

Libidinal Materialism: Speculative Realism's Chthonic Dizygote

Peter Heft¹

Introduction

As Land will tell us, almost fifteen years before a single theorist uttered the world 'correlationism,' the ontological condition of the moderns comes down to the following fundamental premise: 'the outside must pass by way of the inside.' —Amy Ireland²

Formally christened in 2007 at the eponymous conference at Goldsmiths, University of London, 'speculative realism' is a 'non-existent' trend in contemporary continental philosophy that stemmed out of the reinvigoration of speculative metaphysics kindled by Quentin Meillassoux's 2006 book, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (which appeared in English in 2008). The conference brought together four thinkers—Ray Brassier, Iain Hamilton Grant, Graham Harman, and Quentin Meillassoux—to discuss contemporary trends in continental philosophy.³ In reaction to Meillassoux's diagnosis of the primacy of so-called 'correlationism,' speculative realism sought to probe the limits of human thought while pushing back against the idea that the *noumenal*—things as they are in-themselves—cannot be positively thought.

¹ Centre for the Study of Theory and Criticism. @ [University of Western Ontario]

² Amy Ireland, "Noise," 220. Against convention, all footnoted citations will be in short form with the full bibliographic information given in the works cited.

³ The proceedings of the conference were published in *Collapse (Vol. III)*; Brassier, Grant, Harman, and Meillassoux, "Speculative Realism."

Correlationism, the spectre haunting contemporary Western philosophy, is identified in *After Finitude* as “the idea according to which we only ever have access to the correlation between thinking and being, and never to either term considered apart from the other.”⁴ Qualifying this, Meillassoux notes that subjectivity and objectivity—sense perception and things-in-themselves—are trapped in a “vicious circle” wherein each make eternal reference to the other, and it is thus impossible “to consider the realms of subjectivity and objectivity independent[ly].”⁵ While much has been written on the subject, it is worthwhile to briefly recapitulate Meillassoux’s analysis. For Meillassoux, Kant’s ‘Copernican Revolution’—which he sardonically calls a “Ptolemaic counter-revolution”—and rejection of dogmatic metaphysics brought forth an implicit consensus within critical philosophy that any discussion of the world has a caveat baked in: it is the world *for us*—subjectivity takes primacy.⁶ Representative and supposedly ‘objective’ thought is reduced to a relation between apprehended phenomena.⁷ Seemingly objective scientific statements are therefore not objective in the sense that they refer to a thing as it is in-itself, but are instead objective only insofar as they are *intersubjective*—they “should by right be verifiable by any member of the scientific community.”⁸ If it is impossible to know something outside of thought—an example being positive knowledge of what Meillassoux calls an ancestral statement, a statement about “any reality anterior to the emergence of the human species – or even anterior to every recognized form of life”—scientific claims about the universe prior to givenness take on a very odd status.⁹ How are we to make sense of the claim that the Earth formed 4.5 billion years ago? Such a claim implies not only the existence of a universe outside of thought, but also that we can *know*, not merely *think*, such a world.¹⁰ If the Kantian conceit is true—we cannot know things-in-themselves—then the statement that ‘the Earth was formed 4.5 billion years ago’ ceases to have

⁴ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 5.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, 118, 15.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 4.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 15. One finds here an interesting parallel between the implications of correlationism and Rudolf Carnap’s account of the ‘Unity of Science.’ See Carnap, “Intellectual Autobiography,” 50–53.

⁹ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 10.

¹⁰ For Kant, this distinction is, while technical, absolutely necessary. Indeed, cognition entails *positive knowledge* of a thing—a bar that Kant wants to raise—while thinking a thing merely necessitates a lack of contradiction. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 115 [Bxxvi] and footnote *.

a literal meaning. Instead, “a simple codicil [... is] discretely append[ed]”: ‘the earth was formed 4.5 billion years ago *for humans*.’¹¹ This is obviously not what the cosmologist means when she utters the above statement. If one is to retain fidelity to Kant, however, the literal interpretation of the statement “is inadmissible.”¹² Taking issue with this, Meillassoux claims that ancestral statements must be understood according to what he calls “*irremediable* realism: either [the ancestral statement] has a realist sense, and *only* a realist sense, or it has no sense at all”—mind-independence, at the very least, must be affirmed.¹³

While there are serious issues with Meillassoux’s characterization of philosophy after Kant as implicitly correlationist, for the sake of this article I will merely take Meillassoux at his word as the specifics of what he calls the “correlationist two-step” are not as important as the implications of such an idea.¹⁴ While questions about the existence of correlationist dogma are raised in David Golumbia’s scathing critique and Meillassoux’s supposed ignorance of the role technological apparatuses play in constructing knowledge is discussed in McKenzie Wark’s exegesis, I will leave the specific squabbles for another time.¹⁵ Suffice it to say, despite potential issues, amongst those embroiled in realist and/or new materialist debates, correlationism is an issue against which a myriad of thinkers have, directly or indirectly, engaged.

Indeed, in response to the shockwave of Meillassoux’s diagnosis and the 2007 conference, a catalog of speculative realist thought was anthologized in *The Speculative Turn*, published in 2011. While there is no singular doctrine of speculative realism as each original thinker spawned their own school(s) of thought, “they are,” as per Steven Shaviro’s account, “united—as the name indicates—by a common commitment [...] to metaphysical speculation and to a robust ontological realism.”¹⁶ For the sake of brevity, I will not explore each strain of thought

¹¹ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 13.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 5. Should one want another opinion on philosophy after Kant, see Braver, *A Thing of This World*.

¹⁵ See Golumbia, “‘Correlationism’: The Dogma that Never Was” and Wark, *General Intellects*, 286–297.

¹⁶ Shaviro, *The Universe of Things*, 5.

in too much detail save to provide one or two sentences on each of the thinkers (with bloated footnotes pointing to other sources) in an attempt to situate them.¹⁷

Meillassoux stamps out his position as a form of “speculative materialism,” a materialism that is committed to absolute contingency—so-called ‘hyper-chaos’—that eschews the principle of sufficient reason in favor of a radically contingent, yet ultimately cognizable universe where anything can happen at any time for any/no reason.¹⁸ Harman, for his part, formulates an ontology of objects aptly named ‘object-oriented ontology (or philosophy)’ that is not concerned with the finitude of human knowledge implied by correlationism, but is instead worried about the ontological status of objects in themselves. Harman’s work, following the labor of Latour, attempts to bring quarks and quasars, the Bastille and beachballs, imaginary numbers and irrigation systems into conversation.¹⁹ Brassier, taking a radically different approach, champions “eliminativist nihilism,” a project that takes the “destruction of meaning” post-Enlightenment attack on the naïveté of pure reason as a positive, situating humans and cognition alongside extinction and non-Being.²⁰ Grant walks a different road, returning to the *naturphilosophie* of Schelling in his explication of “transcendental naturalism” that attempts to resituate science alongside metaphysical speculation through Deleuze and Whitehead, among others.²¹

These various schools of thought, mainstream to differing degrees, have no doubt been important to contemporary realist and new materialist philosophies, having impacts on fields as disparate as architecture and English literature, and ideas such as pessimism and panpsychism. Like so much in the history of philosophy, however, speculative realism is Janus-faced. While speculative realism proper—that is to say, evolutions of the various offshoots mentioned above—has had 15+ years in the sun, there is another face hidden from view. It is my contention that

¹⁷ Shaviro has an excellent paragraph doing a similar thing, Morelle has an entire article devoted to the task, and Brits, Gibson, and Ireland set forth a nice account in the introduction to *Aesthetics After Finitude*. See Shaviro, *The Universe of Things*, 10–11; Morelle, “Speculative Realism”; Brits, Gibson, and Ireland, “Introduction.”

¹⁸ Meillassoux, *After Finitude, passim*; Harman, “Brief SR/OOO Tutorial (2010),” 5; Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman, “Towards a Speculative Philosophy,” 8.

¹⁹ Harman, “Brief SR/OOO Tutorial (2010),” 5–6; Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman, “Towards a Speculative Philosophy,” 8; Heft, “The Philosopher’s New Clothes”; Morelle, “Speculative Realism,” 250–257.

²⁰ Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*; Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman, “Towards a Speculative Philosophy,” 7; Morelle, “Speculative Realism,” 257–264.

²¹ Grant, *Philosophies of Nature after Schelling*; Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman, “Towards a Speculative Philosophy,” 7; Morelle, “Speculative Realism,” 264–268.

speculative realism has a dizygotic twin; an illegitimate child hidden from view that navigates below and around similar, if not isomorphic, issues: ‘libidinal materialism.’ Where speculative realism attempts to hunt the Basilisk of correlationism from behind, ‘outfoxing it’ by “proceed[ing] obliquely through the history of philosophy, finding its points of divergence and its strange detours” while simultaneously maintaining some sense of (human) cognition, libidinal materialism looks the Basilisk dead in the eye, allowing the human to become petrified and shed off as the dynamic, inhuman forces of the cosmos crash through the correlationist circle like a runaway locomotive.²² Where speculative realism (and its offshoots) attempt to retain cognition in the face of the ‘incognizable’ Great Outdoors—the world *as such*—libidinal materialism, drawing upon Georges Bataille’s base materialism shot through with Freudian energeticism, worries not about maintaining some semblance of the human, instead opting to push philosophy to the edge.

Thus, in the following article I will briefly return to some of the specific issues isolated by Meillassoux that have traction for both speculative realism and libidinal materialism. From there, I will look at two historical antecedents to libidinal materialism: Georges Bataille’s base materialism and Sigmund Freud’s energeticism. Finally, I will, drawing upon Nick Land’s radical (re)interpretation of Bataille and Freud, look at what libidinal materialism ‘is.’ Ultimately, my goal in this article is to shine a (perhaps unwanted, preliminary, and provisional) light into the dark of the Cave to not merely illuminate speculative realism’s chthonic twin, but argue that libidinal materialism explicitly grapples with the same issues that speculative realism isolates whilst operating in a thoroughly impersonal and unique manner.

