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Cube-Shaped Planet

This essay looks at a set of recent and not-so-recent works of fiction and criticism in order to develop some claims about the status of intention, and more specifically how one goes about representing and interpreting a phenomenon like intention, in the age of the so-called Anthropocene. "So-called" here is not meant to signal cynicism, and certainly not climate-change skepticism. My concern is to explore the kinds of desires involved in rethinking the world as no longer divided between spheres of causes and reasons, which is to say divided between events that are natural in the sense that they are ultimately explicable as instances of natural laws, and events that are actions, i.e. that can only be explained by appeals to some kind of agential motivation that is not beholden to predictive schemata. One of the most striking aspects of the Anthropocene's function in humanities scholarship today is the equivocation over its implications for thinking through this division. In other words, there is no clarity, much less agreement, on whether our behaviour is finally becoming thoroughly naturalized, amenable to the same kind of scientific investigation as physical phenomena, or instead whether nature is being reenchanted with a kind of purposiveness that is continuous with, rather than contrastable to, the kind of purposiveness that is an explanatory element in human action.

The treatment of this division as a problem has been central to philosophy from Kant to Davidson, which makes the present confusion all the more glaring. Yet sometimes when our ideas are incoherent it takes a certain figural representation of that incoherence to make it discernible. Such at any rate is the motivating idea behind what follows.[1]

[1] This essay was conceived during John Attridge's visit to the Humanities Research Centre at the Australian National University in the southern winter of 2016 and it bears the stamp of my conversations with him. Other intellectual debts are clear from the authors cited and discussed. A final debt must be repaid to Sigi Jöttkandt for her invitation to contribute to this journal issue and to participate in the RPE2 conference that she hosted in Sydney in 2015, which provided the backdrop for much of my thinking here.

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Rips That Can't Occur

About midway through the middle section of Paul Bowles's *The Sheltering Sky* (1949), Kit Moresby realizes that her husband Port is likely going to die very soon. The scene takes place on a bus rumbling through the Sahara at night. The story to this point has shuttled between existential voyage and domestic melodrama. Kit and Port have each had their indiscretions, Port in an arranged encounter with an unknown woman in the desert night, Kit on an overnight train with their travelling companion and fellow American, George Tunner. With death now on the agenda, the natural world begins to insist in a new and peculiar way. Port's teeth chatter as he slips into delirious sleep. Kit becomes pensive in the narrator's account:

> She looked out at the windswept darkness. The new moon had slipped behind the earth's sharp edge. Here in the desert, even more than in the sea, she had the impression that she was on top of a great table, that the horizon was the brink of space. She imagined a cube-shaped planet somewhere above the earth, between it and the moon, to which somehow they had been transported. The light would be hard and unreal as it was here, the air would be of the same taut dryness, the contours of the landscape would lack the comforting terrestrial curves, just as they did all through this vast region. And the silence would be of the ultimate degree, leaving room only for the sound of the air as it moved past (143).

Walter Benjamin writes somewhere that the future world dreamed of in the nineteenth century will be exactly the same as this one, except different. For Kit Moresby, the dream threatens to become nightmare. Everything on the cube-shaped planet is exactly as it is here on this planet. The only difference is the shape of the planet itself. But the puzzle of this passage is that the cubic shape is what's discerned here in the real world (of the book, that is). The passage begins as description of Kit's impressions of what she sees before her. It then shifts to the conditional: "the light would be hard," the air would be dry, "the landscape would lack the comforting terrestrial curves." But here's the concern: the landscape *does* lack the comforting terrestrial curves. It's that actual vision of the brink – the sharp edge – that sets her on this reverie. The world as it appears geometrically is not the world as it is actually. But which one is real? What is the world that Kit lives in? This turns out to be one of the central questions of the book.

The counterintuitive idea that reality is ephemeral despite the solidity of appearance is figured in the title of the novel, an image that is deployed as well when Port finally succumbs to the typhoid fever that has overtaken him: "A black star appears, a point of darkness in the night sky's clarity. Point of darkness and gateway to repose. Reach out, pierce the fine fabric of the sheltering sky, take repose" (188). The figure evokes an earlier moment in the book when Kit remembers being told that the sky hides the night, that it shelters a person from horror. The other side is a "giant maw." Fixing the "solid emptiness" before her provokes anguish. "At any moment the rip can occur."

