Noise: An Ontology of the Avant-garde

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When he first sights the vast unknown mountain range from the window of an aircraft with his scientific team in tow, geologist and academic William Dyer, the protagonist of H.P. Lovecraft's *At the Mountains of Madness,* is intensely troubled by the vision that confronts him. Like his counterpart Professor Lake before him, Dyer struggles to determine the image's verity.[1] Lake attributes the queer effects to the pre-Cambrian slate, upheaved strata and volcanic quality of the highest peaks, but Dyer is not so sure. For this particular image (in which he discerns a 'seething labyrinth' housed in the range's uppermost slopes), 'has a menacingly novel and obscure quality' about it, giving the effect, Dyer recounts, of 'a Cyclopean city of no architecture known to man or human imagination...'.[2] Of course, the Professor is relieved when the image finally breaks up, dissolved by the shifting mists that screen the mountains - confirmation of its illusory status.

But this relief does not last for long. As is the case for many an unfortunate Lovecraftian protagonist, Dyer's scientific zeal compels him to return, only this time he traverses the peaks and discovers that the distorted image he originally perceived has an origin that is irrevocably real and disturbingly inhuman:

> 'The effect of the monstrous sight was indescribable, for some fiendish violation of known natural law seemed certain at the outset. Here, on a hellishly ancient tableland fully 20,000 feet high, and in a climate deadly to habitation since a pre-human age... there stretched nearly to the vision's limit a tangle of orderly stone which only the desperation of mental self-defence could possibly attribute to any but a conscious and artificial cause. We had previously dismissed, so far as serious thought was concerned, any theory that the cubes and ramparts of the mountainsides were other than natural in origin. How could they be otherwise? Yet now the sway of reason seemed irrefutably shaken, for this Cyclopean maze of squared, curved, and angled blocks had features which cut off all comfortable refuge. It was, very clearly, the blasphemous city of the mirage in stark, objective, and ineluctable reality. That damnable portent had had a material basis after all - there had been some horizontal stratum of ice-dust in the upper air, and this shocking stone survival had projected its im-

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[1] H.P. Lovecraft, 'At the Mountains of Madness,' in *Tales*, ed. Peter Straub (New York: Library of America, 2005) 492.
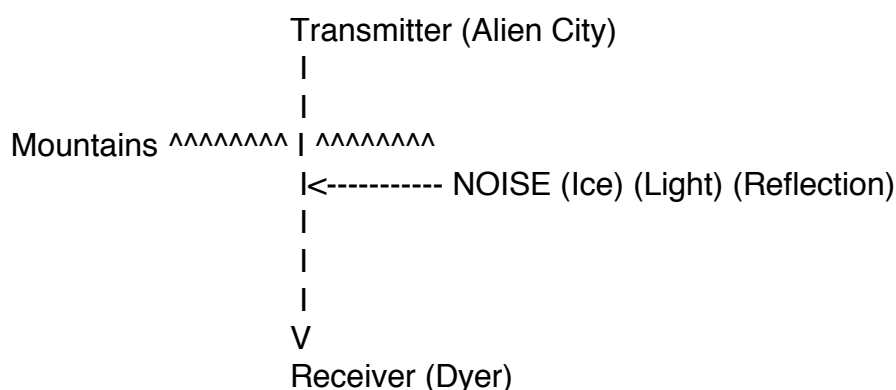
[2] Ibid., 508.

age across the mountains according to the simple laws of *reflection*. Of course the phantom had been twisted and exaggerated, and had contained things which the real source did not contain; yet now, as we saw that real source, we thought it even more hideous and menacing than its distant image.'[3]

This is an image from Lovecraft's notes for *At the Mountains of Madness* that includes - right at the very top - a diagram for the formation of the mirage on a 'layer of cloud' (which is what the text at the very peak of the envelope says) in front of the mountain range, with the Old Ones' city sketched in behind. What is particularly great about this image is that it suggests that the idea of the projection of the city onto the Antarctic dust and mist on the other side of the mountains, seems to have had its own material basis, being informed by the shape of the envelope itself.

