

Václav Janošík is a lecturer, theoretician and curator. He works as specialist assistant at the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague (AVU) and the Department of Photography of the Film and TV School at the Academy of Performing Arts in Prague (FAMU). He also lectures at other universities (UMPRUM, FF UK). He specialises in philosophy, the theory of media and art. His main professional interests include interdisciplinarity, dialogue and the critical potential of art and theory.

[vaclav.janoscik@avu.cz](mailto:vaclav.janoscik@avu.cz)

Originally published as: **Václav JANOŠČÍK, “Území a mapa: Spekulativní myšlení a problém grand dehors”, *Sešit pro umění, teorii a příbuzné zóny*, vol. 10, 2016, No. 21, pp. 8–37.**

Translated from the Czech by Phil Jones.

# THE TERRITORY AND THE MAP: SPECULATIVE THINKING AND THE PROBLEM OF THE GRAND DEHORS VÁCLAV JANOŠČÍK

303

Unlike social constructivism,<sup>1</sup> the approach that predominates in the humanities, speculative realism advocates a realistic and speculative position. In practice this means that it attempts to promote a position from which we do not have only to criticise, analyse and map the socially constructed reality of the world around us. On the contrary, the aim of speculative realists is to break the correlationist circle<sup>2</sup> of thinking and the idea that this thinking is an essential component of the world or directly shapes it. Their interest is in entering the *grand dehors* (great outdoors) that exists outside of our necessarily anthropomorphic meanings and projections. Speculative realism has provoked (and continues to provoke) not only interest and new challenges, but also criticism. And so almost ten years after the inaugural conference *Speculative Realism* at Goldsmiths College, London (2007), we now have a more nuanced perspective and arguably greater space not only to argue for or against speculative realism and its theses, but also to offer a less extrapolated reading of it. Several writers are already trying to turn the tools of speculative realism

<sup>1</sup> See, for instance, Peter L. BERGER – Thomas LUCKMANN, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*, Garden City, NY: Anchor Books 1999.

<sup>2</sup> This term was first used by Quentin Meillassoux for the general tendency of post-Kantian philosophy to set epistemology over ontology, or more precisely the inability to think thinking and being separately: "Correlationism consists in disqualifying the claim that it is possible to consider the realms of subjectivity and objectivity independently of one another. Not only does it become necessary to insist that we never grasp an object 'in itself', in isolation from its relation to the subject, but it also becomes necessary to maintain that we can never grasp a subject that would not always-already be related to an object." Quentin MEILLASSOUX, *After Finitude*, London: Bloomsbury 2010, p. 5.

back on itself, or more precisely in favour of dialogue with poststructuralist philosophy.<sup>3</sup>

In this essay I shall offer an introduction to speculative realism and its attack on post-Kantian philosophy in order to show that these seemingly antithetical positions can engage in joint dialogue. I shall outline the basic contours of speculative thinking by drawing on the work of Quentin Meillassoux, who not only plays a crucial, perhaps founding, role within this current of thought thanks to his book *Après la finitude*, but represents, alongside the object-oriented philosophy of Graham Harman, perhaps the most sophisticated version of speculative realism. Furthermore, he has engaged fully with the arguments being mounted against post-Kantian philosophy.

First of all, it is worth repeating that speculative realism, which has kick-started a whole series of changes in contemporary philosophy and art, is not a unified movement as such. What individual authors have in common is a general desire to uphold realism or materialism of whatever kind, and more particularly an ambition to confront correlationism.<sup>4</sup> Meillassoux says of speculative realism that it is about the “inseparability of the act of thinking from its content”.<sup>5</sup> Thinking and being are circumscribed by a mutual relationship of correlation that, Meillassoux claims, renders impossible any form of realism or materialism because (according to correlationism) all we ever engage with is what is “given-to-thought”, and never an entity subsisting in and for itself. Epistemology (that which can be known or thought) is thus superior to ontology (that which actually exists).<sup>6</sup> Because of this generally accepted,

304

<sup>3</sup> Armen AVANESSIAN, “Language Ontology”, in: *Idem* – Suhail MALIK (eds.), *Genealogies of Speculation*, London: Bloomsbury 2016, pp. 199–216; Arne DE BOEVER, “The Realist Novel and ‘the Great Outdoors’. Towards a Literary-Speculative Realism”, in: AVANESSIAN–MALIK, *Genealogies of Speculation*, pp. 217–237; Suhail MALIK, “Materialist Reason and Its Languages: Part One: Absolute Reason, Absolute Deconstructing”, in: AVANESSIAN–MALIK, *Genealogies of Speculation*, pp. 238–268. Let us not forget that Meillassoux himself claims that we have to use correlationism’s own weapons against it. He himself draws on the principal of facticity that forms the basis of correlationism (see for instance MEILLASOUX, *After Finitude*, s. 72). Generally speaking, Meillassoux is not interested in avoiding the problem of correlation, but instead “proceeds, again and always, by way of the correlationist circle”. (*ibid.*, p. 63).

<sup>4</sup> See, for instance, Armen AVANESSIAN – Suhail MALIK, “Introduction: Speculative Genealogies”, in: *idem*, *Genealogies of Speculation*, p. 10; Graham HARMAN, “Brief SR/OOO Tutorial”, in: *Bells and Whistles: More Speculative Realism*, Winchester: Zero Books 2013. Available at <http://deadlabor.tumblr.com/post/1052615839/brief-sro-oo-tutorial-july-23-2010-an> (accessed 1 September 2016).

<sup>5</sup> MEILLASOUX, *After Finitude*, p. 36.

<sup>6</sup> Steven SHAVIRO, “Speculative Realism: A Primer”, in: *Texte zur Kunst*, no. 93 (March 2014), p. 40; Ray BRASSIER, “Concepts and Objects” in: Levi BRYANT – Nick SRNICEK – Graham HARMAN (eds.), *The Speculative Turn. Continental Materialism and Realism*, Melbourne: re:press 2011, p. 47.

albeit very unclear and negative definition, it is easier to speak of a current of “speculative thinking” rather than a positively delineated movement (not only speculative realism, but new materialism, accelerationism, object-oriented ontology, etc.).<sup>7</sup>

Poststructuralist philosophy, following on from the critical post-Kantian tradition, is based on self-critical thinking, i.e. on the impossibility of thinking to stand outside itself. First and foremost, therefore, we may regard poststructuralist philosophy as the main target of speculative thinking. However, as the latest literature shows,<sup>8</sup> this is less about an attack and more about finding deeper connections and exploring the nuances of specific problems, which includes accounting for the lapsus of correlationism. This then allows us to find realist precursors of the speculative turn<sup>9</sup> within the critical tradition, just as on the other hand we can identify certain features of subjectively oriented thinking in many of the speculative authors.<sup>10</sup>

Rather than pursuing this direction, I shall examine Meillassoux’s arguments in order to uncover certain inconsistencies, as well as to highlight the opportunities it offers and the “territory” where it overlaps with the critical

<sup>7</sup> “New materialism” is also a very loose term for the efforts of contemporary thinkers to return to certain materialist theses. These thinkers include Rosi Braidotti, Manuel DeLanda and Karen Barad, as well as Meillassoux, who avoids the term realism in favour of materialism. “Accelerationism” is the name given to the political offshoot of speculative tendencies, though it would be more precise to define it in relation to its own tradition, namely the criticism of capitalism from Marx, via the sixties generation that mounted a critique of semio-capitalism and the libidinal economy (especially Deleuze and Guattari, Lyotard and Baudrillard), right up to current approaches to the problems of contemporary (digital) capitalism (Nick Land, Nick Srnicek). On the contrary, object-oriented ontology, a term used by Levi Bryant, and the object-oriented philosophy of Graham Harman, refer to the attempts made by individual writers to create a more general ontological position. They have been joined in this endeavour by other authors (e.g. Timothy Morton and Tristan Garcia). The list of contemporary philosophical trends that more or less run in parallel to speculative realism could be continued. I would reiterate that, leaving aside certain exceptions, these projects are all involved in the effort to differentiate themselves from the dominant academic practice of philosophy focused on its history and the creation of secondary literature. Though it is easy and perhaps unfair to generalise regarding academic philosophy, it is clear that the attempt to revive it as a discipline and enter into a direct rather than a historically mediated relationship to the authoritative figures of philosophy (which in the case of correlationism entails a dialogue with Kantian philosophy) is undoubtedly one reason for the popularity and sophistication of contemporary forms of speculative thought.

<sup>8</sup> For instance, AVANESSIAN–MALIK, *Genealogies of Speculation*.

