."[31] In other words, production and

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[28] Rebekah Sheldon, *The Child To Come*, 35.
[29] Ibid, 35.
[30] Edelman, *No Future*, 33. There is also a strange resonance here with Heidegger's use of Rilke's "saving power."
[31] Sheldon, *The Child To Come*, 36.

nonproduction, the future and the rejection of that future, are an engine through which the world keeps churning on. In my reading, Edelman thus produces something that, like Szendy's reading of *Melancholia*, purports to be about the edge of finitude and yet is merely yet another moment of churning post-apocalyptic rearrangement. He simply does not go far enough.

While I agree with Sheldon about the actual output of Edelman's theory, I am also compelled by the anonymous author baedan's longform reworking of Edelman in their 2012 journal issue "baedan: Journal of Queer Nihilism." Like Sheldon, baedan sees *No Future* as failing to fulfill its own stated project. Unlike Sheldon, baedan is much more openly critical of that failure and of Edelman's choice to locate "queer negativity within various cultural productions" and not "in the context of lived revolt or of active struggle against the society he purports to oppose."[32] In response, baedan picks up the tool of queer negativity to wield it against the "safe interpretations offered by the academy and its theorists" and to insure "the destruction of the civilized world itself."[33] In baedan's move to turn Edelman's critique of futurity into a "text sharpened into weapons for anti-social projects," they find the projectile that shoots out beyond the deadlock of almost-dialectics that Sheldon so astutely identifies.[34]

Baedan writes from an explicitly anti-civilization anarchist perspective. Their anarchism is not one of markets and pseudo-libertarian values, but instead it is one in favor of the absolute abolition of anything that impedes the fulfillment of the self-fulfillment of the human. "We understand destruction as necessary," they write, "and we desire it in abundance. We have nothing to gain through shame or lack of confidence in these desires. There cannot be freedom in

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[32] baedan, *baedan: The Journal Of Queer Negativity* (Seattle: no publisher, 2012), 6.
[33] Ibid, 6.
[34] Ibid, 7.

the shadow of prisons, there cannot be human community in the context of commodities, there cannot be self-determination under the reign of the state."[35] Methodologically, baedan works toward this goal by also jettisoning frameworks that don't work toward this goal, but they maintain a commitment to the death drive in concept: "A non-identitarian, unrepresentable, unintelligible queer revolt will be purely negative, or it won't be at all."[36] It is important to note that baedan is leveraging the most radical version of queerness that can be mustered. They agree with Edelman that the deadlock of liberalism must be met with ruthless negativity, but it must also be a negativity that refuses the terms of negation that are presented as the terms of disagreement by the contemporary political order. Baedan argues for a "queer opposition leveled against the false oppositions which politics always serves to represent."[37] To consider this from the perspective of a thinker like Meillassoux, and without betraying the negation at the heart of baedan's claims, it is perhaps productive to think of this as a speculative negation. It is a full abolition of contemporary life that holds certain speculative claims about what the world *could* look like, but that world as it exists in the speculative mode is fundamentally *inaccessible* to the vast majority who are caught within the political, the dialectical, the Symbolic, or whatever world-mediating language you might gather. The absolute banishment of the contemporary ordering of life in the pursuit not of a horizon, a potential future sketched out, but rather a great void in which some kind of life might be lived. The lever that produces this abolition for both Edelman and baedan is queerness, but baedan is specifically attuned to the ways in which an *intelligible* negativity is "recuperated, represented, or annihilated."[38] This annihilation, the edge

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[35] Ibid, 12-13.
[36] Ibid, 17.
[37] Ibid, 22.
[38] Ibid, 41.

of existence for a mode of being, is ultimately what is at stake in baedan's critique of Edelman.

The conditions of contemporary capitalism and the state are such that there is a zero-sum game

of annihilation: either the populations that the state and capital suppress must be eliminated or

those systems must be extinguished. This claim is animated by baedan's critique of the Occupy

movement in which they claim that Occupy is a lesson in "prefigurative politics" which invests

its energy and faith into the hope that if we do the hard work now, our efforts will be redeemed

in a future society."[39] This is the deadlock that prevents us from considering the full speculative

potential of a world liberated from the weight of a messianic moment in which the now flips over

into the liberatory then. For baedan, the work is such that the most valuable thing you can do is

produce a void. The vague shapes of potential life in that void are unknowable, but they are

certainly different than what we have now.

There have been many critiques of this mode of thinking about the project of difference

and how it conceives of new modes of being, but one is that especially pertinent to this

discussion is José Esteban Muñoz's response to the pessimistic turn on queer theory. In the samel

PMLA discussion that I quoted from previously, Muñoz critiques Edelman's negativity as

fundamentally being concerned with a presentism that does not take into account the actual

functioning of queerness: "I respond to the assertion that there is no future for the queer," he

writes, "by arguing that queerness is primarily about futurity. Queerness is always on the

horizon. Indeed, for queerness to have any value whatsoever, it must be considered visible only

on the horizon."[40] He charges the pessimistic queer theorists with being unable to see futurity at

all, and defends the reparative reading strategy over accepting the mire of the contemporary

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[39] Ibid, 52.

[40] José Esteban Muñoz, "Thinking Beyond Antirelationality and Antiutopianism in Queer Critique." *PMLA* 121.3 (2006), 825.

before finally charging scholars like Edelman with having "failures of imagination in queer critique."[41] To put the criticism another way, Muñoz is claiming that Edelman's queer politics has him mired in the current world, a world of "would," when the reality is that queerness inhabits a world to come, a "should." This is what allows Muñoz to position both Edelman's, and by association baedan's, positions as failure of imagination. And, politically, this makes sense, because the idealism of utopia is precisely the work of imagining and demanding a world to come.[42] But what I am interested in pursuing through the Edelman and baedan line of thought it precisely the way that they think the time to come and yet reject futurity. What Sheldon calls the contingency of the earth will keep roiling on, and what the queer pessimists are invested in is a way of considering that the material conditions of moments beyond this exact one are going to be different. They can either be different in the same in the mode of bleakness or post-apocalypse, where the same elements are shuffled around in via reproductive futurism and an attempt to wrangle the future, or they could be radically different due to people refusing to reproduce any part of the now. We will return to this claim at the end of this section.

These thinkers of the negativity of queerness are in alignment with Frank Wilderson III's arguments about the necessity of the destruction of the very conditions of contemporary life, although the approach of critique is different for Wilderson. In his *Red, White, and Black*, Wilderson centers his argument on the fundamental claim that black people and blackness itself is cut off from access to fundamental conceptions of humanity that undergird the liberal order. Demanding that we look to material history and the attending ontological aporia produced

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[41] Ibid, 825.

[42] This intersects in interesting ways with my own claims about bleakness, and I would suggest that queer utopianism is bleak in its recognition of an eternal deferment of queerness. It is possible to enjoy bleakness, or at least prefer it over something else, as *Only Lovers Left Alive* so clearly demonstrates.

around blackness, Wilderson writes that this cannot be approached analogically or by means of metaphor: "The ruse of analogy erroneously locates Blacks in the world—a place where they have not been since the dawning of Blackness. This attempt to position the Black in the world by way of analogy is not only a mystification, and often erasure of Blackness's grammar of suffering . . . but simultaneously also a provision for civil society, promising an enabling modality of Human ethical dilemmas."[43] By drawing a strong analytical line between Human (a subject that can be thought to be "alive" in the world) and Black (who is denied subjectivity, ontology, and is considered already-dead in a political sense), Wilderson explosively draws our attention to the philosophical inequality between these categories. Crucially, this is not a divide that can be bridged through progressive politics. Rather, this ontological division is exploited as a condition under which contemporary political and aesthetic life reproduces itself; the transformation of former Africans into colonized peoples and slaves is both foundational and recurrent, a trip wire triggering all the time. As Wilderson writes in a purposefully shocking way: "Jews went into Auschwitz and came out as Jews. Africans went into the ships and came out as Blacks. The former is a Human holocaust; the latter is a Human *and* metaphysical holocaust."[44] This is to say that the structural *antagonism* that underwrites the relationship between the (implicitly white) Human and the ontologically negated Black is one that cannot be recovered from, "made right," or sublimated beneath other political moves. It is the skeleton, the infrastructure, of civil society.