As Dyer approaches and finally crosses the mountains of madness, straying over the threshold that encircles 'that mysterious farther realm upon which... no *human* eye had ever gazed' his relationship to the image of the alien city and the verity he accords to it shift dramatically.[4] What he first instinctively took to be real is demoted to the status of an illusion, a revelation that is followed by his discovery of its real source, a discovery that in turn *re*states the illusion as a problem of reflection and an epiphenomenal imprint of a very real thing - but a noisy, distorted one.

If one were to diagram this in a cybernetic key - following the models of classic communications theory - the following configuration would emerge:

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                    Transmitter (Alien City)
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                    |
    Mountains ^^^^^^^^ | ^^^^^^^
                    |<----------- NOISE (Ice) (Light) (Reflection)
                    |
                    |
                    |
                    V
                    Receiver (Dyer)
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Here, the real city acts as a transmitter, the ice-dust, mist and most importantly, the Antarctic light, constitute interference to the transmitted signal, and Professor Dyer occu-

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[3] Ibid., 522; 523 [emphasis added].
[4] Ibid., 522.

pies the position of the receiver. The clear signal is scrambled as it passes over the mountains, but Dyer is, at least at first, content to call the distorted image he receives, real.

As well as being an illustration of cybernetic noise, this image schematises the basic cognitive operation of Enlightenment subjectivity, an operation of 'inhibited synthesis' to put it in the vernacular of Nick Land, who goes on to clarify this notion in one of his early essays on Kant, where he writes:

> '[Modernity] lives in a profound and uneasy relation to an outside that both attracts and repels it, a relation that it precariously resolves within itself from a position of unilateral mastery. […] The paradox of enlightenment, then, is an attempt to fix a stable relation with what is radically other, since insofar as the other is rigidly positioned within a relation it is no longer fully other. If before encountering otherness we already know what its relation to us will be, we have obliterated it in advance. This aggressive logical absurdity (the absurdity of logic itself) reaches its zenith in the philosophy of Kant, whose basic problem was to find an account for the possibility of what he termed 'synthetic a priori knowledge', which is knowledge that is both given in advance by ourselves, and yet adds to what we know.'[5]

Modern subjectivity, forged in the cool climes of Kantian critique and Enlightenment rationality, represents the object by passing it through the subject. It is in this way that Kant first sets in place the epistemological limit that would outlaw metaphysics - that is - by installing a representational one. Put another way, for the modern subject, freshly stripped of all metaphysical guarantees, the world cannot appear without the presupposition of a self.

Human subjectivities, of course, may vary wildly, but the objectivity of their experience, as pointed up by Land, is assured by virtue of a universally attributed a priori purification of all that is inputted into cognition. For Kant specifically, this 'signal from the outside' is cleaned up by the pure forms of intuition and the twelve categories, which obtain in all human creatures - Kant explicitly notes that his deduction does not hold for the non-human - thus underwriting the homogeneity and the intelligibility of the world as it *for us*. This constitutes the nub of what Kant would call transcendental conditioning. We no longer discover the order of phenomenal nature; we make it.

Modernity's unprecedented capacity to breed the individual arises from and feeds-back into the constitution of objective reality and the truth of being by means of intersubjectivity. The proper functioning of our significative regimes is unimaginable without this in-

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[5] Nick Land, 'Kant, Capital and the Prohibition of Incest,' in *Fanged Noumena*, eds. Robin Mackay and Ray Brassier (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2012), 64.

tersubjectively-constituted objectivity. Regardless of whether we subscribe to a properly Kantian theory of cognition or not, it is important to recognise that Kant's badly named Copernican revolution continues to determine the configuration of our subject-object relationships, and thus our understanding of representation, right up until the end of the twentieth century, surreptitiously informing, in turn, standardised notions of aesthetic representation.