The Problem of Correlation and Kant’s Insideness

Kant’s critical philosophy is the most elaborate fit of panic in the history of the Earth.
—Nick Land²³

²² Shaviro, *The Universe of Things*, 9.

²³ Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation*, 2.

Königsberg, 1772: Awoken from his dogmatic slumber in a fit of cold sweat—a fever brought on by Hume’s skepticism—Kant set aside his *Inaugural Dissertation* and, in an “elaborate fit of panic,” penned the letter to Marcus Herz that would signify the beginning of a decade of (un)productivity. Attempting to secure his ‘Island of Truth’ from a torrential sea of cyclones and tsunamis “where many a fog bank and rapidly melting iceberg pretend to be new lands” upon which to pitch a tent of speculation, Kant set forth to *firmly ground* reason.²⁴ With a cleave down the middle, Kant sought to create a world that could be known with apodicticity. Bifurcating the world into the two ‘realms’—the *noumenal* and the *phenomenal*—Kant sought to wrestle back and thoroughly reinvent the appearance/reality distinction.²⁵ Intuition (further bifurcated into active and passive, the latter of which we have)—understanding of the world—is given to us through “sensibility,” “the way in which we are affected by objects.”²⁶ Experience understood as sensual and empirical knowledge gives us most of what we know. While there are, for Kant, underlying—transcendental—structures which condition experience, on a superficial level, our knowledge of material objects comes from experience. Crucially for Kant, the experience of watching a sugar cube slowly dissolve as I make myself a *Pontarlier* of absinthe is fundamentally *phenomenal*. I am not so much watching a cube of sugar in-it-self (*Ding-an-sich*) dilute and awaken the spirit—as the thing-in-itself, while thinkable, is not *cognizable*—as I am watching the synthesis of a myriad of cognitive and intuitive processes.²⁷ This experience is, ultimately, an experience mediated by and “thought in accordance with the unity of the categories”; it is a significant experience insofar as it is one that *appears* to me and is filtered through my perception.²⁸ The sugar cube itself as *Ding-an-sich* is not itself directly experienced; instead, there is a correspondence between *Ding-an-sich*

²⁴ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 354 [A235/B294].

²⁵ It ought to be noted, lest I be accused of naïvely reading Kant, that I accept the two-world interpretation of Kant’s critical idealism wherein things as they appear and things as they are in-themselves are, to some extent, ontologically distinct (the position will become clearer as we continue, however it is not hugely important here). While I cannot provide a full justification, it seems to me that if one rejects the epistemological reading of Kant, then a two-world interpretation is what is left. For a far more robust account, see Jauernig, *The World According to Kant*. See also Oberst, “Two World and Two Aspects” for textual support for both two-world and two-aspect interpretations.

²⁶ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 155–156 [A19/B33–A20/B34].

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 338 [A235/B294], see note *b.2*. See also Kant’s distinction between cognizing and thinking, *ibid.*, 115 [Bxxvi], footnote *. For a more robust discussion of objects as they appear in Kant, see the entry on “object” in Caygill’s indispensable *A Kant Dictionary*, 304–306.

²⁸ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 347 [A249].

as *unfiltered data*—“a **something**”—and appearance.²⁹ This representation of a *something*, however, is all that we can say about the correspondence. Indeed, the correspondence between the sugar cube as object of appearance and as *Ding-an-sich* is one of “something = X, of which we know nothing at all nor can know anything in general.”³⁰ Such an object (X) is *noumenal*.

The *noumenal/phenomenal* distinction, while well-worn amongst students of philosophy, sees its first Kantian incarnation in his 1770 *Inaugural Dissertation*. While the original differentiation in that text needn't concern us here as his articulation in the First *Critique* subsumes his previous discussion of sensibility and intelligibility, it is nevertheless worthwhile to note that the First *Critique* is, fundamentally, an expansion upon his initial synthesis between the Rationalists and the Empiricists, itself providing a more robust account of the *noumenal/phenomenal* distinction.³¹ Going forward: of a *noumenal* object, Kant notes that it is “**not an object of our sensible intuition**” but rather an object that “lies absolutely outside our faculty of cognition” and thus “must be understood [...] only in a **negative** sense”; it is a *limit* to reason.³² The purpose of such a limit is to simultaneously solidify Kant's thalassophobia while, as Land notes, erecting “[s]omething like a dike or a sea-wall.”³³ The *noumenal* acts as “a **boundary concept**, in order to limit the pretension of sensibility” thereby forcing us to, in turn, “limit the objective validity of sensible cognition.”³⁴ In spite of the “empty hopes” for “new discoveries” and adventures at sea, we must, according to Kant, assess “by what title we occupy even this land”—our small ‘Island of Truth’—and assure ourselves that we “can hold it securely against all hostile claims.”³⁵ Against the churning waves that tantalize many a sailor, the sea as unknown is ultimately something that must be guarded against: “Reason [...] is a fortified boundary, sealing out everything uncertain, irresolvable, dissolvent, a sea-wall against the unknown.”³⁶

²⁹ Ibid., 347–348 [A250].

³⁰ Ibid., 348 [A250].

³¹ For a reader interested in Kant's early articulation of the distinction, one can look to Paragraph 3 and Paragraph 4 in *Kant's Inaugural Dissertation of 1770*, 50–51.

³² Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 360 [B307], 361 [B309].

³³ Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation*, 107.

³⁴ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 362 [B310–B311].

³⁵ Ibid., 339 [A236/B295].

³⁶ Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation*, 107.

Thus far we've only briefly talked (to the extent that we can) about the *noumenal*. While the *phenomenal* is all around us—and Kant spends much of the First *Critique* discussing how we can know various things about the world—it is important first to return to his 'Copernican Revolution' outlined in the preface the second edition of the First *Critique* to make sense of the *phenomenal* turn. Given the (in)famousness of the passage, it is worthwhile to quote it in full:

Up to now it has been assumed that all our cognition must conform to the objects [of the world]; but all attempts to find out something about them *a priori* through concepts that would extend our cognition have, on this presupposition, come to nothing. Hence let us once try whether we do not get farther with the problems of metaphysics by assuming that the objects must conform to our cognition, which would agree better with the requested possibility of an *a priori* cognition of them, which is to establish something about objects before they are given to us. 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.³⁷

This turn, vitally, positions external objects located in what Kant will call “absolute reality” (in contrast to “empirical reality” and “transcendental ideality”) not so much as sources of knowledge in themselves, but as objects to which our *phenomenal* representations have correspondence.³⁸ To be sure, Kant does not lapse into solipsism or the “dogmatic idealism” of Berkeley as he not only thinks that the phenomenon of sensation proves an absolutely exterior reality, but he also thinks we can abstract from experience to say something about the conditions of thought.³⁹ What's important for us to note is that in this inversion wherein “objects must conform to our cognition,” not only is the site of knowledge internalized, but subject and object become

³⁷ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 110 [Bxvi–Bxvii].

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 164–165 [A35/B52–A37/B54].

³⁹ See, for example, Kant's comments in Paragraph 4 of the *Inaugural Dissertation of 1770*, 51, his “Refutation of Idealism” in *Critique of Pure Reason*, 326–329 [B274–B279], and his comments on appearance, *ibid.*, 348 [A251–A252].

inexorably bound together. If the truth about an object lies not within the *object itself* as a set of primary qualities, for example, but instead rests within our *cognition of the object*, then it becomes unintelligible to speak of the object *without* invoking a subjective experience. The subject and the object become entirely intertwined.

The implications of the Kantian position are profound, and Kantian epistemology has since become ontologized. While noted briefly above, it is worthwhile to re-articulate the main implication as seen by speculative realism through the lens of Meillassoux.

In his monograph on Meillassoux, Graham Harman isolates “two distinct features” of the correlate, both of which variants of speculative realism focus on (and which libidinal materialism engages with). Inverting the order given by Harman: first, correlationism “grants a special philosophical privilege to the human-world relation,” and second, it “entails a limit on human knowledge.”⁴⁰ To be more specific: while other entities may not be “bound to the same conditions that limit our intuition and that are universally valid for us” and are thus able to interact with the world in their own unique way(s), philosophers in the Kantian tradition, generally speaking and with exceptions proving the rule, tend to focus on the human subject.⁴¹ The privileged position Kant affords to humans—the most ‘rational’ of animals—reifies what Harman and others see as a form of anthropocentrism wherein *access to the world* is uniquely given to humans who can cognize *about* the world, thus placing them at the top of the Great Chain of Being.⁴² Ultimately, “the relation[s] between any other things”—fire and cotton, ants and the Higgs-Boson, Batman and McDonald’s—are necessarily relegated to the sidelines, demarcated either as unimportant or worthless.⁴³ It is this situation wherein humans are the prime arbiters of understanding the world that object-oriented ontology—and new materialism(s), generally speaking—critiques. As we will see below, libidinal materialism takes issue with the privileging of the human as well, but not in the name of an expanded ontology. Indeed, where, very broadly and provisionally speaking, object-oriented ontology and new materialisms attempt to either raise objects to the level of humans or

⁴⁰ Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux*, 9.

⁴¹ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 349 [A252].

⁴² For more on this problematic and how it plays out in Harman and Meillassoux, see Young, “On Correlationism and the Philosophy of (Human) Access.”

⁴³ Harman, *Quentin Meillassoux*, 9.

flatten ontology such that ontological differences between things are ‘differences in degree, not kind’—both generally positive moves—libidinal materialism shifts the focus away from humans altogether—there is no elevation to the level of the human—and situates objects as matter amongst energetic flows and fluxes.