But it can't, of course, because there's nothing to rip. In this instance, what is figured as real cannot actually be real. To be sure, the sky does shelter us from the inhospitable nature of outer space. Atmosphere is a kind of container. It nevertheless dissipates on approach. There is nothing to rip, nothing to pierce. One would say that the sky itself evaporates were it not the case that the sky is the milieu in which evaporation takes place.

The psychological themes of the book are all perfectly recognizable: fear of dissolution, unstable identity, death as transformation. Bowles's novel bridges the genres of colonial adventurism and existentialism, not unlike André Malraux's work in the interwar years.[2] It is redolent of romantic ennui filtered through a modernist conception of prose, and thus of a piece with much mid-twentieth century fiction. Though celebrated, *The Sheltering Sky* has also been presented as a thoroughly middlebrow work of art, a specimen of avant-gardism marketed to masses seeking to ingratiate themselves in the upper cultural echelons of post-war boom times.[3] The genre elements of Bowles's novel are emblematic. But they are less interesting than the series of figures that orient its governing metaphor, the one expressed in the title. Appearance appears solid – dependable, a shelter. Reality is unreal, unreliable. The important point is that the reality of appearance is not to be confused with the reality of what appears. The idea that the earth is a cube is an idea that can only be represented in fiction, which is to say *as* fiction. This is the case because the earth is not a cube. Yet the

2 Compare Leslie Barnes, *Vietnam and the Colonial Condition of French Literature*, University of Nebraska Press, Lincoln, NE 2014, chapters 1 & 2.

3 Evan Brier, "Constructing the Postwar Art Novel: Paul Bowles, James Laughlin, and the Making of *The Sheltering Sky*," *PMLA*, 21 (1/2006), pp. 186-199.

representation of the earth as cubic exercises a kind of grip on the imagination because it accords precisely with the phenomenological experience of the world as flat, as fundamentally divided between earth and sky. Why should it be hard to believe the world is flat? After all, it looks flat.

The figure of division is spatialized in myriad ways in Bowles's novel. But it is equally temporal in the conflict that runs through the book between a cyclical conception of time and a linear one. Cyclical time is infinite within a bound loop; linear time is a kind of "bad infinity," inexorable in its form. Bowles concentrates this duality into singular images. "The limpid, burning sky each morning when she looked out the window from where she lay, repeated identically day after day, was part of an apparatus functioning without any relationship to her, a power that had gone on, leaving her behind" (227). The characters of the novel are constantly confronting and negotiating such divisions. "Whichever way she looked, the night's landscape suggested one thing to her: negation of movement, suspension of continuity" (181). That's two things, actually: space (movement) and time (continuity). But they're presented as one, oriented around division. One divides into two, as Mao used to say.

Divided loyalties structure the characters' sexual lives; like all of us, they are subjects of their own visions, objects in others." The concluding section of the novel – "The Sky" – opens with an epigraph from Kafka: "From a certain point onward there is no turning back. This is the point that must be reached." Kit exhausts herself in the end as a kind of pure object. She becomes, literally, an object of sexual pleasure exchanged among a band of Arab traders, with Belqassim at the helm. She herself comes to see others as interchangeable. Leaving Belqassim's home once he has lost interest in her – it hardly seems like escaping – "she realized that any creature even remotely resembling Belqassim would please her quite as much as Belqassim himself" (237). She opens herself to all that pleases her and a dissolution of identity is the predictable result. Ceasing to puzzle over omens, she embraces the fact that she has become one. No longer fearful of the inscrutable, she has become inscrutable – a cipher of feminine sexuality scripted nearly thirty years before Lacan's formalization of the same. The novel ends with her unresponsive to her name and indifferent to directions to reunite with Tunner, who waits for her in a Mediterranean hotel.

Kit dies a psychic death, Port an actual one. The author of the work lived for another fifty years, dying in 1999, and acquired a mystique as an expat living in Morocco for most of his life. Such biographical facts are especially salient in the case of *The Sheltering Sky*, given the similarities between the character Port and the "character" who is Paul Bowles. Both are New York literati types. Both are partners in marriages that deeply affect their sense of self and accomplishment. (Bowles, a failed poet and accomplished composer under the tutelage of Aaron Copeland, was apparently partly motivated to write *The Sheltering Sky* out of envy for the novelistic success of his wife, Jane.) But there is a fundamental sense in which Port and Paul are different, and not just because one is fictional. Port departs from his desire to write in a quest for transformative experience. Clues of his fate beyond the atmosphere are sketched from the opening scene, when he awakes at twilight in a North African hotel, "paralysed in the airless room." The parable of "Tea in the Sahara," which would later find a wider audience through Sting's lyrics for The Police's album *Synchronicity* (see above, re: middlebrow), also signals Port's fate. In their quest to have tea in the Sahara, the three women die of thirst, their glasses full of sand.

