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Review of Nonsense Aesthetics: (Imaginary) Living After the Death of Falsity

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Nonsense Aesthetics: (Imaginary) Living After the Death of Falsity

From the late 17th to the mid-18th Century in Europe, scientists and citizens alike believed that an element called phlogiston was contained within flammable substances [1]. This theory explained a number of diverse observations, including the presence of flames (taken to be the emerging phlogiston), the powdery nature of ash (because a solid object would crumble when it lost its phlogiston), and processes like smelting (which would work by transferring phlogiston). In short, phlogiston theory postulated what we might now call a "negative oxygen," where understanding combustion as a gain of oxygen (as we now commonly do) is logically equivalent to understanding it as a loss of phlogiston, such that "any chemical reaction that involves the transfer of oxygen [could] equally be viewed as a transfer of phlogiston in the opposite direction" [2]. The catch—which ultimately obsolesced the theory—is that chemists realized that for phlogiston to exist it would have to have a negative mass, which is physically impossible.

But what if we weren't quite satisfied with physical impossibility as grounds for dismissal? That is, what if we took this physical impossibility not as a cue to look to another explanation, but rather as a method of sustaining and focusing the imaginative possibility that underwrites impossibility, as well as the impossibility that underwrites possibility itself? In short, what if we recalibrated the (humanist) injunction to mean away from the goal of understanding what is possible and towards the goal of imagining new impossibilities? Instead of debunking phlogiston in the name of what is already known, we might instead come to bear on the precise ways in which knowledge is always simultaneously a form of not-knowing. Moreover, we might take seriously the possibility

that it is this negative knowledge—these delusions—that "maintain the integrity of the question[s]" we ask in and through our daily lives [3].

Asking these questions in this way—and asking them in the context of "the death of falsity" [4] that accompanies postmodernism's death of truth—seeks to replace the horizon of truth with "a horizon of imaginative possibility" [5]. Such is precisely the impulse behind *In Praise of Nonsense*, Ted Hiebert's vertigo-inducing meditation on nonsense as a lived vector of quotidian postmodernism. Hiebert's pursuit of this horizon—executed through encounters with philosophers, artists, and technologists alike—moves always in two directions simultaneously: on one hand, Hiebert follows Wittgenstein in the critical enterprise of demonstrating that "behind every well-founded belief lies belief that is not founded" [6]. In this, Hiebert contributes to an ever-proliferating body of literature (found across disciplines) that deals with the performativity of knowledge: for Hiebert (following Foucault, among others), knowledge is not so much a revelation of what is objectively true, but is instead an iterative, dispersed, and ongoing activity of maintaining the status quo. The task of the critic, then, becomes one of identifying the particular contingencies of a situation that allow it to adopt the appearance of truth, as well as the excluded-inclusions that persistently trouble the boundaries of such appearances. While Hiebert's efforts in this respect are admirable and insightful, more remarkable is the second, twinned vector of his inquiry, which moves towards refashioning understanding "such that it is made to resonate with our own imagined or imaginary experiences" [7]. As he notes, if Wittgenstein's formulation is correct, the fact that the formulation itself is "grounded as non-founded is nothing less than a possibility for nonsense that is nevertheless 'praised into' existence— rendered in terms of imaginary plausibility rather than argumentative demonstration" [8].

In this respect, *In Praise of Nonsense* doesn't just expose contingency, but actually leverages the most radical senses of the term in order to formulate an aesthetic strategy towards—as opposed to a logical description of—postmodern culture.

Indeed, this disposition towards imaginary plausibility aptly characterizes the tone of *In Praise of Nonsense* in general, which frequently hinges (at the local level) on a rhetoric of inversion. Thus, as examples, we are asked to consider not only the illogic that underwrites Wittgenstein's formulation of logic as illogical, but are also invited to reverse "Foucault's idea of thought as 'the presence of someone else in me'" [9], and to turn the psychoanalytic mirror back on Lacan. In fact, these flips are so prevalent in the book that one begins to perform them in advance of their appearance in the text, such that one hears in every statement and description its negative image even before it is conjured by Hiebert's argument; in every case, though, the gambit is not only to show how the perspective is subject to its own perspectival biases, but also to show how this very contingency constitutes experience as an aesthetic concern.

In order to engage this lived aesthetic, Hiebert argues that the postmodern self is technologized along a combination of three vectors. The first of these are technologies of disappearance, which Hiebert describes as "intellectual and psychological devices that one can use to construct a plausible picture of not-being, progressively writing out the residual elements of self and identity in such a way as to re-open the questions of possibility" [10] Included in this category—this aesthetics of living—are the technologies of reflection, perception, and autopoiesis, all of which are implicated in subject-formation and each of which occasion engagement by Hiebert with prominent theorists [11]. Crucially, Hiebert's understanding of disappearance in general recalls McLuhan's notion of obsolescence: just

as an obsolesced technology doesn't cease to exist but rather persists in new forms—and hence obsolescence is "the beginning of aesthetics, the cradle of taste, of art, of eloquence, and of slang" [12]—the disappearance of knowledge is not an absence but a mode of living, a "lived disappearance" [13]. Thus, "what remains when knowledge disappears is an experience without knowledge [that] nevertheless takes form, [...] paradoxical though it might be" [14].