<sup>9</sup> For instance, the philosophy of Alfred North Whitehead, see Steven SHAVIRO, *The Universe of Things: On Speculative Realism*, Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press 2014, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> Meillassoux himself identifies “subjectalism”, i.e. the attribution of subjective traits to non-human beings. I examine this problem in greater detail below. See Quentin MEILLASSOUX, “Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition: A Speculative Analysis of the Sign Devoid of Meaning”, in: AVANESSIAN–MALIK, *Genealogies of Speculation*, pp. 117–198.

tradition. The point of intersection of my considerations will be the possibility of thinking to reach beyond itself into a sphere that Meillassoux and other writers call the *grand dehors*, or great outdoors.<sup>11</sup> I shall first sketch the main features of the philosophy expounded in *After Finitude*, before examining the continuation of Meillassoux's attack on correlationism in the article "Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition".<sup>12</sup> There is not enough space here to examine in detail every one of Meillassoux's claims, and so I will look in brief at some of the important reactions he has provoked, especially at the analysis of *After Finitude* by Ray Brassier and the generalisation of Meillassoux's theory of the empty sign undertaken by Armen Avanesian.

306

I shall also illustrate the problem of the radical, extra-subjective *grand dehors* by looking at the novel *The Map and the Territory* by Michel Houellebecq.<sup>13</sup> This follows the career of artist Jed Martin, who during the course of the book moves away from photographing Michelin maps and realist painting and devotes himself to creating videos of plants and the breakdown of photographs or figurines exposed to natural conditions. His aim is to represent the world objectively. Similarly, the declared aim of speculative realism is to step outside the sphere of thinking and correlation in the direction of the real and outside – the *grand dehors*. What is at stake is the question of whether we are able to come into direct contact with the territory or whether all of our attempts to orientate ourselves in the world simply represent a map, always already constructed by thinking. The storyline of Houellebecq's novel indicates that the link between speculative tendencies and art is not random but, on the contrary, corresponds to the traditional problem of realism or even mimesis. Without wishing to take the liberty to analyse these artistic themes myself, I shall instead deploy them in an attempt to underline the compatibility of speculative thinking with subjectively oriented philosophy.

Choosing Houellebecq's novel is neither random nor intuitive – nor, incidentally, is it completely original. Arne de

<sup>11</sup> MEILLASSOUX, *After Finitude*, p. 7. A similar strategy is used by DE BOEVER in "The Realist Novel".

<sup>12</sup> MEILLASSOUX, "Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition".

<sup>13</sup> Michel HOUELLEBECQ, *La Carte et le territoire*, Paris: Flammarion 2010.

Boever, for instance, in his article “The Realist Novel and the ‘Great Outdoors’”, analyses Meillassoux’s work with literary fiction and cites Houellebecq’s novel as the best example of the link between philosophical and literary realism.<sup>14</sup> De Boever analyses the book’s narrative, specifically the efforts made by Jed Martin to “represent the world”, in order to show that Houellebecq, within the framework of “literary-speculative realism”, is working from a space within traditional realism, rather than drawing on the more comfortable perspective of modernism, postmodernism or sci-fi.<sup>15</sup> He attempts to reveal the possibility of language on the boundary of language, the possibility of reaching out into the great outdoors from the space of our (literary) world. I draw on this aspect of de Boever’s text so as to forge even stronger links between Houellebecq and Meillassoux based on robust work with the schematics of the map and territory.

This type of thinking is not only close to speculative realism, but also to Houellebecq. The theme of the map, as well as the exterior in the form of a secularised absolute (Meillassoux’s project), appears in many of his texts.<sup>16</sup> The very title *The Map and the Territory* was inspired by the work of Alfred Korzybski,<sup>17</sup> a Polish-American philosopher, who created a field

<sup>14</sup> DE BOEVER, “Realist Novel”, pp. 230–233.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 233.

<sup>16</sup> See for instance Houellebecq’s first book dedicated to H. P. Lovecraft: “The surface of the earth today is overlaid with an irregular, dense web of fibres, entirely fabricated by humans. In this web circulates the life-blood of the social. The transport of people, of commodities, of provisions; multiple translations, orders to buy, orders to sell, facts to be believed, other, more intellectual or affective, exchanges... This incessant flux continues regardless of humanity, absorbed in the lifeless convulsions of its own activity.” Michel HOUELLEBECQ, “H. P. Lovecraft: Contre le monde, contre la vie”, in: *Houellebecq 1991–2000*, Paris: Flammarion 2015, p. 39. However, in Houellebecq’s poetry too we find, albeit in the most hidden form, the theme of the absolute transcending the world:

Le lieu où tous nos êtres dispersés marchent de front et où tout décalage est aboli,  
Le lieu magique de l’absolu et de la transcendance  
Où la parole est chant, où la démarche est danse  
N’existe pas sur Terre,  
Mais nous marchons vers lui.

Michel HOUELLEBECQ, “La poursuite du bonheur”, in: *Houellebecq 1991–2000*, p. 215. Of his more recent books, mention should be made of the novel *Platform*, devoted to the evolution of tourism and the mechanisms by which it refashions the world, see Michel HOUELLEBECQ, *Platform*, New York: Knopf 2003.

<sup>17</sup> Interview between Houellebecq and Alain Finkielkraut on the programme *Répliques* broadcast by France Culture, 11 September 2010, see the transcription Alain FINKIELKRAUT – Michel HOUELLEBECQ, “La carte et le territoire”, *Ora, labora et lege*, <http://lajoieudjour.blogspot.cz/2010/09/finkielkraut-et-houellebecq-la-carte-et.html> (accessed 1 July 2016).

called general semantics. In his book *Science and Sanity* (1933) Korzybski writes:

A map is not the territory it represents, but, if correct, it has similar structure to the territory, which accounts for its usefulness. If the map could be ideally correct, it would include, in a reduced scale, the map of the map; the map of the map of the map; and so on, endlessly...

When we think about language we must assume that at best it is only a map. The word is not the object it represents; and language also displays a capacity for self-reflection in that we can analyse it using linguistic means.<sup>18</sup>

308

## **1. Realism and post-Kantian philosophy**

Jeff Koons had just got up from his chair, enthusiastically throwing his arms out in front of him. Sitting opposite him, on a white leather sofa partly draped with silks and slightly hunched up, Damien Hirst seemed to be about to express an objection; his face was flushed, morose. Both of them were wearing black suits – Koons’s had fine pinstripes – white shirts and black ties. Between them, on the coffee table, was a basket of candied fruits that neither paid any attention to. Hirst was drinking a Budweiser Light.<sup>19</sup>

*The Map and the Territory* opens with this description of a painting by Jed Martin called *Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst Dividing Up the Art Market*. The story returns to this canvas several times, as though both its poles – Koons’s pop cultural, fetishistic style, and Hirst’s “existentialism” – were the poles of not only Jed Martin’s own aesthetic, but that of Houellebecq too. However, Martin never manages to capture Koons’s expression,

<sup>18</sup> Alfred KORZYBSKI, *Science and Sanity*, New York: Institute of General Semantics 1994, p. 58.

<sup>19</sup> HUELLEBECQ, *The Map and the Territory*, New York: Knopf 2011, p. 8.

fails to complete the painting, and finally destroys it.<sup>20</sup> The very form of this hyper-realist canvas becomes the subject of Martin's speculations and falls into the category of another of his creative endeavours, conceptual photography, which preceded his period of painting, as well as the videos of plants that he was engaged in at the end of his life. More specifically, Jed Martin links this painting with the problem of realist, photographic depiction.<sup>21</sup> For our protagonist, representing the "truth" does not mean simply capturing a certain moment (in a photograph), nor does it entail identifying a certain representative personality trait. Attempting to represent the world means ongoing failure. In this regard, *The Map and the Territory* is at one with the rest of Houellebecq's oeuvre, which, to simplify matters somewhat, examines the predicament of a disenchanted (post)modern Western Europe and its inability to find new values and social relations corresponding to the current situation.<sup>22</sup>

Far more interesting is the fact that we encounter a similar scepticism, this time at the expense of correlationism, in contemporary speculative realism. According to Meillassoux, correlationism as it appears in post-Kantian philosophy represents a generally accepted position within the context of which thinking cannot be separated from the object thereof: "Correlationism consists in disqualifying the claim that it is

<sup>20</sup> "There was certainly a problem with Koons. Hirst was basically easy to capture: you could make him brutal, cynical in an 'I shit on you from the top of my pile of cash' kind of way; you could also make him a rebel artist (but rich all the same) pursuing an anguished work on death; finally, there was in his face something ruddy and heavy, typically English, which made him look like a rank-and-file Arsenal supporter. In short, there were various aspects to him, but all of them could be combined into a coherent, representative portrait of a British artist typical of his generation. Koons, on the other hand, seemed to have a duality, an insurmountable contradiction between the basic cunning of the technical sales rep and the exaltation of the ascetic. It was already three weeks now that Jed had been retouching Koons's expression as he stood up from his chair, throwing out his arms as if he were trying to convince Hirst of something. It was as difficult as painting a Mormon pornographer." *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>21</sup> "He had photographs of Koons on his own, in the company of Roman Abramovich, Madonna, Barack Obama, Bono, Warren Buffett, Bill Gates... Not one of them managed to express anything of the personality of Koons, to go beyond the appearance of a Chevrolet convertible salesman that he had decided to display to the world, and this was exasperating. In fact, for a long time photographers had exasperated Jed, especially the great photographers, with their claim to reveal in their snapshots the truth of their models. They didn't reveal anything at all, just placed themselves in front of you and switched on the motor of their camera to take hundreds of random snapshots while chuckling, and later chose the least bad of the lot; that's how they proceeded, without exception, all those so-called great photographers. Jed knew some of them personally and had nothing but contempt for them." *Ibid.*, p. 8–9.