Port turns away from craft and care. He wills himself passive, in a way that will find a curious echo in Kit's decisions in the final act. He neglects to get immunized before his trip. The result is as ineluctable as the signalling is clear, especially in light of Kit's obsession with omens recounted in the book's first part. In this, his behaviour is the opposite of Bowles's. Bowles received an advance for his novel from Doubleday and travelled to North Africa with Jane to research and write the book.[4] Once he arrived, regardless of whatever adventures occurred, he succeeded in concentrating his energy to produce a supremely controlled literary work. In other words, the tendency toward disunity that is the most fundamental subject of *The Sheltering Sky* stands in marked contrast to the unified work that the book actually is. The subject of the work is not a stand-in for the work, just as Port, whatever else he is, is not a stand-in for Bowles. The work is constituted in a contrastive division between its form and its content. One can imagine an inversion of Bowles's work in a blathering sprawl of prose devoted to shoring up the identity of its protagonist. For an actual encounter with such work, log in to Twitter, or pick up any of the innumerable memoirs

4 Doubleday rejected the manuscript he submitted, failing to recognize it as a novel. The book was eventually published with New Directions. See the discussion in Ibid.

and attempts at creative auto-fiction that have taken over the publishing industry in the twenty-first century.

Implacable Forms

The middle chapter of Walter Benn Michaels's *The Beauty of Social Problem* (2015) is titled "The Experience of Meaning." The main work treated in the chapter is Tom McCarthy's novel *Remainder*, first published in 2005. The book tells the story of a man who survives a traumatic head injury and receives a lucrative settlement as a result. His sense of experience impoverished, he sets to recreating his memories of his life before the accident in as exacting a detail as his skill and funds can allow. He enlists employees to build sets; memories give way to imaginings, which serve as plans for new enactments. The novel culminates in a "staged" bank robbery in which the distinction between life and art, presentation and representation, breaks down as actual bullets result in actual deaths. On the lam, the narrator escapes by hijacking a plane, which comes to occupy a holding pattern in the sky – an infinite loop. The novel ends.

In his commentary, Michaels points to the significance of this ending. The book is narrated in the first person. Nothing in the narrator's behaviour suggests he'll change his mind and let the pilot land the plane. We know the plane can't circle forever, so presumably it has to run out of fuel at some point and fall to the ground. But then how does the story get told? Who survives to tell it? How does the book get written? In Michaels's interpretation, this narrative feature is an index of the distinction between the content of the work, its subject matter, and the work itself as a formed unity. It's a reminder that *Remainder* is a representation, "but one of the distinguishing features of a representation is that you can *mean* what you can't do" (73). In this case you can mean for a plane to fly forever. This formal feature of art is inscribed in the representation itself, however. *Remainder*'s narrator is obsessed with perfection, getting everything "just right." "To want the perfect in the real," Michaels writes, "is to want the frame or the form in the world [...]; what [the re-enactor] ends up wanting is to turn his world into a place where everything counts as intended" (97-8). Art can be perfect in a way that the world can never be, which is why it is subject to criticism in a way the world can never be. You can regret the weather, but it makes no sense to criticize it. "Only in a world that's 'meant to be' one way can it count as a mistake if things turn out another way" (102).

The desire for form – to impose form on the formless, to generate something perfect from the merely given – is what distinguishes the active creation of art from the passive experience of the world as an assemblage of objects and physical causes. For Michaels, this desire stands in polar contrast to the aesthetic imperative to let matter matter that has dominated theory and artistic practice in a neoliberal age. The experience of art, however, is structured by a strange duality, as the very expression implies – because there is no way to interpret an artwork without some experience of it. You can't look at or behold a painting without seeing it. You cannot read a book without looking at it, notwithstanding Silicon Valley's efforts to develop an apparatus that sequentially flashes words before your eyes at optimal speed. The idea is that it is not up to you the spectator to impose a form (though you invariably will) but to appreciate that there is a form that has not been imposed by you and that did not spontaneously emerge from the world at large, that is not, in any uncontroversial sense of the term, natural. Whatever form there is in the artwork that distinguishes it from the world is a form that is ontologically dependent upon the actions of the artist – even if the action the artist undertook was a kind of willed passivity, an abjuration of form.