My intellectual investment in Fred Moten's work in the previous chapter means that I also need to attend to how Moten, in his mode of understanding continuity and continuance

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[43] Frank Wilderson III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 37.
[44] Ibid, 38.

within contemporary understandings of blackness, interfaces with Afropessimism. Moten reconfigures Wilderson slightly via an image of "a bridge between blackness and antiblackness" that that simultaneously serves as a bridge between Wilderson's categories of the Black being and the Human.[45] While Moten fundamentally grants that much of Wilderson's analysis is correct when it comes to blackness and the conditions of civil society, he also politely disagrees and dismisses the uncompromising nature of Wilderson's arguments about the possibility of life as a Slave. "The truth of the formulation that the black cannot *be* among or in relation to his or her own is given in terminological failure," Moten writes, by which he agrees that the conditions of ontology itself becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy of human potential.[46] "What's at stake," he continues, "is how to improvise the declension from what is perceived as a failure to be together to the unmappable zone of paraontological consent."[47] Orienting the discussion around "stakes" is important for Moten as it allows the discussion of Afropessimism to be turned into a kind of philosophical version of "what is to be done?" This is a question that Wilderson is unwilling to answer, partially at least because his pessimism fully extends to a belief that there is nothing *to* be done within the contemporary social that can, in Moten's words, positively solve the "ongoing drama of force and entry" that is "the interplay of blackness and nothingness."[48] From a methodological perspective, Moten addresses afropessimism with one of his few citations to Deleuze, whose elaboration of the fold in his *Foucault* becomes one of the ways that Moten negotiates the relation between the inside and the outside when it comes to Wilderson's arguments about the hold of the slave ship.[49] While Moten's navigation of the Afropessimism

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[45] Fred Moten, *The Universal Machine* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 204.
[46] Ibid, 208.
[47] Ibid, 208.
[48] Ibid, 208.
[49] Ibid, 210.

question takes many argumentative turns, the answer to "what is to be done?" is at least partially

found in a Deleuzian ground where living "among one's own in dispossession, to live among the

ones who cannot own, the ones who have nothing and who, in having nothing, have everything"

is something necessary that demands the "rigor of a disbelief in social death."[50] Moten orients

this rigor within the context of black optimism: "If pessimism allows us to discern that we are

nothing, then optimism is the condition of possibility of the study of nothing as well as what

derives from that study. We are the ones who engage in and derive from that study: blackness as

black study as black radicalism."[51] While Moten's language and set of equivalencies is

evocative, it also elides some of the argumentative extensions that are happening here. Moten is

fundamentally arguing for optimism as *added value*, as a kind of *more productive analytic*, while

purposefully ignoring that, for Wilderson at least, the idea that civil society can continue to be

productive while resting on fundamental antagonisms is, in fact, the problem. It seems to be no

mistake that Deleuze, the thinker of continuance above all else, is given as an agent who serves

to verify the necessity of response, movement, and sociality against Wilderson's stalwart militant

demand that we question the modes of social reproduction that allow for the world to continue on

the way it is. Moten's accommodating stance toward life and his optimism that there are possible

reconfigurations that, through thought, might work to describe black sociality. While both

Wilderson and Moten generally understand themselves to be in agreement with each other about

the core arguments in the "debate" between Afropessimism and black optimism, what I am

interested in is the quality and the grounding of that agreement. Moten describes the two

positions as asymptotic, and is willing to let the interrelation between the two positions be settled

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[50] Ibid, 212.
[51] Ibid, 230.

by a "nonmeeting" that is "part of a manic depressive episode called black radicalism/black social life" and which is "a minor internal conflict."[52] And while Moten's genial encounter with Afropessimism is characterized by the productivity of that meeting, it is worth noting that he ultimately characterizes that meeting of one in which black study, "a black way of living together in the world," is ultimately produced.[53] The reason that Moten is so unparalleled in his ability to analyze continuance under what I am calling post-apocalypse is precisely why he is unable to provide us with a proper way of understanding disconnect, the eradication of the trace, and the actual destruction of the ground of history and meaning that annihilation asks us to contemplate. Moten seems to provide infinite "preparation for the radical overturning of the ground that we are under," but not many ways of conceiving of the ends of things and the destruction of that world.[54]

The anti-social thesis in queer studies (or queer pessimism) and Afropessimism are two radically different paradigms, and there is a wide diversity of the approaches that scholars and activists take toward those paradigms within those broad structures.[55] One place that these discourses overlap is in the scholarship of Calvin Warren, whose *Ontological Terror* opens with an anecdote about an event where Warren felt it was his "nihilistic responsibility" to inform the audience that "there was no solution to the problem of antiblackness; it will continue without end, as long as the world exists."[56] The responses to this statement were affectively charged, and

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[52] Ibid, 234.
[53] Ibid, 235.
[54] Ibid, 235.
[55] A place to see these connecting strands is also in trans studies. See Riley Snorton, *Black On Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota Press, 2017).
[56] Calvin Warren, *Ontological Terror: Blackness, Nihilism, and Emancipation* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 3.

led Warren to the conclusion that these arguments about the ungrounded nature of blackness produce terror.[57] The work of *Ontological Terror* is of extreme and committed nihilism, and Warren systematically moves through the canon of metaphysics to demonstrate at every turn that there is both no potential for hope and no reason to think that there will ever be any. In an article that takes up the antiqueer, antiblack murder of Steen Keith Fenrich as its primary case study, Warren parses out the contested ontological logics that stand behind that murder: on one hand, blackness is fundamentally outside of the human; on the other, Fenrich's skull was identified as "gay," part of the order of humanism, by his murderer. Warren notes that this places us at an ontological impasse: "We lack a procedure to theorize this fracturing outside humanism."[58] Without delving deeply into this argument, the extremity of the reality that Afropessimism and queer negativity demonstrates an impasse that the contemporary period literally cannot think its way through or out of. It doesn't even have the capacity to do so. Each takes a particular material and subjectivized position as their focus, but at the same time both are animated by a particular form of attention to the structure of civil society or the social in abstract.[59] There is a difference between these theories and the apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic conceptions of the world that we looked to in the previous chapter, and we must be careful to attend to those differences. In those media objects and in the philosophies and the theory that subtended them, there existed an

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[57] Warren, *Ontological Terror*, 4.

[58] Calvin Warren, "Onticide: Afro-pessimism, Gay Nigger #1, and Surplus Violence," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 23, no. 3 (2017): 401.

[59] I cannot help but note that the method that gets these scholars to their point of agreement is Lacanian psychoanalysis. While their attachments are obvious and psychoanalysis does do much to explain the relationship between subjects and their material conditions, my partial reconstruction here (and baedan's reading of Edelman as well), should suggest that while psychoanalysis was productive for these thinkers to get here, it is clearly systemically isomorphic to the interior workings of assemblage theory. At best, psychoanalysis describes something *inside* the larger, more encompassing assemblage theory.

assumption about the world to come. The movement from religious to secular post-apocalyptic

conceptions maintained similar assumptions about the structure of the pre- and post- worlds, and

the existence of those assumptions and their attending philosophical justifications. This was what

I traced in the previous chapter. As I have claimed already in this chapter, what sets annihilation

apart as an aesthetic category is that it cannot conceive of a world after the catastrophe; it is the

fulfillment of Meillassoux's facticity, a void where we can speculate about the world but not

empirically know it. What queer pessimism and afropessism argue is that annihilation is

immanent to the social itself within the context of liberalism. Those who are excluded from the

social order are being *ontologically annihilated*. In the case of Edelman or baedan, that

ontological condition is met with grim acceptance and then identification, which is productive in

the sense that it produces a *jouissance* that dwells in that annihilation. Wilderson makes a similar

point in relation to blackness, and an appropriate index of these theories is perhaps the difference

in their belief about how much one can identify with that annihilative existence.