<sup>22</sup> See for example Guillaume BRIDET, "Michel Houellebecq et les montres molles", *Littérature*, 2008, no. 151, pp. 6–20. On the other hand, in his most recent novel *Submission* he offers a way out in Islam, see Michel HOUELLEBECQ, *Podvolení*, Prague: Odeon 2015.

possible to consider the realms of subjectivity and objectivity independently of one another.”<sup>23</sup> Leaving aside for the moment any doubts we might have regarding Meillassoux’s terminology and argumentation, if speculative realists wish to come up with a realist or materialist philosophical position, they must above all confront the problem of correlationism, i.e. they must show by what means it is possible to postulate an objectivity (reality) independent of subjective mediation.

Houellebecq’s metaphor comes in useful at this point. Speculative realists are not content with creating a map of a given territory, but want to access it directly.<sup>24</sup> Looked at from this perspective, the whole of post-Kantian philosophy is an attempt to renounce the actual territory and instead look for dominant or even universal maps that structure (genuine) territory, so bringing it into existence. In this light Marxism is nothing other than the endeavour to promote relations of production and class as the dominant *dispositif* or apparatus, a map<sup>25</sup> that is superior to other attempts to describe or chart the world around us.<sup>26</sup> Similarly, structuralism, phenomenology and even psychoanalysis are simply other attempts to find a privileged apparatus (language, a transcendental ego, the unconscious, etc.) that would be capable of suitably charting an otherwise unknown and unattainable territory without actually being this territory itself. For instance, Husserl’s phenomenology, though he referred

<sup>23</sup> MEILLASSOUX, *After Finitude*, p. 5.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>25</sup> I use the term *dispositif* (apparatus) with a nod to Michel Foucault, who uses it to refer to a diverse set of discourses, techniques, institutions and other forms that structure our very behaviour. Without wanting to deny this plurality, I try to highlight the dominant *dispositifs*. While Foucault accentuates the role of power and its influence on our conduct, I am interested in the more general role of the *dispositif* as a filter that allows us to simplify and understand “reality”. What follows is a fairly well-known passage from an interview dating back to 1977: “Thirdly, I understand by the term ‘apparatus’ a sort of – shall we say – formation which has as its major function at a given historical moment that of responding to an *urgent need*. The apparatus thus has a dominant strategic function. This may have been, for example, the assimilation of a floating population found to be burdensome for an essentially mercantilist economy: there was a strategic imperative acting here as the matrix for an apparatus which gradually undertook the control or subjection of madness, sexual illness and neurosis.” Michel Foucault, “The Confession of the Flesh”, in: *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972–1977*, New York: Pantheon Books 1980, p. 195.

<sup>26</sup> Historical materialism is based on the idea that social awareness (the superstructure, culture, etc.) is determined by the material relations of production (the base). For instance, Marx, following Ricard, shows that market value is not assigned to objects themselves but to the time and labour necessary for their production.

to it as scientific philosophy, does not examine reality,<sup>27</sup> but rather the phenomenon as “that which presents itself” in natural experience.<sup>28</sup> In a certain sense, one might argue that phenomenology overcomes the separation of subject and object by binding them inseparably within a typically correlationist circle. Husserl himself expressly names the “correlation” between the subject of experience and the method of its presentation.<sup>29</sup>

From Kant, via phenomenology and Marxism, to post-structuralism, we can adopt Meillassoux’s perspective and track the failure of philosophy in its attempt to “represent” the world or reality directly, i.e. outside the method of givenness within the framework of a certain philosophical apparatus. This problem is not caused by a specific philosophical thesis, but arises from the very form or orientation of post-Kantian philosophy on the unveiling or deconstruction of these apparatuses, whether this involves language, consciousness, power, etc. However, this does not bring us closer to reality but shackles us more firmly inside the network of apparatuses or maps. Regardless of whether we regard this anamnesis as convincing, I would venture to suggest that it is very similar to the way that Houellebecq views the characters in his novels, of which *Jed Martin* is the perfect example.

However, it is not merely this simple metaphor of the map and the territory (the apparatus and reality), but the particular critique of post-Enlightenment Europe and post-Kantian philosophy that links our excursion into contemporary speculative thinking with Houellebecq’s approach, especially in what is possibly his most instructive novel *The Map and the Territory*. If obliged to peg out the fundamental positions of speculative realism, I would cite the four apocalyptic horsemen of the original conference in 2007 at Goldsmiths College. Ray Brassier regards science, more specifically “methodological

<sup>27</sup> Husserl himself comes out against the concept of the real in the introduction to the *Ideas*, see Edmund HUSSERL, *Ideas Pertaining to a Pure Phenomenology and to a Phenomenological Philosophy: First Book: General Introduction to a Pure Phenomenology*, The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff 1983, p. XX.

<sup>28</sup> “[E]verything originarily (so to speak, in its ‘personal’ actuality) offered to us in ‘intuition’ is to be accepted simply as what it is presented as being, but also only within the limits in which it is presented there.” *Ibid.*, § 24, p. 56.

<sup>29</sup> Edmund HUSSERL, *The Crisis of European Sciences and Transcendental Phenomenology*, Evanston: Northwestern University Press 1970, pp. 34–35.

naturalism”, as capable of overcoming the correlationist circle and cultivating knowledge outside subjective mediation. What this means is that science not only maps but also enters the territory. Its categories are not (only) anthropocentric, as in the case of Kant, but correspond to the external world, thanks, inter alia, to the self-critical character of the scientific method.<sup>30</sup> Meillassoux, whose work I shall examine in more depth, adopts a more radical position vis-à-vis correlationism and the whole of post-Kantian philosophy. He claims that the subject-object relationship is not the original, primary point of departure for philosophy, but is preceded by a world without people and therefore without a subject. According to Meillassoux (as we shall see below), this non-human reality is of necessity contingent<sup>31</sup> – it can always be otherwise or not be at all – and so correlation itself, i.e. the creation of a subjective perspective through the development of the human species, is a random event. Graham Harman takes Kantian philosophy in another direction altogether. He breaks its injunction on speculation and overturns its thesis on the impossibility of knowing the thing-in-itself.<sup>32</sup> Unknowability becomes a positive trait of objects in the world. Precisely because we cannot know them completely, we have to speculate regarding the items that surround us. The path to the territory itself is therefore never as precise and simple, as objective, as movement around a map. However, this does not prevent us setting forth and speculating. As far as the last of our four horsemen, Iain Hamilton Grant, is concerned, our human perspective, i.e. the Kantian transcendental ego by means of which we map our world, is itself part of procedurally grasped nature and thus is also part of the territory outside.<sup>33</sup>

312

In addition to these well known differences,<sup>34</sup> the individual positions of these writers also possess a certain narrative dynamic. For instance, Meillassoux bases his argument on and

<sup>30</sup> See, for instance, BRASSIER, “Concepts and Objects”, p. 49; Nathan COOMBS, “Underlabouring for Science: Althusser, Brassier, Bhaskar”, in: AVANESSIAN-MALIK, *Genealogies of Speculation*, p. 272.

<sup>31</sup> See, for example, MEILLASSOUX, *After Finitude*, p. 39.

<sup>32</sup> See, for example, Graham HARMAN, *Quadruple Object*, Winchester: Zero Books 2010, pp. 137–138.

<sup>33</sup> See, for example, Iain Hamilton GRANT, *Philosophies of Nature after Schelling*, London: Bloomsbury 2006, p. 2.