The second feature of the correlate is epistemic finitude. As noted above, not only does the Kantian configuration of the *phenomenal* and *noumenal tout court* preclude knowledge about certain types of things—*i.e.*, things as they are unmediated by intuition—but it also discourages attempts at such knowledge. Upon seeing “many a fog bank and rapidly melting iceberg,” Kant warns the intrepid sailor that she mustn’t leave port lest she get lost amidst a world of mirages and illusions. While attempting to revitalize (a certain kind of) metaphysics, Kant ultimately—and nobly—wants us to avoid dogmatism and naïveté. Fearful of a regression back into pre-critical metaphysics—“a wholly isolated speculative cognition of reason that elevates itself entirely above all instruction from experience”—Kant wants to cordon off speculative thought to maintain our surety of the world.⁴⁴ In this vein, as Levi Bryant, Nick Srnicek, and Graham Harman note in their introduction to *The Speculative Turn*, speculation as a process “may be cause for concern amongst some readers, for it might suggest a return to pre-critical philosophy” with all its dogmatism and untempered “belief in the powers of pure reason.”⁴⁵ For them, however, speculation “is not an outright rejection of [...] critical advances,” it “aims at something ‘beyond.’”⁴⁶ As Shaviro (quoting Whitehead) notes, “at its best, speculative philosophy [...] cannot do without extrapolation” as it “works [...] through ‘the complex process of generalizing from particular topics, of imaginatively schematizing the generalizations, and finally by renewed comparison of the imagined scheme with the direct experience to which it should apply.’”⁴⁷ Speculation is thus necessary to make sense of the world and in turn, speculative realism must “maintain both a positive ontological thesis”—that is to say, not only does a world *outside* cognition exist, “but [it] is actually *organized* or *articulated* in some manner, in its own right, without any help from us”—“and a positive epistemological one”—that is to say, we can, in some coherent manner, speak of this “world-without-us” while

⁴⁴ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 109 [Bxiv].

⁴⁵ Bryant, Srnicek, and Harman, “Towards a Speculative Philosophy,” 3.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*

⁴⁷ Shaviro, *The Universe of Things*, 10 (for the Whitehead quotation, see Whitehead, *Process and Reality*, 16).

avoiding reducing it *to us*.⁴⁸ As will be explored later, libidinal materialism affirms the ontological thesis while being generally hostile towards the epistemological one.

There is another problem with Kantian epistemology which is not explicitly identified by the correlate; a trap Kant falls into—or perhaps *creates* for himself—and Land identifies as “[t]he paradox of enlightenment”: the desire to know the Other—the Outside (world)—while simultaneously attempting “to fix a stable relation” with it.⁴⁹ We can see this rather explicitly in Kant himself. When discussing the natural sciences—and the scientific method as such—Kant notes that not only does “reason [have] insight only into what it itself produces according to its own design”—that is to say, the outcome of cognition is pre-determined by reason itself—but “we can cognize of things *a priori* only what we ourselves have put into them.”⁵⁰ Reverting back to narratives of mastery over nature while simultaneously trying to give an account of a scientific method that does not simply rely on “accidental observations,” Kant affirms that “rather than letting nature guide [reason’s] movements,” we ought to keep “reason, as it were, in leading-strings.”⁵¹ On its face this makes sense. Relying on “accidental observations” of natural phenomena without a systematic means of categorizing one’s findings, testing one’s hypotheses, and manipulating the environment while maintaining control groups does seem like a poor method for understanding how the world works. Indeed, absent such a method, it seems as if we return to the ‘habitual connexions’ of Hume. Where Kant previously affirmed his desire to submit everything to criticism, he notes that here too we must, in interrogating nature, take the role of “an appointed judge who compels witnesses to answer the questions he puts to them.”⁵² Such an interrogative method is what secures the natural sciences and is the method by which Kant’s transcendental system works. Since we cannot get out of cognition, we might as well make it work for us. This methodology, however, acts as a Procrustean bed that simultaneously offers itself for the world to rest its weary body on whilst delimiting *how* the world can present itself.

⁴⁸ Shaviro, *The Universe of Things*, 68. For a more contemporary, neo-rationalist account of speculation, see Negarestani, “Notes on the Figure of the Cyclone.”

⁴⁹ Land, “Kant, Capital, and the Prohibition of Incest,” 64.

⁵⁰ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 109 [Bxiii], 111 [Bxviii].

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 109 [Bxiii].

⁵² *Ibid.*, 100–101 [Axi], footnote *, 109 [Bxiii].

If we understand Kant's *noumenal* limit concept as a fear of the unknown, then this view is entirely understandable. Kant as Enlightenment personified partakes in the dream "to grow whilst remaining identical to what it was, to touch the other without vulnerability."⁵³ The desire to know the world—but *only on one's own terms*—is to position oneself in relation to the world such that "within a relation [the world] is no longer fully other."⁵⁴ Such an ideal is exemplified in the Kantian (synthetic) *a priori* where alterity is sought after, but only accepted insofar as "it can be inscribed within the system."⁵⁵ As Land poetically says of synthetic *a priori* knowledge—the knowledge "given in advance by ourselves, and yet adds to what we know," the ultimate triumph of the First *Critique*—"we have always already torn out the tongue of alterity before entering into relation with it."⁵⁶ It is this paradox that libidinal materialism seeks to undo by 'engaging' with the world on its own terms, however inhuman and destructive those terms may be. The tide overwhelms the seawalls.

Following the problems identified with the Kantian correlate we should, before ending this section, briefly (and provisionally) define two terms art to be used throughout the rest of this article: Inside and Outside. As Anna Greenspan notes, 'Inside' and 'Outside' are commonly understood as spatial relations between discrete points.⁵⁷ The statement 'X is inside of Y' typically signifies that a given point, X, is spatially located within the bounds of a larger area, Y. Crucially for this understanding, the spatial boundaries are not insurmountable as there is always a flow from one point to another.⁵⁸ In Kant's transcendental philosophy, however, Inside and Outside represent significantly different things. The Outside—broadly understood as the *noumenal* as that which "cannot be known to the subject" (at least prior to it being worked over by the categories)—shares a fundamentally different relationship with the Inside—the *phenomenal* as that which "can become

⁵³ Land, "Kant, Capital, and the Prohibition of Incest," 63–64.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 71.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 64.

⁵⁷ Greenspan, *Capitalism's Transcendental Time Machine*, 1.

⁵⁸ This makes up the crux of Land's commentary on capitalism in "Kant, Capital, and the Prohibition of Incest." Further, and of moderate import, there is also a transmutation of how Inside and Outside function both ontologically and epistemologically. Briefly, in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* one can read Freud as blurring the lines between the two such that they begin to coincide as the primeval organism is differentiated.

apparent to the subject.”⁵⁹ The relationship is not spatial, but epistemological. The Outside—the world as it exists *in itself*—must, for Kant, be filtered through ready-made preconceptions, a process Amy Ireland refers to as “transcendental conditioning.”⁶⁰ As Kant notes, while the idea “[t]hat our entire sensibility is nothing but the confused representation of things” is “a falsification of the concept of sensibility and of appearance,” this dual claim is implicitly operating under the filter of transcendental conditioning.⁶¹ Indeed for Kant, “[t]he difference between an indistinct and a distinct representation is merely logical,” with a distinct representation affecting us after the ‘noise’ intrinsic to a thing-in-itself has been filtered out by the categories of understanding.⁶² For Ireland, such a process is fundamentally cybernetic where the Outside understood through a Kantian lens is a *noumenal* world that is incomprehensible—or, more specifically (and vital to our understanding of libidinal materialism), “an unknowable site of primary production,” a home to the impersonal forces of the universe—and Kantian epistemology—a kind of gaze from “the inside out”—requires the aforementioned conditioning to ‘clean up’ and make sense of the noise we receive from the Outside.⁶³ While the Outside may be unknowable, the Inside—much like scientific objectivity in Meillassoux—is a field of intersubjectivity masquerading as objectivity, ultimately creating a shared world of understanding.⁶⁴ Although different bodies experience ‘the world’ differently, at base “the modern”—that is to say, Kantian—subject is guaranteed as she is made intelligible to other subjects by a shared set of rules that allow us “humans [to] think of ourselves as inhabiting the *same* space, and the *same* historical timeline.”⁶⁵ Objectivity ultimately becomes subsumed by subjectivity.

⁵⁹ Overy, “The Genealogy of Nick Land’s Anti-Anthropocentric Philosophy,” 18.

⁶⁰ Ireland, “Noise,” 221.

⁶¹ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 168 [A43/B61].

⁶² Ibid. Kant goes on to explain that this is precisely what the categories do when he notes that they “do not represent any special object” but “serve only to determine the transcendental object [...] through that which is given in sensibility, in order thereby to cognize appearances empirically under concepts of objects,” *ibid.*, 348 [A251].

⁶³ Ireland, “Noise,” 219, 221.

⁶⁴ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 15; Ireland, “Noise,” 219. For Kant, this intersubjectivity is raised to the level of objectivity within the ‘Transcendental Aesthetic’ and is contrasted with “absolute reality” when he lays out so-called “**empirical reality**.” Crucially, empirical reality—“i.e., objective validity”—only holds intersubjectively and within the confines of human intuition. Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 160 [A28/B44].

⁶⁵ Ireland, “Noise,” 219; Ireland, “Alien Rhythms,” 61.