Annihilation Theory, Returning

Claire Colebrook's work in her two volumes of *Essays on Extinction* helps to put these

claims into a context that is not only a general statement about the material conditions out of

which the social emerge but also about the way that humans conceive of their finitude. In

previous chapters, I have discussed aesthetic categories that dwell on human finitude in ways

that conceive of death but an unending structural experience for the species (bleakness) and a

revolutionary moment that imagines only partial survival of humans and therefore specific

ideologies (post-apocalypse). As an aesthetic category, annihilation mediates both individual and

species finitude by putting it in conversation with speculation about that which is beyond (or

after) finitude. Claire Colebrook's contribution to this discussion is critical because she helps us

make sense of the moment in which a structural position in society that is founded on ontological divestment (blackness) or always-partial participation (queerness) is part of a larger system of speculation about a condition in which existence is inaccessible. In other words, if for Wilderson blackness is being denied Being, then Colebrook asks us to speculate about conditions under which all of Being is denied the same: extinction. Colebrook writes in *Death of the Posthuman*:

> "If we think of the experimental passage to extinction as *thought*—if we imagine thinking as a variation that takes place *from function* but essentially risks all function—then thinking of life as mindful requires thinking of mind as intrinsically destructive. Thought occurs when relations between terms are destructive, when there is a *not* knowing or misprision."[60]

Later:

> "If extinction is thought experiment, it is because the process of extinction is a variation without a given end determined in advance; thinking possesses an annihilating power."[61]

In Colebrook's estimation, our ability to think a certain shape of the world that contains our absence is one of the profound capabilities of the mind. Our ability to speculate about our own annihilation, our ability to think the lack of our thought, is notable. As Wilderson shows us, however, there's an inequality between existence, the condition of blackness in civil society, and nonexistence. To put it another way, what Colebook outlines as an interesting power of the mind is, in fact, the condition of many people who passed through the slave ships and their attending systems of violence and ontological divestment. I don't bring these two perspectives into

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[60] Claire Colebrook, *Death of the Posthuman: Essays on Extinction, Vol. 1* (Ann Arbor: Open Humanities Press, 2014), 27.
[61] Ibid, 27.

discussion in order to produce a contest between them, but rather simple to say that there are

different modes of grasping the void of existence, the speculative capacity beyond the given, and

that the immanence of that void is not just mental but also material.

Colebrook masterfully demonstrates the value of this mode of speculation when

discussing the double valences of the broad position of speculative realism and the ways that the

loose paradigm "seem[s] both to resonate and jar with broader cultural imperatives."[62] "On one

hand," she explains, "there is an efflorescence of cultural production that imagines a world

without humans, beyond human viewing . . . and on the other, and often from within philosophy

or 'theory after theory,' there is a retrieval of the world only as it appears and only insofar as it is

a lived world *for* some being."[63] What Colebrook means by this latter claim is that there is a

broad cultural move within the academy to privilege the grounded and specific experience of

individuals that, ironically, stand in for the universalizable and abstract experiences of an entire

group of people in order to stand forth with a *theory* about those experiences. Crucially, the

power of Edelman and Wilderson's diagnoses of contemporary life is that they are willing to, in

different theoretical language, place the personal within an explicit structural context that limits

how much explanatory power an individual's experience of the world can have about that world.

The tension that emerges from such claims are, of course, reversible or interpretable, and Fred

Moten's own critique and thinking-through of Afropessimism begins by fundamentally

challenging the relation between individuals, communities, shared racial experience, and

structures of relation and management that all of those travel through.[64] These criticisms are

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[62] Ibid, 30-31.
[63] Ibid, 31.
[64] Fred Moten, *The Universal* Machine,194.

worth considering, but they also from what Wilderson might call a phenomenological perspective; they leverage lived experience, and Wilderson just doesn't see life as livable.

To return to "Need You Now" briefly, we can see that there's a way of understanding the loose characters who are annihilated from the music video as being not unique but rather *wholly common*. As we have seen in the pessimistic philosophies we have worked through here, annihilation is immanent to existence. The uniqueness of "Need You Now" is that we're seeing a white man engaged in some kind of heterosexual romance who is being annihilated. This makes that annihilation *visible* within the contemporary mass media framework, but it does not make it *special*.

From the perspective of assemblage theory, annihilation isn't something that happens. Within the Deleuzian and DeLandan understanding of assemblage theory, a certain assemblage might fully deterritorialize, might fully be reduced to its component parts without anything to hold it together, but it is not annihilated. It simply no longer holds its shape, and the flux of matter in the universe keeps on kicking the can of possible formations down the road. Stones become pebbles then silt then sediment and then rocks, and the vagaries of the material world proceed forever, nothing eliminated, everything saved. But this is also a problem, something that Jacques Derrida approached as the remainder or the cinder.[65] It is a problem because it means that there's never a true end for a set of objects or potential relations; the living hells of the plantation or the camp are as immanent to the material world as the utopian society, and the direction that those materials take is the result of yet more extrinsic qualities of materials in the world. When we talk about annihilation as an aesthetic category, we are talking about a

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[65] See the previous discussion of Jacques Derrida's *Cinders*.

paradoxical diagram that sets up the conditions for its own abolition. It is a self-negating, self-destructive mechanism that orders the material world around itself. It is a game that destroys its own rules as you play it, or a virus that eats through host cells faster than it can reproduce. There might be a remainder, but it is not a remainder through which the diagram itself can be reconstituted. In the diegesis of "Need You Now," these narrative fragments displaced through overlapping timelines are destroyed for us on-screen, creating conditions under which other versions of the character might thrive and live their lives. We don't have access to the annihilated characters, but it should be clear that "Need You Now" does not approach the aesthetic category of annihilation in its fullness. It is, at best, *narratively* annihilative, which does not produce the kind of absolute abolition of the diagram that the diagram itself is capable of.

A media object that does approach the diagram of annihilation in its fullness is Zack Gage's *Lose/Lose*.[66] The conceit of the downloadable PC game is that you are playing a fundamentally destructive version of the classic video game *Space Invaders*. You pilot a small ship at the bottom of the screen, and small, pixelated creatures scroll down the screen toward you. The player has the option to shoot at these creatures. Doing so makes the player's score increase. The difference between *Lose/Lose* and *Space Invaders*, though, is that every creature in the former represents a file in the computer that the game is running on. The act of winning the game and going forward is also a process of destroying the very software substrate that allows the game to run. The files are not only crucial system files. They are also photos, music, or anything else stored in the hard drive that the game is accessing. To proceed through the game

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[66] Zach Gage, "Lose/Lose," http://www.stfj.net/art/2009/loselose/

along linear time, to *win*, is to annihilate the capability for the game to run and the context in which it exists.

In the previous discussions of assemblage theory over the course of this dissertation, I have focused on the tyranny of continuance that attends *conatus* and the continual evolution, and revolution, of forms of organization. Some of those things are human lives, some are human societies, others are ideologies, and all of these are diagrams of some sort. The actualized material of the world and the attending virtual arrangements of that material are being parsed, ordered, and organized by diagrams that are themselves always shifting in time. As I have said many times already, this presents a problem for endings because the end never seems to come. There might be an end for a particular subject, but our ability to speculate in the pedestrian sense (we can think about the future after we are dead) and our ability to speculate in the philosophical sense (we can comprehend an inhuman world that is conceptually accessible to humans but not phenomenologically) both mean that assemblage theory has a unique problem in figuring ends. After all, the radical contingency of matter roiled before humans and will continue to do so after we are an extinct species. Within assemblage theory, finitude is figured as human finitude only, and it becomes exceedingly difficult to discuss the *death* of diagrams or the true *end* of aesthetic categories simply because the method's attending metaphysics demands that there not be deaths or endings for the modes of organization that keep all of material reality working. And yet I hold out for annihilation as a category because clearly humans generate media works that are mediating our concern with the horizon of individual and species death. *Lose/Lose* dissolves information into *nothing*, and it's a nothing from which we cannot recoup information, context, or memory. The file deletion is final, and it is so extensive as to create vulnerabilities and collapses in the system that it is hosted by. By taking *Lose/Lose*'s experience in which you play

the void into our encounters with other media objects, we might discover a throughline between the pessimisms we have already seen and the metaphysical optimism of the assemblage theory framework. We're looking for a brick wall.