For it is there, in the early decades of the nineteen-hundreds that one sees the real maturation of this state of affairs which places its denizens in a queer situation of utter dependency on representation. The cumulative effect of two hundred years of human reflection confirms that the real will always-already be represented and that the material is always-already conditioned by the ideal. There is no such thing as matter *in-itself*. Originary moments of presentation and production are impossible for the moderns. Everything is mediated. Their world, our world, is one of representation and reproduction, right down to the ground - which here, is irrevocably anthropomorphic - the human mind.

As Nick Land will tell us, almost fifteen years before a single theorist uttered the word 'correlationism', the ontological condition of the moderns comes down to the following fundamental premise: 'the outside must pass by way of the inside'.[6] To this I will append that claim that the inside is a condition known in cybernetic theory as 'noise'. What Kant sees as a clarifying process, Land sees as a process of interference, the difference is a simple matter of positioning.

In French the word '*parasite*' has several meanings. It refers, as it does in English, to an organism that subsists by feeding off a host in a non-reciprocal relation; it means *static*, *interference*, or *noise*; and it denotes a point that is beside another, more integral one: *para*-site – beside the site. Michel Serres, in his book of the same name, *The Parasite*, uses these various meanings to frame a logic that is anything but 'absurd' in the sense intended by Land above. Rather, in a flagrant, wholesale rejection of *a priori* thought-structures, Serres' elaboration of his logic takes the form of a series of interrupted meals.[7]

Each meal is a message transmitted to a receiver - an act of consumption, digestion and signification. However, more often than not, the receiver is deprived of the message

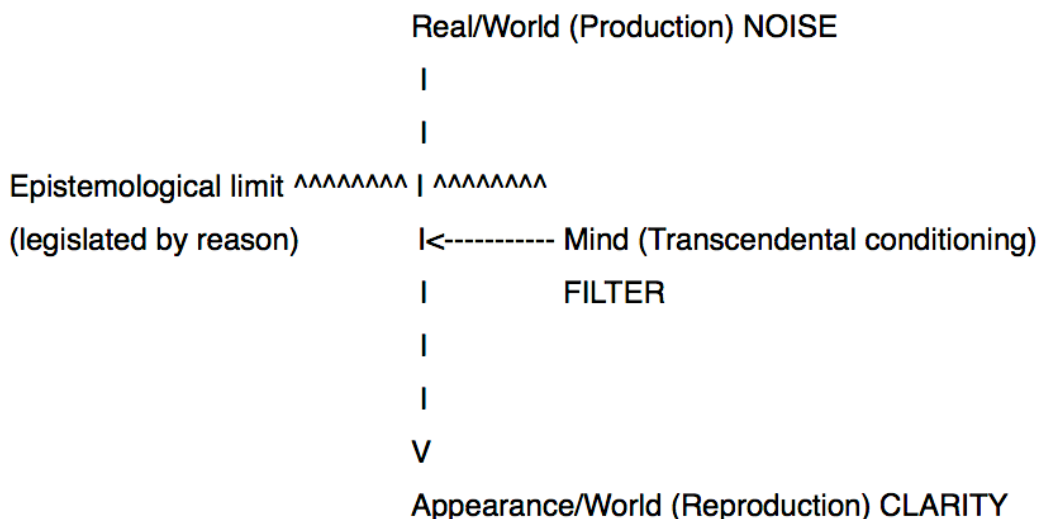[6] Nick Land, 'Machinic Desire,' in *Fanged Noumena*, eds. Robin Mackay and Ray Brassier (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2012), 320.