<sup>34</sup> SHAVIRO, “Speculative Realism: A Primer”, p. 40.

demarcates the *grand dehors* using the concept of ancestry. This is how he designates the facts that took place before the emergence of the human race and which, he claims, correlationist thinking cannot incorporate. According to correlationism, all knowledge is dependent on a perceiving, thinking subject. Yet ancestral facts precede not only Man himself but the conditions underpinning the possibility of human cognition.<sup>35</sup> On the other hand, Brassier draws on the concept of extinction, which he explicitly understands as a complement to Meillassoux's ancestry.<sup>36</sup> He cites a range of authors that we would otherwise be tempted to include in correlationist thinking (Nietzsche, Deleuze, Lyotard, Levinas, Freud, et al.) in order to show that extinction and its trauma is a fundamental philosophical issue that is related to the outside.<sup>37</sup> Again, I do not have the space to reproduce the entire argument. However, for our purposes what is important is that the *grand dehors* is not simply spatial but above all temporal. It is based on a finitude, negativity and absence that is radically exterior to us yet thinkable. It is as though territory, the *grand dehors*, sprawled out not behind the map but beyond its edges.

## **2. The Copernican-Galilean revolution of Quentin Meillassoux**

Jed no longer remembered when he had first begun to draw. No doubt all children draw, more or less, but as he didn't know any children, he wasn't sure. His only certainty was that he had begun by drawing flowers—in small notebooks, with colored pencils.<sup>38</sup>

Jed devoted his life (or at least his professional life, which quite quickly became the whole of his life) to art, to the production of representations of the world, in which people were never meant to live.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>35</sup> MEILLASSOUX, *After Finitude*, p. 17.

<sup>36</sup> Ray BRASSIER, *Nihil Unbound*, London: Palgrave Macmillan 2010, p. 229.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 238.

<sup>38</sup> HOUELLEBECQ, *The Map and the Territory*, p.25.

<sup>39</sup> *ibid.*, p. 27.

The main character in Houellebecq's novel, whose career and life we follow from practically his birth to beyond his death, repeatedly proclaims his simple desire to "represent the world" (*la production de représentation du monde*).<sup>40</sup> His artistic development progresses from drawings of plants, via (conceptual) large format photographs of maps (which is how he makes his name) and hyperrealist series on "professions" (including the painting of Jeff Koons and Damien Hirst), and ends with a return to videos of plants, everyday industrial items, and even photographs of the people he comes into contact with in his life; during the process of taking these videos they curl, grow mouldy and crumble under the influence of natural conditions.<sup>41</sup> However, his many years of effort do not culminate in a clear dénouement or solution. Even having explored different creative processes and enjoyed great success on the art market, Jed Martin does not advance from a jumble of maps to a direct relationship with art, and his personal life is no less unsatisfactory,<sup>42</sup> as tends to be the rule in Houellebecq's novels.

Meillassoux's book *After Finitude* displays a similar (almost narrativel) dynamic. Its aim is to "pass through" the circle of correlation and find itself in the territory of the *grand dehors*.<sup>43</sup> In the first section of the book, Meillassoux breaks through the correlationist circle (of thinking and being) into the past and describes the phenomenon of ancestrality.<sup>44</sup> This refers to facts that preceded the human species and its ability to think, but are nevertheless postulated by science. This would involve, for instance, the creation of the Milky Way or Earth. According to Meillassoux, correlationist philosophy is unable to incorporate these facts, and therefore in order to grasp them we have to overcome pre-Kantian dogmatic metaphysics and post-Kantian (self-)criticism and offer a speculative solution, which is what the author does in the second section.

However, despite its vast discursive apparatus, Meillassoux's programme does not find reality outside thinking in the positive sense of the word. In section three of the book, he

<sup>40</sup> See, for example, *ibid.*, 27, 93, 201, 207, 308, 328.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 331.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 331.

<sup>43</sup> MEILLASSOUX, *After Finitude*, p. 63.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 10.

settles for the only necessary principle, a seemingly paradoxical absolute randomness or contingency.<sup>45</sup> And so while on the level of (the history of) philosophy his main target is correlationism, on the level of his own theory Meillassoux attempts to oppose the “principle of sufficient reason”,<sup>46</sup> i.e. the conviction that reality always has some (hidden) reason why it is as it is. On the contrary, according to Meillassoux all existing entities have the “possibility of being-otherwise” or of not being at all,<sup>47</sup> including the laws of nature,<sup>48</sup> and this contingency is thus the sole necessary fact. He takes the negative principle of facticity (everything is contingent) and uses it to create a speculative principle of “factuality” (everything is necessarily contingent), on the basis of which he extrapolates further ontological implications.<sup>49</sup>

In the fourth section of the book, Meillassoux examines his position in the light of other philosophical approaches. He looks at “Hume’s problem”, i.e. the problem of causality: “It is a matter of knowing whether, given perfectly identical circumstances, the same laws will be verified in the future.”<sup>50</sup> Meillassoux believes there are four possible answers to this question:<sup>51</sup> (1) A basic principle can be formulated from the metaphysical position (generally pre-Kantian or dogmatic philosophy) that controls the entire world, including causality. (2) The sceptical answer (and the one opted for by Hume himself) is based on the unknowability or inexplicability of these principles, but not on their non-existence. (3) The transcendental response (Kant) to Hume’s problem also consists of a rejection of the metaphysical response, though uses causality as a prop, albeit a notion of causality conditional upon the fact that without causality reality could not manifest itself (as reality) and the world around us would not be understood as real if it were to lack a causal framework. This means that the form of representation itself, our intellect, is

<sup>45</sup> “[I]t is absolutely necessary that every entity might not exist. This is indeed a speculative thesis, since we are thinking an absolute, but it is not metaphysical, since we are not thinking any *thing* any (entity) that would *be* absolute. The absolute is the absolute impossibility of a necessary being.” *Ibid.*, p. 60.

<sup>46</sup> See for instance *ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 83.

<sup>49</sup> In general Meillassoux insists that facticity is not simply a negative fact but a positive “cognition”, specifically the cognition of absolute contingency. *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 85.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 85–90.

sufficient reason to postulate causality. (4) Contrary to these possible answers, Meillassoux offers his own speculative solution, in which he rejects the principle of sufficient reason. According to him, there exists no necessary reason that would determine reality. On the contrary, the only necessity is absolute randomness.

In the fifth, final and shortest section of *After Finitude*, Meillassoux attempts to overturn the Copernican Turn attributed to Kant. Kant himself regarded this step as a reversal of the ontological and epistemological perspective. Rather than our knowledge being controlled by the observed objects, the objects are controlled by our knowledge of the object as an object of the senses.<sup>52</sup> However, the “Galilean-Copernican revolution” according to Meillassoux resides in the opposite dynamic of decentralisation of the universe from Kant’s, namely in the rejection of the idea that Earth (and Man) is the centre of the universe. Meillassoux links this thesis with the mathematisation of the universe. This means that the universe, which is not organised from any particular (human) perspective, can only be grasped objectively by mathematics. The true Galilean-Copernican revolution within the context of science is thus distorted by Kant into a Ptolemaic counterrevolution within the framework of philosophy.<sup>53</sup> Man is returned to the centre of a universe in which, within the correlationist circle, every being is a being for Man and his thinking.

Meillassoux’s argument has been dismantled and criticised in many other studies.<sup>54</sup> Here I wanted simply to sketch

316

<sup>52</sup> “This would be just like the first thoughts of Copernicus, who, when he did not make good progress in the explanation of the celestial motions if he assumed that the entire celestial host revolves around the observer, tried to see if he might not have greater success if he made the observer revolve and left the stars at rest. Now in metaphysics we can try in a similar way regarding the intuition of objects. If intuition has to conform to the constitution of the objects, then I do not see how we can know anything of them a priori; but if the object (as an object of the senses) conforms to the constitution of our faculty of intuition, then I can very well represent this possibility to myself.” Immanuel KANT, *Critique of Pure Reason*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1998, p. 110 [B XVII].

<sup>53</sup> MEILLASSOUX, *After Finitude*, p. 118.

<sup>54</sup> For a critique of Meillassoux’s essay see, for example, Justin CLEMENS, “Vomit Apocalypse; or, Quentin Meillassoux’s *After Finitude*”, *Parrhesia*, 2013, no. 18, pp. 57–67. For a criticism in the light of correlationism see David GOLUMBIA, “‘Correlationism’: The Dogma that Never Was”, *boundary*, vol. 43, 2016, no. 2, pp. 1–25. On the other hand, Harman offers a defence of Meillassoux in what is thus far the only monograph devoted entirely to his work: Graham HARMAN, *Quentin Meillassoux: Philosophy in the Making*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press 2011. Perhaps the most influential criticism is offered by Brassier in his article for the magazine *Collapse*, which is a considerably updated chapter from his older and thus far only book *Nihil Unbound*, see Ray BRASSIER, “The Enigma of Realism: On Quentin Meillassoux’s *After Finitude*”, *Collapse*, 2007, no. 2, pp. 15–54; BRASSIER, *Nihil Unbound*, pp. 49–96.

out its basic contours so as to differentiate them from other positions. I would now like to evaluate the general points I find less convincing in Meillassoux's argument. Firstly, there is the very anamnesis of correlationism, which avoids engaging in explicitly textual argumentation with a particular author or theory but prefers to attack the unexamined convictions (*doxa*) of contemporary academic philosophers and others in the humanities.<sup>55</sup> If we were to apply Meillassoux's criticism to a specific correlationist philosopher, we would stumble across a host of other problems. I am also not completely convinced (nor for that matter is Brassier) by the principle of ancestrality, according to which correlationist positions are unable to deal with facts that took place prior to the inception of correlationism (the development of the human species).