This, then, is the second technological trope that gains prominence in postmodern culture: Hiebert nominates the term "technologies of ironic appearance" as a means of characterizing the myriad "modes of prioritizing the masquerade of falsity over the domination of truth" [15] demonstrating the numerous ways in which "the performance of disappearance always contains a trace of irony, a self-reflexive relationship to the paradox of its own impossibility" [16]. Readings of Barthes, Zizek, and Bakhtin play an animating role in this section of the book, with each adding a conceptual card to the house that Hiebert builds...an architecture that is all the more potent for its fragility—for the fact that it is built on allusions, slippery metaphors, and rhetorical reversals as much as linear reasoning—as (again) Hiebert is explicitly engaged in an exercise of "thought as incantation" [17] in response to a culture of ubiquitous logical indeterminacy.

For Hiebert's argument, then, the final step is to ask after the "possibilities for inauthentic engagement to be non-ironic" [18], to engage a "mode of living with uncertainty that would no longer be simply the attempt to self-contextualize as a function of contingencies of disappearance, but to instead begin re-mapping uncertainty itself" [19]. Hiebert calls the various means of achieving this "technologies of delirious appearance," a term that explicitly reverses "the terminologies of sensical apparition in favor of the

delirious possibilities of livable un-reason" [20]. Here again then, performativity and aesthetics combine to play an animating role in forming the question: "how to maintain a form of thinking that no longer has a well-grounded basis?" [21] To this end, Hiebert moves from knowledge to conviction, where the latter is a lived aesthetic practice; one can be mistakenly convinced, after all, but "one's conviction need not be lesser for the mistake" [22].

Fittingly (given the book's emphasis on specifically lived disappearance), underwriting this larger technological narrative in the book is an implicit emphasis on a term that only appears on a few occasions: embodiment. And yet, vectors of embodiment palpate the text's stated subjects continuously; indeed, Hiebert states early on in the text that his goal is to "formulate an embodied 'illogic' which might be translated into plausible methodologies of interaction with (and within) an increasingly uncertain philosophical world" [23]. In what, then, does this embodiment consist?

There is, first of all, the by now familiar insistence on the difference between embodiment and "the body," a distinction that Katherine Hayles eloquently charts by arguing (in the context of a critique of Foucault) that "the body is always normative relative to some set of criteria" while "embodiment is the specific instantiation generated from the noise of difference" [24]. Hiebert, though, takes this observation a step further: motivated by the observation that "difference becomes the common denominator for a theory of meta-sameness" [25] when all perspectives are acknowledged as different, he argues that embodied subjectivity results from incommensurability instead of the other way around [26]. That is, the oft-remarked incommensurability of subjectivity is simulated, not in the name of a unified subject but rather as the condition of appearance—where to appear is

always to appear as something—of a pre-existent absence (i.e. a technology of disappearance). In short, "if there is nothing to which subjective experience can be compared, then 'somethingness' can only ever by the prosthetic aura of an incommensurable 'nothingness'" [27].

What Hiebert sustains, then, is a theory of a kind of post-differential difference towards an "explicit reversal of the terminologies of sensical apparition in favour of the delirious possibilities of livable unreason" [28]. In this way, embodiment and subjectivity are conflated along the lines of lived experience so that, here again, contemporary conversations regarding embodiment are turned on their heads. The "postmodern identity" of the book's title, for example, bears little resemblance to the stochastic processes that often characterize identity politics. Instead, Hiebert gives us "autonomic personalities" as a way of embracing the contingency of lived contexts. That is, for Hiebert "autonomic trajectories—habits— are not necessarily the enemy of subjectivity [but] instead can be seen as that which allows one to autonomically proceed along various personality paths while still being disciplined into new ones" [29]. Importantly, Hiebert argues that this understanding resituates the unconscious (which works of its own accord) as a "consciously rendered unconscious-machine" [30], losing its primacy over subjectivity to become one (lived and imaginary) habit among many.