[7] Michel Serres, *The Parasite*, trans. Lawrence R. Schehr (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

by means of an uninvited guest - a parasite, who para-sites or eats-next-to the host, effectively interrupting the transmission, only to be interrupted in their interruption (which is a message being transmitted in its own right) by another message or guest. It suits Serres' purposes that the words for guest and host are identical in French: '*hôte*'. The message here - although Serres makes sure it does not come through clearly - is that there is always an alternative position from which a guest may suddenly appear as a host; a message as a parasite; signification as noise.[8]
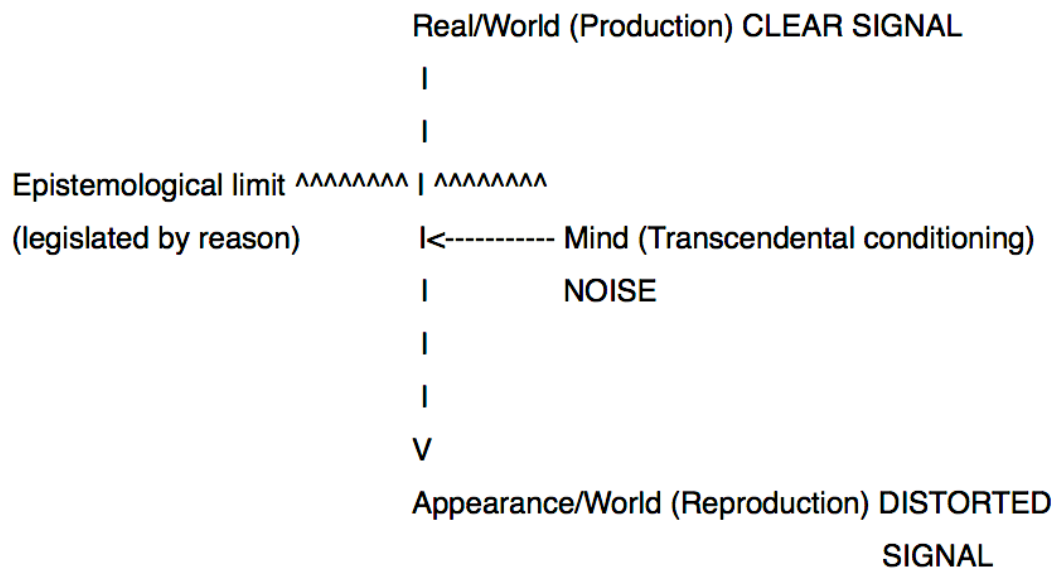
Borrowing Serres's method of using cybernetics as a means of articulating complex relationships between elements that are both internal and external to a system, we can diagram Kantian cognition from both the position of the human subject and the position of the non-human object:

I. Inside Out

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                              Real/World (Production) NOISE

                              |

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Epistemological limit ^^^^^^^^ | ^^^^^^^^

(legislated by reason)        |<----------- Mind (Transcendental conditioning)

                              |             FILTER

                              |

                              |

                              V

                      Appearance/World (Reproduction) CLARITY
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[8] 'The host, the guest, breathes twice, speaks twice, speaks with forked tongue as it were... we don't know what belongs to the system, what makes it up, and what is against the system, interrupting and endangering it. Whether the diagram of the rats is generative or corrupting.' Ibid., 16.

II. Outside In

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                         Real/World (Production) CLEAR SIGNAL

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Epistemological limit ^^^^^^^^ | ^^^^^^^^
(legislated by reason)        |<----------- Mind (Transcendental conditioning)

                         |              NOISE

                         |

                         |

                         V

                         Appearance/World (Reproduction) DISTORTED
                                                         SIGNAL
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The advantage of transcribing a philosophical description of consciousness into a cybernetic register is that it allows us to move from a transcendent structure to an immanent one, and once within the latter, to move from one observer position to another. Hence, cybernetics affords us a vantage point from which to examine our own experience from the position of both the human and the nonhuman, effectively returning to the decentered Copernican viewpoint so cheekily co-opted by Kantian philosophy.

Looking from the inside out, the transcendental conditioning of experience establishes clarity by admitting certain contents of an unknowable site of primary production; yet from the outside in, the transcendental conditioning of experience is itself a degenerative noise that degrades the clarity of its external input, rendering it unintelligible and ultimately inaccessible to internal modes of apprehension. What, for the observer-as-subject is clarity, for the observer-as-object is noise. As Niklaus Luhman once remarked: 'Reality is what one does not perceive when one perceives it'.[9] Or (to collapse the first *Critique* into a single aphorism), '[t]he world is observable *because* it is unobservable.'[10] As the signal passes through the human - by virtue of this processing which ultimately renders it intelligible *to* the human - it becomes distorted. Signification, then, rests on a fundamental inter-

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[9] Niklas Luhmann, 'The Cognitive Program of Constructivism and a Reality That Remains Unknown.' in *Selforganisation: Portrait if a Scientific Revolution*, ed. Wolfgang Krohn et al. (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1990), 76.

