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“Image, Truth, Worlds”

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How does the concept of world rely upon the experience and sense of images? There is something peculiarly modern and Western about the concepts of lifeworlds, end of the world, possible worlds and the essential meaning and humanity of the world. In many respects current fictions regarding the end of the world are ultimately thought experiments about the end of images. By contrast, one of the ways we might think about artworks after Romanticism is by way of a conception of images that survive what we understand as ‘the world.’ This strain in Romanticism would cut against the grain of the dominant way in which the artworld views images, regarding them as fragments of a world. “The image comes from the sky,” writes Jean-Luc Nancy, “not the heavens, which are religious, but from the skies, a term proper to painting.” Taking Nancy’s claim as our point of departure, we want to consider how the image is not “of” the world. Can we entertain the possibility that the vitality of the “true image” resides in its disappearance? We want to examine the flashings and vanishings of the romantic image as it circulates and flees, yesterday and tonight, in artworks of the period and after. If the true image comes from the sky which will be its destination, how is the special world called “art” the “proper term” of its special currency?

To pursue this cluster of questions for the NASSR seminar, Colebrook and Pyle have each submitted a recent essay (Colebrook’s “Images Without Worlds” and Pyle’s “Sky-Lark Image; or, The Vitality of Disappearance”) and have selected two poems by contemporary poets who are both explicitly concerned – though in notably different ways – with the relationships between images, worlds, and truth: Colebrook has chosen Claudia Rankine’s 2014 volume *Citizen, An American Lyric* and Pyle has chosen Jorie Graham’s “Vertigo” from her 1987 collection *The End of Beauty*.

Rather than hijack a session of NASSR and turn it into a Deleuze recruitment exercise, our reasons for selecting the readings we have are based on what we

suggest might be a broader problem of reading in the twenty-first century (where the fall-out of Deleuzian criticism is one symptom among many). This is suggested in one of the strands of Pyle's essay on Shelley, where he argues for a counter-phenomenology, and does so after noting the ways that Deleuze and Guattari see Romanticism as an attempt to give voice to the ground of the earth, whereas it is *modernism* for D&G that will free qualities from their lived, worldly and human experience:

If the first six stanzas of Shelley's poem invoke a phenomenology of the flight of the bird, it would be more accurate to call them a poetic anti-phenomenology, at least of the variety we have come to associate with Merleau-Ponty. If in his own Phenomenology, Merleau-Ponty understands the image of the world's appearances as inextricable from the percipient's view of them – his or her embodied consciousness – Shelley's skylark not only proposes an image disappearing from the percipient's view but one that dispenses with the percipient altogether. This is what Deleuze calls “percept” without perception.

We would like to extend this reading of Shelley and Romanticism: a reading that is intensified in Jacques Khalip's recent work on last things, which emphasizes the worldlessness of so many fragments of Romantic poetics. The problem of the image is ultimately the problem of the relational. It seems we are presented with two possibilities: either we only know things as they are experienced (the relational, synthesized, human and phenomenological *world* of Kant and much of twentieth-century theory) *or* it is ontologically necessary to think of things themselves (the noumenal world of Kant, rejected by phenomenology, but retrieved by object-oriented ontology). This is not a metaphysical either/or; nor is it solely metaphysical: would our being-in-the-world mean that all we can do is work *within* the systems of relation and recognition that we have (such that the otherness of the other is always *our* otherness), *or* can we have an ontology of the non-relational, where there would be as many worlds as there are things, and as many things as there are parts of things?

Claire Colebrook:

The reason why I have chosen Claudia Rankine's 'lyric' to set alongside this question is that it forces this seemingly metaphysical question about matter into a register of life and death. I think what Tres Pyle's 'skylark image' (and Khalip's

‘last things’) generate is a radical potentiality in Romanticism that gets occluded with the opposition between relational and non-relational theoretical oppositions. Rather than happily assert that even if we only know things through relations we can confidently assert the ontological existence of the non-relational, Pyle and Khalip pick up on certain aesthetic events that are destructive of the relational. By aesthetic I do not mean what de Man referred to as ‘aesthetic ideology’ – the assumption that what we read can issue in some revelation — but what de Man saw as the material sublime: to see *as if* one had no world. But rather than this being a rigorous attitude of reading and critical acumen, Khalip and Pyle look to the poetic tradition that tries to create monuments destructive of such recuperative sense. Rankine’s lyric seems at first to be at odds with the claim for worldlessness that I am putting forward, and I will admit that when I was thinking about non-phenomenological aesthetic modes that were destructive of the experiencing ‘I’ they were less grounded in Western poetics than the Rankine who quotes Derrida, Wallace Stevens, and Paul Celan, even if these quotations are mixed with the labels on drug bottles, and a series of blank or frozen TV screens. Why I think Rankine’s lyric helps us think beyond the theoretical impasse of relationality versus the autonomy of the object, is its charting of the necessary relatedness of the world that is constantly being torn apart, frozen and ended. The ‘loneliness’ mapped in these lyrics is not that of an ‘I’ unable to relate to the world, so much as an ‘I’ robbed of a world and with that end of the world comes the breakdown of the ‘I’ to whom such a world would be given:

... a life can not matter. Or, as there are billions of lives, my sadness is alive alongside the recognition that billions of lives never mattered.

... .. too experienced to experience, too close to dead.....

Tres Pyle: Once Colebrook offered “Images Without Worlds” as part of the introductory materials for the seminar, I responded with my “Sky-Lark Image” as a brief companion piece, one that addressed Shelley’s “To a Sky-Lark” in terms I find remarkably close to those proposed by Colebrook: “when art appears as lost, no longer recognized, . . . we are given images without world.” This resonates articulates what I was trying to name with my subtitle: “the vitality of disappearance.” Colebrook arrives at her version of “world-leaving” by way of a compelling account of the way in which “world in its strongest is bound up with the image” and that the most productive way to approach the subject who *apprehends* the images that compose the world is itself “as nothing more than a synthesis of images,” in a world of “general imaging.” Colebrook’s conception of

an "imaging" that implicates subjects and worlds offers a decisive way to think about the deployment of the romantic image, both in its period and in ours.

When in her essay Colebrook turns to Romantic poems, it is by way of a stunning reading of Wordsworth's leech-gatherer – perhaps "anti-skylark" – as "on the threshold of being-in-the-world, and yet . . . close to being worldless."

*Apprehension* is the Shelleyan term that activates or animates the three nouns named in the title; the true apprehension of the image is one that is leaving the world behind. I chose Jorie Graham because she is certainly one of the North American poets most engaged with the Romantic legacy, especially of Keats and Shelley, and because it makes "bird-flight" a way of exploring the relationship between world, image, and the true. And I chose this volume of her poems – *The End of Beauty* – because it addresses the ends of not only of beauty but of the world in many of its poems, most notably in "What the End is For." But "Vertigo" is the Graham poem that most explicitly addresses the constellation of terms – image, world, truth -- we're invoking for this seminar. When at the opening of that poem Graham's speaker comes to "the very edge of the cliff" and looks down, she apprehends "the updrafting pastures of the vertical in which a bird now rose,/ blue body the blue wind" until "it was frozen until she could see them/ at last/...[ ] Until they made, all of an instant, a bird, a blue/enchantment of properties no longer/knowable." These lines offer a poetic version of the Deleuzian image as Colebrook understands it: "like colour as such, not just the colour of this leaf but that which appears *as if for all time*." The bird in its leave-taking of the world offers the poetic apprehension of "a blue/enchantment of properties no longer knowable" or *comprehensible*.