Assemblage theory has a problem with endings because of the perspective it takes on the material world. While this is perhaps apparent so far through this dissertation, it is perhaps valuable to see what actual Deleuzian and assemblage theory scholars have said when it comes to finality. Rosi Braidotti's longform discussion of death in her *Transpositions* is probably the closest to a "standard" reading of assemblages and the relationship to death, and it is worth noting how the argument is scaffolded here in order to discuss other moves that have been made to address, circumvent, or think beyond it.

Braidotti identifies Deleuzian assemblage theory in relationship to two other 20th century paradigms for understanding the human relationship to finitude. One is Martin Heidegger's being-toward-death, and the other is Sigmund Freud's death drive. The former, she argues, "sacralizes death as the defining feature of human consciousness" due to Heidegger's elevation of the horizon of human life as the all-consuming concern of individual humans.[67] The latter fails simply because it is tied to a project of psychoanalysis that is attached too preciously to the ego and its concerns with its own finitude.[68] To put it bluntly, Braidotti sees both of these systems misunderstanding the reality of the position of the human in the world, and charges both with not thoroughly thinking through the "new alliance of physics and biology. . . which rests on and reasserts the positive logic of difference through repeated patterns of becoming."[69] She also

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[67] Rosi Braidotti, *Transpositions: On Nomadic Ethics* (Malden: Polity Press, 2006), 210.
[68] See Braidotti, *Transpositions*, 240-247 for the full, extensive argument made against Freudianism.
[69] Ibid, 246.

leverages this as a way of usurping Heideggarianism, writing that "Deleuze turns this also into a critique of the whole Heideggarian legacy that places mortality at the centre of philosophical speculation. Only the arrogance of self-consciousness desperately seeking power and recognition could invest the individual self with such exorbitant and megalomaniac powers of control."[70] Against this Heideggarian philosophical individualism, Braidotti claims that the assemblage thinking of Deleuze sets us up for thinking through death and endings as merely a singular point in a vast roiling sea of constant change. In the framework of assemblages,

> "death is not the teleological destination of life, a sort of ontological magnet that propels us forward: death is rather behind us. Death is the event that has always already taken place at the level of consciousness. As an individual occurrence it will come in the form of the physical extinction of the body, but as event, in the sense of the awareness of finitude, of the interrupted flow of my being-there, death has already taken place. We are all synchronized with death—death is the same thing as the time of our living, in so far as we all live on borrowed time. The time of death as event is the impersonal ever-present aion, not the individualized chronos. It is the time span of death in time itself, the totality of time."[71]

Later in the same section Braidotti sums up the position succinctly: "One has to work [at life]. Life is passing and we do not own it, we just inhabit it, as a time-share location."[72] While her claim here is certainly more rhetorical than metaphorical, we can imagine an elaboration of Deleuzian life as a time-share that functions as a critique of the theory: it's a bad investment, it

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[70] Ibid, 247.
[71] Ibid, 210-211.
[72] Ibid, 211.

doesn't understand the actual lack of power that life has in the face of the real estate agent we call the void, and it's never quite what you wanted it to be. The Deleuzian model of death sees life-as-*conatus* as a valorized, impersonal force that constantly shoots through a cosmos in which time is meaningless and a single life is merely a cluster of affects and materials at a particular intersection of forces. For Braidotti, this is a liberating realization that affords a "creative conflagration" in the form of a "leap of faith in the world" build on a "friendship with impersonal death."[73] Her reading of Deleuzian assemblage theory produces, to borrow a little from Nietzsche, an eternal churn of possibility. It is that eternal churn that has grounded my analysis of the aesthetic categories of bleakness and post-apocalypse, and the media objects that I worked through in those chapters indexes a particular relationship to that churning feeling. Contra Braidotti and Deleuze, I feel that contemporary media objects are right at home with "impersonal death," and it's the realization that *things will continue impersonally* that grounds the despairing bleakness and stalwart post-apocalyptic stances in media objects that reflect on forms of human finitude.

If Braidotti is indicative of a certain Deleuzian attitude toward death, then it is perhaps helpful to look to Deleuze's on writing on the limits of assemblage theory and what that theory has to say about the possibility of noncontinuance. Braidotti cites Deleuze on "the crack," which "designates the generative emptiness of Death, as part of *zoe* and the swarming possibilities it expresses," which again makes clear the stakes of death in Deleuze for Braidotti.[74] Honing in on an interview with Claire Parnet collected in *Negotiations*, Braidotti pays close attention to the

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[73] Ibid, 262.
[74] Ibid, 214.

way that Deleuze attends to the death of his friend Michel Foucault.[75] In this short discussion, Deleuze celebrates Foucault's analysis of medical conceptions of death in *The Birth of the Clinic*, remarking that death in that conception is "violent, plural, and coextensive with life" and that leads Deleuze to suggest that Foucault's own death is an understanding of that mode of death put into practice.[76] "Beyond knowledge and power," he says, "there's a third side, the third element of the 'system'... an acceleration, one might almost say, that makes it impossible to distinguish death and suicide."[77] This is a cryptic statement, but it is also one that seems to give the best context to the way that Deleuze understood death as a thinkable event. Rather than the complete horizon line of the human, it is merely a trajectory upon which things tend in relation to a singularity; for Deleuze, death is a particular kind of biological diagram in which intentionality or stance is utterly moot. Unlike the psychoanalytic or Heideggarian paradigms, death does not form the core concern of human experience. Instead, it's an event that humans interact with intensively and extensively like they would a bicycle or a volcanic eruption.

Of course, it is difficult to read Deleuze's remark on Foucault's death and not consider that Deleuze himself threw himself from his balcony on November 4, 1995. In André Pierre Colombat's analysis of that event through the thought of Deleuze and Maurice Blanchot, he writes that Deleuze's understanding of death that I have reconstructed above has a double

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[75] A bibliographic note: Braidotti quotes several passages that appear to be self-translated into English from *Pourparlers*, which was translated into English by Martin Joughin as *Negotiations*. Not only can I not identify these passages in the English versions of the essay, but the content of those passages, including Deleuze's discussion of Bousquet and Lowry (as well as his own alcoholism) fail to appear in the English translation. I cannot account for this discrepancy between versions, and have not been able to consult the French to verify Braidotti's translation.
[76] Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations 1972-1990*. Trans. Martin Joughin. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 111.
[77] Ibid, 111.

valence.[78] One form of death is the death of the I, the personal death; the other form of death is

"always ahead of me" and is "the extreme form of my power to become other or something

else."[79] Whatever it is that makes the individual up is caught up the material churn that goes on

forever, "that which will never end, the virtual that never gets accomplished, the unending and

unceasing in which 'I' lose the power to die because through it 'we' . . . are dying."[80] For

Colombat, much like Braidotti, the anti-negative vitalism of Deleuze and the assemblage theory

that emerges from him means that death is not just a dissolution of the self but a positive

development, a kind of charitable giving and event that causes ripples intensity to distribute

themselves through the social. Consider Deleuze's suicide asks us to consider the assemblage

form of death that does not emerge from *inside* the human as a kind of universal negating force

that eliminates the I, which Colombat argues is a "degrading idea created by the priest, the

Hegelian philosopher, and the psychoanalyst," but instead as a moment where the human is

fundamentally "opened to the outside, on new becomings and metamorphoses."[81] I am not

recounting these various threads of Deleuzian celebrations of death simply to do so, but rather I

am trying to demonstrate that Deleuzian and his theoretical heirs really do prevent us from

considering death as a finality. To have *fidelity* to Deleuzian concepts is to, in a very practical

way, dispense first with our normative models of death. Taken holistically, this could even be

said to be *the core* of a practical application of assemblage theory. If one tries to hold onto

traditional death, one fundamentally cannot access the significant contributions that assemblage

theory makes to our understanding of the world around us.