This last qualification is important because it helps us understand the ambivalence of Michaels's perspective on authors and artists like Roland Barthes and John Cage. Such individuals radicalize the desire to let matter matter but in ways that serve ultimately to accentuate the implacability of form. Barthes's *punctum* is a function of the spectator's gaze, a radically individuated form that makes a single photograph the ground for a plurality of irreducibly unique experiences. Cage radicalized the autonomy of form in modernism by taking the irreducible form of music – sound – and making it the content of the work *4'33*." As with Barthes's *punctum*, each individual will experience the performance of this work differently, not just because of variations in "performances," but right down to the spatial coordinates your ears happen to occupy when a performance is underway.

Michaels's perspective is ambivalent because on the one hand such works are exemplary of bad, variously postmodern or neoliberal tendencies that suture meaning to individuated experience. But on the other hand, they do crucial theoretical work in foregrounding the issue of form. In the case of Barthes, Michaels is explicit about this. He demurs from Michael Fried's description of

Barthes's project as absorptive,[5] but he recognizes the dialectical centrality of Barthes work to any theorization of absorption and theatricality or any historical consideration of how that dialectic is playing itself out. In Cage's case, the inferences aren't fully cashed out by Michaels himself. If his composition is the ultimate refusal of form – the sonic equivalent of Tony Smith's unfinished New Jersey Turnpike at night – there is another way in which form insists in an overwhelming, determinant way. Wherever it is performed, whenever a recording is played, *4'33"* is always the same duration. It takes precisely four minutes and thirty-three seconds. One second more or less, and it isn't Cage's work. It wasn't his design. If form is intimately related to convention – and, in the sense Michaels relies on it in recent work, it decidedly is[6] – then Cage foregrounds the convention of time as a matter of minutes and seconds, agreed-upon units that coordinate social interaction in the modern age. Another way to consider this is to try to imagine what *4'33"* sounds like on fast-forward – chipmunk ambient?[7] The point is that the form of the work is ultimately inescapable, its single defining feature, the only thing that distinguishes it from mere sound, which is to say the only thing that distinguishes it from the world.

Seconds, minutes, and hours are conventional units, forms for enclosing and forging temporally discrete unities. But is time itself? It seems unlikely. Irrespective of the shape and size of cosmic entities and the gravitational forces they exert, it seems that something like duration is a metaphysical property of the universe we happen to live in. The division between earth and sky is not. It is in no metaphysically necessary way "meant to be." It is just how matter happens to be in this corner of the multiverse.

5 Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before*, Yale University Press, New Haven, CT 2008, chapter 4.

6 In this and other respects, the attention Michaels pays to form in his recent work revises or at least modifies the positions on conventionalism in the "Against Theory" articles he co-authored with Steven Knapp. See W.J.T. Mitchell, ed. *Against Theory: Literary Studies and the New Pragmatism*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1982.

7 Yet another way to make the point: The Magnetic Fields include a cover of Cage's *4'33"* on their dual album *The Wayward Bus/Distant Plastic Trees*, and they've also been known to play it live as an encore. A final way: set your iPhone timer (or any timer) for 4:33 and press play. You may have just listened to John Cage's *4'33"*. If you didn't mean to listen to it, that is, if you didn't undertake actions with the aim of listening to Cage's composition, then you haven't listened to Cage's composition.

Denaturation and Truth

The ingenuity of Bowles's work in *The Sheltering Sky* is to take our phenomenological experience of the world and to accentuate its representational quality by denaturalizaing it. It's important to understand why this aesthetic effort is significant. Central to phenomenological philosophy from Husserl onwards has been the tendency to ask us to suspend the natural attitude, which objectifies the world, and to attend instead to the modes of appearance that our perceptual being more fundamentally comprises. But the endgame of phenomenology is to invert the premises. It turns out, of course, that the natural attitude is not natural at all, but a product of years of cultural accretion, conventions and ways of seeing that have accrued for contingent reasons and that now shape our vision of the world in a fundamental way. The more natural attitude – the one closer to nature, to being itself – is one that prioritizes the phenomenon, the appearance. This is why Merleau-Ponty finds more authenticity in a vision of the Sun as nearby, rather than an object of astronomical measurement.[8] We still say sunrise and sunset even though we know the terms are wrong. We don't say earthturn 1 and earthturn 2.