In order to explain these reservations, I must reconstruct the most common criticism levelled against Meillassoux's concept of ancestrality and the *arche-fossil*,<sup>56</sup> which he recapitulates at the end of the first chapter.<sup>57</sup> I would argue that ancestral facts, i.e. events that took place prior to the emergence of the human species, are unwitnessed facts only in the same way as are facts that are distant in space. We do not have to witness what happened prior to the creation of our planet in the same way that we do not have to witness what is happening in neighbouring galaxies. The problem is that this lack of knowledge does not undermine the correlationist viewpoint, because the correlationist does not claim that only that which is actually perceived exists. The correlation includes only potentially perceivable objects. Meillassoux himself cites Husserl's well-known example of what he calls *Abschattung* (translated variously

<sup>55</sup> See, for example, Robin MACKAY, "Editorial Introduction", *Collapse*, 2007, no. 2, p. 4; HARMAN, *Quadruple Object*, p. 137.

<sup>56</sup> "I will call 'ancestral' any reality anterior to the emergence of the human species – or even anterior to every recognised form of life on earth. I will call 'arche-fossil' or 'fossil-matter' not just materials indicating the traces of past life, according to the familiar sense of the term 'fossil', but materials indicating the existence of an ancestral reality or event; one that is anterior to terrestrial life. An *arche-fossil* thus designates the material support on the basis of which the experiments that yield estimates of ancestral phenomena proceed – for example, an isotope whose rate of radioactive decay we know, or the luminous emission of a star that informs us as to the date of its formation." MEILLASSOUX, *After Finitude*, p. 10.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 18–22. Meillassoux fills out his argument in material he added to the English translation of the book.

as “shading”, “adumbration”, “profile”, even “aspect”). When we perceive a cube, we only ever have before us a certain facet or surface, and yet we still perceive the cube in its entirety, including the shaded, rear surface.

According to Meillassoux such criticism is misleading, because it confuses the *ancestral* in the strong sense of the word with simply the old or *ancient*. Meillassoux is clearly not speaking of the unwitnessed fact, but of the facts that took place prior to the inception of the very possibility of witnessing.<sup>58</sup> However, this thesis is unconvincing if we confront it with the individual positions of the “correlationists”. Even Kant himself gave consideration to ancestral phenomena in the sense of facts preceding the existence of Man.<sup>59</sup> We can therefore assume that he would insist that perception is given through a priori forms regardless of whether a representative of the human race exists or not. Similarly Husserl, who had access to a far more precise corpus of information regarding ancestral facts, would never make his phenomenology conditional upon the presence of perceiving human beings.<sup>60</sup> Though I may be skating on the thin ice of fictive philosophical discussions, I would go so far as to maintain that ancestral facts do not in themselves represent a problem for correlationism.

318

These potential ripostes from the correlationist side bring us to the second objection, which Meillassoux himself address in his book. Here the claim is that Meillassoux confuses the transcendental and the empirical. While the fact of correlation is established transcendently, the reality of ancestral facts is only empirical, and this means that Meillassoux cannot disqualify correlation from empirical time prior to the existence of Man on

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

<sup>59</sup> “How many such [natural] revolutions (including, certainly, many ancient organic beings, no longer alive on the surface of the earth) preceded the existence of man, and how many (accompanying, perhaps, a more perfect organization) are still in prospect, is hidden from our inquiring gaze – for, according to Camper, not a single example of a human being is to be found in the depth of the earth.” Immanuel KANT, *Opus Postumum*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1993, p. 67.

<sup>60</sup> Meillassoux would of course counter that transcendental idealism (represented by Kant and Husserl), unlike speculative idealism, cannot postulate a subject without the instantiation thereof in the real world. (See, for example, MEILLASSOUX, *After Finitude*, p. 25.) Here, however, we find ourselves caught in an interpretative conflict over the difference between the empirical (the individual) and transcendental (the subject). As deployed by Kant, for instance, these categories allow us to speak of a subject independently of the presence of Man.

an empirical level, because the fact of correlation is constantly present on a transcendental level. Meillassoux replies that for the correlationist postulating a transcendental subject and thus transcendental correlation it is impossible to escape from the problem of correlation to the transcendental level. Unlike speculative idealists, who postulate a subject independent of its material manifestations, the transcendental idealist cannot think the subject without its individual representatives in empirical reality. Man is embodied or instantiated and not simply an example of a transcendental subject.<sup>61</sup> Leaving aside for the moment the fact that we might again speculate to what extent our correlationist would be willing to accede to this dragging of the transcendental subject into its material instantiation, what is important is that Meillassoux is actually ceding more ground to the correlationist viewpoint than he is prepared to admit, and thus confirming that there exists an anthropomorphic time (from the emergence of Man) within non-anthropomorphic, cosmological time.<sup>62</sup> An ontological chasm exists between these two. The first time is that of correlation, of the transcendental subject, while the second time transcends correlation on the basis of chronological anteriority. Meillassoux both acknowledges the ontological relevance of correlation, as well as (more seriously) the fact that his speculative materialism becomes dependent on chronology and more specifically anteriority.

In my opinion Meillassoux not only fails to repudiate these two lines of argument, but finds himself in a precarious situation in relation to correlation, which he had wanted to overcome. On the other hand, his considerations certainly offer a fruitful perspective on correlationism in its guise more as *doxa*, an unexamined conviction in the background of more general reflections, than as an explicit philosophical programme. To be more precise, the historicisation of the fact of correlation (the emergence of the human species and the possibility of perception as we know it) can certainly assist in the decentralisation of our view of the world and our awareness of non-human beings. It is interesting that Meillassoux barely deigns to examine this

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

<sup>62</sup> BRASSIER, *Nihil Unbound*, p. 59.

ethical or political dimension. This is mainly because in his own philosophical system he concentrates on the absolute qua absolute contingency, regarding which every perspective (even the decentralised or environmental) seems marginal and worthless in respect of his philosophical project.

A third problem that we have not yet considered is the mathematical level of Meillassoux's system, namely his conception of the Galilean-Copernican revolution that he derives, in the form of the necessary "mathematisation of the world", from the original necessity that relates only to contingency.<sup>63</sup> Not only the connection Meillassoux makes with mathematics, but the way he actually works with maths, remains marginal, not least, for instance, in comparison with the way that Alain Badiou, Meillassoux's teacher, draws on mathematics in his philosophy. This too has been and continues to be subject to criticism.<sup>64</sup> Meillassoux naturally continues to work on his theory of the absolutisation of mathematics (the mathematisation of all possible worlds), though in relatively divergent ways. In his second book, *The Number and the Siren*, he analyses chance, while in the article examined below, "Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition", he investigates the "sign devoid of meaning".<sup>65</sup> In the first book, in sleuth-like fashion he stalks the absolute in the form of contingency with the aid of Mallarmé's poem *A Throw of the Dice will Never Abolish Chance*, while in the second text the absolute acquires the form of the contingency of the empty sign. However, both cases involve an attempt to think the absolute, i.e. to find a formal language (mathematics) reflecting a reality outside the subjective human position.

Brassier advances very similar criticisms in *Nihil Unbound*, though he is also generous in his praise of Meillassoux's philosophy.<sup>66</sup> He also addresses the problem of ancestrality and Meillassoux's strategy of creating a difference between correlation and the outside, between anthropomorphic and cosmological time, on a chronological base.<sup>67</sup> Brassier views

<sup>63</sup> MEILLASSOUX, *After Finitude*, p. 117.

<sup>64</sup> See, for example, Ricardo L. NIRENBERG – David NIRENBERG, "Badiou's Number: A Critique of Mathematics as Ontology", *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 37, 2011, no. 4, pp. 583–614.

<sup>65</sup> Quentin MEILLASSOUX, *The Number and the Siren: A Decipherment of Mallarmé's Coup De Dés*, Falmouth: Urbanomic 2012; MEILLASSOUX, "Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition", pp. 121–122.