[10] Luhmann, 'The Paradoxy of Observing Systems,' *Cultural Critique* 31 (Fall 1995): 46.

ruption and deformation. Here, the 'objectivity' of intersubjective experience is reconceivable as interference in a primary signal that originates beyond the human in the unexperienceable (and unknowable) world of things-in-themselves.

If Enlightenment subjectivity is constituted in this jamming of a signal from the outside, can we, by negating human noise (i.e. the a priori, the rational), reconstruct a vision of the source?

In *At the Mountains of Madness* as it is elsewhere, the perpetual Lovecraftian lesson is - of course - that the conditions upon which our Enlightenment subjectivity (figured in the hapless man of science) is founded and by which it is maintained, constitute a fundamental repression of something else, which, as is always the case in Lovecraft's prose, inevitably returns to invade the human from a point outside of it. I want to suggest that we take the Lovecraftian lesson here just as seriously as we take our Enlightenment genealogy and interrogate human representations of self and world from the *far side* of the mountains of madness in order to cultivate a properly inhuman notion of representation with which to reconsider certain moments of twentieth century aesthetic 'production'.

This widening of perspective to a point beyond the human afforded by thinking cybernetically (perhaps one could even say, 'by machining thought') brings with it new tools for the critique of Critique, and, thereby, the critique of representation in art and poetics insofar as aesthetic representation is the representation of a representation that we can now grasp as a noisy one. Such a positioning is, of course, a form of philosophical speculation or better, a xenotheoretical *act* - one commensurate with the inversion Serres performs in his story of the rats' meal:

> 'At the door of the room, [the rats] heard a noise. What happened? The master is there; he disrupts the rats' feast. Why? He was sleeping soundly, after a good meal of ortolans, a heavy dish. Suddenly he awakens. He has heard a noise. Uneasy and anxious, he gets up and bit by bit opens the door. No one. The rats have left. A dream; he goes back to bed. Who, then, made the noise? The rats, of course... with their little paws and the gnashing of their teeth. All that wakes him up. The noise, then, was called for by noise. At the door of the room, *he* heard a noise.'[11]

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[11] Serres, *The Parasite,* 66.

In the beginning, it is the noise of the master that interrupts the meal of the rats, but Serres then inverts the configuration by moving to the position of the human, and now it becomes evident that the source of the noise is in fact the rats' meal - although the master is left with nothing to confirm his speculation, and concludes, like Dyer, that it was only a dream. Perhaps if he had cultivated his insomnia a little longer, and sat up in the dark without a light - for it is light that turns the real into an illusion - he might have discovered the source... because *the rats always come back*. In fact, they've never left. Just as Serres' conceives of the post-human as something that does not simply succeed the human, but precedes and subtends it too, the rats wait in the ground, perpetually ready to 'climb onto the rug when the guests are not looking, when the lights are out, when the party's over'.[12]

The transmission itself begins in noise, but this noise is different from the noise of the human subject.[13] It is a rat noise. A noise from underground. A noise that is *post-, pre-* and *sub-* all at once.[14] Land would write in 'Spirit and Teeth' that '[the rat has] a 'hideous talent for decomposing interiorities,' that it is a 'sheer intensity, a potential for disaster' whose 'destructiveness is almost unlimited', and that, much in keeping with the thinking of Serres', there is no such thing as a single rat-unit, for as far as differentiation can occur within the rat-swarm, it is only 'differentiation within an illimitable series, [an] alogical dissimilarity, [an] indiscriminate proliferation of nonidentity'. 'This,' concludes Land, 'is the "logic" of the rat.'[15]

Serres differentiates the parasite-producer of the message, the one who is 'always attentive to the game of the things-themselves' from the parasite-reproducer 'who plays the position' or 'the location', which is to say, the one who positions themselves at the relation rather than at the object.[16] These latter lack the complexity and generative potential

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[12] Ibid., 12.