All of this is to make of embodied subjectivity a theory of media, and moreover one wherein causality itself is captured in advance by its medial appearance. When the rug is pulled out from under the rug of experience, causality itself becomes "a function of perspectival assemblage [...]—a delirious proposition of contingency rather than a legitimizing structure of logic" [31]. This is, of course, the condition of postmodernity writ

large, but Hiebert shows how this combines with McLuhan's media theory to situate the postmodern self as a "deferred fantasy of itself as another" [32]. Simply put, if McLuhan is correct both that "'the medium is the message' and at the same time [that] 'the content of any medium is always another medium,'" [this implies that the] content of a medium is always deferred [...and...] the self, as a medium of messages, always has its content in a deferred fantasy of itself as another medium" [33].

This is not, however, to undermine the medial specificity of these appearances, and Hiebert notes the specific affordances that come with moving from technologies of reflection to that of the screen in our approach to selfhood. Specifically, he suggests that in the screen "one finds for perhaps the first time the possibility of a non-traumatized image, an image that is capable of rendering fantasy for the simple reason that it never pretended to be real" [34]. This is a crucial insight because if it was the body that was the implied content of the reflected image, "it is the reflected body (and not the biological body proper) that is the content of the projected self" [35]. In contemporary technical culture, then, Hiebert finds (echoing Baudrillard, in this respect) the conditions for acting on appearances in their own right, for incanting reality's (or realities'?) hallucinatory vectors.

Indeed, I will be interested to see how this text itself might act out its claims as it is deployed across various settings. Being published by a distinguished University press, one expects that it (or sections of it) will appear on syllabi, where it will circulate according to the rhythms and demands of the University knowledge economy. One hopes that the text's autopoietic impulse—its constitution of itself as an incantation of itself, rather than as an object of study—might frustrate professor's and student's institutionally disciplined autonomic wills to extract and exchange arguments as quantifiable and verifiable currency;

one hopes, that is, that the extremity of its speculation—in the absence of the gold standard of linear reasoning—might catalyze at least a local economic collapse in University classrooms. That is, precisely because the text isn't a particularly "teachable" one, it may leave one in a position to learn.

Indeed, I myself have been caught in this same dilemma, which might be characterized as the hyperlocalization that comes with knowing through hallucination. In my case, I find myself having reached the end of this review essay without having discussed what, to my mind, is the most compelling part of *In Praise of Nonsense*, namely the remarkable readings of artworks that are offered at the beginning of each chapter. In each case, Hiebert "praises" a non-canonic artwork into existence for the reader, but in such a way that one can't quite hold it. That is, I might be convinced, moved, and otherwise incited towards autonomic affective responses by a reading, but it never allows me to make a demonstration of the artwork, to extract the artwork (or the reading of it) from the local instance of the text (or, more specifically, from the local instance of reading the text). To be clear, this is not a deficit of the book, but rather a clear demonstration of the performative—or perhaps even ritualized—aspect of reading it: to praise nonsense in the sense that Hiebert advocates is always a "praising with" Hiebert wherein Hiebert, the subject at hand, and oneself as reader are all lost to a lived disappearance. In short, we are all "performed," in the precise sense that the term indicates an unassimilable supplement to every constative claim. *In Praise of Nonsense* acts, then, perhaps as a kind of discursive phlogiston, a negative image of communication for a world where imagination is produced instead of knowledge being consumed, even if the former continually floats away under the weight of its own negative mass.

Notes:

[1] My description here borrows heavily from the discussion of phlogiston and atomic weight in Cohen, Jack and Ian Stewart, *The Collapse of Chaos: discovering simplicity in a complex world* (New York: Penguin, 1994), 33.

[2] Cohen and Stewart, 33.

[3] Hiebert, Ted. *In Praise of Nonsense: Aesthetics, Uncertainty, and Postmodern Identity* (Montreal, Canada: McGill Queens University Press, 2012), 12.

[4] Ibid, 6.

[5] Ibid

[6] Cited in Hiebert, 8.

[7] Hiebert, 9.

[8] Ibid

[9] Ibid, 59.

[10] Ibid, 18.

[11]Reflection is read through Foucault and Lacan; perception through Virilio, McLuhan, and Arthur Kroker; and autopoiesis through Benjamin.

[12] McLuhan, Marshall and Eric. *Laws of Media: the new science* (Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press, 1980), 100.

[13] Hiebert, 73.

[14] Ibid, 72.

[15] Ibid, 74.

[16] Ibid, 69.

[17] Ibid, 8 (note 4).

[18] Ibid, 134.

[19] Ibid

[20] Ibid, 137.

[21] Ibid, 135.

[22] Ibid, 136.

[23] Ibid, 4.

[24] Hayles, N. Katherine. *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 196.

[25] Hiebert, 148.

[26] Ibid, 66.

[27] Ibid, 65.

[28] Ibid, 137.

[29] Ibid, 160.

[30] Ibid, 157.

[31] Ibid, 147.

[32] Ibid, 96.

[33] Ibid, 95-96.

[34] Ibid, 106.

[35] Ibid, 106.

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