Problems arise when the boundary between the Inside and Outside is discussed. While not prohibiting *thought* of the Outside, the correlate does prohibit *positive knowledge* of it. While we can deduce that the *noumenal* as such exists—indeed, it must, according to Kant, if we are to make sense of *phenomenal* perception (and reject Berkeleyian subjective idealism)—we cannot know anything about it, and it is this inability to *know* the Outside that places a limit on our knowledge: we are bound by finitude. Interiority thus conceived becomes, according to Greenspan, “a mode of containment that operates not through physical boundaries but by an imperceptible border which draws the contours of all that can be thought and perceived.”⁶⁶ Taking Kant to his extreme, she characterizes Insideness as “an absolute segregation” (a line of thinking that is not uncontested).⁶⁷ Ultimately, thought *of* the Outside *from* the Inside is, per the transcendental imperative, coerced and reorganized—it is “cleaned up by the pure forms of intuition and the twelve categories” such that the world becomes “the world as it [is] *for us*.”⁶⁸

The Energetic Materialisms of Bataille and Freud

*Materialism is not a doctrine by an expedition,
an Alpine break-out from socially policed conviction.
—Nick Land⁶⁹*

To academically speak of libidinal materialism is to engage in a performative contradiction as libidinal materialism is “at best a parody, at worst a constriction” that is not something to be thought so much as experienced—it “is a ‘doctrine’ that can only be suffered as an abomination, a jangling of the nerves, a combustion of articulate reason, and a nauseating rage of thought.”⁷⁰ Indeed, to fully explicate libidinal materialism—a thoroughly perverse prospect that

⁶⁶ Greenspan, *Capitalism's Transcendental Time Machine*, 1.

⁶⁷ Ibid. For a more robust discussion of the transcendental boundary that draws in Hegel, see Brassier and Morgan, “Transcendental Realism: A Conversation with Ray Brassier.”

⁶⁸ Ireland, “Noise,” 219.

⁶⁹ Land, “Shamanic Nietzsche,” 211.

⁷⁰ Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation*, xxi.

would necessarily navigate far too many thinkers and ideas than I have space for here—would be a heretical task. Nevertheless, we shall ‘engage’ (with, admittedly, a certain degree of trepidation). If not bound by the mores of academic convention, the best model for ‘explaining’ libidinal materialism would be to intersplice audio recordings of readings from Giordano Bruno, Spinoza, the Marquis de Sade, Nietzsche, Bataille, Freud, Deleuze and Guattari, and Land amidst harsh noise music or deafening jungle mixes. Since this is not the place for such a project, I will instead be taking a different approach. Specifically, the frequent usage of quotations as well as the polemical style of parts of this text—a text which, as it drags on and enters the storm itself, will become increasingly unhinged and frantic—ought to be viewed performatively as a series of *movements* towards an impulsive and energetic subject matter; a subject matter that has as its subject, energetic matter.

Starting off timidly enough, this section will thus follow a bipartite division looking first at Georges Bataille’s heterology and base materialism, after which I move to Freud’s energeticist model.⁷¹ With the dominos in place, I will then look at libidinal materialism ‘proper,’ situating it within the lineage of the aforementioned thinkers and against the backdrop of the Kantian system.

1: Georges Bataille and Base Materialism

Base matter is external and foreign to ideal human aspirations, and it refuses to allow itself to be reduced to the great ontological machines resulting from these aspirations. —Georges Bataille⁷²

The precursor to libidinal materialism is Georges Bataille’s conception of base materialism, a concept he in turn inherited from Bruno and de Sade. Since Allan Stoekl gives us a

⁷¹ It ought to be noted that both topics are hugely dense and what follows is a distillation of their most potent themes. A full account of the intricacies of both is still tunneling beneath me, slowly eroding the ground upon which I (mentally) stand, soon to give way (to insanity).

⁷² Bataille, “Base Materialism and Gnosticism,” 51.

tour de force of the relationship between the three thinkers in the first chapter of *Bataille's Peak*, I will only briefly mention Bruno and de Sade, while focusing most of my energy on Bataille and base materialism as such.⁷³

Building off the energetic understanding of matter put forward by Bruno—an understanding that, following the literal Copernican Revolution, situates matter as everywhere, supplanting humans at the “center of the universe” while affirming a form of matter that is fundamentally active (contra understandings of matter as “a neutral entity, fit only to be stockpiled, used, or discarded”)—and the radically solipsistic yet “impersonal” and “unmasterable” understanding of matter as energy in de Sade where matter is seen as “ferocious, incessant agitation,” Bataille begins to formulate a conception of matter that is both heterodox and Gnostic.⁷⁴ We must first revolve backwards, however, as to speak of Bataille without speaking of the sun is to be celestially heretical, and thus we must engage in circuitous convection amidst the words of Bataille to return to (the) matter. Given that, we must start with that which is primal: the sun as a stellar entity. Indeed, solarity is arguably at the core of Bataille’s thinking as the sun, for him, is the perfect example of an energetic entity that, while productive in its core, is gratuitous insofar as it gives and gives “without ever receiving”: the sun, the energy from which “is the source of life’s exuberant development,” is exemplified by the dual movements of rotation and eroticism.⁷⁵ Celestial plasma circulates amidst the convective zone while a doubly articulated orgasm occurs on (and out from) the sun’s corona. Stellar energy—energy alchemically produced by the transmutation of one element into another deep within the sun’s core—is ejected from its surface indiscriminately. The energy (matter) shot out from the sun is, additionally, sometimes combined with visible ejaculate as coronal mass ejections: *eruptions of solar plasma itself*. This pure, unrefined energy powers life as such, both as the fuel that “is expressed [*i.e.*, expended] by the locomotive’s wheels and pistons” and the metabolic energy utilized in “the *copulation* of bodies.”⁷⁶ Bataille yells, “I AM THE SUN,” further noting the parodically circular movements of life and the

⁷³ See Stoekl, *Bataille's Peak*, 3–31.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 9, 3, 15, 16. For a reading of base materialism as it relates to other (revolutionary) materialisms (including, in a limited capacity, libidinal materialism), see Noys, “Georges Bataille’s Base Materialism.”

⁷⁵ Bataille, *The Accursed Share (Vol. I)*, 28.

⁷⁶ Bataille, “The Solar Anus,” 6, 5.

flows of terrestrial energy—“a car, a clock,” a body; movements all recapitulating the circular (and circuitous) movement of the sun.⁷⁷

Such energy is unrestricted—excessive—and is, at least in part, captured. The core of Bataille’s ethics surrounds *how* humans expend the captured energy of the sun. Ought we excessively waste it? Stockpile arms? Engage in ruthless, unrelenting conflict? For Bataille, the answer lies in how we conceive of excess and its relation to utility. Indeed, ‘utility’ and ‘reason’ are two words that are particularly important within Bataille’s *œuvre*.⁷⁸ While linked to political economy in his *magnus opus*, *The Accursed Share*, utility and reason can be abstracted to philosophy as such. Where Alain Badiou (beautifully) asks in his preface to *After Finitude*, “[w]hat wound was I seeking to heal, what thorn was I seeking to draw from the flesh of existence when I became what is called ‘a philosopher’?” there is another reading of the philosopher not as benevolent healer, but as malevolent ruler.⁷⁹ Badiou’s reading is a reading that is thoroughly utilitarian insofar as reason is employed, at best, to *solve* a problem and at worst, at the behest of the State.⁸⁰ Such reason is best understood with recourse to Bataille’s own terminology: homogeneity.

Homogeneity, what Bataille defines (in one location) as “the commensurability of elements and the awareness of this commensurability” as “a reduction to fixed rules”—in other words, “productive society,” “useful society”—is a structuring principle of his thinking and one counterposed to heterogeneity.⁸¹ Formulating the science of heterology—“[t]he science of what is completely other”—Bataille distinguishes the two forces, homogeneity and heterogeneity, inasmuch as the latter necessarily undergirds the former while simultaneously eluding *complete*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁷⁸ Strictly speaking, Bataille’s analysis is more nuanced. As per Land, reason fuzzes the distinction between utilization and utility, where the former is understood as “expenditure” and the latter as “*making use of* in terms of *usefulness*.” We cannot escape utilization, as expenditure is necessary for the flow of terrestrial energy, but we can reframe how we think about utilization. Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation*, 5. Utility gets further interrogated by Bataille himself in relation to the human as such in “The Economy Equal to the Universe,” and in relation to sovereignty in *The Accursed Share (Vol. III)*, 198–200, and problematized in Landa, “Bataille.”

⁷⁹ Badiou, “Preface,” vi.

⁸⁰ See Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation*, 10–14.

⁸¹ Bataille, “The Psychological Structure of Fascism,” 137, 138.

capture.⁸² The heterogeneous, for Bataille, is the unassimilable term that is characterized by excretion, waste, and non-useful energy.

In a “proto-deconstructive mode,” as Stoekl says, heterogeneous forces are forces that undergird organized, useful society while simultaneously being “impossible to assimilate” and out of the reach of science as such.⁸³ Indeed, where science—the ultimate tool of utilitarian society—acts as a force of “appropriation” in a thoroughly Kantian manner, organizing and categorizing the world by “everywhere replacing *a priori* inconceivable objects with classified series of conceptions or ideas” bringing forth a society built around order with a “reduction to fixed rules” and static identity relations ultimately coalescing around productivity—a homogeneous society—heterogeneous forces act as the excreted excess that elides assimilation yet is nevertheless thoroughly necessary for homogeneity insofar as the structural exclusion of the former by the latter ensures the latter’s “coherence.”⁸⁴ Going further, Bataille notes that traditional understandings of philosophy are built around the “intellectual appropriation” of hifalutin ideas generally considered as “waste products.”⁸⁵ Following the Kantian tradition, “all things considered”—the *phenomenal*—are the subjects of analysis, an analysis that is, ultimately, (re)presentative and, for Bataille, a “deprivation of our universe’s sources of excitation”—the Outside is caged by way of the Inside.⁸⁶ Further, as Land notes, even in philosophical moves that attempt to orient themselves outward, the recapitulation of the subject within the intentional, transcendental ego is outward-oriented in name only; such thought is still cloistered within the Kantian correlate and a focus on the subject brings us back to concerns of idealism and solipsism.⁸⁷

Despite the pervasiveness of systems of homogeneity, there is an energetic motor that, while not captured, is theoretically harnessed: heterogeneity. Expanding upon ‘heterogeneous social existence,’ Bataille notes that the sacred—that which defies ‘logic’ yet nevertheless produces an affect in the social body—the ‘delirious,’ and the ultimately unproductive yet active forces are

⁸² Bataille, “The Use-Value of D. A. F. de Sade,” 102.