When Kit attends to the world she feels drawn to the Earth's sharp edge. Her and Port's efforts toward relieving themselves of responsibility, of purposefully disavowing their capacity for purposiveness, do not result in encounters with a more primordial or authentic nature. Port thinks he's going to have a transformative experience in the desert. Instead, it's a typical tourist shakedown. He's led into the night, into a tent, by a pimp he's met in town, who assures him repeatedly that he's not being set up for a scene in which cash payment will be expected. A nameless woman tells him a beguiling tale. Congress ensues. In the morning, his wallet has been stolen and the woman is gone. The struggles with the mother and son team known as the Lyles give the book its only real semblance of plot. This plot is a comedy of mistaken identities and hotel antics. The Lyles are con artists. They steal Port's passport. Bowles's humour insists. Loss of identity isn't about the limits of embodied experience; it's about being unable to authenticate yourself before colonial authorities. It's about being able to justify – or not – just what the hell you are doing here.

8 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays*, ed. and trans. James M. Edie, Northwestern University Press, Evanston, IL 1964, pp. 12-27.

Throughout their descents, Kit and Port cling to their representations, their perceptual needs, foregrounding nature not as it is but as they imagine it to be. At every turn, whenever they break through – piercing, rupture, such figures abound – they don't encounter unformed nature. They encounter capitalism. We know they are in Africa because Europe is marred by recent conflict; the war is too present still. They need to get further afield if there's any chance of escaping modern trappings and conventions. But the drive toward nature only serves to accentuate the primacy of conventions, forms of relation that are indifferent to the natures of the relata. There is nothing to know; there is no there there, to ape Gertrude Stein. There is no untouched nature, no beyond. There is finitude and exchange. Port loses his passport and dies. Kit still has hers – she remains passed from one to another – but is unresponsive to her name. Death or capitalism. These are the options faced by the protagonists of Bowles's work. It is yet another fundamental division figured in its pages.

In "The Freudian Thing," Lacan writes:

> A truth, it must be said, is not easy to recognize once it has been received. Not that there aren't any established truths, but they are so easily confused with the reality that surrounds them that no other artifice was for a long time found to distinguish them from it than to mark them with the sign of the spirit and, in order to pay them homage, to regard them as having come from another world (408/330).

Truth presents itself as otherworldly but such presentation is false. The effort to make it otherworldly is a consequence of the desire to endow it with significance, to weight it with a meaning that the surrounding reality alone does not or cannot bear. When Kit sees the earth's sharp edge she imagines herself transported to a cubic planet, knowing full well that that the reality she imagines is this planet. There is only one scene of Kit and Port's life together beyond the diegetic parameters of the novel. It begins oddly, in that the narrator presents it as a memory that Kit has forgotten. But Port's words to her that "August afternoon only a little more than a year ago" are recounted in direct quotation:

> "Death is always on the way, but the fact that you don't know when it will arrive seems to take from the finiteness of life. It's that terrible precision that we hate so much. But because we don't know, we get to think of life as an inexhaustible well. Yet everything happens only a certain number of times, and a very small number,

> really. How many more times will you remember a certain afternoon of your childhood, some afternoon that's so deeply a part of your being that you can't even conceive of your life without it? Perhaps four or five times more. Perhaps not even. How many more times will you watch the full moon rise? Perhaps twenty. And yet it all seems so limitless" (190).

The narrator then continues: "She had not listened at the time because the idea had depressed her; now if she had called it to mind it would have seemed beside the point. She was incapable now of thinking about death, and since death was there beside her, she thought of nothing at all" (190).

When nature is present, it requires no representation. Death is not figured because death is there. This memory of Port is one that she has forgotten. And yet it is recounted. Like *Remainder*'s narrator in flight on an infinite loop, this is something that could only happen in fiction. *Remainder*'s narrator is also a character in the work. *The Sheltering Sky*'s narrator is not. The narrator is omniscient, but coy. Again, this is the only scene of Kit and Port's life outside the space of the novel or the story that is recounted. In any event, Bowles, in writing this scene, figures forth an impossible scene. He insists on the importance for Kit of a memory that she consciously disavows – of a truth that she did not want to hear at the time and that, if she had heard it, she would not want to recall now.