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[78] André Pierre Colombat, "November 4, 1995: Deleuze's Death As An Event." *Man and World* 29 (1996), 241.
[79] Ibid, 241.
[80] Ibid, 241.
[81] Ibid, 245.

As a brief aside and as footing for a later argument, it is when Deleuze is speaking more informally and "traditionally" about death that he both holds onto his particular productive frame and alters it slightly. Discussing André Malraux's claim that "[art] is the only thing that resists death," Deleuze invokes "a statuette from three thousand years before the Common Era" as proof.[82] While Deleuze doesn't explain, taken in the context of his other statements about death, Deleuze seems to be suggesting here that what is powerful about art's ability to withstand death is its ability to be both virtual and materially present. Unlike the human that actualizes a particular set of immaterial transformations in the world upon the instant of death, the work of art that maintains itself against that dissolution can cause those same transformations over and over and over again, constantly actualizing particular forms of the virtual when encountered again by humans through time. This is a powerful claim, and one we will return to shortly.

In Manuel DeLanda's version of assemblage theory (which I have referenced throughout this dissertation), the problem of ending is mostly avoided, which is why I deferred back to the Deleuzian source code as a way of addressing it here. In *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History*, for example, DeLanda ends with a reference to the famous sand on the beach passage that completes Foucault's *The Order of Things*, writing that the wider assemblage view of reality (as opposed to anthropocentric models of history and society) "invoke[s] the 'death of man,' it is only the death of the 'man' of the old 'manifest destinies,' not the death of humanity and its potential for destratification."[83] While this is an implicit reference, it is also a claim that necessarily defends the argumentative groundwork of the way that Deleuze conceives of death

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[82] Gilles Deleuze, *Two Regimes Of Madness: Texts and Interviews 1975-1995*. Ed. David Lapoujade. Trans. Ames Hodges and Mike Taormina. (New York, NY: Semiotext(e), 2006), 328.

[83] Manuel DeLanda, *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History* (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 274.

that I outlined above. However, DeLanda is much more willing to discuss the end points of specific assemblages. In his discussion of the pidgin language Sabir, a Mediterranean trade language that developed during the Middle Ages and existed into the early 20th century. The origins of the language are obscure and it might have been a cluster of pidgins instead of a single distinct one. DeLanda writes that "most pidgins emerge and disappear as the short-lived contact situations that give rise to them come to an end" but that they also "endure wherever contact between alien cultures has been institutionalized" in locations such as "slave trading posts and on sugar plantations."[84] DeLanda goes on to argue about the role of language in a material situation that rests on institutional unequal access to power, including the formation of the official language of the city state, but that analysis does not extend to what happens to languages that are extinguished or annihilated. Referencing Deleuze & Guattari's arguments about major and minor languages, DeLanda presents us with an assemblage of language competition in the Mediterranean region during the early modern period, but unlike Deleuze's statue, we don't have a sense that the preserved-yet-dead languages of this period have any particular power to actualize the virtual if suddenly discovered tomorrow by a public that cannot access them. Unreadable, unspeakable, frozen in time without access; the truly dead language might give us purchase on annihilation within assemblage theory.

In a general sense, DeLanda's reconstruction of assemblage theory is more open to a discussion of ending simply because DeLanda is concerned with actual historical phenomena. While Deleuze often evokes an ever-present now of experience and affects, DeLanda's deep attention to historical circumstances provides a foothold for thinking through media objects that want to speculate not only about the death of an individual but the death of material reality itself.

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[84] Ibid, 196-197.

After all, DeLanda will defend the ability for materialist realism as an analytic that can take a tornado and "explain how it is born, how it lives, and how it dies."[85] With the overwhelming resilience of Deleuzian assemblage theory laid out, and the hints in its DeLandan form that we might be able to think *through* it, we can now turn to a combined philosophical perspective of realist materialism and speculative materialism that could provide an escape hatch from the eternal churn of material reality.

Ray Brassier's *Nihil Unbound*, which looks to speculative philosophy as an escape hatch of sorts from the progression of material reality, is in deep conversation with some of the philosophical sources that I have already mentioned. Much like Derrida and then Moten following him, Brassier is after a particular mode of Enlightenment thinking that works through philosophy to look to the places beyond where philosophy has traditionally stopped.[86] By taking up some of the core arguments from Meillassoux that are critical of correlation, Brassier embraces ancestrality (or the claim that certain arche-fossils such as radioactive isotopes produce claims about the world before and after the emergence of life) and the already-discussed argument of facticity. Summarizing Meillassoux's defense of speculative materialism, Brassier writes that "speculative materialism asserts that, in order to maintain our ignorance of the necessity of correlation, we have to know that its contingency is necessary."[87] This fundamentally upends much discussion of metaphysics as we understand them in a post-Kantian framework, and provides a challenge for the Deleuzian and DeLandan frameworks that I have presented so far. As Brassier notes, if we take Meillassoux's argument to its logical end, when

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[85] DeLanda, *Philosophy and Simulation*, 12.
[86] Brassier writes that "the principle task of contemporary philosophy is to draw out the ultimate speculative implications of the logic of Enlightenment." Ray Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, 25.
[87] Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, 67.

end up with an understanding of the absolute as "the fact that everything is necessarily contingent or 'without-reason.'"[88] The effect of this claim is that metaphysical claims about either process or fixity are placed above a fundamental void from which nothing can be saved.

If we use this as a lever on assemblage theory, we have to accept two premises: one is that the virtual-diagram-actual process that operates the material of the world *does* produce things according to the logic that Deleuze, DeLanda, and others have articulated. The other is that there are no givens, no guarantees of process or becoming in the actual logic of the conditions of the universe. As Brassier artfully critiques Deleuzianism, "to affirm the metaphysical primacy of becoming is to claim that it is impossible for things not to change; impossible for things to stay the same; and ergo to claim that it is necessary for things to keep changing."[89] Whatever position one takes on metaphysical necessity, whether it be "perpetual flux or permanent fixity," is impossible when pushed up against facticity or the contingency of contingency itself.[90] Brassier makes clear, without reservation, that taking a true measure of the universe means evacuating any thought of actual givens. Within Meillassoux's framework, the predictable processes revealed by science, metaphysics, and combinations of each must fundamentally reconcile themselves with the hyper-chaos of absolute time in which, the "order of disorder or the constancy of inconstancy."[91] For Brassier and Meillassoux, the fact is that "absolute contingency" is the "only certainty."[92] When Brassier takes this argument to Deleuze's

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[88] Ibid, 67.
[89] Ibid, 68.
[90] Ibid, 68.
[91] Ibid, 68.
[92] Ibid, 69.

work specifically, he is mostly concerned with the work in *Difference and Repetition* that I addressed in the first chapter of this dissertation.

By engaging in an extensive critique of Deleuze account of individuation in the univocity of being, Brassier writes of what I have been discussing under the term of diagram through this dissertation. Reading *Difference and Repetition*, Brassier argues that "individuation is a dynamic process characterized by a positive feedback loop" that operates between "an intensive individual and the pre-individual singularity borne of Ideas."[93] To speak across Deleuze's work as I've tried to do throughout this dissertation, this is simply a way of discussing the process of creating an assemblage (an individual) from a diagram (the positive feedback loop) that emerges on the border of Ideas (the virtual). What Brassier is invested in here is similar to my own interest, which is to say that he wants to interrogate where that positive feedback loop breaks down and *does not* reconstitute into another loop. To investigate this, he looks to Deleuze's own work on death, and comes to a similar position to that of Braidotti and Deleuze himself that I addressed previously in this chapter. Brassier's specificity in this argument matters, though, because he correctly identifies that the process of individuation out of the pre-individual (and a reversal across this boundary) is what disallows true endings in Deleuze. In other words, the very existence of the virtual and its processional flow into the actual hard locks assemblage theory's ability to deal with death-as-stoppage. "For Deleuze," Brassier explains, the "pre-individual realm remains the true locus of individuation that its emergence within the psyche coincides with the latter's maximal individuation."[94] From this philosophical angle, death is an affirmation of life and the will, a return to the grey goo of flux and pre-individualism that will go on to assert

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[93] Ibid, 171.
[94] Ibid, 185.