⁸³ Stoekl, *Bataille’s Peak*, 19; Bataille, “The Psychological Structure of Fascism,” 140.

⁸⁴ Bataille, “The Use-Value of D. A. F. de Sade,” 96; Bataille, “The Psychological Structure of Fascism,” 137; Stoekl, *Bataille’s Peak*, 19.

⁸⁵ Bataille, “The Use-Value of D. A. F. de Sade,” 96.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 96, 97.

⁸⁷ Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation*, 7. We see a similar posturing in Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 6–7.

harnessed to propel society forward. Channeling Freud, Bataille notes that the coherence and structure of the static subject relies upon the existence (and repression) of the unconscious, a force that “must be considered as one of the aspects of the *heterogeneous*.”⁸⁸ “[P]resent[ing] itself as a charge, as a value, passing from one object to another in a more or less abstract fashion,” heterogeneity is “something other”—the artist, the poet, the sex worker, etc.—that brings life to society and energizes bodies.⁸⁹

Epicycling back to the sun—and breaking from the social model—heterogeneity is, following Bruno and de Sade, applied to matter itself. Indeed, matter is fundamentally energetic, an excess of excitation produced by the sun itself. As noted, solar excess is energy that is simultaneously life affirming and radically destructive. It is the wellspring of life as the source of terrestrial energetic flows, yet it nevertheless requires that we “avert [our] eyes” as its solar rays “scandalize” us.⁹⁰ Thus, heterology is the recognition of such awesome power, power that excites and “liberat[es] in a disordered way the heterogeneous excremental element” of matter that is “an end in itself, leading nowhere” yet always-already “prior” and “virulent.”⁹¹ Drawing upon Gnostic conceptions of the material world, Bataille brings forth a type of matter that not only has “an *active* principle,” but maintains “its own eternal autonomous existence as darkness [...] and as evil,” a conception that is utterly at odds not only with Christian understandings of matter “identified exclusively with corruption, imperfection, [and] decay,” but also with matter understood as standing reserve to be utilized.⁹²

Breaking with conceptions of materialism that imply an ontotheology—that is to say, a (re)presented theory of Being hypostasized to transcendence—base materialism attempts to situate matter not as transcendent thing-in-itself elevated to a privileged position, but rather as an immanently fundamental force (matter-energy equivalence) ‘animating’ the universe. Similar to the *noumenon*, base matter is a limit, something “*that* exists outside of myself,” and yet, while

⁸⁸ Bataille, “The Psychological Structure of Fascism,” 141.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 143.

⁹⁰ Bataille, “The Solar Anus,” 8.

⁹¹ Bataille, “The Use-Value of D. A. F. de Sade,” 97; Stoekl, *Bataille's Peak*, 21, 31.

⁹² Bataille, “Base Materialism and Gnosticism,” 47; Stoekl, *Bataille's Peak*, 4. One finds the same view situated as a critique of the so-called “physicalistic prejudice” in Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation*, 38.

irreducible to concepts, is affectively charged and generative.⁹³ Opposed to materialisms that rely upon the exhaustion of matter by utility, base materialism affirms an implicit finitude to our use, both epistemologically and materially; we can only *understand* matter to a certain extent, only use it to a certain degree.⁹⁴ Even when used for, or understood in, deeply reasonable ways—ways that reify the “juridical discourse in philosophy”—there is an act(ive)(of) transgression that can occur by sumptuary expenditure, expenditure that transgresses social mores and liberates the latent energy (desire) of matter.⁹⁵ Although heat death will out, base matter nevertheless produces change, growth, chaos, and (dis)order. If there is an *élan vital*, it is, for Bataille, base matter.

2: Sigmund Freud and Neurodynamic-Energeticism

[T]here is no question but that the external world is the origin of all major quantities of energy, since [...] it consists of powerful masses which are in violent motion and which transmit their motion.
— Sigmund Freud⁹⁶

Reversing ‘time’s arrow,’ we peek in on a Viennese neurologist who has delved deep into the mines of speculative biology. In communiqués with colleagues, he set out to understand the impersonal, physical forces which govern the biological organism.⁹⁷ Attempting to make sense of organismal reactions, a precocious Sigmund Freud begins to theorize about the energetic excitations which appear “on the frontier between the mental and the somatic.”⁹⁸ Indeed, as noted in his suppressed 1895 book, *Project for a Scientific Psychology*, Freud claims that the aim of the

⁹³ Bataille, “Base Materialism and Gnosticism,” 50.

⁹⁴ Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation*, 65.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 59. For more on transgression in Bataille, see Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation*, 58–74 and Noys, *Georges Bataille*, 82–102.

⁹⁶ Freud, “Project for a Scientific Psychology,” 304.

⁹⁷ See Freud’s 1893 communiqué with Josef Breuer, “On the Psychical Mechanism of Hysterical Phenomena” and “Extracts from the Fliess Papers.”

⁹⁸ Freud, “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes,” 122.

project is to “represent psychical processes as quantitatively determinate states of specifiable material particles.”⁹⁹

Throughout his long career, despite nominally rejecting physicalism for purely psychical (or, sometimes, psychological) understandings of the mind, Freud repeatedly circled back to questions of physicality.¹⁰⁰ Operating slightly earlier—and in a different orbit—than Bataille, Freud’s neuro-energetic model of the mind as formulated (and re-formulated) in numerous texts—most significantly, *Project for a Scientific Psychology*, “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes,” and *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*—serves simultaneously as a prefiguration of base materialism, locating within the activity of matter a mode of desire. In “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes,” Freud seeks to make sense of the distinction between ‘instincts’ and ‘stimuli’ (the former being at times called ‘drives’ or ‘instinctual stimuli’).¹⁰¹ Demarcating a *spatial* Inside and Outside, Freud ascribed to stimuli the quality of an *external* force acting *upon* nervous tissue. Such tissue, upon excitation from without would “discharg[e...] action *to* the outside,” theoretically resulting in a return to homeostasis.¹⁰² Stimuli are thus, at least preliminarily, understood as external forces which elicit a reaction—external energetic excitement causing a reciprocated internal expenditure of energy.

Probing further, Freud identifies as an instinct, “a stimulus applied to the mind.”¹⁰³ Crucially, however, such a stimulus does not, strictly speaking, come from without; rather, stimuli of the mind (instincts) originate “within [an] organism itself.”¹⁰⁴ Contrary to the one-and-done nature of the “reflex arc” attributed to stimuli as such (described above), instinctual stimuli are constantly operative on the organism, exerting pressure that can only ever temporarily be satiated. Instinctual stimuli are forces *within* an organism—and within matter itself—that exert a constant

⁹⁹ Freud, “Project for a Scientific Psychology,” 295.

¹⁰⁰ See Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, 536 and *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, 147–148.

¹⁰¹ It’s important to note that the conflation and/or equivocation of ‘instincts’ with ‘drives’ is a problematic Land briefly takes up in a footnote to “Machinic Desire,” 327, fn. 7 and is discussed by Strachey in the editor’s note to “Instincts and their Vicissitudes,” 111–116. For spatial reasons, we shall, perhaps rather rudimentarily, ignore the decades of secondary literature and extend the equivocation.

¹⁰² Freud, “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes,” 118. One finds resonance between homeostasis and Freud’s ‘principle of constancy’; see Strachey’s footnote, *ibid.*, 119.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 118.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

push and propel the organism forward.¹⁰⁵ Resorting to a hyper-physicalist reading of organismal physiology, Freud contends that the distinction between stimuli proper and instincts—a distinction between external and internal excitation with variable time-lag—constitutes an originary bifurcation between Inside and Outside understood in spatial terms. Indeed, as Freud notes, an organism will simultaneously recognize a distinction between “stimuli which can be avoided by muscular action (flight)”—forces from an external world—and stimuli (properly, instincts) which cannot be escaped and are characterized by “constant pressure”—forces of an internal world.¹⁰⁶ Abstracting from the organism and applying Freud’s understanding to matter as such, we thus get an account wherein matter is internally energetic, always seeking to discharge energy into the environment in order to, as Freud will state in one reading of the so-called death drive, repeat trauma and ultimately “*restore an earlier state of things*” in order to, in the context of an organism, return to a state of inorganicity—death—and in the context of matter, return “to the lowest possible [energy] level”: thermodynamic equilibrium.¹⁰⁷

Further, this energy—energy that properly psychoanalytic readings will identify as intrinsic to the social organism—is strictly physical and is designated in *Project for a Scientific Psychology* as ‘*Q*.’¹⁰⁸ While a confusing force in and of itself, *Q*—a force that “Freud was always quite consistent in emphasizing our ignorance of”—nevertheless can be linked to an earlier concept of internal mental energy.¹⁰⁹ Specifically, Freud’s commentary on mental energy at the end of his 1894 essay, “The Neuro-Psychoses of Defence,” proves helpful here:

I refer to the concept that in mental functions something is to be distinguished—a quota of affect or sum of excitation—which possesses all the characteristics of a quantity (though we have no means of measuring it), which is capable of increase, diminution, displacement and discharge, and which is spread over the memory-traces of ideas somewhat as an

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 118–119.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 119.