Nature and Negligence

Returning to France in 1774 after his visit to the Hermitage in Russia, Denis Diderot discovered Christian Ludwig Hagedorn's *Betrachtungen über die Malerei (Reflections on Painting)*. Combined, the trip and the work inspired him to write some "Isolated Reflections on Painting." The derivative nature of Diderot's reflections is suggestive, not least because the derivative relation between art and nature is a leitmotif of these jottings. A cardinal sin in Diderot's view, as that of any critic, is to be negligent in one's work as an artist. But the representation of negligence – in the sense of heedlessness or *oubli de soi* – is a supreme technical accomplishment.[9] "Negligence in a composition is like a young woman in her morning *déshabillé*; in a minute, fully dressed, she will have spoilt everything"

9 Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1980, esp. 13, 55-70, 75.

(338). But the phenomenon is unique to the extent that it can only occur in art, not nature itself:

> Why do we never see negligence in nature? Because, whatever object she presents to our gaze, at whatever distance it is placed, from whatever angle it is seen, it is as it must be, the result of causes whose effects it has experienced (338).

Nature is the domain of cause and effect, codified as so many natural laws. To intervene in nature is in some way to break with it, to impose form on it, to disrupt what would otherwise be a law-like regularity. But in so far as nature insists, it is not justifiable. It is not criticisable. Earlier I deployed the example of the weather, suggesting we can regret it, but we can't really criticize it. Until recent decades, perhaps even just this decade, the truth of this example would have been plainly evident, even if it required a moment's reflection. It was certainly evident to Diderot. But such is not the case today, when the discourse of the Anthropocene is ascendant, the geological denomination for the epoch of human-induced climate change.

Among other things, crucial to the discourse of the Anthropocene is the desire, if not the need, to see the world as *made*, not as something that simply is. To name the motivations behind such a discourse a "desire" is not to challenge the empirical claims that support the truth value of statements about human-induced climate change. It is instead to highlight the ontological implications of such a breakdown between actor and environment. Here as in other respects *The Sheltering Sky* is remarkably prescient because in its pages all that appears natural is recast as figured. Consider the comfort Kit feels when she spots "once more the thin pencilled border between earth and sky" (217). Everywhere she looks she sees craft in nature. In this case she sees a pencilled line, a figure drawn for her gaze. The images evoke Kant's notions of a purposiveness in nature that must be presupposed, but in no way known or verified, in order for aesthetic judgment to take place. But a paradox arises. If everything in nature is always just as it ought to be, what happens to the force of the ought in this case? If something is ontologically as it always ought to be, then there is never a case in which it is criticisable, because there is no deviation from a norm. But what is a norm that literally cannot be deviated from if not a natural law rather than a moral one?

Diderot was attuned to this problem as well. "Everything that has been said about elliptical, circular, serpentine and undulating lines is absurd. Every part of the body has its line of beauty, and the line of the eye is not the line of the knee" (340). If every part has its unique way of being beautiful, then no part is perverse – there is no deviation. But what happens to the potential for a misfire in this case? How can one do something wrong? Can we honestly judge Port and Kit for their behaviour in *The Sheltering Sky*? Bowles himself signals the difficulties in resolving such a question: "It was so long since she had canalized her thoughts by speaking aloud, and she had grown accustomed to acting without the consciousness of being in the act. She did only the things she found herself already doing" (222-23). Previously, Kit's speech had been a mode of thought, interiority actualized in speaking aloud. Now, intention is consciously disavowed, which is to say intentionally foresworn. *She did only the things she found herself already doing*.

This is the inverse – *l'envers*; the other side – of the ethic exuded by *Remainder*'s narrator. Whereas he seeks to imbue all events with the intention that would make them actions, Kit seeks to recast all actions as mere events. All would-be acts – the things she might purposively do – were those things that she already happened to be doing. In such a scene, it is impossible to be negligent, not least because the aim is to *appear* negligent. Kit has effectively naturalized herself. She is "the result of causes whose effects [she] has experienced." But *The Sheltering Sky* is not a scene of nature; it is a work of art. And it is one that consciously, purposively exposes its protagonists to judgment. In this it bears comparison with Jacques Rancière's discussion of "Why Emma Bovary Had to Be Killed," to wit: "she is sentenced as a bad artist, who handles in the wrong way the equivalence of art and nonart" (240). Rancière's point is to signal the contrast between the "subject of desire," which is the way of a character in a plot, with the "fabric of an impersonal sensory life – which is the way of the artist" (244). Flaubert subtracts himself from the work, and puts himself in a position to judge Emma as a result. In this, he is the polar opposite of Proust. But we should contrast this account of Flaubert with the discussion of *The Red and the Black* in Rancière's *Aisthesis*, where the author Stendhal is absented from the analysis. "At the decisive moment," Rancière writes, "Julien acts without choosing: he subtracts himself from the universe where one must always choose, always calculate the consequences of these choices, always copy the right models of political, military, or romantic strategy" (51). For Rancière, such subtraction is intimately related to freedom and not least the freedom embodied in what he terms "the aesthetic regime of

art." In this regime "no situation, no subject is 'preferable'. Everything can be interesting, it can all happen to anyone."