itself in the creation of conditions for the future.[95] While Brassier is interesting in dismantling the

Deleuzian paradigm to extinguish vitalism's attachment to the nearly-numinous life force, I am

similarly interested in considering this critique because I am interested in modes of escape from

it. As Brassier summarizes, Deleuze is committed to a paradigm in which "time makes a

difference that cannot be erased," and thinking through annihilation demands that we consider

the possible conditions under which a media object can not only *think* the erasure of the past but

can *enact* an intervention in the human consideration of finitude that enacts that erasure.[96]

     A strange loop, then, has returned us to *Melancholia* and Peter Szendy's elision between

vision, the self, and the world. As I noted in my initial analysis of this position, Szendy's

argument that the eradication of visuality and the context of the subject within the field of being

seems on-face incorrect because a viewer who is sitting and watching a screen is not, in fact,

being destroyed or killed or losing any actual ground in their material access to the world. It is

not even a sufficient thought experiment. That said, Szendy is correct to follow Meillassoux

down the rabbit hole of speculative philosophy, and it is where that speculation touches both

philosophical realism and Brassier's conception of extinction that we can see an enlivened

debate about annihilation itself. If Brassier is correct in his argument about how we must

consider extinction as the ultimate consideration of the world without humans, then looking to

how extinction fuses with the anti-social thesis in queer studies and Afropessimism. That fusing

is the aesthetic category of annihilation.

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[95] "Ultimately, the caesura of thinking, the fracture of time, the affirmation of recurrence, and the experience of death through which the psychic individual becomes re-implicated in individualization, all point towards a fundamental ontological conversion where consciousness frees itself from the strictures of representation to become the catalyst for the eternal repetition of difference-in-itself." Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, 186.

[96] Ibid, 203.

The media objects that I have discussed so far in the chapter have largely been partial explorations of what the aesthetic category of annihilation purports to *do*. *Melancholia* gives us a proper image of the true destruction of our planet and a Heideggarian, or even a Kantian, mode of picturing that destruction. Hot Chip's "Need You Now" contextualizes annihilation in both narrative and visual terms, producing and formal structure of annihilation, but it is still unable to embrace the full eradicating power. *Lose/Lose* is perhaps the closest object, since it destroys the platform that it runs on and (eventually) itself, but the interacting person still lives on after the program runs. It is apparent here that what the aesthetic category of annihilation demands is a mode or condition that is so shattering, so disruptive, that the interacting human and the media object itself are removed from existence, extinguished, with no remainder.

The media object that truly fulfills the potential of the diagram of annihilation would be one that, in being created, begins to swallow both itself and all viewing agents up with it. Like a black hole, the very conditions of its existence are dependent on consuming and tearing apart anything that could verify it in a material sense. Metaphysically, it would be something akin to the cursed video tape of *The Ring* (Verbinski, 2002) which guarantees the eradication of everyone who comes into contact with it. Or it could be something like the Parrot, a pattern of visual data from David Langford's short story "BLIT" (1988) that, once fully conceived and represented either through sight or even a good mental image, algorithmically destroys the mind with ruthless efficiency.[97] Crucially, both of these are speculative concepts from within genre fiction—the haunted video tape, the computer program that kills—and they exist amongst a wide range of other fictions that give us diegesis in which annihilation occurs. However, again, these

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[97] David Langford, "BLIT," *infinity plus*. http://www.infinityplus.co.uk/stories/blit.htm

are all *within* media. Like *Melancholia*, they are bounded by the fact that they destroy *something*, but that something is, at best, a mental representation for the viewing party.

If we look to the connection points between the anti-social thesis in queer theory, Afro-pessimism, and Brassier's Meillassouxian argument about extinction, it is possible to see the conditions under which an absolute abolition of all things is possible. It is the destruction of the future, of the hope of recovering from the antagonism of civil society, and, indeed, the absolute eradication of the atoms of the universe that allow for not just human life but matter itself to exist. If assemblage theory, especially its DeLandan form that is so invested in materials science and chemistry, takes on a Realist view of the world, then it has to be able to consider both the thinkability of the end of the universe and the conditions under which that system of thought breaks down. When Brassier writes that "extinction indexes the thought of the absence of thought," he's claiming that facticity, and therefore the possibilty of a world that is not just without us but was never for us and never had us, creates the conditions under which a stoppage is actually possible.[98] For baedan and Wilderson, part of the problem is that the world just keeps moving on and reproducing itself. It will keep doing that after us, and the marks in the material of things will maintain the trace of what came before. In that way, the *future* (for Edelman, baedan, and Sheldon) and *civil society* (for Wilderson) keep materially and socially reproducing themselves. This is why all of these thinkers find both liberal progress and traditional leftist radical rejections to be equally ineffective. Liberalism is about choosing what track the freight train travels down. Extinction requires we imagine a world, wholly real, in which freight trains never were.

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[98] Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, 229-230.

Crucially, this is not a thought experiment. This is not a consideration of an alternate archive or a hyperstitionistic way of approaching the world. For Meillassoux, and therefore for Brassier, the contingency of contingency means that this is wholly immanent in the conditions of material reality. To bend this into the language I have inserted here, the conditions of the annihilation of the phenomenal World and the material one. Brassier writes: "Extinction has a transcendental efficacy precisely insofar as it tokens an annihilation which is neither a possibility towards which actual existence could orient itself, nor a given datum from which future existence could ever proceed."[99] From this point, it is possible to see that the aesthetic category of annihilation, the mode of staging human finitude from the point of view of the absolute extinction of the human and its mode of thought, it always going to be partial. However, it is not partial in a Kantian way (we cannot think it) or a Heideggarian one (we cannot experience it), but rather it is partial because the media object would have to truly communicate the material realism of the void. It would have to thoroughly, through the senses and not merely abstraction, destroy the experiencing agent so thouroughly that it would not be communicable information afterward. Brassier puts it cleanly:

> "It is precisely the extinction of meaning that clears the ways for the intelligibility of extinction. Senselessness and purposeless are not merely privative; they represent a gain in intelligibility. [. . .] But to acknowledge this truth, the subject of philosophy must also recognize that he or she is already dead, and that philosophy is neither a medium of affirmation nor a source of justification, but rather the organon of extinction."[100]

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[99] Ibid, 230.
[100] Ibid, 238-239.

It is possible to read a kind of quietism or an ethical nihilism in these claims by Brassier. If everyone has the condition to be extinct, does a queer relation to the future matter? Does the unavailability of ontology to the Slave matter? One can imagine a Rust Cohle desire of annihilation that dismisses these things are mere phenomena, a blip in the timeline of the universe. From a purely abstract point of view, that's right, but it ignores that annihilation is delivered via a media object. Our finitude is not considered via pure philosophical inquiry in our day to day lives, and so the mode through the politics of our epoch play out against the image of the world without the human is important. For post-apocalypse, I inquired about *what survives*. In the context of annihilation, we must pay attention to *what existed*. And I write this because it is obvious that those who are thinking about practical questions of finitude are members of populations who have been denied full life against the measure of the expansionist principles of European political philosophy in the time since the Middle Ages. When Afro-pessimism digs into the difference between the living and the existing (or the Human and the Slave), it impresses on a reader that there are people who live under the conditions of being already-annihilated. When we talk about extinction, then, it is worth considering with scholars like Wilderson if the political actions available to people of African descent, for example, are significantly different under the conditions of liberalism or within the context of humanity's extinction.

The three aesthetic categories of finitude that I have chosen to address in this dissertation are each a mode of ordering the world that produces a certain relation to expectation of human death. Bleakness works under the assumption that the present material conditions of the world will recreate themselves through to the horizon of time. Post-apocalypse suggests that radical ruptures of the present material conditions of the world will happen, but that *certain pieces* will live on and create a radically reoriented world that is informed by the new and yet tainted by the

old. Annihilation produces aesthetic objects that recognize the horror of the previous two and attempt to demonstrate a transcendence of the assembling and arranging functions of the diagram. These are media objects that attempt to sabotage the runaway train of human life on the planet.