¹⁰⁷ Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” 36, 38; Freud, “Instincts and Their Vicissitudes,” 120. It should be noted that one of Freud’s definitions of trauma is slightly at odds with the directionality of this reading: trauma is, in one instance, identified as “any excitations from outside” that “breach an otherwise efficacious [internal] barrier.” Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” 29.

¹⁰⁸ For an attempt to make sense of *Q*, see Strachey’s appendix, “The Nature of *Q*,” in “Project for a Scientific Psychology,” 392–397.

¹⁰⁹ From Strachey’s appendix, *ibid.*, 396.

electric charge is spread over the surface of a body. This hypothesis [...] can be applied in the same sense as physicists apply the hypothesis of a flow of electric fluid.¹¹⁰

What's more, we can say that Q possesses two (interrelated) positive characteristics: first, it is a physical entity that is "subject to the general laws of motion," and second, it is, as such, originally formulated in opposition to the psychical.¹¹¹ Q thus seems best understood as physical, internal (mental) energy—that is to say, energy that can be reduced to an electric charge, or some such machination—that operates on neurons. Bracketing Freud's elaborate account of permeable and impermeable neurons, we can take this understanding and look at the flow of Q as energetic expenditure.¹¹² And going further, we can link the aforementioned with a materialist reading of primary processes to get a perverse "Freudian concept which depicts matter and its operations before they are transposed in the subject to the secondary process, where they are manifested as ideas."¹¹³ While an admittedly heterodox reading of primary processes, the above does have textual support in Freud's topographical view of the mind where primary processes are "characteristic of the unconscious system"—a system which we can only infer and obliquely attain knowledge of, yet is given to us materially—while secondary processes "typi[fy] the preconscious-conscious system."¹¹⁴

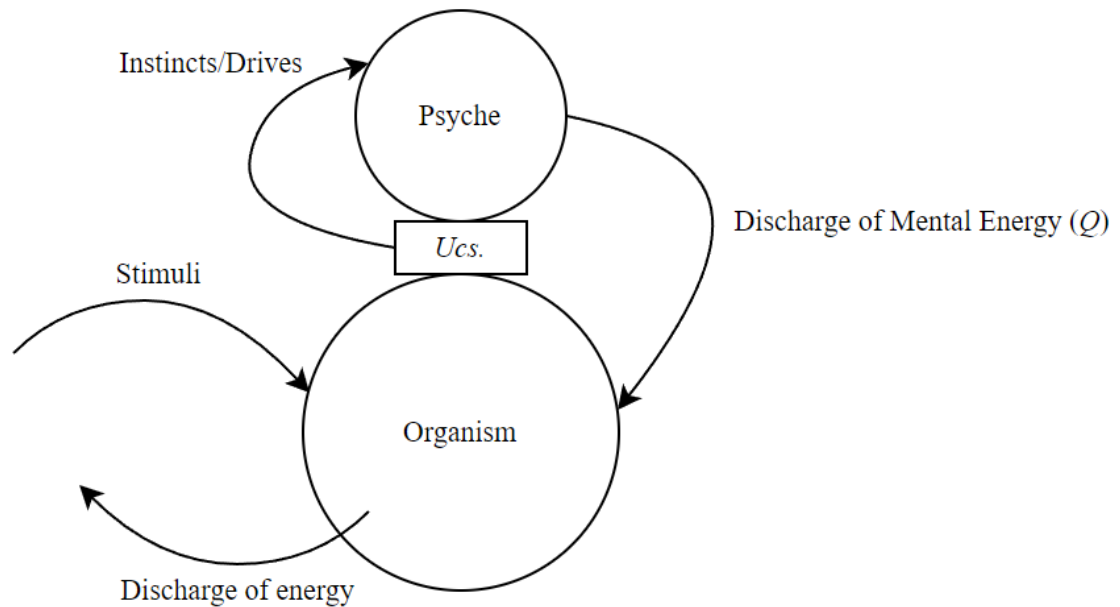
¹¹⁰ Freud, "The Neuro-Psychoses of Defence," 60–61.

¹¹¹ Freud, "Project for a Scientific Psychology," 295, 395.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 298–302.

¹¹³ Overy, "The Genealogy of Nick Land's Anti-Anthropocentric Philosophy," 25, fn. 38.

¹¹⁴ Laplanche and Pontails, "Primary Process/Secondary Process," 339. See also Freud's comments at the end of section one in "The Unconscious," 171.



Contra Bataille, for whom expenditure is useless and unproductive, when confronted with the “*exigencies of life*,” organisms—clusters of energy—must invest Q in different biological functions, be they repression, censorship, or more mundane, everyday actions.¹¹⁵ It is here that we return to, and link up with, Bataille’s precursor, de Sade, for whom such energy is always mutating—an “alchemical transformation” which serves to free “more energy” and lead “to more ‘transmutation’”—a positive feedback loop that Land isolates as one of the always-shifting cores of libidinal materialism.¹¹⁶ Desire as impersonal force ultimately becomes the generative motor underlying the aforementioned understandings of matter, and as we move forward, Freud will continue to make appearances.

Libidinal Materialism as Cosmic (Dis)Integration

[Libidinal materialist] thinking is less concerned with propositions than with punctures; hacking at the flood-gates that protect civilization from a deluge

¹¹⁵ Freud, “Project for a Scientific Psychology,” 297.

¹¹⁶ Stoekl, *Bataille’s Peak*, 12, 13.

of impersonal energy [...] libidinal materialism is the textual return of that which is most intolerable to mankind. —Nick Land¹¹⁷

Anyone (well)versed in conversations about new and/or libidinal materialism has no doubt noticed the lack of engagement with Deleuze and Guattari’s conception of the machinic unconscious and will, no doubt, notice the lack of explicit engagement with Land’s conception of capital(ism) as “an invasion from the future by an artificial intelligent space.”¹¹⁸ While a chapter specifically on Landian ontology would necessarily engage with such eccentricities—indeed, for Land himself, the only issue that’s guided his work for past 25+ years has been “the teleological identity of capitalism and artificial intelligence”—such a rigorous genealogy (or perhaps, archaeology) is well beyond the scope of this article.¹¹⁹ As such, this section will focus specifically on libidinal materialism—a materialism Land defines as “the theory of unconditional (non-teleological) desire”—as an outgrowth and, perhaps to Land’s chagrin, ontologization of the energetic materialisms of Bataille and Freud.¹²⁰ To that end, I will also bracket Land’s discussions of entropy and extropy as they relate to intelligence (capitalism) as such discussions are not only an article in-and-of themselves, but revolve around *implications* of libidinal materialism expressed more explicitly in Land’s later works. To that end, this section will look at what Stephen Overy characterizes as the “*micro*” or “*critical*” commentary on libidinal materialism, “the domain of pure theory.”¹²¹ Given that, it’s important to bear in mind that this section will not attempt to tackle the *application* of libidinal materialism (either to anthropic systems or artificial systems), but rather focus on the theory as such. Indeed, this section will look at libidinal materialism through three

¹¹⁷ Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation*, xx–xxi.

¹¹⁸ Land, “Machinic Desire,” 338.

¹¹⁹ Nick Land, “The Teleology of Capitalism and Artificial Intelligence.” For one attempt at a genealogy, I would point the reader to Stephen Overy’s doctoral dissertation, “The Genealogy of Nick Land’s Anti-Anthropocentric Philosophy.” For a general exegesis on Land see Mackay, “Nick Land – An Experiment in Inhumanism” and/or Mackay and Brassier, “Introduction.”

¹²⁰ What ‘teleology’ means for Land is a much larger issue that I am still coming to terms with. Following discussions with Vincent Lê and other Cave Dwellers, it seems as if teleology in the Landian sense can be understood ‘naturalistically’ and/or quasi-theologically—the former is an immanent understanding of *telos* as production-always-in-production situated within an entropic framework of the universe, Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation*, 41–45 and Land, “Disintegration”; the latter is an understanding of *telos* more classically understood and aligned with God, albeit a figur(e)(ation) Land thoroughly modifies, Land, “The Cult of Gnon,” 46–47; Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation*, 37.

¹²¹ Overy, “The Genealogy of Nick Land’s Anti-Anthropocentric Philosophy,” 283.

different lenses—one aesthetic, one energetic, one critical (with a return to speculative realism)—in an attempt to ‘make sense,’ to whatever extent one can, of this “nauseating rage of thought.”¹²² Given that, where the door *began* to become unhinged in the above discussions of Bataille and Freud, with each step forward here, the screws that held the very hinges to the frame exponentially meltdown. Any account of libidinal materialism must come from a place of madness.

Working out of the materialisms and energeticisms of Bataille and Freud, Land begins, in his 1992 monograph on Bataille, to experiment with libidinal materialism as an unholy—atheistic—mashup of the profane, base matter in Bataille, and the death drive (*Todestrieb*) as energetic expulsion in Freud. Libidinal materialism is first and foremost something to be experienced. Taking a cue from Kant but departing in radical ways, libidinal materialism can only ever be obliquely *theorized* while its full force must be felt as “a hyperlepsy of the central nervous-system” resulting from an *attempt* at unmitigated and unmediated contact with the Outside—it is sacred.¹²³ One must let the Outside In as an affective negativity that can only temporarily be reached—and experienced, *not known*—by sumptuous expenditure, Bacchic frenzies, excessive stimulant (ab)use, and prolonged meditation upon one’s own death. As an aesthetics of cosmic will, one can only really attempt to ‘make sense’ of libidinal materialism by groping in the dark. Indeed, for Land’s Nietzsche, “[m]ankind as a whole is nothing but a resource for creation, a dissolving slag to be expended in the generation of something more beautiful than itself,” “a planetary artistic experiment.”¹²⁴ The human here retains agency only insofar as she is a vector for an impersonal, aesthetic force to work through—she is the physical instantiation of the Freudian secondary process letting the primary process in; as in Bataille, she is an effect of, and ‘(sol)ution to,’ inorganic accumulation of energy.¹²⁵ Social structures, technological development, war, orgies, or a ‘controlled’ pit of fire in Turkmenistan are the ‘(sol)ution to’ the inefficient expenditures of energy by pre-anthropoid entities—the Freudian secondary process is simultaneously elevated to the level of the social whilst being shot through by the energetic. What’s more, the forces which

¹²² Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation*, xxi.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid., 15.