<sup>66</sup> See BRASSIER, *Nihil Unbound*, e.g. pp. 49, 58, 64.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

the problem of mathematisation in a similar light. On the one hand, Meillassoux defends the access of thinking to being by means of mathematisation, while on the other he has to avoid mathematical ontology (the reduction of being to mathematics), since this would contradict his rejection of the principle of sufficient reason (there would exist a mathematical reason for the existence of objects such as they are) and would propel him back into correlation because of idealism (the mathematical ideality controlling the reality of the world).<sup>68</sup> It is the relationship between reality and ideality that in Brassier's commentary is the key problem in Meillassoux's philosophy. The distinction is necessary in order to maintain the difference between the present of correlation and the past of ancestrality, between the ideality of ancestral statements and the reality of ancestral facts. At the same time, however, he cannot cover his tracks with recourse to the dualism of thinking and being, since this would entail a return to correlation. According to Meillassoux, thinking in its ideality can find contact with reality by means of mathematisation. On the other hand, ideality cannot be fully mathematical or Meillassoux would be advocating mathematical ontology, which would mean a return to metaphysics.

Brassier concludes his commentary by saying that Meillassoux must resolve the "distinction between the reality of the ancestral phenomenon and the ideality of the ancestral statement".<sup>69</sup> He must defend the relationship of the real and the ideal such that he not return once more to the correlationist circle of being and thinking.<sup>70</sup> According to Brassier, in the final analysis, Meillassoux does not present a clear concept of being that would compete with the phenomenological or metaphysical concepts that he is so prone to criticise.<sup>71</sup>

If we now return to our map and territory, to the attempt on the part of speculative realism to reject the correlationist construction of territory by means of the map, we see that Meillassoux's solution does not involve a rejection of the map in favour of direct access to the territory. On the contrary,

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 87.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 94, 87.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 88.

the territory itself is subject to absolute contingency and is indescribable by physical or any other method, with the exception of mathematics. And so, according to Meillassoux, we must reject not only the correlationist mapping of reality, but the very idea of genuine territory, and replace both within a specific mathematisable structure, or, if I may continue with the spatial metaphor, a Cartesian set of coordinates. This, argues Meillassoux, is the meaning and significance of the Copernican-Galilean revolution of modern science. At the same time, it raises doubts as to what extent Meillassoux's mathematic mat(h)erialism<sup>72</sup> is materialism.

322

### **3. Subjectalism and poststructuralism**

At around the same time, he began filming photographs of all the people he had known, from Geneviève to Olga, including Franz, Michel Houellebecq, his father, some other people too, in fact all those he had photographs of. He fixed them to a neutral gray waterproof canvas, and shot them just in front of his home, this time letting natural decay take its course. Subjected to the alternations of rain and sunlight, the photographs crinkled, rotted in places, then decomposed into fragments, and were totally destroyed in the space of a few weeks.<sup>73</sup>

The attack by speculative thinking (including Meillassoux) on the concept and role of the subject is far from being the first of its kind. Post-Kantian philosophy, about which Meillassoux is so scathing, contains a range of positions that are critical of subjectivity, especially the idea of a transparent human subject guaranteeing objective cognition,<sup>74</sup> as well as the subject as such. Meillassoux is aware of this and so expands his philosophy to include an attack on the “critique of the subject”. In a recent

<sup>72</sup> MEILLASSOUX, “Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition”, p. 154.

<sup>73</sup> HOUELLEBECQ, *The Map and the Territory*.

<sup>74</sup> For instance, when Vincent Descombes reviews the “European struggle” over the subject, he claims that both champions and critics agree that the subject lacks two properties: transparency and sovereignty, see Vincent DESCOMBES, *Le complément de sujet*, Paris: Gallimard 2004, p. 10.

article entitled “Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition: A Speculative Analysis of the Meaningless Sign”, which represents the most important shift in his criticism of correlationism from the original study *After Finitude*, he articulates in more detail both correlationism and the position of subjectalism, which he had previously called “subjective metaphysics”.<sup>75</sup>

Post-Kantian philosophy is not simply correlationist, but consists of two lines of thought, namely, subjectalism and correlationism in the narrowest sense of the word,<sup>76</sup> which provide both a speculative and anti-speculative answer to the problem of correlation and open up an entire era in this history of philosophy:

323

It is indeed an Era that we are dealing with here, *since it crosses many epochs* of philosophy, allowing us to discover in it the perenniality of the intracorrelational opposition between subjectalism and correlationism: the late Renaissance and the Classical Age (from Montaigne to Leibniz); the Enlightenment (Diderot/Kant); the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (early Fichte/Hegel); the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (neo-Kantianism and Husserlianism on one side, Bergsonism on the other), the second part of the twentieth century (Ruyer and Deleuze, faced by certain variants of postmodernity), etc.<sup>77</sup>

I have expressed doubts, to put it mildly, regarding the applicability of the term correlationism to the whole of post-Kantian philosophy, and its division into these lines does little to assuage my anxieties. Meillassoux labels very different philosophies with the term subjectalism or vitalism (from Berkeley and Hegel via Nietzsche and Bergson to Deleuze and Harman), which he claims attribute subjective traits (perception, habitus, creation, life) to material reality,<sup>78</sup> or to be more precise, overcome correlation by absolutising the subjective position

<sup>75</sup> MEILLASSOUX, “Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition”, pp. 121–122.

<sup>76</sup> As far back as *After Finitude* Meillassoux had been using the term “subjective metaphysics”, but in a very limited way.

<sup>77</sup> MEILLASSOUX, “Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition”, p. 122.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

(e.g. perception – Berkeley, reason – Hegel, will – Schopenhauer, the plurality of will – Nietzsche, or freedom – Bergson).<sup>79</sup> The “strangest moment” then occurs, according to Meillassoux, when vitalist authors attempt a radical critique of the subject. Such philosophers, he claims, reject certain basic aspects of modern or Cartesian subjectivity (consciousness, reason and freedom), only to hypostasise other subjective traits that they attribute generally to reality (albeit mostly organic).<sup>80</sup> It is as though they have simply exchanged anthropocentrism for anthropomorphism. However, these philosophies are basically, to use Meillassoux’s terminology, a “speculative gesture” (they overcome correlation by absolutising it)<sup>81</sup> and realist (inasmuch as they regard a certain element as real and absolute).<sup>82</sup> Their problem as far as Meillassoux is concerned is that they are also metaphysical (they continue to be based on the principle of sufficient reason: things are as they are for a certain reason) and non-materialistic (they do not adhere to the accessibility of external reality independent of any subjectivity).

Meillassoux sets his materialist absolutory, based on the contingency of the existing, in opposition to this absolutism, established metaphysically. He claims we have only two possible options in relation to correlationism: either absolutistic metaphysics (that assumes the principle of sufficient reason and by extension the necessity of being), or absolutory speculation (that in its capacity as absolute and necessary recognises only contingency).<sup>83</sup>

Rather than seek subjectivities around us, Meillassoux claims we should focus on what is “dead, totally deprived of life”.<sup>84</sup> His materialism is therefore in sharp opposition to the way that Deleuze and Guattari understand materialism, who say that “Unformed matter, the phylum, is not dead, brute, homogeneous matter, but a matter-movement bearing singularities or haecceities, qualities and even operations”.<sup>85</sup> Unlike materialism,

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 121.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 124.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 122. Despite this explicit designation, these philosophies do not meet another criterion of speculation, namely the rejection of the principle of sufficient reason.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 126.

<sup>85</sup> Gilles DELEUZE – Felix GUATTARI, *A Thousand Plateaus*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press 1987, p. 512.

which wants to investigate and chart these movements, Meillassoux puts all matter at risk of absolute contingency. In this sense he regards his concept as “non-intrusive”,<sup>86</sup> since it does not prescribe any entities or principles (apart from necessary and absolute contingency) and leaves it to “all other disciplines of thought *that they alone have the right to describe and to explain* (in a non-necessarist form) *the world in which we live*”.<sup>87</sup> Meillassoux regards their structure as an organogram, an organisational chart showing the distribution of knowledge within individual disciplines that individually cannot exceed or explain all the others. The structure of the academic production of knowledge has ontological significance for him. On the other hand, the nature of art and literature is such that they evade such an organisational structure.<sup>88</sup> Meillassoux does not specify why this is so. However, it seems clear that, while science is divided into disciplines employing disparate methodologies and domains of knowledge and without the possibility of creating a meta-position or total synthesis (a knowledge of knowledge), art avails itself of the freedom to overcome these differences and, indeed, to interrogate these interstices and fissures.<sup>89</sup> Whatever the case, being itself contains these fissures, to which the plurality of disciplines corresponds. In other words, we always have more than one map of the territory (reality), and these maps only ever correspond (by virtue of their structure) to the structure of reality.