And yet what I have demonstrated here is a paradox. As a species, humans have stepped into the bear trap of continuance. We cannot stop. The mode of *imagining* that stoppage, what we are calling annihilation here, is hopelessly compromised by a double maneuver. On one hand, Meillassoux and Brassier demonstrate that the hyper-chaos of reality means that the conditions under which our reality materially exists contains our own immanent deaths, not in time but rather in a kind of facticial dice roll. At any moment, every electron in the universe could disappear; the conditions of the universe make this an immanent possibility. On the other hand, none of these moments of considering annihilation deliver it simply because it can be *known* but it cannot *be delivered*, experienced, or considered in any way other than the rationalist organon of philosophical entity. Both modes of approaching this question of the end share a critique of the saving grace of the progress of time itself. For Brassier, *all of time is now*, and the linear progression of material reality is a convenient way of mapping phenomena more than it is a philosophically useful system. Wilderson doesn't address the philosophical question of time directly, but arrives at a similar place by claiming that time can never save the Slave, that no alteration within civil society can perform the required work to establish the Slave's ontological status as that of the Human. As he writes in the epilogue to *Red, White & Black*, the very possibility of a reachable status of the Human is predicated on the Slave's existence: "anti-Blackness is the genome of [the] horticultural template of Human renewal."[101] For both of these

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[101] Wilderson, *Red, White & Black,* 337.

thinkers, the idea that the works of today produce the world of tomorrow is a misguided idea. Worse, the very assumption that this is true is productive of a system that actively prevents us from ascertaining the real structures of life.

A media object can dramatize it or do the philosophical work of considering annihilation, but it cannot deliver it to us. Aesthetic categories create dispositions toward their objects, and when it comes to aesthetic categories of different modes of considering finitude, the *consideration* must be taken into account. I am not arguing this to remove myself from a burden of proof or from finding examples, but instead to argue that, in the final calculus, what matters about media objects that work through the diagram of annihilation is that they function as tools that enable that "organon of extinction" rather than representations of a potential time to be. The black screen at the end of *Melancholia* is not giving us an image of the void without the human. It is asking us to do the philosophical work of annihilation. It is a provocation to do philosophical work that does not simply reground us in the churning continuance of life and material reality. We are not meant to dissolve ourselves in the absence of light on the screen. We are meant to think through the implications of already being dead and never having had existence at all. With the knowledge that we can *think* this reality but the caveat that the moment we represent it we betray it. We are left with objects that gesture but do not fulfill.

To put it bluntly, I have come to the same problem that Quentin Meillassoux does in his own book about the practical application case of his own work within the field of science fiction. In his *Science Fiction and Extro-Science Fiction*, Meillassoux argues for an understanding of these two categories of literature as fundamentally different. In his argument, science fiction (SF)

is a projection of the future that diverges from our own reality due to some invention or claim.[102] Whatever that intervention into human history is, it still holds true to a basic axiom: "in the anticipated future it will still be possible to subject the world to a scientific knowledge."[103] Extro-science fiction (XSF) is distinguished from science fiction by virtue of this relationship to empirical reality. He explains:

> "By extro-science worlds we mean worlds where, in principle, experimental science is impossible and not unknown in fact. Extro-science fiction thus defines a particular regime of the imaginary in which structured—or rather destructured—worlds are conceived in such a way that experimental science cannot deploy its theories or constitute its objects within them. The guiding question of extro-science fiction is: what should a world be, what should a world resemble, so that it is in principle inaccessible to a scientific knowledge, so that it cannot be established as the object of a natural science?"[104]

The reason that Meillassoux has for creating this divide is related to his work in *After Finitude*. He claims that we can both break with the correlation *and* still properly speculate, and it seems clear that the mode of fiction that deals most explicitly with speculation should be able to produce work in which facticity could be rendered apparent and clear.[105] While the specifics of this argument are not necessary here, what's important is that Meillassoux sets up a *thinkable*

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[102] This is similar to how Darko Suvin conceives of the novum in his *The Metamorphoses of Science Fiction*.

[103] Quentin Meillassoux, *Science Fiction and Extro-Science Fiction* (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2015), 5.

[104] Ibid, 5-6.

[105] For an analysis of the full relationship between *Science Fiction and Extro-Science Fiction* and *After Finitude*, please see Cameron Kunzelman, "The Click of a Button: Video Games and the Mechanics of Speculation" in *Science Fiction Film & Television* 11, no. 3, 2018.

system that is wholly metaphysically sound but which he has an extremely difficult time of finding examples of. This is not an unexpected outcome. After all, his philosophical inquiry asks us to think a gap that we previously did not consider, and if there were a vast number of works that embraced his conceptual picture of philosophy then there wouldn't be a gap. This is, of course, the position that I find myself in. While I have provided examples in *Melancholia*, "Need You Now," and *Lose/Lose*, the former two are, at best, partial examples that do not fully show how annihilation operates as a diagram. It is an aesthetic category that produces the utter destruction of aesthetics. It is a way of turning the virtual into an actual that obliterates its own ability to actualize things in the process. It is autodestruction and decoherence systematically applied to itself. While we have been able to see diagrams by way of their output assemblages so far, this becomes extremely difficult in this case. As a complete and utter escape from the system itself, we can think it but it is supremely difficult to show it. This is not a problem of abstract theory alone. The reproduction of the social, alongside the reproductions of the *conditions* of that reproduction, is the core problem at the heart of both the anti-social thesis in queer theory and Afropessimism. It is possible to think beyond the social conditions that create the human and slave relation, for example, but producing a representation or an image or a fiction in which the full abolition of the conditions of civil society has been abolished is extremely difficult because those conditions provide the bounds for how we understand all political arrangements, modes of citizenship, rights, and all of the hierarchies of social status that have been erected and maintained in the ongoing conditions of slavery. As Wilderson puts it plainly in an interview from 2015 when asked about life beyond the antagonisms of civil society, "I do believe that there is a way out. But I believe that the way out is a kind of violence so magnificent and so

comprehensive that it scares the hell out of even radical revolutionaries."[106] Later in the same

answer he elevates this beyond political horizons or arrangements and to the level of

"epistemological catastrophe," claiming that "what Black people embody is the potential for a

catastrophe of human arrangements writ large."[107] Wilderson holds out for a position or a way of

existing in the world that is not civil society, by which he means a social arrangement that does

not preclude the humanity of people of African descent, and the conditions of delivery are

dependent on the annihilation of a mode of resurrection and reconvening. In other words, as he

put it in 2010, "it's like the end of the world."[108]

In the final movement of this chapter, I will provide three readings of media objects that

take us as far as the aesthetic category of annihilation can go before it fully decoheres both our

ability to discuss aesthetics and our ability to understand these things as discrete objects.

Objects From Which To Assemble Annihilation

The first is the artist Thijs Rijkers's series of sequential "Suïcide Machines." These are

machines that are designed to destroy themselves in specific mechanical ways. Unlike other

machines that break down as part of a process that outputs string cheese or motor oil in an

industrial production setting, Rijkers's designs break by their very design. They are

autodestructive, and they have no purpose other than to render themselves inoperable. There are

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[106] Frank Wilderson III, "Blacks and the Master/Slave Relation" in *Afro-Pessimism: An Introduction* (Minneapolis: racked & dispatched, 2017), 30.

[107] Ibid, 30.

[108] The full quotation is "I think, I believe that the liberation of Black people is tantamount to moving into an epistemology that we cannot imagine. Once Blacks become incorporated and recognized I don't think we have the language or the concepts to think of what that is. It's not like moving from Capitalism to Communism, it's like the end of the world." Percy Howard, "Frank Wilderson, Wallowing in the Contradictions, Part 2" *A Necessary Angel*. 2010. https://percy3.wordpress.com/2010/07/14/frank-wilderson-wallowing-in-the-contradictions-part-2/

currently three machines in the series: two versions of "Saw," which destroys itself by sawing

through its own motor, and "Sand," which destroys its own machinery with sand.[109] The latter is

particularly interesting, and it is the machine that I will look to here briefly. It is bolted to the

wall and is comprised of three distinct parts. The bulk of the machine is a motor attached to an

external power source via a large white cable. That motor powers the second piece, which is an

exposed gearbox with an attending chain of gears that extend a few inches above the gearbox.