¹²⁵ Bataille, “The Economy Equal to the Universe,” 36–37.

actually flow through the human—uncontrolled cosmic energy—are the primary process connecting the human—and every other entity—to universal flows of matter (energy). Fighting against (re)presentation (and the non-(re)presentation of Derrida), such a cosmic aesthetics elides human understanding, shredding the purposiveness one finds in Kant’s aesthetics.¹²⁶

As a ‘theory proper,’ however, libidinal materialism is understood as matter imbued with impersonal will first understood through the lens of immanence counterposed to transcendence and permanence. Humanistic attempts at production—control of the deluge of cosmic energy—are seen by Land through the lens of Bataille as utilitarian constrictions on what matter can do. The sublimation of ever-present flows of (solar) energy for personal ends is merely an instance of “regional resistance” to the tendency for energetic matter to disperse itself, to waste itself, to expend.¹²⁷ Utility—the capture of energy for restricted, productive forces—is thus seen as yet another act of humanistic hubris, an attempt to subsume and control the Outside by way of the human (Kantian) structured Inside. It is here that the omnipresent question of *what*, in human terms, libidinal materialism is—by way of some definition—returns to rear its head. While Land does provide a list of ‘characteristics’ of libidinal materialism (all related to a specific understanding of thermodynamics)—“Chance,” “Tendency,” “Energy,” and “Information”—it is more useful to look at his polemical comments.¹²⁸ Affirming a Schopenhauerian understanding of “the ‘noumenon’ as an energetic unconscious”—a will of sorts—libidinal materialism is best ‘understood’ first by way of Bataille’s base matter.¹²⁹ In Land’s reading, under Bataille, the “‘noumenon’ is addressed as impersonal death and as unconscious drive,” an excessive type of materialism that operates on multiple strata with flows of energy criss-crossing the entropic tendency of the universe as such, temporarily being realized in organized flows of restricted,

¹²⁶ As Vincent Lê will note in an article on Land’s fiction, the Kantian sublime is reworked as, on the one hand, an overwhelming aesthetic experience that forces us to confront death while, on the other hand, being situated as “the telling sign of the noumenon’s incursion into the fortress of reason.” Lê, “Philosophy’s Dark Heir,” 28. The sublime is Bataille injected into the body of Kant.

¹²⁷ Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation*, xviii, 33. It ought to be noted that Land’s seeming opposition to “regional resistance” of impersonal, energetic flows in his early work is (perhaps) in contrast with his interest in AI and extropic/entropic relations in his later work. See Overy, “The Genealogy of Nick Land’s Anti-Anthropocentric Philosophy,” 272–288.

¹²⁸ Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation*, 42.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.

phenomenal cognition.¹³⁰ Ultimately, however, such a materialism is directly counterposed to classically physicalist readings of matter as passive. Opposite such a view, matter is extraordinarily active and creative while simultaneously being “anarchic, even to the extent of evading the adoption of an essence.”¹³¹ For Land, then, libidinal materialism is a force—“the primary process (Bataille’s sun)” counterposed to “the secondary process (representation)”; it is materialism contra representationalism.¹³² What’s more, there is a deep link with a (specific and unique) reading of the will to power:

Unlike the will to life, the will to power is not driven by the tendency to realize and sustain a potential [—against readings of homeostasis in Freud—], its sole impetus is that of overcoming itself. It has no motivating end [—it is non-teleological—], but only a propulsive source. It is in this sense that will to power [—as a materialistic tendency, at times anthropically instantiated—] is creative desire, without a pre-figured destination or anticipatory perfection. It is an arrow shot into the unconceived.¹³³

Despite the arrow already having been fired, Land can’t help but continue groping, grasping at different threads in the dark in the hopes not of *understanding* the impersonal forces of the universe, but of being *dragged behind them*. It is out of the above that we can make sense of the most ‘straightforward’ definition of libidinal materialism as “the theory of unconditional (non-teleological) desire.”¹³⁴

As *noted* above, teleology in Landian philosophy is a notoriously problematic concept supplanted, perhaps, by teleonomy. According to Overy, if libidinal materialism is to be understood as a theory of primary processes—that is to say, in this sense, a theory of energetic matter as such, before being (re)represented by/to the human—then a teleonomy which “identifies ends in terms of evolved causes rather than ideas”—a teleonomy perhaps more aptly framed as an anti-*telos* of

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid., 9.

¹³² Ibid., 31.

¹³³ Ibid., 142.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 37.

immanent Becoming contra transcendent Being—might be a better way to understand Land’s ambiguous definition above.¹³⁵ We thus get another melding of Freud and Bataille in a foray into thermodynamics. “Negative disorder—negentropy” proves to be a temporary abatement of the primary process’ tendency toward (dis)integration via productive expenditures of energy framed through (impersonal) creative processes—“this is the background against which desire is to be thought.”¹³⁶ Against matter that is, *à la* classical materialisms, couched as “unambiguously passive,” desire (which Land equates with the energetics of the sun) frees matter from a theologized physics, as it is situated as “that which [...] implies a process of mutation which is simultaneously devoid of [human] agency”—drive.¹³⁷ Drive thus presents itself not merely as an opposition to a theologized physics subordinated to Kant, but an eruption of the *noumenal* into the world of (re)presentations as “proto-physical”; prior to epistemological understandings of nature, yet nevertheless in accordance with nature *as it is independent of cognition*: “libidinal energy is chaotic, or pre-ontological.”¹³⁸

Freud is re-appropriated, re-anointed as an atheistic Priest, “an energeticist” who “does not conceive desire as lack, representation, or intention, but as dissipative energetic flow.”¹³⁹ Freud and his theory of the dual drives (*Eros* and *Thanatos*) becomes subject to monstrous mutation. Against the admittedly cursory understanding of the death drive in the previous section, Land radicalizes it—and desire as such—in a creatively destructive manner. As Overy helpfully notes, the “[d]eath drive is experimental extropy, and creates unstable and untested formation[s]” which are “vital to progress as they offer the chance for innovation.”¹⁴⁰

Looping around, we see textual and theoretical innovations occurring in real-time as Freud works through his conception(s) of the death drive from page-to-page in *Beyond the Pleasure*

¹³⁵ Overy, “The Genealogy of Nick Land’s Anti-Anthropocentric Philosophy,” 302.

¹³⁶ Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation*, 37.

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 38, 41.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 42, 43. It is here that a larger discussion of thermodynamics would take place. I am, however, theoretically, lexically, and temporally limited, thus I merely point to Land’s account, *ibid.*, 39–45, noting particularly the last paragraph on 43.

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹⁴⁰ Overy, “The Genealogy of Nick Land’s Anti-Anthropocentric Philosophy,” 284. Overy’s discussion is admittedly framed in the context of Landian ‘intelligence production’ (a topic I am avoiding here). The quoted passage, augmented with Land’s work itself, will get us where we were always going, however.

Principle. Changing the death drive from, first, “an expression of the *conservative* nature of living substance” wherein organic life has “*an urge inherent [in it] to restore any earlier state of things,*” to, second, a radicalization of the first understanding wherein the instincts in an organism “give a deceptive appearance of being forces tending towards change and progress” while in reality, they are regressive processes, processes that seek to return the organism to a state of homeostasis—inorganicity—Freud notes that when affirming the conservative thesis, “we shall be compelled to say that ‘*the aim of all life is death,*’” to return to a time where “‘*inanimate things existed before living ones.*’”¹⁴¹ Shifting his account, Freud goes on to conclude that in fact, the death drive works in tandem with the life drive, propelling organisms along a path of self-preservation, *if only* “to ward off any possible ways of returning to inorganic existence other than those which are immanent in the organism itself”—the death drive becomes reinterpreted as a drive to “die only in [one’s] own way.”¹⁴² This ultimate collaboration marks the melding of the death and life drives as the organism strives to stay alive against ‘unnatural’ death from without so as to affirm ‘natural’ death from within.¹⁴³

Land takes these readings and synthesizes them such that the death drive is not merely “the longing to return” to our primeval origins, but is abstracted from the organism to matter as such insofar as “[e]nergetic matter has a *tendency, a Todestrieb.*”¹⁴⁴ Indeed, what’s crucial for the Landian drive economy is that the death and life drives *are not* unique to living (or organic) beings. Freud’s great discovery—a discovery which he attributed to living beings—is the isolation of primary processes underlying humanistic understandings of thermodynamics: energy differentials latent in matter itself are productive due to “uneven distribution [and] thermic disequilibrium.”¹⁴⁵ As Land notes, what’s crucial about Freud’s insights are that they depersonalize traditionally anthropic forces, providing not only an “account of how creativity occurs without the least effort,” but, more importantly, “how desire is no more problematic than a river’s search for the sea.”¹⁴⁶

¹⁴¹ Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” 36, 38.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 39; Land, “Making it with Death,” 284.

¹⁴³ Freud, “Beyond the Pleasure Principle,” 40–41.

¹⁴⁴ Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation*, 43.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.* While there’s significantly more to say on entropy and extropy in Landian ontology, that discussion must be saved for a later time.

¹⁴⁶ Land, “Making it with Death,” 283.

Human capture of matter (energy) is itself but a mere detour along the route toward dissipation. As above, humans become a means to an end—cosmic expenditure and squalor.