It is precisely in this regard that Meillassoux offers subjectalism another chance, so long as it surrenders its metaphysical claims and attempts to legitimise itself by means of the postulate of a “possible project for the description of our world”.<sup>90</sup> Within the context of Meillassoux’s absolutely random universe, stable situations can arise that can be described using one of these theories. Within Meillassoux’s absolutely random world there is therefore space, if not for necessity, then at least

<sup>86</sup> MEILLASSOUX, “Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition”, p. 141.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 143–144.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 144–145.

<sup>89</sup> It seems that this is also the role played by art in Meillassoux’s essay on Mallarmé’s *Coup de Dés*: MEILLASSOUX, *The Number and the Siren*.

<sup>90</sup> MEILLASSOUX, “Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition”, p. 152.

for sufficiently stable situations that can be mapped scientifically and philosophically.<sup>91</sup> It would appear that Meillassoux himself offers a non-metaphysical “postulatory” reading of, for instance, Deleuze’s philosophy,<sup>92</sup> which he does not want to exclude from his system, even though his materialism is clearly superior to it. The same is true of the natural sciences, which according to Meillassoux describe regularities but not universally valid laws. The subject of their investigation may always be something else or not be at all.<sup>93</sup> This means that in the end it is possible for us to reflect hypothetically upon the world (in the concepts of subjectalism) without having any right to claim general validity for our findings.<sup>94</sup> On the other hand, speculation in the true sense of the word has the right to truth, but only on condition that it says nothing of the actual world but only of its speculative conditions of possibility. It is for this reason that when Meillassoux speaks of the individual theses of his philosophy, e.g. the mathematisation of the world, such theses do not relate to the (f)actual world but must be applied to every possible world.

As regards the map and the territory, in the end Meillassoux does not reject the process of mapping (be this on a disciplinary or now philosophical level), since his mathematised set of coordinates is able to encompass not only a randomly changing territory, but also different attempts at its mapping. On the other hand, within the framework of speculative materialism, not only is Meillassoux uninterested in (correlationist) mapping, he is uninterested in the territory itself (be it metaphysical or subjectalist). And so we must go back to his theory in order to find out what the *grand dehors* actually consists of.

Apart from contingency, Meillassoux also attempts to defend a second necessary dimension of his materialism, namely the mathematisation of the world. In the article I have just analysed (and as the title implies), he attempts to do this via the “ontology of the empty sign”. This is the most fundamental form of the

<sup>91</sup> Such a mapping would not be metaphysical but “crypto-physical”, *ibid.*, p. 153.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 152–153.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 156–157.

<sup>94</sup> However, another problem arises. According to Meillassoux, the most effective attack on subjectalism is correlationism: “If we leave subjectalism and correlationism face to face, it will always be the second that carries the day by way of emphasizing the facticity of any correlate whatsoever.” *Ibid.*, p. 151.

sign. Devoid of any meaning it is reduced to its material support: “a trace of ink on paper, a sound wave, or, we might say today, liquid crystal visible on a screen”.<sup>95</sup> Though Meillassoux of course alludes to Saussure’s arbitrariness of the sign (the relationship between signifier and signified), he clearly considers his own understanding of arbitrariness to be anterior.

According to Saussure, every sign comprises a signifier (e.g. the word “tree”) and a signified (the concept of a tree). The relationship between signifier and signified is arbitrary, i.e. there is no universal reason why a certain referent is assigned to a certain word. Unlike Saussure, Meillassoux wants to capture the sign even before it acquires a referent, before the signifier receives the signified. Meillassoux claims that this arbitrariness is necessary if we are to understand the sign as sign.<sup>96</sup> What he calls the “material” conditions of the possibility of the sign have, it goes without saying, an immaterial power of reproduction, e.g. “\$\$\$”, etc.”.<sup>97</sup> This is a sign using which we can perform certain operations (iteration), but completely independently of its content. A key question for Meillassoux is “from what capacity of the mind does this ‘etc.’ come?”<sup>98</sup> It is at this very moment, he claims, that thinking can attain a certain absolute, i.e. thinking can transcend itself and thus the circle of correlation, because it encompasses something completely necessary, independent of any content.

The answer to this question is *iteration as the operating principle of the great outdoors*. Meillassoux uses the hypothetical scenario of an archaeologist who finds two rows of the same signs:

§§§§§§  
 ++++++++<sup>99</sup>

The archaeologist first assumes that these are motifs of a *frieze* embellishing the edge of a tablet. However, she suddenly realises that this frieze might in fact be two *lines* of signs. Meillassoux describes the difference between the first and second

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 161.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 170, 168.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 171.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 172.

mode of understanding as the transition from the contingency of the object (the frieze on the tablet) to a realisation of this contingency of the object (the awareness that these are signs that mean something).<sup>100</sup> Thus we arrive at the sign, which is already endowed with arbitrariness but does not fill it in with specific meaning. Meillassoux gives us to understand that this is how we can overcome the correlationist method of understanding the world.<sup>101</sup> We accomplish this via formal language (reiteration), which is in the radical sense of the word devoid of content (not only of the signifier). Analogously, Meillassoux's speculative materialism is devoid of the possibility of saying anything about the actual world. For Meillassoux the empty sign corresponds to absolute contingency (it is not dependent on any being and is therefore compatible with the being or non-being of any being), while at the same time evading correlation because it is independent of the thinking subject: it is a necessary (absolute) fact.

Armen Avanesian, one of the editors of the anthology in which the above article was published, responded immediately to it with a contribution entitled "Language Ontology". Drawing on his long-standing project devoted to speculative poetics, he attempts to defend the thesis that language itself, i.e. language generally, not simply its formalised variants, has ontological relevance.<sup>102</sup> He differentiates between two approaches to language, the correlationist and the realist:

A realist or materialist ontology of language – unlike the correlationist or metaphysical one – has to reject the sceptical poststructuralist commonplace that language merely forms the world or creates the images of world. From the point of view of a speculative linguistics or a speculative poetics, language both changes the world of which it is a part and, at the same time, optimizes human cognition by means of recursive structures.<sup>103</sup>

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 182.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 183. The article lacks a clear conclusion and ends with an enumeration of many problems that are to become the subject of further investigation. *Ibid.*, p. 187.

<sup>102</sup> Armen AVANESSIAN, "Language Ontology", in: *Idem*–MALIK, *Genealogies of Speculation*, pp. 199, 201.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 211.

Language is not therefore simply a *dispositif* (apparatus) mapping territory (poststructuralism), but has an internal recursive structure. This means that it is not simple representation approaching reality in order to describe or chart it, but has its own formal principles that structure our world, not in accordance with a particular language, but from the perspective of any possible language. It has ontological relevance and is thus a certain territory of our world: “While using language in speaking we change, in infinitesimally small steps, not just the language as such but our being in the world.”<sup>104</sup>

And so, while Meillassoux claims that it the empty sign that allows us to experience the “pure absence of necessity”, the radical “nonfoundation of all beings, not of the sign alone”,<sup>105</sup> Avanesian states that our natural language can perform the same function. Inasmuch as Meillassoux wishes to overcome the circle of correlation and reject the poststructuralist (mapping) apparatus by means of formal, mathematicised language with the example of the reiteration of the sign, Avanesian claims that this principle is contained in any natural language within the framework of its recursive structure. In doing so, however, he returns the poststructuralist criticism (of language) to the game and, more generally, my metaphor of mapping. For if language contains certain elements of an absolute dimension (whether this be by virtue of its recursive structure or reiteration), then it is ontologically relevant to study the means by which language covers and maps our reality.

Every map assumes a scale and a certain network of arbitrary, mathematisable coordinates. Language is analysed using its own resources. The map becomes part of the territory, as in the introductory quote by Alfred Korzybský or in the famous short story by Jorge Luis Borges entitled “On Rigour in Science”, in which cartographers create a map of a province the size of a city and a map of an empire covering the entire province.<sup>106</sup> The arbitrariness of scale (like recursivity and iterability) on the one

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 210.

<sup>105</sup> MEILLASSOUX, “Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition”, p. 182.

<sup>106</sup> Jorge Luis BORGES, “O důslednosti vědy”, in: *Obecné dějiny hanebnosti*, Prague: Práce 1990, pp. 104–106.

hand reveals to us the arbitrariness of map-making, while on the other shows us that the map enters the territory (hence the doubly absurd point of the story).