Julien's freedom is Kit and Port's finitude. To arrive in a situation in which nothing is preferable is to arrive at a scene in which any man can deliver the same experience as Belqassim can. To act without choosing is, for Rancière, to enjoy a suspension of natural causality. But it is not to enter a Kantian space of freedom, which remains beholden to moral law. Such a space remains governed by laws that can be broken, laws that are laws precisely to the extent that one can default on them. It is instead to enter a space where no law exists, either as determination or as moral injunction. Rancière's account of the aesthetic regime of art is by turns diagnostic and ambivalent. But the main aim of his investigations is to concentrate our focus on a place that quite literally does not exist, that is utopian in the pure sense, constructed, the inexistent space of sensuous representation that occurs not in the world but in the aesthetic regime of art. Here Rancière's motivations become more discernible. To speak of Stendhal in the account of "Plebeian Heaven" would be to speak not of the space figured beyond the sheltering sky – which is, in many respects, the subject of his effort in *Aisthesis* – but the world below.

Rancière elevates idleness and play. What gives *The Sheltering Sky* its contrastive moral seriousness is also what gives it its political meaning. More than a plot device, the counter-utopianism that lies at the heart of the depiction of Port and Kit and their complementary fates is intimately related to the book's formal affirmation of craft, intention, and purposiveness against the desire for the dissolution of these properties in the equivalences that obtain within natural causality and, for Rancière, between natural causality and its imagined absence. The final indicator here is Bowles's deployment of a convention that had already become quaint if not forced by 1949 – he signs the book with the place of its composition. The last words of the novel are set apart from the main text and indented: "Bab el Hadid, Fez." Kit and Port are not in North Africa. But he is.

Representation and Intelligibility

Bowles's aesthetic effort gives us a model of how to think the Anthropocene not as a problem demanding a solution but as a problem that is not yet intelligible as a problem. With detours, this essay has focused on a novel, and its main concern has been to show the ingenuity required to represent the desire to have

done with desire, to recast the world as a space exhausted solely by mere events rather than comprising events *and* actions (with criticisable consequences) as a related but somehow distinct class of events. Its agenda has been shamelessly "meta-." Many are rightly concerned to think through the technical scientific and policy challenges of climate change. But the analogy I've sought to exploit reads Bowles's formal relation to his own fiction, which is to say the totality of his representational and aesthetic choices, as harbouring insights not so much for how we think the ontological dilemmas of the Anthropocene – as if such a possibility were plausible – but for how we represent these dilemmas to ourselves *as dilemmas*. This is what I mean when I describe climate change as a problem that is not yet intelligible as a problem. Representation is a sine qua non of intelligibility. And here the irony insists. By Bowles's own account, the final third of *The Sheltering Sky* was written on hashish in an attempt at something like automatic writing. But the result that stands before us in each printing of the book is not an ephemeral experience, but a consequence of formal determinations. Every line, each word, remains obdurately *on purpose*.

The final point to make about Paul Bowles's relationship to his novel is to emphasize the virtues of artistic subtraction, in the sense that Bowles subtracts himself from the novel in a way analogous to Flaubert. Where McCarthy signals his theoretical commitment to minimal materialism from the opening line of *Remainder* – "very little, almost nothing;" a bald allusion to his conspirator Simon Critchley's work on Levinas with that title – Bowles and Flaubert construct spaces in which actors can be judged precisely because the space in which they exist cannot. As works of art, such novels are perfect, in that they are exquisitely formed unities. They are, as works, just as they are meant to be. But when the characters in the works think they have finally assimilated themselves to a world as it actually is "in reality" rather than a world as it might have been or is meant to be, we see clearly the error of their ways. The complications that ensue when our desires confront a world indifferent to them have not become clearer in the age of Anthropocene. They have become more recalcitrant than ever.

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