That gearbox is ultimately powering a small apparatus that shakes a small box of coarse

industrial sandblasting sand that is positioned directly above the exposed gears. This means that

every revolution of the motor spills a little more sand directly into the gearbox that allows the

whole apparatus to operate. Every moment that these machines operate takes them further toward

destruction. In drawing some boundaries around the the aesthetic category of annihilation, we

must take seriously the idea that pointing at an ending *without recoupment of value or some kind*

of regeneration is a critical component. Rijkers often discusses these machines in the context of

empathy for the nonhuman by asking the fairly uninteresting question of whether we do or do not

feel pity for these machines. It is worth considering beyond Rijkers's own understanding of the

work to consider what the machines are doing on their own terms: they are operating with

maximum efficiency toward their own complete destruction. In the case of both "Saw" and

"Sand," the machines are actively destabilizing the DeLandan singularities upon which their

extensive qualities rest: the motor. Once the motor is severed from the rest of the apparatus (in

"Sand") or completely destroyed (in "Saw"), what is left is a disparate set of parts that have no

function to one another and no ability to cohere into something else. These machines destroying

themselves is something like an atom decohering; it is isomorphic to the heat death of the

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[109] Thijs Rijkers, "Sand," http://www.thijsrijkers.nl/suicide-machine-sand/

universe in which the constitutive parts of all of the molecules of material reality can no long

hold together. They are operating within an aesthetic category that makes their destruction

thinkable but not recoupable. What Rijkers calls "empathy" we might simply call a saddened

realism.

In a different register, but along similar edges of existence and experience, is Stephen

Best's discussion of annihilation and suicide in his *None Like Us*. The overarching argument of

the book is two-fold: on one hand, Best argues against positions in black studies that map "a

notion of black selfhood that is grounded in a kind of lost black sociality."[110] Best holds the idea

that slavery, the "scene of origin," in suspense in order to assert a claim "that there can be no

'we' in or following from such a time and place, that what 'we' share is the open secret of 'our'

impossibility."[111] This argument holds that whatever black sociality reconvenes from slavery and

its afterlife indexes as much aesthetic and aspirational content as it does archivally, and this

reclaimant mode ultimately reveals that "whatever blackness or black culture is, it cannot be

indexed to a 'we'—or, if it is, that 'we' can only be structured by and given in its own negation

and refusal."[112] This presents us with the other claim of the book, which is that it is crucial to

look to what he terms "the aesthetics of the intransmissible" that ultimately produces a "'style' of

freedom [...] from constraining conceptions of blackness as authenticity, tradition, and

legitimacy; of history as inheritance, memory, and social reproduction; of diaspora as kinship,

belonging, and dissemination."[113] In its full form, Best's argument demands as much attention in

the breakages of the historical trajectory of those caught in the legacy of the African diaspora as

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[110] Stephen Best, *None Like Us: Blackness, Belonging, Aesthetic Life* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 22.
[111] Ibid, 22.
[112] Ibid, 22.
[113] Ibid, 22-23.

we currently pay to the archival recouping and discovery that is privileged within the academic work on the subject.

While this plays out in multiple ways in *None Like Us*, I want to point directly to Best's discussion of slave suicide as an important moment of working through the aesthetic category of annihilation. In discussing it, Best notes that there is both a historical (in the terms of abolition activism) and a contemporary desire to "make death in slavery mean (social death, civil death, necropolitics, necrocitizenship), which carries with it the demand that these acts be evidence of something—of a culture of resistance or of nihilism and social death."[114] In writing on slavery and death, particularly suicide, Best is attempting to mark out a space in the discipline in which "figures who resist our attempts to restore them to wholeness" are able to be taken seriously within the theoretical discussion while simultaneously being "figures for whom our present does not (and cannot) represent the future they imagined."[115] Best purposefully stops short of interpreting moments of slave or colonial suicide to sit with the question about why historians feel that they need to answer the interpretive question at all. The dead who choose to die are never left alone, Best seems to say, and so we need to turn the critical apparatus toward the logic of archival resurrection that shoots through so much inquiry around the political lives of the dead; Best asks that we "hold in abeyance" the impulse to demystify them.[116] Against reparative readings of encounters in the history of slavery that look to slave agency or creativity or positive maneuvers in the face of violence, Best argues for a historical necessity in looking at "domination for what it is—as engendering and destroying the subject."[117] What Best is calling

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[114] Ibid, 25.
[115] Ibid, 25.
[116] Ibid, 95.
[117] Ibid, 101.

attention to here is not the ways that enslaved people were able to somehow eke out a liveable life. Instead, he hones in on a question that gives pause to any reparative reading: "Why should we want to see [slavery] as an obfuscating screen behind which is secreted an irrepressible slave agency?"[118] In addition to speaking directly to discussions of the Afro-Atlantic, Best's argument also pushes back against the efficacy of positive and vitalist assemblage theory that would have us looking for the elements of assemblages that continue beyond this moment of abject destruction of human life. In this context, assemblage theory puts us in a conceptual cluster typified by something like theoretical survivor's guilt; we can only talk about the spillover, the continuance, the slave ingenuity that allowed for the *clinamen* of virtuality to swing into a new arrangement of livable life. As we already know from both Edelman and Wilderson (in different ways), to talk about continuance or *conatus* is insufficient without talking about *quality* of existence, the containers and the frameworks through which life is made continuable, unlivable, and yet lived. Best is demonstrating a gap here that I think is properly called the aesthetic category of annihilation. It is the churn of virtuality that creates conditions in the actual that cannot continue themselves. Put another way, Best is taking his form of inquiry *as far as it can go* because to go any further, to begin to speak of the logics and the lives and the politics of the slaves who kill themselves, would be to reconstitute them within a diagram of *post-apocalypse* and survivance. For Best, the intellectual work that is valuable is precisely that which lets go and allows annihilation, which is purposeful and chosen, to fully occur. "There is broad consensus," he writes while summarizing the field's position, "that power is productive, that death is generative of praxis."[119] Best makes a choice to sit with ambiguity and difficulty rather than with

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[118] Ibid, 101.
[119] Ibid, 103.

an attachment to regaining the past, and this informs his reading of a slave song about a gully in which sick or wounded living slaves were thrown, and he understands it as indicative of a stance that responds to the agency of slaves. The song "seems to point in the direction of those moments in which the social cannot contain a sense of agency, or when agency is expressed as a refusal of the possibilities of social action that have been shaped and organized by colonial power--in short, when the enslaved innovate in the interest of their own oblivion (when they choose it)."[120] This absolute ambiguity when it comes to intention in singing, in cadence, in material conditions, sets the conditions for an active and purposeful refusal to interpret and reground in hopes of refusing "the metalepsis of the subject" under which "the slave makes himself once over from the stuff out of which he has been made (the figure of a figure.)"[121]

This attention to how our attention creates the past out of our own blinkered historical framing and reading of intent serves to demonstrate the necessity of non-reproduction. Wilderson argues that a future that fully carries through the work of rooting out anti-blackness will be one in which the epistemological conditions of civil society are completely destroyed and rearticulated, and Best provides a critical reflexive move on that position: we must be wary of marshalling the past to reproduce these same conditions and debates. Both operate to create a necessity for thinking through annihilation, to create conditions under which a mechanism that produces actual conditions out of virtual potentials fundamentally breaks down.

The aesthetic category of annihilation is what thinks the undoing of history, the undoing of ourselves, and the undoing of the conditions that could create us again. If there is hope here, it is the hope of facticity, a hope that might spring up through a complete rearticulation of the

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[120] Ibid, 105.
[121] Ibid, 105.

conditions of reality. This is a hope that is immanent and possible, unbound from the timely and linear progression of process philosophy, yet wholly thinkable. It is a position in which the virtual and the actual, the diagram and the aesthetic category, no longer have ontological capacity to generate the world. It is from this position, the absolutely annihilated, that hope emerges.

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