#### **4. Conclusion – the relationship of map and territory**

The entrance to the hall was barred by a big panel, leaving two-meters-wide passageways at either side, on which Jed had displayed a satellite photo taken around the mountain of Guebwiller next to an enlargement of a Michelin Departments map of the same zone. The contrast was striking: while the photograph showed only a soup of more or less uniform green sprinkled with vague blue spots, the map developed a fascinating maze of departmental and scenic roads, viewpoints, forests, lakes, and cols. Above the two enlargements, in black capital letters, was the title of the exhibition: THE MAP IS MORE INTERESTING THAN THE TERRITORY.<sup>107</sup>

330

When describing Martin's career, works and exhibitions, Houellebecq oscillates between an attempt to depict the world of art realistically and a certain anti-intellectual irony, an oft-commented aspect of his novels.<sup>108</sup> What is certainly true is that the duplication (map and territory) continues to proliferate. In a review of a Jed Martin exhibition we read: "With that profound tranquillity of the great revolutionaries,' he wrote, 'the artist—a man of tender age—moves away, starting with the inaugural piece by which he makes us enter his world, from that naturalist and neo-pagan vision by which our contemporaries exhaust themselves in an attempt to retrieve the image of the Absent One. Not without gallant audacity, he adopts the point of view of a God co-participating, alongside man, in the (re)construction of the world'."<sup>109</sup>

<sup>107</sup> HOUELLEBECQ, *The Map and the Territory*. p. 63.

<sup>108</sup> See, for instance, Carole SWEENEY, *Michel Houellebecq and the Literature of Despair*, London: Bloomsbury 2013.

<sup>109</sup> HOUELLEBECQ, *The Map and the Territory*, pp. 64–65.

It is as if the reviewer were praising not only Jed Martin but Meillassoux too. As we have seen, the latter's speculative materialism consists of a rejection of any "absent" dispositifs, especially vitalism and subjectalism, that we might identify with naturalism or neo-paganism, and instead tries to resuscitate the relationship of thinking to the absolute. As I have observed many times, Meillassoux does not wish to say anything about our actual world, but is more interested in its conditions of possibility. He wants to offer us "support during its (re)construction".

I believe that, though the schema of map and territory does not function in its simple form, a wholesale rejection of the map and *dispositifs* of poststructuralism is not the answer. What I am saying is that we cannot reduce the problem of realism to an attempt to relinquish the map in favour of a direct relationship with the territory (as this would represent a return to a dogmatic metaphysics). This is not because the very endeavour is naive, but because it fails completely to resolve the problem of realism. If we are going to be realists simply because we acknowledge as real those entities (territories) that are independent of our representations (maps), then the problem of realism returns in relation to our representations, which we have prevented from being real by virtue of the self-same procedure. It is their (precarious) reality that Borges addresses in his story.

We have seen that what is at first sight Meillassoux's enormously complex solution lies not in giving precedence to territory over map, but in the rejection of both. We can get rid of poststructuralist *dispositifs* (the anti-realist approach to language, consciousness, power, etc.) only on condition that we also get rid of the territory, in which case we will be incapable of saying anything about the actual world. The boundary between us and the *grand dehors* is therefore not between the map and the territory, but between the territory and its conditions of possibility. And yet, as I have shown, this solution is not without its own problems. Brassier, for instance, doubts that an investment in the chronological difference between correlationist schema (the map and territory) and realism (the *grand dehors*) consisting of the concept of ancestrality is convincing. He also shows that Meillassoux has not extricated himself from the duality of the real (ancestral phenomena) and ideal (postulates of ancestrality), and that this threatens a return to correlation.

In “Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition”, Meillassoux mounts an attack not only on correlationism (the duality of map and territory), but also on subjectalism. He sees this as the more important adversary and the very antithesis of his own theory. This is because subjectalism represents the opposite reaction to the problem of correlationism. Instead of rejecting the *dispositif* / reality combo, as does Meillassoux, subjectalism attempts to show that the map and the territory cannot be separated. This category would include Nietzsche’s perspectivism (reality is (de)formed by our specific position, by the act of mapping), the idiosyncratic materialism of Deleuze and Guattari (an entire index of multiplicities, lines, strata, sediments, intensities, etc., that on the other hand rest on the “univocity of being”),<sup>110</sup> or for instance Harman’s object-oriented ontology (objects show signs of subjectivity).<sup>111</sup> I have tried to show here that these positions (Meillassoux on the one hand and a certain type of subjectalism on the other), though polar opposites, are not necessarily mutually exclusive. More specifically, Meillassoux holds out the possibility to these diverse forms of materialism without metaphysical claims of existing within his speculative materialism. At the same time, I have outlined Avanesian’s response to this text and its line of argument. Avanesian claims that the absolute dimension that Meillassoux looks for in the “empty sign” (reaching out into an absolutely contingent sphere beyond map and territory) is in reality part of the broader ontology of language, within the framework of which we can regard language more generally (even natural language in the sense of a map) as mediating this arbitrariness of signs.

332

And so the conclusion of my reading of Meillassoux’s philosophy might appear banal. The map and territory are an insufficient approximation of thinking. We must reject them either in favour of the outside (Meillassoux’s chosen option) or in the sense of their mutual interdependency (subjectalism and poststructuralism). However, this conclusion too can have a surprising consequence, and from this perspective neither solution is excluded. We are just as free to explore the

<sup>110</sup> DELEUZE–GUATTARI, *Thousand Plateaus*, p. 5. Meillassoux examines the “mono-pluralismus” of Deleuze and Guattari in MEILLASSOUX, “Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition”, p. 190.

<sup>111</sup> MEILLASSOUX, “Iteration, Reiteration, Repetition”, p. 191.

*dispositifs* of our current reality as we are to speculate on the conditions of possibility completely disencumbered from the concrete world we inhabit at any given moment. It goes without saying that the problem of such a solution resides in the fact that it assumes a hierarchy of systems of cognition (Meillassoux). Speculative materialism feels itself to be superior to the investigation of our world that science reserves for itself,<sup>112</sup> but implicitly admits the possibility of squeezing into this space the philosophical investigation of our world (without a claim to necessity).

We must face the fact that Meillassoux's project throws up many problematic issues, some of which I have outlined here, others I did not have the space to address. I would just mention one thing. Along with the problem of the actual world and the mapping thereof (social, cultural, ideological, etc.), the political dimension has disappeared entirely from Meillassoux's philosophy.<sup>113</sup> Readers who approach speculative realism in the hope that, unlike poststructuralism, its philosophical predecessor, it will provide more adequate resources for thinking through, if not resolving, the problems of our times, are likely to experience disappointment upon encountering Meillassoux's texts, with their tendency to verbosity only matched by their reluctance to address counterarguments. This in fact was my main motivation for seeking dialogue, or at least compatibility, between speculative and poststructuralist philosophy, between a way of thinking that rejects the metaphor of the map and one that subjects it to ongoing criticism. I wanted to track down areas of potential dialogue with current speculative tendencies that did not necessarily involve rejecting the previous, especially poststructuralist, tradition. It seems to me that it would be possible to include within Meillassoux's materialism the absolute contingency of many other materialisms, whether

<sup>112</sup> One of the problems of Meillassoux's philosophy is its ambivalent relationship with science. On the one hand, it attempts to defend science and leave it its own space, including the proclamation of "non-intrusiveness" (*ibid.*, pp. 141, 144). However, it achieves this at the cost of hierarchisation and the denial of the claim to necessity.

<sup>113</sup> I must, however, mention at least the consistency of Meillassoux's argument against fideism, i.e. any return to a religious form of the absolute or *grand dehors* under the influence of poststructuralism or social constructivism, which ignore the problem of the absolute. See, for example, MEILLASSOUX, *After Finitude*, p. 46.

they be based on Deleuzian philosophy (Manuel DeLanda), media theory (Jussi Parikka), humanism (Reza Negarestani), or indeed posthumanism (Rosi Braidotti). These and many other varieties of materialism are based on the interconnectedness of territory and the mapping thereof (and not on the dualism of subject/object). Meillassoux's philosophy holds itself aloof from this interconnectedness and thus in a certain sense is compatible with it.

Though speculative realism has perhaps not lived up to the many unrealistic expectations invested in it, it has a host of fascinating manoeuvres at its disposal, whether these be within the territory or outside it. Inasmuch as it revisits old problems, it does so by creating new navigational possibilities, to which I have attempted, with the aid of Houellebecq, to contribute with the simple and unsatisfactory schema of the map and territory.

334

This interpretation is, however, inadequate when one tries to make sense of the unease that grips us on seeing those pathetic Playmobil-type little figurines, lost in the middle of an abstract and immense futurist city, a city which itself crumbles and falls apart, then seems gradually to be scattered across the immense vegetation extending to infinity. That feeling of desolation, too, that takes hold of us as the portraits of the human beings who had accompanied Jed Martin through his earthly life fall apart under the impact of bad weather, then decompose and disappear, seeming in the last videos to make themselves the symbols of the generalized annihilation of the human species. They sink and seem for an instant to put up a struggle, before being suffocated by the superimposed layers of plants. Then everything becomes calm. There remains only the grass swaying in the wind. The triumph of vegetation is total.**114**