[13] 'In the beginning was noise…' Ibid., 13.

[14] 'Are not the rats... a positive antihistoricism?' Nick Land, 'Spirit and Teeth', in *Fanged Noumena*, eds. Robin Mackay and Ray Brassier (Falmouth: Urbanomic, 2012), 192.

[15] Ibid., 193; 196; 199; and 'We are fascinated by the unit; only a unity seems rational to us... Disaggregation and aggregation as such, and without contradiction are repugnant to us... We want a principle, a system, an integration, and we want elements, atoms, numbers. We want them and we make them. A single god and identifiable individuals.' Serres, *The Parasite*, xii.

[16] 'To play the position or to play the location is to dominate the relation. It is to have a relation only with the relation itself, never with the stations from which it comes, to which it goes, and by which it passes. Never to the things as such, undoubtably, never to subjects as such. Or rather, to those points as operators, as sources of relations. And that is the meaning of the prefix *para-* in the word *parasite:* it is on the side, next to, shifted, it is not on the thing, but on its relation. It has relations, as they say, and it makes a system out of them. It is always mediate and never immediate.' Serres, *The Parasite*, 38.

that Serres suggests with the trope of fire; those at the relation are 'the cold ones', while those at the object, the producers, are hot. Their operation is one of deliquescence, dissolution, meltdown - the pursuit of a heat death in which the verticality of transcendence slips forwards or backwards into the ooze of immanence:

> 'Those of fire without location burn madly, so strongly that around them, objects change as if in a furnace or near a forge... They are not the masters [the one who plays the position plays the relations between subjects; thus, he masters men], they can be slaves, but they are the beginnings. They are the noise of the world, the sounds of birth and of transformations.'[17]

Here is the primary noise, the noise that produces, the site of genesis or primary production. An uninhibited 'primary synthesis', to put it in more Kantian terms, from which the a priori synthesis that Kant attributes to the human mind is itself drawn.

Land and Serres both theorise the productive element of Being as a pre-individuated, generative excess that precedes the mental processing which, under the direction of Enlightenment rationality, filters from it all that is inefficacious or problematic for the consolidation of the category known as 'the human', serving up experience as a single, anthropocentrically calibrated, signifying channel. Thus, we have two parasites/two noises: one that is an endlessly proliferating, generative, disorganised and unstable multiplicity and one that interrupts and interferes with this multiplicity by constraining it, and in doing so, maintains coherence in the reproduction of the conditions of its own possibility. One noise that is hot, that races, disperses and transforms; and one that is cold, a noise composed of structured rigidity and immobile formalism. One noise that is devoid of relation, that is immediate, that *is* the site and one that mediates, is *para-* site, is born of a relation: the parasite that 'parasites the parasite'.[18] For each, the other constitutes an interruption.

On the other side of the mountains of madness, the tunnel to the centre of the earth has its entrance. Professor Dyer and his assistant plumb the subterranean ratholes looking for evidence of the authors of the alien city. What they find is futurism.

> '...there was something vaguely but deeply unhuman in all the contours, dimensions, proportions, decorations, and constructional nuances of the blas-

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[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid., 13.

phemously archaic stonework. [The reliefs] involved a peculiar treatment of perspective; but had an artistic force that moved us profoundly notwithstanding the intervening gulf of vast geologic periods. [...] It is useless to try to compare this art with any represented in our museums. Those who see our photographs will probably find its closest analogue in certain grotesque conceptions of the most daring futurists.'[19]