Thus, understood within the Landian drive economy, Freud takes on the status of an inhuman shaman. Where classical ‘psychoanalysis,’ because of its humanistic (and clinical) bent, “has always had a tendency to degenerate into a technology of repression,” Land pulls us away from such an understanding, instead isolating the *double-sided coin* of the life and death drive as reality *par excellence*.¹⁴⁷ Further kicking back against humanistic psychoanalysis and drawing upon well-known critiques of the Oedipal complex—a complex akin to desire cloistered and bound to the interiority of a static subject—Land radicalizes Deleuze and Guattari’s critiques in *Anti-Oedipus* by affirming not only that desire as impersonal yet productive force—an energetic materialism birthed from Bataille’s base materialism and plugged into Freudian mental energy (*Q*)—is the “pilot of history,” but also that such a force precedes the Real as (re)presentat(ed)(ion).¹⁴⁸ Indeed, on a cosmic scale, machinic production as material(ization)(ism) *is* the primary process. Going further, Land takes cues from Kant and concedes that “the empirical subject of production is man,” but instead of reverting to an interiorized production of the transcendental subject as in ‘The Deduction,’ the “transcendental subject [as such] is the machinic unconscious,” an unconscious that is structured and organized by the ‘drive economy.’¹⁴⁹ Cyberneticizing drives, Land further contends that the energetics of matter “are either cyberpositive-nomadic, with a deterritorializing outcome”—that is to say, an outcome which destroys existent codes both in the social and the physical; policed subjects become liberated while organized and controlled matter is freed—“or cybernegative-sedentary, with a reterritorializing outcome”—that is to say, an outcome that reaffirms and strengthens organization and discipline and on the side of the “Kantian cultural revolution.”¹⁵⁰ Of vital import is the *counter-revolutionary* nature of libidinal materialism. If the “Kantian cultural revolution [...] deepened [...] juridical discourse in philosophy,” on the level of theory as such, it made epistemology—and in turn, the perverse belief that we can *know* the Outside via the “inhibited synthesis” of rationality (and

¹⁴⁷ Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation*, 46.

¹⁴⁸ Nick Land, “Circuitries,” 295; Land, “Machinic Desire,” 321.

¹⁴⁹ For a reading of interiorized, transcendental subject production, see Greenspan, *Capitalism’s Transcendental Time Machine*, 26–35; Land, “Machinic Desire,” 322.

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 330; Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation*, 59.

relationality)—first philosophy.¹⁵¹ For epistemology as first philosophy, “the outside must pass by way of the inside.”¹⁵²

Circling back upon—and devouring—its twin, libidinal materialism comes in direct confrontation with speculative realism. Where, as noted above, the latter, generally speaking, “must maintain both a positive ontological thesis and a positive epistemological one”—affirmation of the existence of, and *positive knowledge* about, the world outside cognition—libidinal materialism maintains only one thesis: a positive ontological one.¹⁵³ Conceived of as flows and fluxes, as primary processes that precede and exceed (re)presentation and transcendental filtering, matter is understood as an affective, energetic force that is both generative and degenerative, a churning sea underneath any formulation of the subject. While libidinal materialism makes positive claims about the Outside insofar as they are negative—not as limit concepts, but as claims revolving around an *intrinsic lack* of exhaustive knowledge of alterity—it rejects the epistemological thesis of speculative realism by denying that we can say anything more about such external forces save for their affectivity and unknowability; it is a mere affirmation of the irreducibility and excessive nature of base matter in Bataille, and the thoroughly mysterious nature of *Q* in Freud.

Recapitulating and dividing further, libidinal materialism as an ontology is eerily similar to Kant’s preliminary account of the *noumenal*. There *is* a world that exists and exceeds cognition, but it is *also* a world about which we can have no specific knowledge.¹⁵⁴ Although we have no specific knowledge of *what base matter truly is*, or *how Q truly functions*, both nevertheless exert an effect on us—the former seen, in one sense, in Bataillean ritualistic sacrifice and useless expenditure, the latter, in one form, vomited out in the psycho-analyst-analysand relationship. We are always affected by these forces of primary production, yet can only ever, like searching for a black cat in a dark room, see the blinking and shifting of inhuman eyes.

Where Kant wants to maintain that our lack of knowledge about the *noumenal*—a lack posited as a limit concept—means that we must *shift our attention* to its *phenomenal* phantasms,

¹⁵¹ Ibid.; Land, “Kant, Capital, and the Prohibition of Incest,” 63.

¹⁵² Land, “Machinic Desire,” 320.

¹⁵³ Shaviro, *The Universe of Things*, 68.

¹⁵⁴ Given this, it would not be wholly incorrect to situate Land as a Kantian, albeit a very perverse one who burns much of the First *Critique*.

libidinal materialism rejects such fearful caging, refusing the epistemic turn in Kant. For Land, epistemologically, Kantian thought can be seen as the will to knowledge/will to dominate. The Outside becomes caged within cognition and subordinated to subjective and internal (synthetic) *a priori* processes.¹⁵⁵ As noted above, Kant’s account of the scientific method is fundamentally an account based on fear of the Other; an ultimate affirmation of logic and legislation—modes of thought that are intrinsically opposed to the affective—and a binding of the subject (as well her impersonal energetics) to the categories, the “strictly demarcated domains of legitimate sovereignty.”¹⁵⁶ The law becomes transcendent, a filter through which energy must pass and which regulates what is and is not seen, what does and does not happen, what is and is not felt.¹⁵⁷ Since we can have no true insight into the Other as such—that is to say, *as the Other* (the Outside, the *noumenal*) *as it exists without us*—we must force it to submit to our mastery, predetermining what it can tell us about itself by inverting the Outside-Inside relationship such that we ‘hold the reigns,’ not only refusing to let nature speak for herself, but by violently inserting ourselves into the ‘discussion.’ By trying “to learn and to legislate for all time” via the introduction of already self-certain knowledge while reifying the law as a means “to capture alterity within a system of rules,” I have already presupposed a relationship between myself and the world “before any object is given to me.”¹⁵⁸

This epistemology—indeed, *any* ‘sound’ epistemology—is absolutely antithetical to libidinal materialism. Where Kantian epistemology wants to know the world not as it is, but as it is *for us*, libidinal materialism wants to *experience* the world in all its awesome, destructive glory. Libidinal materialism rejects the “caging of noumenon in the form of the object” and instead seeks “to awaken the monster in the basement of reason.”¹⁵⁹ Just like the Basilisk which turns all who gaze upon it to stone, or the eldritch creatures of Lovecraft’s cosmic horror invoking insanity, the Outside is terrible. Two different contexts register the same thought: “[Y]ou cannot see my [God’s,

¹⁵⁵ Meillassoux makes a similar observation in *After Finitude*, 6–7.

¹⁵⁶ Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation*, 59.

¹⁵⁷ Whether there is an *affective* way out of such a caging is a problematic Ireland takes up in “Noise,” 224–227.

¹⁵⁸ Land, “Kant, Capital, and the Prohibition of Incest,” 63, 69; Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 111 [Bxvii].

¹⁵⁹ Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation*, 116, xiv.

nature's, Nature, or Nature's God's] face, for no one may see me and live" (Exodus 33:20); "To know the face of God is to know madness" (Leoben Conoy, *BSG S1E8*).

The hand that gropes in the darkness hoping to hang on to the coattails of the impersonal flows of energy may temporarily have a grasp, but in the final estimation, it is chopped off as the universe tends towards cosmic (dis)integration. As the universe cools down and everything falls apart, the human is still questioning the surety of space and time and substance and causality and totality and...

Weathering the onslaught of impersonal forces, of monsters awakened, of cyclones destroying shorelines, everything fades, and the motor of destruction runs down. As we enter the eye of the storm—a zone that provides a false sense of security—our “humble citizen of Königsberg” returns to (re)claim his throne.¹⁶⁰ Double-checking to assure himself that he has secured his *terra firma* from the rage of the sea, Kant walks the levees inspecting his island, “cast[ing] yet another glance at the map” to be sure by “what title [he can] occupy even this land, and can hold it securely against hostile claims.”¹⁶¹ As Kant recapitulates his thesis, he fails to notice the cracks beneath his feet. Waves crashing against the walls, the cracks begin to widen as the excess Kant sought to categorize and strand at sea only grows more powerful as the winds gain speed and the eye begins to leave us behind. At the eyewall of the storm, the excess of reason—not eliminated, merely hidden (or worse, vainly thought to be under control)—pushes against the buckling levee.

Seeing their chance to free the *noumenon* from its ‘domestication,’ speculative realists of all stripes rush the seawall proclaiming that through the cracks they can *see* the Outside. Amidst high winds and swirling waves, they claim to have positive knowledge—an ontology, or even an epistemology—of *things*, of objects lurking beyond. As Kant continues to talk, still holding the reigns of much of Western philosophy, this small group of outsiders convenes a conference. They discuss the objects they see through the cracks in the wall; what they can and cannot know about them; what impacts they may have on humans and non-humans alike. They question their moral

¹⁶⁰ Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation*, 3.

¹⁶¹ Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, 354 [A236/B295].

status and whether they ought to be offered consideration within the halls of justice. Meanwhile, the rain starts up again as the storm just beyond the wall rages, growing ever-more powerful. Oblivious—or more accurately, indifferent—to the lecturing German professor and those opposite him at the conference, it begins moving unstoppably until rainbands envelop the island. All parties are too caught up in their theorizing to notice. And yet even were they not, it is too late. Over the years, unknown and unseen, subterranean flows of energy—(water) erosion from the Outside—had slowly been “hacking at the flood-gates that protect civilization from a deluge of impersonal energy.”¹⁶² All that’s left is to watch as “all stability [reason] is washed away and loss alone prevails.”¹⁶³

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¹⁶² Land, *The Thirst for Annihilation*, xx–xxi.

¹⁶³ *Ibid.*, 106–107.

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