As one approaches the heat at the centre of the earth, *pre-* collapses into *post-* and *sub-* intensifies. At the nadir of their descent, the scientific language with which Dyer controls his narration gives way entirely and it is only through the negative that his retelling is able to continue. Meanwhile his assistant can only chant the names of stations of the Boston-Cambridge subway line, portentous in their accelerating rhythm – '*South Station Under - Washington Under - Park Street Under - Kendall - Central - Harvard...*' an analogy that is not lost on Dyer.[20] The legislative power of the a priori is waning, and this 'something else' - the Lovecraftian alternative to the professorial regime of sense - swerves abruptly into human experience:

'It was the utter, objective embodiment of the fantasy novelist's "thing that should not be"; and its nearest comprehensible analogue is a vast, onrushing subway train as one sees it from a station platform - the great black front looming colossally out of infinite subterranean distance, constelled with strangely coloured lights and filling the prodigious burrow as a piston fills a cylinder.'[21]

'It' is an acephalous, alien thing, a 'nightmare plastic column of foetid black iridescence', a 'fifteen foot sinus', 'formless protoplasm' - pure noise - the pre-condition of life, and - 'gathering unholy speed', it is also modernity.[22] But more profoundly, it is a certain element of modernity that - despite its ostensible development from it - comes back to Enlightenment rationality, to the human, from a position outside of it with the tremendous force of an *interruption*. This noisy drive to rupture and to race, to deform and disrupt, to collapse all boundaries between art and life, between life and machine - between the *reproduction-of-reproduction* and the *reproduction-of-production* (as a gesture towards the ultimate collapse between reproduction and production itself) belongs to the 'inhuman will'

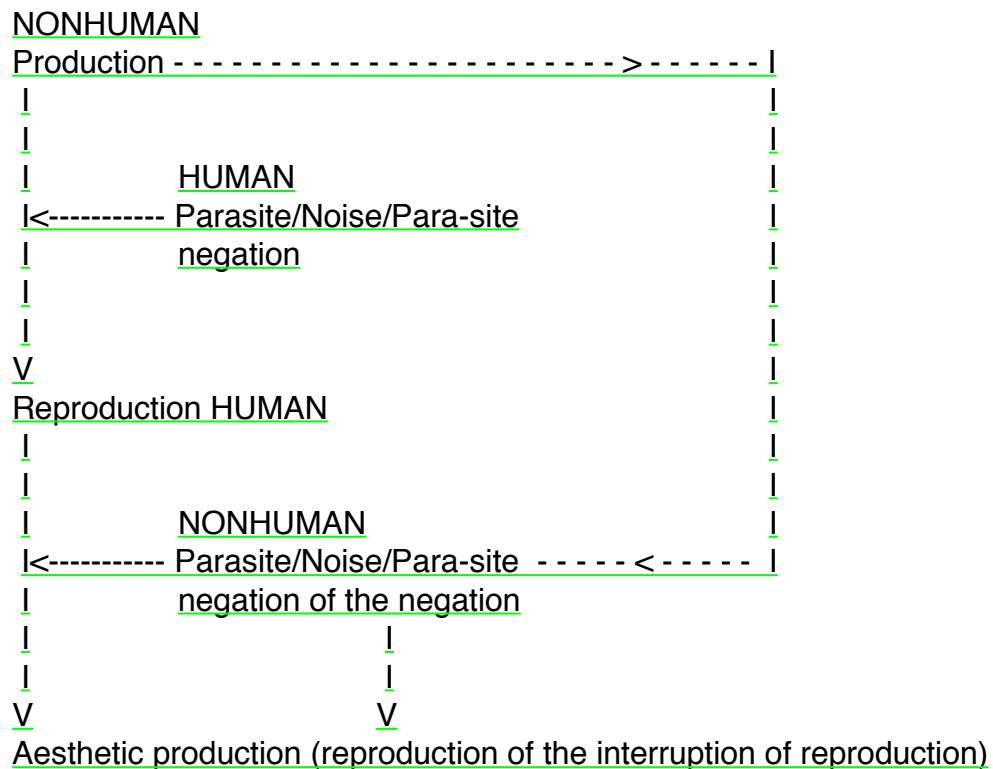[19] Lovecraft, 'At the Mountains of Madness,' in *Tales*, 535-536.
[20] Ibid., 580-581.
[21] Ibid., 581.
[22] Ibid., 575; 581.

(to quote D.H. Lawrence) of the modernist avant-garde - an envoy from the future, defini-tionally 'out of time'.[23]

A figuration of the non-relation between human and world can only be posited within the aesthetic as an irruption of this primary noise into the secondary noise of human rep-resentation.

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NONHUMAN
Production - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - > - - - - - - I
   I                                                                    I
   I                                                                    I
   I              HUMAN                                                 I
   I<----------- Parasite/Noise/Para-site                              I
   I              negation                                              I
   I                                                                    I
   I                                                                    I
   V                                                                    I
Reproduction HUMAN                                                      I
   I                                                                    I
   I                                                                    I
   I              NONHUMAN                                              I
   I<----------- Parasite/Noise/Para-site  - - - - - < - - - - - I
   I              negation of the negation
   I                              I
   I                              I
   V                              V
Aesthetic production (reproduction of the interruption of reproduction)
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Thus, F.T. Marinetti, Kurt Schwitters, and Sibyl and Lazlo Moholy-Nagy, for the most part reluctant guests at a banquet held in the name of the German Press Association - the epitome of legislative, a priori conditioning - demonstrate the doctrine of uninhibited synthesis: that entropy is generative. Schwitters is on the point of getting himself arrested after insulting the official from the Folk Culture Organisation who is seated beside him at the table and, following the account of Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, shoots a desperate glance at his fellow artists for aid. But before he can incite anyone to action, Marinetti has risen from his chair, swaying considerably, his face purple. Moholy-Nagy continues the account:

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[23] D.H. Lawrence to Edward Garnett, 5 June 1914, in *The Cambridge Edition of the Letters of D.H. Law-rence*, vol. 2: *1913-16*, ed. George J. Zytaruk and James T. Boulton (Cambride: Cambridge University Press, 1981), pp. 182-183.

"'My friends," Marinetti said in French. "After the many excellent speeches tonight" - the silent officials winced - "I feel the urge to recite my poem 'The Raid on Adrianople'." There was polite applause. Some nice poetry would break the embarrassing dullness of dinner.

Adrianople est cerné de toutes parts
SSSSrrrr zitzitzitzitzi PAAAAAAAAAAAgh
Rerrrrrrrrrrrrrrrr, roared Marinetti.

Ouah ouah ouah, départ des trains suicides, ouah ouah ouah -

The audience gasped; a few hushed giggles were audible.

Tchip tchip tchip --
féééééééééééééééééééléz !

He grabbed a wine glass and smashed it to the floor.

Tchip tchip tchip-----des messages télégraphiques,
couturières Americaines
Piiiiiiiiiiiii--------------iiiiiiiiiiiiing, sssssssssssrrrrrrrr, zitzitzit
toum toum Patrouille tapie----

Marinetti threw himself over the table.

"Vanitéeeeee, viande congeléeeeeeeee --------
veilleuse de La Madone --

–expiring almost as a whisper from his lips. Slowly he slid to the floor, his clenched fingers pulling the tablecloth downward, wine, food, plates, and silverware pouring into the laps of the notables.'[24]

The poet descends along the vertical to reassume a formless horizontality under the table, commensurate with the noise from which the avant-garde emerges, taking order with him and reinstating, amidst the clamour of errant cutlery, the profound unreasonable-ness of an entropic regime - one that dissolves the borders between table-top and pleated pants, sauce béarnaise and boutonnière, riesling, ramekin and wrist-watch. That which would legislate artistic production will be shown a thing or two: 'Départ de trains suicides' - the suicide train is leaving the station.

Sydney, 2013

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[24] Sibil Maholy-Nagy, quoted in *The Dada Painters and Poets: An Anthology*, ed. Robert Motherwell (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1981) pp. xxix-xxx.